

# BJCT

## Berlin Journal of Critical Theory

Volume 2, Number 2 (April, 2018)

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*Simon Susen*

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# The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?

Simon Susen<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The main purpose of this paper is to provide a critical overview of the key contributions made by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre in *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).<sup>2</sup> With the exception of one journal article, entitled 'The Economic Life of Things: Commodities, Collectibles, Assets'<sup>3</sup>, their collaborative work has received little attention in Anglophone circles.<sup>4</sup> This paper aims to demonstrate that Boltanski and Esquerre's *Enrichissement* contains valuable insights into the constitution of Western European capitalism in the early twenty-first century. In order to substantiate the validity of this claim, the subsequent inquiry focuses on central dimensions that, in Boltanski and Esquerre's view, need to be scrutinized to grasp the nature of major trends in contemporary society, notably those associated with the consolidation of the enrichment economy. In the final section, attention will be drawn to several noteworthy limitations of Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis.

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2 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a).

3 Boltanski and Esquerre (2016). Cf. Boltanski and Esquerre (2014b).

4 See Fraser (2017) and, in response, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b). See also Outhwaite (2018).

## 1. Commodities and Commodification: Between States and Markets

In capitalist societies, actors 'are constantly immersed in the *universe of commodities*'<sup>5</sup>. Caught up in this universe, their lives are impacted by the systemic imperatives of capitalism, to such an extent that its underlying logic of functioning permeates 'their experience of what they conceive of as reality'<sup>6</sup>. A commodity 'finds its unity in the operation by which a price is assigned to things, every time it changes hands, against monetary means'<sup>7</sup>. Capitalist processes of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption are unthinkable without the social construction of commodity exchanges. Notwithstanding its ubiquity, 'the universe of commodities presents itself not as *an opaque totality*'<sup>8</sup>, which would make its *modus operandi* incomprehensible and 'impenetrable'<sup>9</sup>, but as '*a structured whole*'<sup>10</sup>, whose fetishizing spirit – owing to its pervasive power – is capable of colonizing virtually every aspect of social reality. Firmly situated in '[t]he age of the "commodity fetish"'<sup>11</sup>, all behavioural, ideological, and institutional dimensions of capitalist formations are dominated by the instrumental telos of profit maximization.

The worldwide influence of 'European industrial powers'<sup>12</sup> cannot be properly understood without examining 'the distribution of commodities between different forms of valorization'<sup>13</sup> attributed to objects within

5 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 9 (italics added): 'sont constamment plongés dans l'univers de la marchandise'.

6 Ibid., p. 9: 'leur expérience de ce qu'ils conçoivent comme la réalité'.

7 Ibid., p. 9: 'trouve son unité dans l'opération par laquelle un prix échoit à ces choses, chaque fois qu'elles changent de mains, contre des espèces monétaires'.

8 Ibid., p. 9 (italics added): 'l'univers de la marchandise se présente non comme une totalité opaque'.

9 Ibid., p. 9: 'impénétrable'.

10 Ibid., p. 9 (italics added): 'un ensemble structuré'.

11 Ibid., p. 10: '[l]'âge de la « marchandise-fétiche »'.

12 Ibid., p. 10 (translation modified): 'la puissance industrielle européenne'.

13 Ibid., p. 11: 'la distribution de la marchandise entre différentes formes de mise en valeur'. In the English editions of Boltanski's writings, the most common translation of the notion '*mise en valeur*' is '*valorization*'. See, for

networks of economic exchange. In the most general sense, a commodity can be defined as '*anything to which a price is assigned when it changes its owner*'<sup>14</sup>. Hence, every commodity has a monetary value, which fluctuates across diverging transactional contexts. Granted, the 'commercial dexterity'<sup>15</sup> with which actors may, or may not, be equipped can vary considerably between them, depending on 'their level of market-specific socialization'<sup>16</sup>. Without 'a minimal competence'<sup>17</sup> facilitating their participation in the construction of the economy, however, 'actors would be simply lost and incapable of making their way in the world'<sup>18</sup> of capitalism, which is profoundly shaped by 'market transactions'<sup>19</sup>. In historical formations whose societal developments are largely driven by business and trade, 'actors are expected to know how to negotiate'<sup>20</sup>, thereby positioning themselves in relation to others.

The task of uncovering the '*structures of the commodity*'<sup>21</sup> is essential to shedding light on the *specificity of capitalist reproduction*. Just as the structures of the commodity are marked by their 'historical nature'<sup>22</sup> and, therefore, by spatiotemporal contingency, so are the capitalist systems in which they are

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instance, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 67, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, and 76. Please note, however, that an alternative (and, in some cases, preferred) translation of this concept is the English term '*valuation*'. See, for example: Boltanski, Esquerre, and Muniesa (2015); Lamont (2012).

14 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 12 (italics added): 'toute chose à laquelle échoit un prix quand elle change de propriétaire'. On Boltanski and Esquerre's conception of '*commodity*', see also Boltanski and Esquerre (2014b) as well as Boltanski and Esquerre (2016). Furthermore, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), esp. pp. 60 and 70–76. Cf. Fraser (2017), pp. 60 and 64.

15 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 12: 'dextérité commerciale'.

16 Ibid., p. 12: 'leur niveau de socialisation marchande'.

17 Ibid., p. 12: 'une compétence minimale'.

18 Ibid., p. 12 (translation modified): 'un acteur serait simplement égaré et incapable de faire son chemin dans le monde'.

19 Ibid., p. 12: 'des transactions marchandes'.

20 Ibid., p. 108: 'les acteurs sont supposés savoir négocier'. On this point, see also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 70: '[...] actors are supposed to know how to negotiate commercially and are encouraged to become sellers themselves [...].'

21 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 12 (italics in original): '*structures de la marchandise*'.

22 Ibid., p. 13: 'caractère historique'.

embedded and in which they exert their hegemonic power.<sup>23</sup> 'The diversification of commodity structures'<sup>24</sup> emanates from varieties of capitalism<sup>25</sup>, united by a common mode of production and separated by diverging ways of sustaining it. *Different types of capitalism generate, and depend on, different degrees of commodification.* Key differences between capitalist regimes manifest themselves in diverging *regional* traditions<sup>26</sup> (for instance, Anglo-Saxon, continental European, Latin-American, Asian, and African models) and in diverging *national* traditions<sup>27</sup> (in Europe, for example, Great Britain's neo-liberal 'spectator state', Germany's neocorporatist 'facilitative state', and France's neostatist 'developmental state'). Unsurprisingly, these traditions are marked by varying degrees of commodification: the more market-driven and the less state-interventionist a particular type of capitalist reproduction, the more intense and the more extensive its processes of commodification. Irrespective of the historical specificities of economic forms of governance, the 'condition of the commodity'<sup>28</sup> is built into the architecture of capitalism: *there are no dynamics of marketization without processes of commodification.*

## 2. Price and Value: Between Justification and Critique

In capitalist economies, things have 'their *price* and *value*'<sup>29</sup>. Far from categorically accepting monetary arrangements as if they were incontestable,

23 On this point, see, for example: Braudel (1967); Braudel (1979a); Braudel (1979b). See also, for instance: Bonefeld, Gunn, Holloway, and Psychopedis (1995); Holloway (2005 [2002]); Holloway (2010); Holloway and Susen (2013); Susen (2012a).

24 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 14: '[I]a diversification des structures de la marchandise'.

25 On *varieties of capitalism*, see, for instance: Hall and Soskice (2001); Hancké (2009); Hancké, Rhodes, and Thatcher (2007); Miller (2005); Soederberg, Menz, and Cerny (2005); Susen (2012a), p. 306; Susen (2015a), pp. 134 and 310n380.

26 On this point, see Weiss (1997a), pp. 16–17.

27 On this point, see Dunning (1997), pp. 244–282 (on Great Britain), pp. 335–358 (on Germany), and pp. 313–334 (on France).

28 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 107–111: 'La condition de marchandise'.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 9 (italics added): 'leur prix et la valeur'. See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), esp. pp. 68–72 and 76. Cf. Fraser (2017), esp. pp. 57, 59, and 60 (on 'price') and pp. 57–64 (on 'value').

actors – owing to their 'polysemic'<sup>30</sup> dispositions – are able to *criticize* and, if required, to *justify* prices and values.<sup>31</sup> By doing so, they confirm the ineluctable contingency permeating the social structures of capitalist economies. Broadly speaking, prices are monetary expressions of values attributed to objects, subjects, and/or states of affairs. In *Enrichissement*, we are presented with several competing conceptions of value, two of which are particularly worth mentioning:

- In Marxist accounts of economic relations, value is regarded as 'a simultaneously *substantial* and *mysterious* property of things'<sup>32</sup>. On this view, value is not only real and genuine but also, paradoxically, imagined and fake. This assumption lies at the heart of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism.<sup>33</sup> In capitalist societies, things take on a life of their own, insofar as their *exchange value*<sup>34</sup> is elevated to a quasi-metaphysical status of ontological preponderance, whereas their *use value*<sup>35</sup> is degraded to a praxeological element of subordinate relevance.
- In Boltanski and Esquerre's account of economic relations, value is interpreted as 'a device of *justification* or of the *critique* of the price of things'<sup>36</sup>. On this view, value can be sustained only to the extent that it can be *justified* because, in principle, it can be *criticized*. More specifically, value is established as a combination of objective, normative, and subjective dimensions:
  - (a) it exists as an *objective* part of reality, since it has a tangible impact upon the empirical constitution of social relations;

30 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 12: 'polysémique'.

31 See *ibid.*, p. 12: 'de critiquer ce prix ou de le justifier'.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 12 (italics added): 'la valeur pour une propriété à la fois substantielle et mystérieuse des choses'. Cf. Fraser (2017), p. 60.

33 See, for example: Marx (2000/1977 [1857–1858/1941]); Marx (2000/1977 [1859]); Marx and Engels (2000/1977 [1846]); Marx and Engels (1987/1945 [1848]); Marx (2000/1977 [1867]). For an excellent overview, see Marxhausen (1999).

34 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 111: 'valeur d'échange'.

35 See *ibid.*, p. 111: 'valeur d'usage'.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 12 (italics added): 'un dispositif de justification ou de critique du prix des choses'.

- (b) it exists as a *normative* part of reality, since it acquires different meanings in different cultural settings;
- (c) it exists as a *subjective* part of reality, since actors confirm its presence by making it an integral part of their imaginaries when participating in both the material and the symbolic construction of society.

For Boltanski and Esquerre, then, a critical sociology of economic exchanges needs to explore the multiple ways in which, within 'the universe of commodities'<sup>37</sup>, *prices are justified and/or criticized*.<sup>38</sup> These processes of justification and critique illustrate that capitalist modes of socialization are contingent upon 'different forms of valorization'<sup>39</sup>, without which there would be no symbolically mediated dynamics of market-driven profit maximization.

Proposing a 'distinctive *pragmatics of value-setting*'<sup>40</sup>, Boltanski and Esquerre distinguish *four forms of valorization*<sup>41</sup>, whose 'relationships can be articulated as a set of *transformations*'<sup>42</sup>:

- (a) the '*standard form*'<sup>43</sup>, which is vital to industrial economies and which allows for the possibility of mass production;

37 Ibid., p. 9: 'l'univers de la marchandise'. See also *ibid.*, p. 111.

38 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 13: 'différentes façons d'en justifier (ou d'en critiquer) le prix'.

39 See *ibid.*, p. 13: 'différentes façons de les mettre en valeur'. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's conception of 'valorization'*, see also, for instance, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), esp. pp. 67–70 and 72–73.

40 Fraser (2017), p. 59 (italics in original).

41 For a *useful summary of these four 'forms of valorization'*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), esp. pp. 69–70. See also *ibid.*, pp. 72–76. On *the notion of 'forms of valorization' ['les formes de mise en valeur']*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), Chapter IV.

42 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 68 (italics in original). Boltanski and Esquerre spell out that they conceive of this 'set of transformations' in Claude Lévi-Strauss's sense of the term. On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 164–165 and 196. See, in particular, Lévi-Strauss (1962). See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 586n12, and Maniglier (2002), pp. 55–56. On *the relevance of Lévi-Strauss's work to Boltanski and Esquerre's argument*, see, for example: Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 120, 164–165, 196, 242, 282, 494, 582, 586, 594, 598, and 609; Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 68–69. Cf. Lévi-Strauss (1962); cf. also Lévi-Strauss (1949) and Lévi-Strauss (1971).

43 On *the 'standard form' ['forme standard']*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), esp. Chapter V. More specifically, see *ibid.*, pp. 21, 129, 157, 159, 165, 166, 173, 178, 179, 181, 182–183, 187, 201–242, 234, 295, 357, 394, 395, 429, and 524–526.

- (b) the '*collection form*'<sup>44</sup>, which prevails in enrichment economies and which is based on a narrative attached to an object's past;
- (c) the '*trend form*'<sup>45</sup>, which is crucial to fashion economies and whose principal reference points are appealing discourses, which are often linked to contemporary high-profile figures and present-day celebrities;
- (d) the '*asset form*'<sup>46</sup>, which is preponderant in financial economies and which is driven by the incentive to re-sell objects for a profit at some point in the future.

Despite the considerable differences between these four forms of valorization, the 'specific arenas of transaction'<sup>47</sup> to which they are attached share one significant feature: the prices of the commodities by which they are sustained 'can be justified or criticized according to a range of *different arguments*'<sup>48</sup>. The co-articulation of these four forms of valorization is central to the rise of a new form of capitalism:

To mark the specificity of the form of capitalism that takes advantage of all four forms of valorization, we will speak of *integral capitalism*.<sup>49</sup>

The secret of success underlying this type of economic organization consists in 'exploiting new lodes of wealth and *interconnecting different ways of valorizing things*'<sup>50</sup>, thereby securing that these are put into circulation for acquiring maximum profit.

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44 On the '*collection form*' ['forme collection'], see *ibid.*, esp. Chapter VII. More specifically, see *ibid.*, pp. 68, 129, 165, 166, 178, 179, 181–182, 188, 243–325, 349, 352, 401, 403, 404, 417–419, 429, and 527–529.

45 On the '*trend form*' ['forme tendance'], see *ibid.*, esp. Chapter IX. More specifically, see *ibid.*, pp. 175, 179, 181, 184, 188, 226, 327–353, 394, 404, and 526–527.

46 On the '*asset form*' ['forme actif'], see *ibid.*, esp. Chapter X. More specifically, see pp. 159, 165, 174, 178, 181, 184, 188, 224, 226, 288, 293, 327, 355–372, 394, 395, 399, 401, 442, 484, 493, and 529–530.

47 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 70.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 70 (italics added).

49 *Ibid.*, p. 74 (italics in original). On the *concept of 'integral capitalism'*, see, for instance: Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 26, 375, 399–400, and 566; Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 68 and 73–75.

50 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 74 (italics added).

In their analysis of profit generation, Boltanski and Esquerre draw on both Marx's notion of profit derived from labour ('surplus-value labour' [*plus-value travail*])<sup>51</sup> and Braudel's notion of profit derived from commerce, trade, and exchange ('commercial surplus-value' or 'trading profit' [*plus-value marchande*])<sup>52</sup>:

The specificity of the enrichment economy [...] lies in profits derived from a commerce of objects that, even when they are manufactured industrially, give rise to a valorization based primarily on the three other forms. It is associated with particular ways of exploiting a highly qualified local workforce entrusted with the tasks of such valorization. In this sense, the profits it generates depend in part on the extraction of surplus-value labour. Nevertheless, what makes this type of economy distinct is above all its reliance on systems that enable it to extract much larger commercial profits than can currently be made from standard objects, which face a higher level of competition. Finally, it should be noted that whereas a mass economy relies principally on exploitation of the poor, whether as workers or consumers, an enrichment economy derives its profits essentially from the wealthy. As Braudel's analyses have shown, it is primarily trade in 'rare' or luxury goods destined for the wealthy that generates especially large commercial surplus-value. As these remarks suggest, integral capitalism is not the expression of a 'postmodern' capitalism that would no longer rely on profits derived from surplus-value labour, or even on the production and circulation of material objects. But it is a form of capitalism whose flexibility enables it to take advantage of a much wider range of things

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51 On the concept of 'surplus-value labour' [*plus-value travail*], see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 180, 379–383, 388, 389, 400, and 592. See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), esp. pp. 71–76.

52 On the concept of 'commercial surplus-value' or 'trading profit' [*plus-value marchande*], see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 180, 184, 233, 384–388, 389, 400, and 610–611. See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), esp. pp. 71–76.

than in the past, whose diversity is not only preserved but valorized, to exploit the differences it establishes between the status of varying commodities.<sup>53</sup>

Given their emphasis on the relationship between, on the one hand, *price and value* and, on the other hand, *justification and critique*, Boltanski and Esquerre take issue with the Marxist distinction between 'use value' and 'exchange value'.<sup>54</sup> In their eyes, it is by 'reference to *value*'<sup>55</sup> that it is possible 'to criticize or to justify the price of things'<sup>56</sup>. Their value-focused approach, however, 'discards [...] the convoluted debates on the relationship between use value and exchange value'<sup>57</sup>. As such, it rejects any simplistic reading of Marx's account of commodity fetishism, according to which social scientists are required to pursue the 'uncovering'<sup>58</sup> mission of 'ideology critique'<sup>59</sup>, permitting them to unearth the stifling logic that pervades mechanisms of 'reification'<sup>60</sup>, which convert subjects into objects by reducing humans to things.

Notwithstanding the dehumanizing consequences of commodification processes in capitalist formations, the social construction of price

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53 Ibid., pp. 74 and 75.

54 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 111. On *the distinction between 'use value' and 'exchange value'*, see, for example, Susen (2012a), pp. 307–308 and 324–325n165. Cf. Haug (1999a) and Marxhausen (1999).

55 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 111 (italics in original): 'la référence à la *valeur*'.

56 Ibid., p. 111: 'de critiquer ou de justifier le prix des choses'.

57 Ibid., p. 111: 'écarte [...] les débats alambiqués sur la relation entre valeur d'usage et valeur d'échange'.

58 Ibid., p. 111: 'dévoilement'.

59 On *the concepts of 'ideology' and 'ideology critique'*, see, for example: Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1980); Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1990); Apel (1971); Boltanski (2008); Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976); Bourdieu and Boltanski (2008 [1976]); Browne and Susen (2014); Conde-Costas (1991); Eagleton (2006 [1976]); Eagleton (2007 [1991]); Holloway and Susen (2013); Larrain (1991 [1983]); Marx and Engels (1953 [1845–1847]); Marx and Engels (2000/1977 [1846]); Rehmann (2004); Reitz (2004); Simons and Billig (1994); Susen (2008a); Susen (2008b); Susen (2012a); Susen (2014a); Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 2; Susen (2016c); Wacquant (2002 [1993]); Weber (1995); Žižek (1989); Žižek (1994).

60 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 111: 'réification'.

and value cannot be separated from the normative forces of justification and critique:

These forms of *valorization* contribute to both the *partitioning* and the *structuring* of the *universe of commodities*, because they are associated with modalities – that is, at the same time, *devices* and *arguments* – making it possible to make statements concerning the *value* of different things and to carry out tests substantiating these arguments. In a way, arguments generated by different forms of valorization render possible the *mediation between objects and prices*. On the one hand, they *build on certain properties of objects* considered as pertinent. On the other hand, they *serve to criticize or to justify the price*.<sup>61</sup>

In brief, the realm of commodities is shaped by subjects capable of justifying and criticizing the prices attributed to objects on the basis of evaluative devices and arguments, whose epistemic validity can be confirmed or undermined by multiple tests [*épreuves*].

Boltanski and Esquerre distinguish between 'price' and 'metaprice':<sup>62</sup>

- In the world of commercial transactions, the *price* is essentially 'a sign associated with a thing'<sup>63</sup>. As such, it constitutes a value-laden aggregate that is assigned to an object in order to express its monetary worth.
- The *metaprice* is, literally, 'the about-the-price', constructed by cognitively equipped and discursively engaged subjects. It is '*meta*'<sup>64</sup> in

61 Ibid., p. 111 (italics added): 'Ces formes de mise en valeur contribuent à partitionner et par là à structurer l'univers de la marchandise parce qu'elles sont associées à des modalités – c'est-à-dire à la fois à des dispositifs et à des arguments – permettant de former des énoncés concernant la valeur de différentes choses et aussi de mettre en place des épreuves pour fonder ces arguments. Les arguments générés par différentes formes de mise en valeur font en quelque sorte la médiation entre les objets et les prix. D'un côté, ils prennent appui sur certaines propriétés des objets considérées comme pertinentes. De l'autre, ils servent à en critiquer ou à en justifier le prix.'

62 On the distinction between 'price' and 'metaprice', see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 124–133. See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 71.

63 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 124: 'un signe associé à une chose'.

64 Ibid., p. 132 (italics in original): '*méta*'.

the sense that, rather than representing a mere 'fact' or 'event'<sup>65</sup>, it emanates from 'a reflection on the price (a discussion, a comparison, a critique, a justification, etc.)'<sup>66</sup>.

Prices can be challenged in numerous ways, two of which are particularly important:

- (a) *silently*, when, based on the competition principle, a buyer decides to change suppliers;
- (b) *verbally*, when – as is common in insufficiently competitive environments – a buyer explicitly calls a supplier's price(s) into question.<sup>67</sup>

Rather than assuming that the competition principle that is built into capitalist market economies is 'pure and perfect'<sup>68</sup>, a critical sociology of material and symbolic exchanges needs to account for the extent to which social networks are shot through with power relations. Market-driven economies are characterized by 'a difference of *power* between supplier(s) and buyer(s)<sup>69</sup>, producers and consumers, workers and capitalists.

Given the discursive nature of social relations, in every economy the *construction of value* is inextricably linked to the *justification of price*.<sup>70</sup> In many cases, the explicit justification of a price emerges in response to the buyer challenging the price demanded by the seller.<sup>71</sup> To the degree that *processes of valorization*<sup>72</sup> cannot be divorced from *processes of justification*<sup>73</sup>,

65 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 132: 'Les métaprix ne sont pas des faits, ils n'appartiennent pas à l'événement [...].'

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133 (translation modified): 'd'une réflexion sur les prix (d'une discussion, d'une comparaison, d'une critique, d'une justification, etc.)'. In the original version, the word 'price' appears in the plural [*les prix*].

67 On these points, see *ibid.*, pp. 134–138. Cf. Hirschman (1970) and Hirschman (2013 [1977]).

68 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 134: 'pure et parfaite'.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 134 (italics in original): 'une différence de *pouvoir* entre offreur(s) et demandeur(s)'.

70 See *ibid.*, pp. 138–144: 'La valeur comme justification du prix'. See *ibid.*, p. 138: 'Nous définirons la valeur comme étant un dispositif de justification du prix.'

71 See *ibid.*, p. 138: 'La justification du prix peut soit être une réponse à la contestation du prix demandé'.

72 See *ibid.*, p. 140 (italics in original): 'un *processus de valorisation*'.

73 See *ibid.*, pp. 13, 111, 113, 114, 133–139, 143–144, 149, 160, 172–173, 195, 235,

different social values are attached to different monetary prices in different interactional contexts.<sup>74</sup>

In economic trade, 'the role of *reflexivity*'<sup>75</sup> is crucial. For 'the seller must *convince* the buyer that what he [or she] offers is acceptable at a certain price'<sup>76</sup>. Within liberal-capitalist settings, both parties enjoy 'the freedom to criticize'<sup>77</sup> and, thus, draw on their 'reflexive capacity'<sup>78</sup> when grappling with '*things + prices*'<sup>79</sup>, as they navigate their way through endless supply-and-demand chains. When doing so, actors need to put forward 'arguments permitting [them] to justify and to criticize the relationship between a thing and a price'<sup>80</sup>.

Such an arguably *hermeneutic* conception of the economy<sup>81</sup> obliges us to take seriously the *interpretive* resources mobilized by social actors when establishing a more or less *meaningful* relationship with things and prices. Inevitably, their lives are shaped by processes of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption. Without them, there would be no capitalist exchange of goods and services. Yet, these *economic processes*

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242, 375, and 467. On the concept of '*justification*' in Boltanski thought, see, for example: Blokker and Brighenti (2011); Boltanski (2002); Boltanski (2009b); Boltanski and Thévenot (1991); Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]); Borghi (2011); Corcuff (1998); Eulriet (2014); Habermas (2004 [1999]); Jetté (2003); Lemieux (2014); Livet (2009); Müller-Doohm (2000); Silber (2011); Stark (2009); Stark (2017); Susen (2017e); Turner (2007); Vaisey (2009); Wagner (1999).

74 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 138: 'Attacher la valeur au prix [...]'].

75 See *ibid.*, pp. 193–195 (italics added): 'Le rôle de la réflexivité'. See *ibid.*, pp. 17, 171, 189, 190, 193–195, 499–500, and 504. On the concept of '*reflexivity*', see, for example, Susen (2016b). In addition, see Susen (2007), pp. 9, 11, 19, 20, 23, 25, 35, 41, 52, 57, 94, 119, 120, 133–137, 139, 145n6, 215, 216, 222, 225, 226, 227n29, 235, 236, 243, 249, 256, 262, 269n7, 276, 287, 293, 296, 308, 309, 311, 312, 313, and 314.

76 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 193 (italics added): 'l'offreur doit convaincre le demandeur que ce qu'il offre est valable à un certain prix'.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 193: 'la liberté de critiquer'.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 193: 'capacité réflexive'.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 193 (italics in original): '*choses + prix*'.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 194: 'arguments permettant de justifier ou de critiquer la relation entre une chose et un prix'.

81 Cf. Lavoie (1990), Prychitko (1995), and Thompson (2017). On the *justification and critique of prices*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 13, 111–114, 133–139, 143–144, 149, 160, 172–173, 195, 235, 242, 375, and 467.

– far from being reducible to 'social facts' that exist independently of human experience, understanding, and reflection – *are embedded in a world of purposive, regulative, and projective actions*. In capitalist societies, multiple 'forms of valorization exert an impact on the organization of commodities'<sup>82</sup> insofar as they are influenced by, and in turn influence, 'the composition of *discourses about things*'<sup>83</sup> that are regarded as commodities and, as such, are associated with prices. From a positivist perspective, the economy is tantamount to a 'universe of things considered *independently* of all discourse'<sup>84</sup>. Challenging this 'positivist logic'<sup>85</sup>, Boltanski and Esquerre insist on the hermeneutic features of capitalist systems, drawing attention to the pivotal role that 'critique and justification'<sup>86</sup> play in framing economic transactions.

### 3. Society and Enrichment: Between Things and Persons

According to Boltanski and Esquerre, the rise of the *society of enrichment*<sup>87</sup> marks the arrival of an unprecedented era. 'The emergence of new sources of the creation of wealth is one of the principal factors commonly mentioned to make sense of the changes within the composition of a social formation.'<sup>88</sup> In Marxist terms, the incessant development of the *forces*

82 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 194: 'les formes de mise en valeur n'exercent un effet sur l'organisation de la marchandise'.

83 Ibid., p. 194 (italics added): 'la composition des discours sur les choses'. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's conception of 'discourse'*, see also, for instance, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 68. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's conception of 'narrative'*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 169–170, 175–176, 283, 422–423, and 444; Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 69–70; Fraser (2017), p. 61. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's emphasis on the discursive construction of the value of objects*, see *ibid.*, pp. 57 and 60.

84 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 194 (italics added): '[u]n univers de choses considérées indépendamment de tout discours'.

85 See *ibid.*, p. 194: 'logique [...] positiviste'.

86 Ibid., p. 375: 'critique et justification'. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's emphasis on processes of critique and justification*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 70 and 71, as well as Fraser (2017), pp. 57 and 60.

87 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), esp. pp. 441–457 (Chapter XIII): 'Les contours de la société de l'enrichissement'.

88 Ibid., p. 441: 'L'émergence de nouvelles sources de création de richesses est l'un des principaux facteurs communément invoqués pour interpréter les

of production manifests itself in the constant transformation of the *relations of production*, which are embedded in perpetually evolving *modes of production*. Rather than focusing exclusively on spheres of production, however, Boltanski and Esquerre reflect on two elements that are fundamental to the constitution of any society: (a) *things* and (b) *persons*.<sup>89</sup>

A key characteristic by which *things* and *persons* are divided is their *lifespan*. In industrial societies, the former tend to have a shorter lifespan than the latter. 'One of the most radical changes introduced by the mass production of standard things has been to populate the world with things, which are conceived of as having a lifespan that is largely inferior to that of persons, as is the case with the majority of technical artefacts.'<sup>90</sup> The main reason for this discrepancy is that 'the life expectancy of human beings has been extended'<sup>91</sup> significantly, due to a general improvement in standards of living and considerable advancements in levels of health and medicine. Another important reason is that most industrial products are designed to have a limited lifespan, so that they have to be replaced with new ones – representing an economic cycle that is in the interest of profit-seeking sellers.

Aiming to identify the central features of *enrichment*, Boltanski and Esquerre distinguish two meanings of this term:

- (a) enrichment of *'things* already there'<sup>92</sup> – for instance, the enrichment of a natural resource, such as metal;
- (b) enrichment of *persons*, based on access to and accumulation of socially relevant – notably material, symbolic, and/or financial – resources.

It is the latter, rather than the former, meaning that is vital to Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis. In the advanced economies of 'the West',

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changements dans la composition d'une formation sociale.'

89 See *ibid.*, p. 441: 'une société est une composition de choses et de personnes'. On this distinction, see also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 75.

90 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 442: 'L'un des changements les plus radicaux introduits par la production de masse de choses standard a été de peupler le monde de choses conçues pour avoir une durée de vie très inférieure à celle des personnes comme c'est le cas de la plupart des artefacts techniques.'

91 *Ibid.*, p. 443: 'l'espérance de vie des humains s'est allongée'.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 11 (*italics added*): 'des choses déjà là'.

members of the wealthy sectors of society tend to use 'commerce [as] a supplementary source of enrichment'<sup>93</sup> and, in many cases, significant amounts of income. In these economies, enrichment tends to be generated by and aimed at the affluent members of society.<sup>94</sup> Irrespective of whether we take into consideration 'the arts, especially fine arts, culture, antiques trade, the creation of foundations and museums, luxury goods industry, heritagization, and tourism'<sup>95</sup> – all of these spheres are essential to the 'economy of enrichment'<sup>96</sup>.

This 'economic reorientation towards the rich'<sup>97</sup>, and hence towards the privileged sectors of society, taps into a far-reaching trend of the early twenty-first century: there has been an 'increase in inequalities at the global level'<sup>98</sup>. Thus, the number of poor and extremely poor as well as the number of rich and super-rich have 'significantly increased over the course of the past twenty years'<sup>99</sup>. While the gap between poor and rich has grown, the presence of both 'underprivileged' and 'overprivileged' social groups has steadily augmented in recent decades.

Contemporary societies, therefore, are shaped by both tendencies towards *impoverishment*<sup>100</sup> and tendencies towards *enrichment*<sup>101</sup>. In their inquiry, Boltanski and Esquerre choose to focus on the latter, rather than the former, suggesting that this analytical emphasis enables them to flesh

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93 Ibid., p. 11: 'commerce, une source supplémentaire d'enrichissement'.

94 See *ibid.*, p. 11.

95 Ibid., p. 11: 'les arts, particulièrement les arts plastiques, la culture, le commerce d'objets anciens, la création de fondations et de musées, l'industrie du luxe, la patrimonialisation et le tourisme'.

96 On *the concept of 'économie de l'enrichissement'*, see *ibid.*, pp. 11, 17, 26, 52, 56, 67–72, 94, 97, 152, 221, 239, 251, 294, 299, 314, 320–325, 378, 391, 399, 400, 403, 443, 476, and 487–495. See also, for example: Boltanski and Esquerre (2014b); Boltanski and Esquerre (2016); Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b). In addition, see Fraser (2017) and Outhwaite (2018).

97 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 63–65: '[u]ne réorientation économique vers les riches'.

98 Ibid., p. 63: 'L'augmentation des inégalités au niveau mondial'.

99 Ibid., p. 63: 'a considérablement augmenté au cours de vingt dernières années'.

100 See, for example, Butterwegge (2009).

101 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 67–104 (Chapter II): 'Vers l'enrichissement'.

out the nature of historical trends that are of paramount importance to the structural development of contemporary Western societies. When doing so, they emphasize that their own account of '*the economy of enrichment*'<sup>102</sup> fundamentally differs from Bourdieu's notion of '*symbolic economy*'<sup>103</sup>. The use of the adjective 'symbolic'<sup>104</sup> is, in their view, 'both too broad and too vague'<sup>105</sup> to capture the specificity of the dynamics shaping highly stratified exchanges of goods and services in advanced societies. Bourdieu's perspective, they posit, remains caught up in the orthodox Marxist opposition 'material' vs. 'ideological' (and, correspondingly, in the philosophical division 'materialism' vs. 'idealism').<sup>106</sup> Contrary to this – arguably artificial – separation between 'material' and 'symbolic' realms of society, they maintain that 'all things that are part of an economy can be considered under these two aspects'<sup>107</sup>. On this interpretation, the distinction between 'material' and 'symbolic' designates a conceptual, rather than an ontological, differentiation. Even if, however, one wishes to distinguish between 'material economy' and 'immaterial economy'<sup>108</sup> (or, in their words, between 'the trade of things'<sup>109</sup> and 'the trade of "immaterial" goods'<sup>110</sup>), these two market spheres are inextricably linked.

102 Ibid., p. 70 (italics added): 'l'économie de l'enrichissement'.

103 Ibid., p. 70 (italics added): 'l'économie symbolique'. See also, for instance: Bourdieu (1971); Bourdieu (1977); Bourdieu (1992); Bourdieu (1992 [1977]); Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992b). In addition, see, for example: Addi (2001); Grenfell and Kelly (1999); Honneth (1984); Jurt (2004); Ledeneva (1994); Leneveu (2002); Mauger (2005); Peter (2004); Susen (2007), esp. Chapter 5, section 3; Susen (2011b), esp. pp. 176–184 and 193–197; Susen (2011d); Susen (2013a); Susen (2013c); Susen (2013d); Susen (2013e); Susen (2014e); Susen (2014 [2015]); Susen (2015c); Susen (2016a); Susen (2016c); Susen (2016b); Susen (2017a); Susen (2018c); Terray (2003); Wacquant (2002 [1993]).

104 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 70: 'symbolique'.

105 Ibid., p. 70: 'à la fois trop large et trop vague'.

106 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 70.

107 Ibid., p. 71: 'toutes les choses qui s'insèrent dans une économie peuvent être envisagées sous ces deux aspects'. On this point, see also *ibid.*, p. 331.

108 On this distinction, see *ibid.*, pp. 239–242: 'Économie matérielle, économie immatérielle'.

109 Ibid., p. 241: 'le commerce des choses'.

110 Ibid., p. 241: 'le commerce de biens « immatériels »'.

Over the past decades, a profound 'economic change'<sup>111</sup> has been taking place in Western Europe. This transition is epitomized in the consolidation of an *economy of enrichment*, centred upon the creation of *new sources of wealth*.<sup>112</sup> It is not the case that, in this context, material goods have lost all significance. It is the case, however, that those 'goods often characterized as immaterial'<sup>113</sup>, along with those commonly described as 'material', constitute a major source of economic profit. Goods may be considered *immaterial* not only in the sense that they have 'a "symbolic" dimension'<sup>114</sup>, but also in the sense that they may be regarded as having a life that is seemingly '*independent* of their physical foundation'<sup>115</sup> – a life whose discursive reconstruction may become the decisive reference point when determining their value.

#### **4. Cultural Workers and Cultural Capital: Between Privilege and Precariousness**

The aforementioned development is expressed in 'the economic condition of *cultural workers*'<sup>116</sup>, who, as 'creators'<sup>117</sup>, are the protagonists of the 'society of enrichment'<sup>118</sup>. It is no accident, then, that the acquisition of '*cultural capital*'<sup>119</sup> is crucial to dynamics of social positioning within an

111 Ibid., p. 107: 'un changement économique'.

112 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 107.

113 Ibid., p. 239: 'profits des biens souvent qualifiés d'immatériels'.

114 Ibid., p. 239 (italics added): 'une dimension « symbolique »'.

115 Ibid., p. 239 (italics added): 'indépendamment de leur assise physique'.

116 See *ibid.*, pp. 459–467 (italics added): 'La condition économique des travailleurs de la culture'.

117 Ibid., p. 459: 'créateurs'.

118 See *ibid.*, esp. pp. 441–457 (Chapter XIII): 'Les contours de la société de l'enrichissement'.

119 Ibid., p. 445: 'capital culturel'. On *Bourdieu's conception of 'capital'*, see, for example: Bourdieu (1975b); Bourdieu (1979b); Bourdieu (1986); Bourdieu (2013 [1978]). See also, for instance: Albrecht (2002); Aldridge (1998); Beasley-Murray (2000); Calhoun (1995); Gouanvic (2005); Hakim (2011); Hakim (2012); Herz (1996); Neveu (2013); Reay (2004); Robbins (2005); Shilling (2004); Sullivan (2001); Susen (2007), chapters 5–8; Susen (2011b), pp. 181, 194, and 195; Susen (2011c), pp. 368, 369, 370, 372, 384, 386, 387, 389, 390, 392, 403, 406, 408, and 409; Susen (2013d), pp. 210, 214–215, 219, 222, 226, and 229; Susen (2013e), pp. 324–325, 329, 349, 354, 370, and 371; Susen (2016a); Susen

economy oriented towards, and driven by, symbolically mediated forms of enrichment: the passing-on of culturally codified resources through families, schools, universities, and educational institutions from one generation to another allows for the accumulation of symbolic profits, from which those at the upper end of the social hierarchy tend to benefit the most.<sup>120</sup> 'People who dispose of cultural capital'<sup>121</sup> permitting them to enjoy high degrees of symbolic distinction 'play a central role in an economy of enrichment'<sup>122</sup>, as illustrated in 'the rise of their numbers since the 1960s-1970s'<sup>123</sup>.

Literary or artistic types of cultural capital<sup>124</sup> are tantamount to 'commercial competences'<sup>125</sup>, insofar as, potentially, they put those who are equipped with valuable resources in economically advantageous positions over those who are not. There is no doubt that 'artistic and cultural activities, notably in the domains of luxury and tourism, [...] make a significant contribution to capitalist prosperity'<sup>126</sup>. The advent of the 'credential society'<sup>127</sup>, which is closely related to the 'crisis of the salary society'<sup>128</sup>, reflects the emergence of an era in which 'cultural professionals'<sup>129</sup> exercise substantial influence on the established order. They do so by mobilizing expert resources derived from 'organizational, administrative, and statistical devices'<sup>130</sup>, to which they have access and upon which

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(2014e), pp. 105 and 107; Susen (2016b), pp. 53 and 71; Susen (2017a), pp. 135, 141–142, 143, and 146; Susen and Turner (2011), pp. xix, xxiii, and xxvi; Swain (2003); Urban (2003); Verter (2003); Wacquant (2004 [1997]); Wacquant (2013).

120 On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 445.

121 Ibid., p. 459: 'Les personnes qui disposent d'un capital culturel'.

122 Ibid., p. 459: 'jouent un rôle central dans un économie de l'enrichissement'.

123 Ibid., p. 459: 'L'augmentation de leur nombre depuis les années 1960-1970'.

124 See *ibid.*, p. 459: 'capital culturel littéraire ou artistique'.

125 Ibid., p. 459: 'compétences commerciales'.

126 Ibid., p. 484: 'les activités artistiques et culturelles notamment dans les domaines de luxe et du tourisme qui apportent une contribution non négligeable à la prospérité du capitalisme'.

127 Ibid., p. 468. See Collins (1979).

128 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 460: 'crise de la société salariale'.

129 Ibid., p. 468: 'professionnels de la culture'.

130 Ibid., p. 468: 'dispositifs organisationnels, administratifs et statistiques'.

they draw when engaging in different forms of 'valorization'<sup>131</sup>, without whose structuring function it would be impossible to 'sustain the economy of enrichment'<sup>132</sup>.

A striking phenomenon of the economy of enrichment, however, is 'the constraint of *self-exploitation*'<sup>133</sup>, which limits the room for agency enjoyed by cultural workers and intellectuals. The interactional spheres in which they operate are shaped by fundamental tensions – such as collaboration vs. competition, solidarity vs. rivalry, unity vs. division.<sup>134</sup> Notwithstanding their symbolically privileged position in society, large numbers of 'precarious intellectuals'<sup>135</sup> are obliged 'to promote themselves'<sup>136</sup> in 'intellectual fields'<sup>137</sup>. In many cases, they spend several years seeking to establish themselves (by working on research projects, pursuing academic studies, aiming to obtain university degrees, often at prestigious institutions) only to realize that – after having made a considerable mental, emotional, and financial investment – they find themselves in a vulnerable situation. If they are *very lucky*, they may end up working in a sector that is directly or indirectly related to their qualifications and experience. If they are *fairly lucky*, they may be able to secure employment in a sector that is largely or completely unrelated to their area of interest and/or field of expertise. If they are *unlucky*, they may not succeed in

131 Ibid., p. 485: 'la mise en valeur'.

132 Ibid., p. 485: 'soutient l'économie de l'enrichissement'.

133 Ibid., pp. 473–478 (italics added): 'La contrainte d'auto-exploitation'.

134 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 473: 'un environnement qui est à la fois un monde commun et un espace de concurrence'.

135 Ibid., p. 474: 'intellectuels précaires'. On this point, see also, for example, Susen (2017f), pp. 34 ad 73.

136 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 474: 'ils se mettent eux-mêmes en valeur'.

137 Ibid., p. 474: 'champs intellectuels'. On *the sociology of 'intellectual fields'*, see, for instance: Baert (2017); Bautista (1987); Boschetti (1985); Boschetti (1988 [1985]); Bourdieu (1984b); Bourdieu (1993); Bourdieu (1993 [1984]-a); Bourdieu (1993 [1984]-b); Bourdieu (1993 [1984]-d); Collins (1998); Fritsch (2005); Fuller (2005); Fuller (2009); Gross (2002); Gross (2008); Kauppi (2000); Mahar (1990); Miller (2003); Nash (2005); Pecourt (2007); Pecourt (2008); Pels (1995); Picò and Pecourt (2013); Pinto (1991); Ringer (2000 [1990]); Schwengel (2003); Sintomer (2005); Sintomer (2011); Susen (2011d); Susen (2017f); Susen and Baert (2017a); Susen and Baert (2017b).

finding any job at all, forced to live on benefits and without a prosperous professional future.<sup>138</sup>

It appears, then, that in the era of 'neoliberalism, neomanagement, and financial capitalism [...], *people [are] responsible for their own exploitation*<sup>139</sup>. Instead of breaking out of the straitjacket of economic heteronomy, imposed upon those seeking to realize the dream of artistic and/or intellectual autonomy, the protagonists of the cultural and creative industries of contemporary societies are immersed in a stratified horizon of class-divided realities. Far from having disappeared, the antagonism between *workers*, who sell their labour force, and *capitalists*, who own the means of production, continues to exist within the economy of enrichment.<sup>140</sup> Unlike the traditional or blue-collar proletariat, however, 'cultural workers' and 'knowledge workers' tend to be conceived of as a 'creative class'<sup>141</sup> and 'new class'<sup>142</sup>, whose members – insofar as they belong to a resourceful 'cognitariat'<sup>143</sup> – are driven by high degrees of dynamism, imagination, and innovation.

## 5. Capitalism and Neoliberalism: Between Crisis and Critique

The critique of capitalism is as old as capitalism itself. Yet, whereas between 1965 and 1975 the critique of capitalism intensified, reaching its peak in the revolts and radical social movements of 1968, between 1985

138 On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 460, 464, 474, and 616–618. See also, for example: Bettahar and Choffel-Mailfert (2014); Tasset (2014a); Tasset (2014b); Tasset (2015).

139 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 476 (italics added): 'le « néolibéralisme », le « néomanagement » ou le « capitalisme financier » [...], les personnes responsables de leur exploitation'. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's conception of 'exploitation'*, see *ibid.*, pp. 398, 400, 475–477, 488–490, and 605. See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 71 and 73–76, as well as Fraser (2017), pp. 57 and 61–64. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's conception of 'self-exploitation'*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 473–478. In addition, see Foucault (2004), esp. pp. 33, 55, 68, and 247, as well as Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 149–152.

140 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 477: 'des travailleurs, ne possédant que leur force de travail [...], et des propriétaires des moyens de production'.

141 *Ibid.*, p. 479: 'classe créative'. Cf. Fraser (2017), p. 61.

142 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 479: 'nouvelle classe'.

143 *Ibid.*, p. 479: 'cognitariat'.

and 1995 it became less and less significant, reaching its lowest point with the collapse of state socialism in 1989/1990. From a Fukuyamaian perspective, this dissolution of one of the most influential macro-teleological projects of modernity signals 'the end of history'<sup>144</sup>, epitomized in the consolidation of liberalism as the triumphant ideology of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.<sup>145</sup> The implosion of state socialism in several parts of the world has strongly 'delegitimized the parties and trade unions of communist inspiration'<sup>146</sup> in Western countries. In this new global political climate, even the most powerful 'communist' player, China, although it has maintained its official ideology, has been converted into a market-driven, albeit state-controlled, society. The 'end of the Cold War'<sup>147</sup> dissolved the ideological rivalry between the two diametrically opposed systems of capitalism and communism: whereas the latter – despite a few real or nominal exceptions (China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cuba) – has effectively disappeared, the former has established itself as the hegemonic mode of production across the globe.<sup>148</sup>

Another key factor contributing to the dominant position of capitalism on the world stage is its enormous *adaptability*.<sup>149</sup> '[T]he capacity of capitalism to overcome crisis'<sup>150</sup> has been essential not only to its survival

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144 On *Francis Fukuyama's conception of 'the end of history'*, see Fukuyama (1992), esp. pp. 276–277. On this point, see also, for example: Blackburn (2000), p. 267; Boltanski (2008), p. 63; Bourdieu and Boltanski (2008 [1976]), p. 53; Eagleton (1995), esp. p. 66; Fukuyama (2002); Good and Velody (1998), pp. 5 and 9; Hammond (2011), pp. 305–306, 310, 312, and 315; Horrocks (1999), pp. 7 and 13; Kellner (2007), p. 119; Osamu (2002); Paulus (2001), p. 745; Susen (2014e), pp. 103–104 and 110; Susen (2015a), pp. 169, 170, 271, and 317n207; Susen (2016c), pp. 204 and 212; Williams (2010), p. 309.

145 On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 482: 'd'incrédibilisé les partis et les syndicats d'inspiration communiste'.

147 See Susen (2015a), pp. 26, 32, 35, 126, 169, 170, 194, and 306n305.

148 On this point, see, for example: Blackburn (2000), p. 267; Boron (1999), p. 63; Davies (2014); Delanty (2000), pp. 145–146; Eagleton (1995), esp. pp. 59–60 and 69–70; Gane and Gane (2007), pp. 134–135; Hammond (2011), pp. 305–306 and 310–315; Paulus (2001), p. 745; Sloterdijk (2013 [2005]), pp. 294, 303, and 307–308; Torfing (1999), pp. 1–2.

149 On this point, see Susen (2012a), esp. p. 287. See also Holloway (2010), esp. pp. 6–7, 17, 51, 65, and 180. Cf. Holloway and Susen (2013).

150 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482: 'la capacité du capitalisme à surmonter la crise'. Cf. Habermas (1988 [1973]). On *the sociology of crisis*, see, for

but also to its ability to assert itself as the seemingly most efficient economic form of organization available in the early twenty-first century. Granted, the recent global financial crisis, which peaked in 2008, was a stark reminder of the fact that capitalism is an inherently unstable and volatile socio-economic system.<sup>151</sup> Yet, the fact that the political left has failed to capitalize on this major event (in terms of both its causes and its consequences) indicates that, paradoxically, *in times of systemic crisis the legitimacy of capitalism may be reinforced by normative agendas that make its presence appear not only inevitable but also desirable*. In light of this tension-laden situation, actors who hold state power have been able to push through neoliberal austerity policies on a large scale, often with devastating implications for the most vulnerable groups in society.<sup>152</sup>

The transformation of contemporary capitalism involves 'the reorganization of businesses'<sup>153</sup>, a large part of which recruit and make use of the abundantly available work force in low-salary and low-tax countries, thereby increasing their profits and putting themselves in a stronger position when competing with other economic players in the global market. The gradual shift 'from collective property to private property'<sup>154</sup> – illustrated in neoliberal policies of *economic deregulation*<sup>155</sup> – has 'undermined and dismantled the working class'<sup>156</sup>. This radical transition has eroded (a) its *institutional* capacity to defend its members' interests through trade unions, (b) its *socio-cultural* capacity to build upon a collectively shared

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example, Cordero (2017) and Susen (2017c).

151 On this point, see, for instance: Adkins (2011); Adkins (2014); Berberoglu (2010); Browne and Susen (2014); Brummer (2009 [2008]); Cordero (2017); Doyran (2011); Farrar and Mayes (2013); Habermas (1988 [1973]); Jessop (2001); Lascelles and Carn (2009); Mimiko (2012); Susen (2012a); Susen (2017c); Turner (2008).

152 On this point, see Browne and Susen (2014). See also Susen (2017b), pp. 156, 169–170, and 178.

153 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482: 'la réorganisation des entreprises'.

154 Ibid., p. 482: 'de la propriété collective à la propriété privée'.

155 On this point, see Susen (2015a), pp. 124–125 and 130–135.

156 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482: 'a désarçonné et démantelé la classe ouvrière'. Cf. Fraser (2017), p. 58: 'the concomitant decline in working-class power'.

identity, and (c) its *ideological* capacity to offer a viable alternative to capitalism. In short, we are confronted with the gradual disempowerment of the working class on a global scale.

In light of the previous reflections, a thorough 'critique of neoliberalism'<sup>157</sup> needs to address the following *key aspects of the current world order*:

- (a) '*the power of financial markets*'<sup>158</sup> in national and international trade zones, leading to the emergence of a 'casino capitalism'<sup>159</sup>, characterized by unprecedented levels of monetary flows and economic volatility;
- (b) '*the difficulties of nation-states to deal with debt*'<sup>160</sup>, especially if and when they are expected to repay unrealistically high volumes of money to powerful lenders, while seeing themselves obliged to impose radical austerity policies on their populations;
- (c) '*forms of domination through work*'<sup>161</sup>, which are exercised not only by regulating labour in accordance with the systemic imperatives inherent in the capitalist mode of production, but also by normalizing 'mass unemployment'<sup>162</sup>;
- (d) '*the exploitation of so-called "natural" resources*'<sup>163</sup>, affecting not only several so-called developing countries but also numerous "'native" populations'<sup>164</sup>, whose environment is controlled and, in many cases, destroyed by exogenous political and economic powers;

157 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482: 'critique du néolibéralisme'. On this point, see also, for instance: Berberoglu (2010); Boltanski and Esquerre (2014a); Browne and Susen (2014); Davies (2014); Gane (2014); Harvey (2006); Marcos (1997); Soederberg, Menz, and Cerny (2005); Susen (2015a), pp. 124, 134, 185, 194, 195, 201, 257, and 273.

158 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482 (italics added): 'la puissance des marchés financiers'.

159 On *the concept of 'casino capitalism'*, see, for instance, Strange (1997 [1986]). See also Susen (2015a), pp. 124, 127, and 130.

160 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 482 (italics added): 'les difficultés des États-nations confrontées à la dette'.

161 Ibid., p. 482 (italics added): 'des modes de domination par le travail'.

162 Ibid., p. 482: 'chômage de masse'.

163 Ibid., p. 482 (italics added): 'l'exploitation des ressources dites « naturelles »'.

164 Ibid., p. 482: 'des peuples « autochtones »'.

- (e) '*the spread of an "individualist" morality*'<sup>165</sup>, which constitutes one of the cornerstones of philosophical, political, and economic liberalism and which permeates the behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning adopted by large-scale populations in the twenty-first century;
- (f) '*the decline of solidarities and even the dissolution of collectives*'<sup>166</sup>, expressed in generalized tendencies towards social atomization and 'individual responsabilization'<sup>167</sup>, resulting in the consolidation of low-trust societies, whose members' lives are shaped by high degrees of anomie and alienation;
- (g) constant '*competition between all and at all levels*'<sup>168</sup>, generating divided and divisive communities, whose normative compass is dominated by instrumental and strategic, rather than communicative or substantive, rationality.

In the current socio-political climate, so-called 'metanarratives'<sup>169</sup> – based on grand ideas, utopian ideals, and/or major ideologies – appear to be less and less significant. Rightly or wrongly, this trend has been interpreted as a sign of the arrival of the 'postmodern age'<sup>170</sup>, which, according to some commentators, constitutes a historical condition characterized by 'the end of metanarratives'<sup>171</sup>. Given the 'multitude of actors'<sup>172</sup> shap-

165 Ibid., p. 482 (italics added): 'la généralisation d'une morale « individualiste »'.

166 Ibid., p. 482 (italics added): 'le déclin des solidarités et même la dissolution des collectifs'.

167 Ibid., p. 482: 'responsabilisation individuelle'.

168 Ibid., p. 483 (italics added): 'la concurrence entre tous et à tous les niveaux'.

169 On the *concept of 'metanarrative'*, see, for instance: Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 4. See also Susen (2016d) and Susen (2017d).

170 On this point, see Susen (2015a), esp. Introduction and Chapter 4; see also Susen (2016d) and Susen (2017d). It should be noted that Boltanski and Esquerre explicitly distance themselves from the contention that we have been witnessing the rise of 'a "postmodern" capitalism'; see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 75.

171 On '*the end of metanarratives*', see, for example, Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 4. See also Susen (2016d) and Susen (2017d). In addition, see, for instance: Coole (1998); Friedrich (2012); Halttunen (1999); Kellner (2007); Kellner (1987); Pieters (2000); Stone (1979); Thompson (1993); White (1980); White (1984); White (1987); Zagorin (1999).

172 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 485: 'multitude d'acteurs'.

ing societal developments, there is no single individual or collective subject capable of monopolizing the stage of history for its own purposes.

## 6. Markets and Culture: Between Authenticity and Inauthenticity

At the heart of the economy of enrichment lies the contradiction between *authenticity* and *inauthenticity*.<sup>173</sup> This contradiction manifests itself in one of the most curious paradoxes of the economy of enrichment: on the one hand, its actors are '*anti-market*', in the sense that they seek to bypass the constraining mechanisms of commodification, commercialization, and objectification; on the other hand, its actors are '*pro-market*', in the sense that they buy into the logic of capitalism, ranging from those who barely succeed in making ends meet to those benefiting – in some cases, considerably – from social processes of enrichment.

In this respect, tourism may serve as an example. In the early twenty-first century, France has one of the most developed economies of enrichment in the world – not least because it enjoys the status of being 'the first global destination for tourism'<sup>174</sup>. An obvious paradox of the tourism industry can be described as follows: while most of its promoters aim to exploit the idea of providing people with '*authentic experiences*'<sup>175</sup> in different places, vacations are packaged in terms of '*standardized travelling*'<sup>176</sup>, especially if they fall into the category of '*mass tourism*'<sup>177</sup>. Ultimately, the vacation industry is driven by profit maximization, rather than by the ambition to circumvent the hegemonic influence of the capitalist market. Ironically, '*patrimonial sites*'<sup>178</sup>, whose incommensurable value may derive from their '*ancestral and unique*'<sup>179</sup> history, are reduced

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173 See *ibid.*, pp. 31, 34, 174, 209, 265, 268, 269, 283, 302, 331, 337, 341, 363, 393, 568, and 596. Cf. Fraser (2017), p. 61.

174 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 320: '*première destination mondiale pour le tourisme*'.

175 *Ibid.*, p. 320 (italics added): '*les expériences authentiques*'.

176 *Ibid.*, p. 320 (italics added): '*voyage standardisé*'.

177 *Ibid.*, p. 320: '*le tourisme de masse*'.

178 *Ibid.*, p. 321: '*sites patrimoniaux*'.

179 *Ibid.*, p. 321: '*d'ancestraux et d'unique*'.

to commodities, the experience of which can be bought by financially resourced consumers.

'[T]he relation between the merchant *exploitation* of the past and the development of ideologies that place the emphasis on *culture*<sup>180</sup> illustrates the tension between instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and value rationality (*Wertrationalität*) – that is, between *using culture as a means to an end* and *treating culture as an end in itself*. No matter how hard tourist agencies – including its 'alternative' variants – may intend to sell '[t]he world of art and culture as if it constituted a realm outside capitalism'<sup>181</sup>, they remain trapped in the stifling horizon of a market-driven system, capable of converting the quest for cultural authenticity into a commodity.

High-end markets of luxury goods and services, including those in tourism, may be shaped in such a way that their protagonists can purport to replace the industrial tendency towards mechanical *standardization* with self-legitimizing claims to social *distinction*, thereby challenging the ubiquity of *inauthenticity* by promising experiences of *authenticity* to the privileged – that is, financially fortunate – members of humanity. At the heart of the enrichment economy, however, lies the contradiction between the reality of *inauthenticity, market-dependence, and means-to-an-end* and the pursuit of *authenticity, market-transcendence, and ends-in-themselves*. Those immersed in, and benefitting from, 'important characteristics of the economy of enrichment aim not to resolve this contradiction, but to render it acceptable, or at least habitual, as if it were self-evident, in the sense that one could learn to live with it'<sup>182</sup>.

A major task for critical sociologists of enrichment consists in demonstrating that the myths by which capitalist markets tend to be sustained

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180 Ibid., p. 321 (italics added): 'la relation entre l'exploitation marchande du passé et le développement d'idéologies qui mettent l'accent sur la culture'.

181 Ibid., p. 321: 'Le monde de l'art et de la culture [...] comme s'il s'agissait d'un dehors du capitalisme [...] nouvelles formes d'exploitation'.

182 Ibid., p. 324: '[d]es traits importants d'une économie de l'enrichissement visent non à résoudre cette contradiction, mais à la rendre sinon acceptable, au moins habituelle, comme si elle allait de soi, de façon à ce qu'on puisse apprendre à vivre avec'. On this point, see also Harvey (2001).

are – to use Marx's famous phrase – 'real sham'<sup>183</sup>: they are 'real' because they have a tangible impact on social reality; at the same time, they are 'sham' because they conceal the underlying logic that permeates human relations in capitalist formations. Irrespective of the question of whether or not, in market-driven societies, *enrichment for some* actually means *impoverishment for most*, the contradiction between authenticity and inauthenticity poses a fundamental challenge to the civilizational accomplishments of humanity in the era of modernity.

### 7. Valorizability and Temporality: Between the Present and the Past

Every economy depends on the exploitation, distribution, circulation, and consumption of different resources. In the economy of enrichment, one resource is of supreme importance: 'this resource is *the past*'<sup>184</sup>. Far from being reducible to a peripheral expression of a nostalgic attachment to something that is no longer relevant to the present, the past constitutes not only an integral element of the enrichment economy, but also a key reference point for those participating in the hermeneutic construction of its reality. As such, it is vital to both the material and the symbolic reproduction of its existence. Its centrality is reflected in the fact that the economy of enrichment 'rests not mainly on the production of *new* objects but, above all, on the valorization of objects that are *already there*'<sup>185</sup>. In fact, the older an item is, the more precious it may be for those seeking to acquire it. Its 'embeddedness in the past'<sup>186</sup> may be its principal selling point and, as such, more decisive than its use value or aesthetic value in defining its exchange value. The commodified exploitation of temporali-

183 On Marx's concept of 'real sham' [realer Schein], see, for example, Fischer (1978). See also, for instance: Susen (2007), p. 165; Susen (2014c), p. 345. In addition, see, for example: Haug (1999b); Marxhausen (1999); Rehmann (2004); Reitz (2004); Steiner (2008); Vester (2008); Weber (1995); Wolff (2004).

184 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 11 (italics in original): '[...] cette ressource est *le passé*.'

185 Ibid., p. 11 (italics added): 'prend appui non pas, principalement, sur la production d'objets neufs, mais surtout sur la mise en valeur d'objets déjà là'.

186 Ibid., p. 11: 'ancrage dans le passé'.

ty is essential to the ways in which objects are signified and resignified by 'prestigious brands of the luxury goods industry'<sup>187</sup>, which seek to make financial profits from attaching a specific – history-laden – type of worth to objects, whose value is, to a large degree, derived from their age.

### **8. Non-Reproducibility and Hierarchy: Between Distinction and Domination**

The development of the enrichment economy hinges on 'the increase in number, activity, and wealth of collectors, in the proper sense of the term'<sup>188</sup>. The growing significance of social practices motivated by the pursuit of the '*collection form*'<sup>189</sup> of objects, followed by dedicated buyers, appears to indicate 'the displacement of capitalism towards new domains of activity'<sup>190</sup> driven by 'new forms of valorization'<sup>191</sup>. One aspect to which these buyers attribute particular importance is the notion that the value of an object is marked by its 'singularity'<sup>192</sup> or 'rarity'<sup>193</sup>, as opposed to the commonality and frequency of 'standard objects'<sup>194</sup>. These objects are unique and 'exceptional'<sup>195</sup> – not only because they stand out due to their functional or aesthetic properties, but also because, unlike industrial items, they are '*not reproducible*'<sup>196</sup>. Irrespective of whether one conceives of their remarkable features as 'natural and absolute'<sup>197</sup> or 'cultural and relative'<sup>198</sup>, the *non-reproducibility* of particular objects is regard-

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187 Ibid., p. 11: 'des marques prestigieuses de l'industrie du luxe'.

188 Ibid., p. 287: 'l'augmentation du nombre, de l'activité et de la richesse des collectionneurs, au sens propre du terme'.

189 Ibid., p. 287 (italics in original): '*la forme collection*'.

190 Ibid., p. 287: 'le déplacement du capitalisme vers de nouveaux domaines d'activité'.

191 Ibid., p. 287: 'nouvelles formes de mise en valeur'.

192 Ibid., p. 287: 'singularité'.

193 Ibid., p. 287: 'rareté'.

194 Ibid., p. 287: 'objets standard'.

195 Ibid., p. 287: 'exceptionnelles'.

196 Ibid., p. 288: 'pas reproductibles' (italics added).

197 Ibid., p. 287: 'naturelle et absolue'. Cf. Ricardo (1966).

198 In opposition to the previous point.

ed by their owners and/or buyers as symptomatic of their irreducible authenticity in the enrichment economy.

Human actors are equipped with a dispositional apparatus of perception, comprehension, appreciation, and judgment. The economy of enrichment relies on its participants' 'cognitive capacity permitting them to appreciate the value of things considered "exceptional"<sup>199</sup> and non-reproducible. As a tension-laden economy, it is organized around diametrically opposed spheres: 'between work and leisure (or non-work); between necessity and surplus; between action oriented towards commerce (business) and action oriented towards disinterest'<sup>200</sup>. The former sphere is marked by *reproducibility*, since it is driven by instrumental rationality, allowing for the more or less efficient organization of capitalist society. The latter sphere is characterized by *non-reproducibility*, since it is shaped primarily by creativity, enabling actors to escape the stifling logic of the systemic imperatives that permeate target-driven realities.

In a psychoanalytic fashion, one may interpret the enjoyment of 'pleasure, passion, [and] consumption'<sup>201</sup> as reflecting 'a simultaneously aesthetic and sexual orientation'<sup>202</sup> and, consequently, as providing 'a substitute for sexual activity'<sup>203</sup>. The social construction of *gender binaries* fits into the aforementioned scheme of normative oppositions: on the one hand, the '*masculine*' is associated with 'business, money, labour, science, sport, and outdoor activities'<sup>204</sup>; on the other hand, the '*feminine*' is brought into connection with 'taste, the novel, indoor practices, and

199 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 288: 'un cognitif permettant d'apprécier la valeur des choses jugées « exceptionnelles »'.

200 Ibid., p. 289: 'entre le travail et le loisir (ou le non-travail) ; entre le nécessaire et le surplus ; entre l'action orientée vers les affaires (le business) et l'action orientée vers le désintéressement'. Cf. Veblen (1970 [1899]).

201 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 289: 'le plaisir, la passion, la dépense'.

202 Ibid., p. 289: 'une orientation à la fois esthétique et sexuelle'.

203 Ibid., p. 289: 'substitut de l'activité sexuelle'. On this point, see also Baudrillard (1968), esp. pp. 122–125. Cf. Boltanski (1975). Cf. also Moreau Ricaud (2011).

204 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 289: 'les affaires, l'argent, le travail, la science, le sport et les activités d'extérieur'.

religion'<sup>205</sup>. Insofar as the former covers the 'professional, institutional, and lucrative'<sup>206</sup> dimensions of the social universe, it is controlled largely by those occupying *dominant* gender roles. Insofar as the latter covers the 'disinterested and spending-focused'<sup>207</sup> dimensions of the social universe, it is pursued mainly by those occupying *dominated* gender roles.

Notwithstanding the regulative functions of gender-based binaries, the economy of enrichment reinforces the influence of *social hierarchies* defined around 'undesirable' and 'desirable' characteristics: 'old' vs. 'young', 'ugly' vs. 'beautiful', 'rustic' vs. 'famous', 'poor' vs. 'rich', 'ordinary' vs. 'stylish' – to mention only a few.<sup>208</sup> Those at the top of the pecking order enjoy the privilege of benefiting from 'the value of useless accumulation'<sup>209</sup>, driven by '*accumulation for the sake of accumulation*'<sup>210</sup>. In the economy of enrichment, the rich continue to enrich themselves, as they possess, and profit from, the means of enrichment. The 'double movement of mimesis and distinction'<sup>211</sup> forms part of a circular process: actors *adapt* to their social environment by means of *assimilative* dynamics, while seeking to *differentiate* themselves from others (individually and/or collectively) by means of *discriminatory mechanisms*.

205 Ibid., p. 289: 'le goût, le roman, les pratiques d'intérieur et la religion'.

206 Ibid., p. 289: 'professionnelle, institutionnelle et lucrative'.

207 Ibid., p. 289: 'gratuite ou associée à la pure dépense'.

208 See *ibid.*, p. 329: 'Les « vieux » sont en manque de ne pas être plus « jeunes »; les « moches », de ne pas être « beaux »; les « péquenots », de ne pas être « célèbre »; les « pauvres », de ne pas être « riches »; les « quelconques », de ne pas être « chics », etc. ; [...]'. – Cf. Susen (2016a), esp. pp. 79–102.

209 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 292: 'la valeur d'une accumulation de l'inutile'.

210 Ibid., p. 292 (italics in original): 'une *accumulation pour l'accumulation*'. See also *ibid.*, p. 293. Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997 [1944/1969]), p. 158: 'The principle of idealistic aesthetics – purposefulness without a purpose – reverses the scheme of things to which bourgeois art conforms socially: purposelessness for the purposes declared by the market.' On this point, see also Susen (2011b), esp. pp. 188–190.

211 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 329: 'double mouvement de mimétisme et de distinction'.

## 9. Alienation and Anonymity: Between Empowerment and Disempowerment

One need not be a pessimist to acknowledge that a key feature of the historical era commonly described as 'modernity' is the experience of *alienation*. Of course, one may identify different – for instance, social, political, or cultural – forms of alienation. What these variations of alienation have in common, however, is that they entail a degree of *estrangement* and *disempowerment* suffered by those directly or indirectly affected by it.<sup>212</sup> As such, it involves 'the loss of the possibility of "possession or mastery of oneself, or of self-identity [...] caused by external constraint"'<sup>213</sup>.

The standardization of products constitutes a crucial element of industrial economies.<sup>214</sup> Interestingly, one finds *radical critiques of human alienation* caused by industrial standardization processes both on 'the left' and on 'the right' of the political spectrum. On the left, among the most influential examples are variants of critical theory – notably those developed by thinkers whose works are linked to the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School.<sup>215</sup> On the right, among the most influential examples are defenders of Western civilization, such as Oswald Spengler<sup>216</sup>, and phenomenology, such as Martin Heidegger<sup>217</sup>. All of them draw attention to the *dehumanizing* consequences of alienation, which, to

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212 On this point, see Susen (2015b), esp. pp. 1025–1030 and 1032.

213 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 221: 'ce que la condition de l'homme moderne avait de spécifique. C'est-à-dire la perte de la possibilité « d'une possession ou maîtrise de soi, ou d'une identité à soi [...] du fait de la contrainte extérieure »'.

214 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 221. Cf. Susen (2011b), esp. pp. 190–192.

215 See, for example: Behrens (2002); Benhabib (1986); Boltanski, Honneth, and Celikates (2014 [2009]); Bronner (1994); Cannon (2001); Cordero (2017); Frère (2015); Geuss (1981); Habermas (1981a); Habermas (1981b); Held (1980); Honneth (1991 [1986]); How (2003); Hoy and McCarthy (1994); Ingram (1990); Kellner (1989); Macey (2000); Schneider, Stillke, and Leineweber (2000); Schroyer (1973); Stirk (2000); Susen (2007), esp. chapters 1–4 and 10; Susen (2009); Susen (2010b); Susen (2011a); Susen (2015b); Susen (2017c); Susen (2018b).

216 See Spengler (1973 [1918/1922]).

217 See Heidegger (2001 [1927]).

a greater or lesser degree, can be experienced by *all* members of modern societies.<sup>218</sup>

By 'placing the emphasis on the "*authenticity*" that is anchored in the autonomy of the subject, in contrast to the *inauthenticity* of "mimetic desire", which, driven by the "desire of desire of the other", plunges alienated persons into the anonymity of the "we" [in French: *on*; in German: *man*]<sup>219</sup>, it becomes possible to draw attention to a central sociological problem: the disempowering facets of modern society rob human actors of their ability to realize their creative potential as sovereign subjects.

Challenging the widespread experience of alienation, the world of artistic production appears to provide a realm of individual and collective emancipation, permitting its protagonists to escape both the administrative and the economic constraints of advanced capitalist formations.<sup>220</sup> Hence, 'the development of the critique of the society of consumption, publicity, fashion, and the media'<sup>221</sup> is essential to the view that modernity constitutes a deeply *ambivalent* historical condition, which is characterized by the contradictory confluence of positive and negative, bright and dark, empowering and disempowering dimensions.<sup>222</sup>

218 On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 222. Cf. Borch (2012) and Le Bon (1977 [1995]).

219 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 331 (italics added): '[...] mettant l'accent sur « l'authenticité » ancrée dans l'autonomie du sujet, par opposition à l'inauthenticité du « désir mimétique » qui, mû par le « désir du désir de l'autre », plongerait les personnes aliénées dans l'anonymat du « on ».' In this context, Boltanski and Esquerre mention Adorno and Heidegger. It should be acknowledged, however, that these two major thinkers provide fundamentally different interpretations of modern social life.

220 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 223. See also, for instance: Adorno (1973 [1966]); Adorno (1997 [1970]); Adorno (1991); Susen (2007), pp. 107–111; Susen (2011b), esp. pp. 185, 186, 188, 191, 193, 196–197, 199, and 200n12; Susen (2015b), esp. pp. 1031–1032; Wellmer (1985). On *the concept of 'emancipation'*, see, for example: Antonio (1989); Benhabib (1986); Bensussan (1982); Bhaskar (1998); Boltanski (2009a); Harding (1992); Laclau (1992); Laclau (1996); Lukes (1991 [1983]); Nederveen Pieterse (1992a); Nederveen Pieterse (1992b); Nuyen (1998); Pease (2002); Ray (1993); Santos (2006); Santos (2007); Scruton (1996); Susen (2009); Susen (2015b); Weiss (1997b).

221 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 224: 'le développement de la critique de la société de consommation, de la publicité, de la mode et des médias'.

222 On *the ambivalence of modernity*, see, for example: Bauman (1991); Bauman and Tester (2007), esp. pp. 23–25 and 29; Hammond (2011), pp. 305, 310,

'[T]he transition from a society of consumption to a society of commerce'<sup>223</sup>, which has been taking place since the second half of the 1990s, indicates the consolidation of a civilizational order that is 'almost totally dominated by the power of money and profit-seeking'<sup>224</sup>. One may go back to the French Revolution of 1789 to examine the significant impact of 'liberal themes'<sup>225</sup> on the development of modern societies. The abolition of traditional political, legal, and institutional constraints preventing the free 'circulation of persons and of goods'<sup>226</sup>, as well as of capital and services, can be interpreted as a major attempt to liberalize society. The aim of promoting and protecting the free movement of labour, goods, capital, and services has always been vital to establishing a market-driven order whose material and ideological developments transcend national boundaries. A key part of this process, however, is the *tendency 'to detach things from persons and to liberate the exchanges'*<sup>227</sup> of commercial nature. This liberalization provides access to almost anything, 'no matter where, by no matter whom, to no matter what, on condition that it can be assigned a price'<sup>228</sup>.

*Anonymity* is a noteworthy feature of capitalist economies. 'The anonymity of things matches the anonymity of the buyers of these things, who henceforth intervene within the market space as consumers.'<sup>229</sup> The cri-

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312, and 315; Iggers (2005 [1997]), pp. 146–147; Jacobsen and Marshman (2008), pp. 804–807; Kellner (2007), p. 117; Mulinari and Sandell (2009), p. 495; Quicke (1999), p. 281; Smart (1998); Susen (2010c), esp. pp. 62–78; Susen (2015a), pp. 1, 16–18, 190, and 236; Susen (2016d), esp. pp. 430 and 432–433; Susen (2017d), esp. pp. 104–105; van Raaij (1993), esp. pp. 543–546, 551–555, and 559–561.

223 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 224: 'le passage d'une société de consommation à une société de commerce'.

224 *Ibid.*, p. 224: 'presque totalement dominée par le pouvoir de l'argent et la recherche du profit'.

225 *Ibid.*, p. 235: 'thématiques libérales'.

226 *Ibid.*, p. 235: 'la circulation des personnes et des bien'.

227 *Ibid.*, p. 235 (italics added): 'de détacher les choses des personnes et de libérer les échanges'.

228 *Ibid.*, p. 236: 'n'importe où, de n'importe qui à n'importe quoi, à condition d'y mettre le prix'.

229 *Ibid.*, p. 236: 'À l'anonymat des choses répond l'anonymat des acheteurs de ces choses, qui n'interviennent désormais dans l'espace marchand qu'au titre de consommateurs.'

tique of commodity fetishism – which is central to most, if not all, currents of Marxist thought, including the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School – 'denounces an extension of standardization from things to human beings themselves, resulting in the *reification* of social relations and persons'<sup>230</sup>. Put differently, commodity fetishism implies the subjectification of objects and the objectification of subjects, to the degree that things are treated as if they had human-like attributes and humans are treated as if they could be degraded to things. The classical distinction between 'things equipped with a price'<sup>231</sup> and 'human beings equipped with desires'<sup>232</sup> is undermined in a world in which a monetary value is attached to *both* objects *and* subjects. From a Marxist point of view, the construction of the capitalist market is inextricably linked to dehumanizing aspects – such as reification, fetishization, stratification, exploitation, and alienation. From a liberal perspective, by contrast, it is imperative to recognize 'the emancipatory role of the market'<sup>233</sup> – that is, not only its capacity to bring about freedom, democracy, meritocracy, and formal equality, but also its tendency to stimulate its participants' dynamism, creativity, and sense of autonomy.

### **10. Mass Production and Restricted Production: Between Standardization and Specialization**

Advanced capitalist economies are marked by the separation between markets of *mass production* and markets of *restricted production*.<sup>234</sup> The former cover the realm of 'standard products, commercialized by the businesses of large-scale distribution aimed at less wealthy buyers'<sup>235</sup>.

230 Ibid., p. 236 (italics in original): 'une extension de la standardisation se déplaçant des choses vers les êtres humains eux-mêmes, dont le résultat a été une *réification* des relations sociales et des personnes'. Cf. Perce (1965). Cf. also Benjamin (2008).

231 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 236–237: 'des choses équipées de prix'.

232 Ibid., p. 236: 'des personnes humaines équipées de désires'.

233 Ibid., p. 236: 'le rôle libérateur du marché'.

234 On this point, see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 65–68. See also *ibid.*, pp. 13, 21, 217, 376, and 442, as well as Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 69 and 73–75. In addition, see Fraser (2017), pp. 60 and 64. On this point, see also, for instance, Susen (2011b), pp. 176–184. In addition, see Fuller (2016) and Gartman (2012).

235 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 65: 'produits standard, commercialisés

The latter encompass the realm of 'products that are defined precisely by their distance in relation to standard objects and are aimed at satisfying the needs of more wealthy buyers'<sup>236</sup>.

- Markets of *mass production* have major economic, political, and cultural implications insofar as – in the context of modernity – they have *enlarged* the scope of access to products to a level that is unprecedented in human history. In this sense, they constitute a significant sociological phenomenon that can be, and has been, 'legitimized in democratic terms'<sup>237</sup>, rather than merely in terms of an expanded supply-demand chain.
- Markets of *restricted production* have major economic, political, and cultural implications insofar as – in the context of modernity – they have *reduced* the scope of access to products to a level that is reserved to relatively few members of society. In this sense, they constitute a significant sociological phenomenon that is essential to the economy of enrichment, which 'seeks to exploit the purchasing power of those who can access exceptional goods'<sup>238</sup>.

In contemporary capitalist societies, a substantial gap between 'rich and poor'<sup>239</sup> continues to exist. This disparity is crucial to 'understanding the dynamic of the economy of enrichment'<sup>240</sup> by taking seriously the stratifying role of 'differentiated social classes'<sup>241</sup>, which are divided by diverging – and, at several levels, diametrically opposed – interests. The economy of enrichment is marked by a curious paradox: in *financial* terms, it is aimed mainly at the wealthy sectors of society; in *cultural*

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par les entreprises de grande distribution à destination des acheteurs les moins fortunés'.

236 Ibid., p. 65: 'se définissent précisément dans leur écart par rapport aux objets standard, et qui sont destinés à satisfaire les manques d'acheteurs plus fortunés'.

237 Ibid., p. 65: 'se légitimait en termes démocratiques'.

238 Ibid., p. 65: 'vise à exploiter le pouvoir d'achat de ceux qui peuvent accéder à des biens d'exceptions'.

239 See *ibid.*, p. 65: 'le couple riches et pauvres'.

240 Ibid., p. 65: 'comprendre la dynamique de l'économie de l'enrichissement'.

241 Ibid., p. 65: 'classes sociales différenciées'.

terms, it is aimed not only at affluent actors but also at those who may not be able to benefit economically from it. Although it 'is directed primarily at the rich and the very rich, one of its peculiarities is that it is also directed at others as if they *were* rich, or at least richer than they actually are'<sup>242</sup>. Actors belonging to the lower strata of society may lack the *economic* capital required to participate in markets of restricted production. Yet, to the degree that significant proportions of them are equipped with the *cultural* capital necessary to enjoy, or at least to admire, some of the symbolic and/or material products from whose consumption they are financially excluded, they may be able to participate – at least marginally – in the construction of the enrichment economy.

In industrial economies, material products 'see their price greatly *reduced* with time'<sup>243</sup>. In fact, these products are supposed to last only for a limited period, so that they have to be replaced with new ones, which, again, are meant to last only for so long, and so on and so forth. The limited lifespan of industrial items forms part of a seemingly endless cycle of production, distribution, consumption, ejection, destruction, and substitution. Obviously, the *economic* logic of profit maximization, which lies behind this process, defies the *environmental* logic of ecological preservation. Unlike the former, the latter is vital to the survival not only of the human species but also of other species and, in a more fundamental sense, of the planet as a whole. In large-scale industrial formations, the disposal of waste 'has become a major concern'<sup>244</sup> – both for citizens and for those who represent them in political institutions. It is no accident that, in most Western liberal societies, 'green' agendas have found their way into the political mainstream.<sup>245</sup>

In the economy of enrichment, goods that are not part of the conven-

242 Ibid., p. 65 (italics added): '[...] s'adresse d'abord aux riches et aux très riches, une de ses spécificités est de s'adresser aussi aux autres comme s'ils étaient riches, ou, à tout le moins, plus riches qu'ils ne le sont'.

243 Ibid., p. 67 (italics in original): 'voient leur prix *diminuer* fortement avec le temps'.

244 Ibid., p. 67: 'est devenue une inquiétude majeure'.

245 On this point, see, for example: Bradley and Hedrén (2014); Doyle (2005); Doyle and MacGregor (2014).

tional market 'see their price *increase with time*, following a movement that is opposite to the one affecting industrial products'<sup>246</sup>. Indeed, these items are supposed to last for a large amount of time, potentially for as long as they are not (deliberately or accidentally) destroyed. Unlike industrial products, they cannot be substituted, since they are considered irreplaceable. With a few exceptions, such as high-end quality food, the lifespan of many of these items is, at least in principle, unlimited. Similar to industrial products, these items – although, eventually, they may be used for non-economic purposes – can be exchanged with the intentions of money-making and profit maximization. The economy of enrichment is inconceivable without the 'work of selection [...], conservation [...], heritage inventory [...], collection'<sup>247</sup>, forming an indispensable component of the collective effort to convert the time-laden constitution of objects into a source of, rather than an obstacle to, symbolic (and, if desired, monetary) value. In short, *whereas in industrial economies 'increase in age' is tantamount to 'decrease in price', in enrichment economies 'increase in age' is tantamount to 'increase in price'*.

Processes of *industrialization* are inextricably linked to mechanisms of *standardization*.<sup>248</sup> 'The *standard* form is one of the principal innovations on which the development of industrial society has hinged'<sup>249</sup> ever since it came into existence. In industrial settings, methods of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption need to be standardized in order to make the life of commodities relatively *predictable, measurable, and profitable*. By definition, industrial goods are replaceable and reproducible, implying that, in technologically advanced societies, the same types of items can be provided for large amounts of consumers. Industrial econ-

246 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 68 (italics in original): 'voir leur prix *croître avec le temps*, selon un mouvement inversé de celui qui affecte les produits industriels'.

247 Ibid., p. 68 (italics removed from 'collection'): 'travail de sélection [...], la conservation [...], l'inventaire du patrimoine [...], *collection*'.

248 On this point, see *ibid.*, pp. 201–224: 'La forme *standard*' (Chapitre V).

249 Ibid., p. 201 (italics in original): 'L'invention de la forme *standard* est l'une des principales innovations sur lesquelles a reposé le développement de la société industrielle.'

omies, then, depend on '*the use of standards*, which are often associated with brands and models'<sup>250</sup> as well as styles and series. In 'economies of scale'<sup>251</sup>, in which actors aim to secure proportionate savings in costs through increased levels of production, there would be no financial profits without the fabrication of *standard* items, *standard* tastes, and *standard* behaviours.

An illustrative example of industrial standardization are department stores.<sup>252</sup> Within these stores, items are distributed between different departments and sections, each of which contains and presents a multiplicity of objects, which – irrespective of their differences – share one central feature: *substitutability*.<sup>253</sup> In each subdivision, one is expected to find 'a specialized Sales Assistant'<sup>254</sup>, or a 'Department Manager'<sup>255</sup>, able to provide potential buyers with relevant information, useful advice, and competent answers to any product-related questions they may have. A key characteristic of these stores is that the products on offer 'are *detached* from the people who have crafted and dispatched them, in such a way that the buyer cannot attribute a personal identity to them'<sup>256</sup>, apart from the one that they may, or may not, attach to the Sales Assistant who has aided them. The development of local, national, regional, and global brands has been, and continues to be, crucial to the standardization of commodities in capitalist economies. 'This homogenization of the commodity relation to heterogeneous objects constitutes a historic process of primary significance'<sup>257</sup>, which signals a decisive rupture with precapitalist economies.

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250 Ibid., p. 201 (italics added): 'l'usage de standards, qui sont souvent associés à des marques et à des modèles'.

251 Ibid., p. 201: 'les économies d'échelle'.

252 See *ibid.*, p. 231: 'les grands magasins'.

253 Ibid., p. 230 (italics added): 'substituabilité'.

254 Ibid., p. 231: 'un vendeur spécialisé'.

255 Ibid., p. 231: 'le « chef de rayon »'.

256 Ibid., p. 231 (italics added): 'sont détachées des personnes qui les ont confectionnées et acheminées, en sorte que l'acheteur ne peut leur conférer une identité personnelle qu'en les associant à la personne du vendeur'.

257 Ibid., p. 231: 'Cette homogénéisation de la relation marchande à des objets hétérogènes constitue un processus historique de première importance [...].'

The economy of enrichment is shaped by '[t]he plurality of *non-standard things*'<sup>258</sup>, which, on some levels, constitute 'a sort of *outside-of-capitalism*'<sup>259</sup>, in that they *do* escape the constraining logic of standardization and – to the extent that their aesthetic value is deemed more significant than their use value and/or exchange value – *appear* to escape the instrumental logic of commodification. The 'link between contemporary art and collection'<sup>260</sup> lies at the core of the economy of enrichment, illustrating the emphasis that its protagonists place on the aesthetic value, as well as on the real or imagined uniqueness, of the products that they sell and buy. This does not mean that we are witnessing the emergence of a post-capitalist economy, since both the use value and the exchange value of traded items continue to define their destiny. Far from being reducible to the idealistic formula 'art for the sake of art'<sup>261</sup> or the self-referential – let alone autopoietic – logic underlying 'the formation of specific and relatively autonomous fields, within which artists and “creators” compete for recognition'<sup>262</sup>, the economy of enrichment constitutes a social universe shaped by the commodified pursuit of monetarily measurable values of aesthetic and symbolic distinction.

## 11. Capitalism and Critique: Between Reproduction and Transformation

For Boltanski and Esquerre, a comprehensive analysis of the economy of enrichment is inextricably linked to the '*critique of capitalism*'<sup>263</sup>. In this

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258 Ibid., p. 237 (italics added): 'La pluralité des choses non standard'.

259 Ibid., p. 237 (italics in original): 'une sorte de *dehors* du capitalisme'.

260 Ibid., p. 315: 'Le lien entre art contemporain et collection [...]'. On this point, see *ibid.*, pp. 315–325.

261 Ibid., p. 317: 'l'art pour l'art'. On this point, see also, for example: Bourdieu (1968); Bourdieu (1975a); Bourdieu, Boltanski, Castel, and Chamboredon (1965); Bourdieu and Darbel (1969); Gartman (2012); Heinich (2004); Moulin (1987 [1967]); Stewart (2014); Susen (2007), p. 177; Susen (2011b); Susen (2011d), p. 59; Susen (2013d), p. 207; Susen (2016a).

262 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 318: 'la formation de champs spécifiques et « relativement autonomes »'.

263 Ibid., p. 487 (italics added): '*critique du capitalisme*'. On *the critique of capitalism*, see *ibid.*, pp. 209, 236, 380, 477, 482–485, and 487–495. See also, for

respect, three issues take centre stage:

- (a) '*the relationship between capitalism and the state*'<sup>264</sup> and, hence, the confluence of commodification and bureaucratization processes in modern societies;
- (b) '*forms of exploitation* that are put in place within the context of an economy of *enrichment*'<sup>265</sup> and, thus, mechanisms of profit maximization by means of which some actors, or groups of actors, are wealthier than others;
- (c) '*the role of commodification in the displacements of capitalism*'<sup>266</sup>, illustrated in the deterritorialization of capital and monetary flows across the globe.

Boltanski and Esquerre's critical understanding of these issues informs their entire analysis of the economy of enrichment. The following conceptual oppositions are crucial to their account:

- '*State Capitalism*' vs. '*Private Enterprise Capitalism*': The second part of the twentieth century was marked by the transition from 'state capitalism' to 'private enterprise capitalism'.<sup>267</sup> The former illustrates the historical 'importance of the nation-state as a centre of profit'<sup>268</sup>, whereas the latter 'benefits private entities'<sup>269</sup>, elevating them to 'the principal actors of capitalist dynamics'<sup>270</sup>. Contrary

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example, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 68 and 75. In addition, see Fraser (2017), pp. 58, 59, and 62–65.

264 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 487 (italics added): '*la relation entre le capitalisme et l'État*'. Cf. Foucault (2004), esp. pp. 33, 55, 68, and 247, as well as Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 149–152.

265 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 487 (italics added): '*formes d'exploitation qui se mettent en place dans le cadre d'une économie de l'enrichissement*'.

266 Ibid., p. 487 (italics added): '*le rôle de la marchandisation dans les déplacements du capitalisme*'. On Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis '*displacement*', see *ibid.*, pp. 381, 384, 385, 388, 389, 392, 494, 610–611 (of commodities), pp. 294, 388–393 (of buyers), pp. 163, 393–396 (of things), and pp. 9, 94, 149, 190, 223, 375, 376, 378, 491, and 496 (of capitalism). Cf. Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 67, 72, 73, and 76.

267 On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 488.

268 Ibid., p. 488: '*l'importance de l'État-nation comme centre de profit*'.

269 Ibid., p. 488: '*bénéfice des entités privées*'.

270 Ibid., p. 488: '*les principaux acteurs de la dynamique du capitalisme*'.

to alarmist announcements regarding the 'the death of the state'<sup>271</sup>, the nation-state continues to constitute a key institutional apparatus for the concentration of wealth.<sup>272</sup> The pivotal role it plays in both 'the formation and the accumulation of wealth'<sup>273</sup> manifests itself at several levels – for instance, in 'aeronautics, arms industries, and nuclear industries (both civil and military)'<sup>274</sup>. The worldwide influence of 'private entities, super-rich individuals, international firms and markets'<sup>275</sup> – while 'operating at a global level'<sup>276</sup> – may give the impression that nation-states have become 'the principal victims of capitalism'<sup>277</sup>, insofar as their steering capacity has been significantly undermined by seemingly uncontrollable economic forces. Whereas early capitalism is linked to the liberal ideal of 'the wealth of nations'<sup>278</sup>, late capitalism is associated with 'the accumulated wealth of entities or individuals owning capital or firms'<sup>279</sup> acting as 'autonomized'<sup>280</sup> entities. Irrespective of how one seeks to

271 For *recent debates on the relationship between the state and globalization*, see, for example: Amin-Khan (2012); Ashford and Hall (2011); Baraith and Gupta (2010); Berberoglu (2010); Böss (2010); Boyer (1996); Boyer and Drache (1996); Carlson (2012); Chernilo (2007); Chernilo (2008); Cohen (2006); Crouch, Eder, and Tambini (2001); de Larrinaga and Doucet (2010); Farrar and Mayes (2013); Gritsch (2005); Herrschel (2014); Hirst and Thompson (1995); Holton (2011 [1998]); Jessop (2007); Lachmann (2010); Löhr and Wenzlhue-mer (2013); Morris (1997); Nayar (2009); Piketty (2013); Reid, Gill, and Sears (2010); Ripsman and Paul (2010); Rosecrance (1996); Susen (2015a), pp. 132–135; Weiss (1997a); Weiss (1998).

272 On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 488: 'États-nations constituent toujours des cadres au sein desquels se concentrent les richesses'.

273 *Ibid.*, p. 488: 'la formation et l'accumulation des richesses'.

274 *Ibid.*, p. 488: 'l'aéronautique, les industries de l'armement et le nucléaire (civil et militaire)'.

275 *Ibid.*, p. 487 (italics removed from 'super-rich'): 'des entités privées, individus *richissimes*, firmes internationales et marchés'.

276 *Ibid.*, p. 487: 'opérant sur un plan global'.

277 *Ibid.*, p. 487: 'les principales victimes du capitalisme'.

278 See Smith (2008 [1776]).

279 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 487: 'la richesse accumulée par des entités, individus propriétaires de capitaux ou firmes'.

280 *Ibid.*, p. 487: 'autonomisées'.

capture the essence permeating the 'new spirit of capitalism'<sup>281</sup>, the relationship between the state and the market is constantly being redefined.

- '*Collectivization*' vs. '*Individualization*': Within industrial economies, the social class of wage earners is 'framed by *collective conventions* put in place after long struggles'<sup>282</sup>, especially by those that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, leading to the consolidation of state-regulated forms of welfare capitalism. Nowadays, 'each of the enrichment workers is forced to become his or her own exploiter as a *trader with him- or herself*, that is, he or she is, at the same time, a trader and a commodity'<sup>283</sup>. In this context, 'the indefinite extension of individual working time is uncoupled'<sup>284</sup> not only from employees' income but also from 'the distribution of wealth'<sup>285</sup>, including those 'who participate in its creation'<sup>286</sup>. To put it bluntly, 'the economy of enrichment enriches mainly the richest'<sup>287</sup>. Far from being accessible to, let alone contributing to the wealth of, the majority – or, as some call it, 'the 99%'<sup>288</sup> – of the world population, the economy of enrichment constitutes a space of material, symbolic, and financial exchanges shaped by, and aimed at, the most privileged members of society. Consequently, it is marked by what may be described as *commodified hyper-individualism*:

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281 See Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). On this point, see also, for instance: Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010); Chiapello and Fairclough (2002); Fairclough (2002); Gadrey, Hatchuel, Boltanski, and Chiapello (2001); Susen (2012b); Susen (2012a); Susen (2015a), p. 201; Turner (2007).

282 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 489 (italics added): 'encadrée par des conventions collectives mise en place après de longues luttes'.

283 Ibid., p. 489 (italics in original): 'chacun des travailleurs de l'enrichissement est contraint à devenir son propre exploiteur en tant que *commerçant de soi-même*, c'est-à-dire qu'il est à la fois le marchand et la marchandise'.

284 Ibid., p. 489: 'l'extension indéfinie du temps de travail individuel se trouve découplée'.

285 Ibid., p. 489: 'la distribution des richesses'.

286 Ibid., p. 489: 'qui participent à leur création'.

287 Ibid., p. 489: 'l'économie de l'enrichissement enrichit d'abord les plus riches'.

288 See Gould-Wartofsky (2015).

Insofar as *every individual actor* is envisaged as a *centre of autonomous profit*, it may seem utopian to defend the validity of collective arrangements oriented towards the redistribution of income.<sup>289</sup>

Hence, we are confronted with the radical *individualization of both success and failure*. For the ultimate core of constantly monitored, audited, and evaluated performance is the individual, rather than the collective. In industrial economies, by contrast, 'workers can be remunerated in accordance with their working hours and the certified competences that they possess, recognized by collective conventions'<sup>290</sup> and institutional norms. This 'archaic conception of capitalism'<sup>291</sup>, which is based on 'the properly collective nature of the creation of wealth'<sup>292</sup>, is gradually being eroded by the economy of enrichment, which 'relies on other devices'<sup>293</sup>, notably on those perpetuating the logic of hyper-individualism.

- '*Commodification*' vs. '*Non-Commodification*': All capitalist societies – irrespective of whether their economies are governed by liberal or social-democratic, monetarist or fiscalist, laissez-faire or interventionist policies – are characterized by the discrepancy between commodified and non-commodified elements of behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns of existence. Indeed, capitalism works 'at the limits of the commodifiable and the non-commodi-

289 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 490 (italics added): 'Chaque acteur individuel est donc envisagé comme un centre de profit autonome, il peut sembler utopique de défendre la validité de dispositifs collectifs de redistribution des revenus.' As Boltanski and Esquerre point out, there are different explanations of 'profit', whose sources have been 'traced to entrepreneurial innovation (Schumpeter), monopoly effects limiting competition (Chamberlin), action in situations of uncertainty (Knight), or access to power positions from which competition can be paralyzed (Veblen)'; see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 71.

290 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 490: 'les travailleurs peuvent être rétribués en fonction de leurs heures de travail et des compétences certifiées qu'ils possèdent, reconnues par des conventions collectives'.

291 Ibid., p. 491: 'une vision archaïque du capitalisme'.

292 Ibid., p. 491: 'Le caractère proprement collectif de la création de richesse'.

293 Ibid., p. 491: 'recourir à d'autres genres de dispositifs'.

fiable<sup>294</sup> – that is, different types of capitalism generate different degrees of commodification in different areas of social life. These limits are constantly being defined and redefined by discursive processes located in the superstructure of society: while these limits are 'sustained by social and moral norms'<sup>295</sup>, which are solidified in judicial arrangements, they can be transformed, to the extent that they are challenged by particular groups of actors.

- *'Human' vs. 'Non-Human'*: The task of 'separating the commodifiable from the non-commodifiable'<sup>296</sup> goes hand in hand with drawing a distinction between 'the human' and 'the non-human'. In an ideal world, human subjects are exempted from entering 'the cosmos of the commodity'<sup>297</sup>, whereas things, at least under the systemic umbrella of capitalism, are 'commodities by destination'<sup>298</sup>. Of course, a central purpose of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism is to uncover the extent to which, in capitalist societies, subjects are objectified and objects are subjectified, as illustrated in the reification of human relations. The standardization of the social universe is accompanied by the homogenization of people's lifeworlds<sup>299</sup>, owing to their colonization by the functional imperatives of the state and the market. Granted, it is far from obvious whether or not the colonization of everyday life by functionalist rationality involves the gradual dehumanization of humanity. It is unquestionable, however, that the widespread commodification of the relations that human actors establish (not only in relation to the non-human aspects of their existence, but also in relation to one another) poses profound civilizational challenges.

294 Ibid., p. 492: 'aux frontières du marchandisable et du non-marchandisable'. On this point, see also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 75–76.

295 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 492: 'soutenues par des normes sociales et morales'.

296 Ibid., p. 492: 'séparant le marchandisable du non-marchandisable'.

297 Ibid., p. 492: 'cosmos de la marchandise'. On this concept, see also *ibid.*, pp. 81, 110, 158, 160, 162, 227, 234, 237, 375, 378, 399, and 496.

298 Ibid., p. 492: 'marchandises par destination'.

299 See *ibid.*, p. 493: 'à uniformiser le monde vécu'.

## 12. Pragmatism and Structuralism: Between Action and Structure

The theoretical framework that informs Boltanski and Esquerre's sociological exploration in *Enrichissement* can be defined as *pragmatic structuralism*.<sup>300</sup> In essence, this project aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the confluence of 'action and structures'<sup>301</sup> in the unfolding of social life. Before examining the main assumptions underlying this endeavour, let us consider Boltanski and Esquerre's research strategy.

Seeking to shed light on 'the dynamics of capitalism'<sup>302</sup> in the early twenty-first century, Boltanski and Esquerre propose to combine 'two approaches, *historical* and *analytical*'<sup>303</sup>:

- Their approach is *historical* in that it takes into account the development of capitalism in terms of its spatiotemporally contingent specificities.
- Their approach is *analytical* in that it aims to identify key elements of capitalism that undergird different evolutionary stages reflecting its transformative constitution.

In order to deliver such a historico-analytical framework, Boltanski and Esquerre move back and forth 'between different disciplines, different methods, and different fieldworks'<sup>304</sup>. Thus, their inquiry is (a) *inter-disciplinary*, (b) *inter-methodological*, and (c) *inter-investigative*:

- It draws on different *disciplines* (notably sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, philosophy, and history).
- It combines different *methodologies* (especially archival work, primary and secondary data analysis, quantitative and qualitative methods, discourse analysis, and ideology critique).

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300 On the concept of 'pragmatic structuralism' ['structuralisme pragmatique'], see *ibid.*, pp. 16, 495–502, 503, and 522.

301 On this point, see *ibid.*, pp. 487–502: 'Conclusion : Action et structures'.

302 *Ibid.*, p. 13: 'la dynamique du capitalisme'.

303 *Ibid.*, p. 13 (italics added): 'deux approches, historique et analytique'.

304 *Ibid.*, p. 14: 'entre différentes disciplines, entre différentes méthodes et entre différents terrains d'enquête'.

- It covers different *fields of research* (focusing on economic, cultural, political, and demographic factors shaping the development of capitalist societies).

Similar to Bourdieu's project<sup>305</sup>, part of Boltanski and Esquerre's ambition is to transcend counterproductive divisions in the social sciences. Given the thematic focus of their study, a central area of inquiry in which they seek to accomplish this is *economics*:

- On the one hand, there are '*orthodox*'<sup>306</sup> approaches, which insist on the 'autonomy of the economy'<sup>307</sup>, whose logic of functioning can be grasped by virtue of 'mathematics'<sup>308</sup> and statistical methods in a law-uncovering fashion. According to 'orthodox' accounts, the relationship between supply and demand follows 'a classical logic of the market'<sup>309</sup>, in which the price of products is the result of a quasi-natural equilibrium created by the structural relationship between sellers and buyers.
- On the other hand, there are '*heterodox*'<sup>310</sup> approaches, which tend to resort to 'data stemming from other social sciences'<sup>311</sup> and which, consequently, are open not only to recognizing but also to scrutiniz-

305 On *Bourdieu's ambition to overcome counterproductive antinomies in the social sciences*, see, for example: Bourdieu (1980), pp. 29, 43, 46, 77, 78, 87, 103, 135–138, 178, 202, 209, 234, and 242; Bourdieu (1982a), pp. 35–37; Bourdieu (1982b), p. 14; Bourdieu (1982c), p. 36; Bourdieu (1984a), p. 5; Bourdieu (1993 [1984]-c), pp. 55, 57, and 59; Bourdieu (1994a), p. 169; Bourdieu (1994b), p. 3; Bourdieu (1995a), p. 8; Bourdieu (1995b), p. 120; Bourdieu (1997), pp. 16–17, 43, 77, 122, 157, 159–160, 163–167, 185, and 225; Bourdieu (1998), pp. 9 and 110; Bourdieu (2005 [2000]), pp. 210–213; Bourdieu (2001a), pp. 7, 24, and 31; Bourdieu (2001b), pp. 76, 151, and 153; Bourdieu (2002), p. 353; Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1968), pp. 34, 93–94, and 101; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992c), p. 66; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992d), pp. 121–122; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992e), pp. 151 and 162. On this point, see also, for example: Susen (2007), pp. 18, 149–157, 171, 172, 173, 174, 183, 217, 218, 239, 249, 250, 270n21, and 310; Susen (2011c), p. 368, 374, 393, 394, and 402; Susen (2011d), esp. pp. 80–81; Susen (2017a), pp. 140–141 and 149–150n34.

306 See Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 15: 'les « orthodoxes »'.

307 Ibid., p. 15: 'autonomie de l'économie'.

308 Ibid., p. 15: 'mathématiques'.

309 Ibid., p. 108: 'une logique classique du marché'.

310 See *ibid.*, p. 15: 'les « hétérodoxes »'.

311 Ibid., p. 15: 'données venues des autres sciences sociales'.

ing the numerous dimensions influencing both the constitution and the evolution of the economy. According to 'heterodox' accounts, there are material and symbolic goods whose price depends on 'a value or an evaluation'<sup>312</sup> based on socio-culturally contingent criteria – such as reputation, recognition, accolades, and 'hierarchies of qualities *via* rankings and prize lists'<sup>313</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, Boltanski and Esquerre favour the latter over the former perspective. Hence, they endorse the idea of a constructive *dialogue between economics and other social-scientific disciplines*:

Our main worry was to detach ourselves from the often difficult relations that sociology and anthropology maintain with economics, leading a number of sociologists and anthropologists sometimes to ignore economics (as if there were an autonomy of *relations of symbolic exchanges* with regard to *relations of the exchanges of goods*) [...].<sup>314</sup>

In order to overcome the limitations of such a narrow vision, which is based on a simplistic opposition between *social constructivism* and *economic positivism*<sup>315</sup>, it is – in Boltanski and Esquerre's eyes – necessary to bridge the gap between different epistemic comfort zones. As anticipated above, they set out to achieve this by means of a *pragmatic structuralism*.<sup>316</sup> One of the noteworthy advantages of such an approach, they argue, is that it 'permits to articulate, at the same time, a *social history* and

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312 Ibid., p. 108: 'd'une « valeur » ou d'une « évaluation »'.

313 Ibid., p. 108 (italics in original): 'hiérarchies des qualités *via* des classements ou des palmarès'.

314 Ibid., p. 15 (italics added): 'Notre souci principal a été de nous dégager des relations souvent difficiles qu'entretiennent la sociologie et l'anthropologie avec l'économie et qui conduisent nombre de sociologues et d'anthropologues tantôt à ignorer l'économie (comme s'il y avait une autonomie des relations d'échanges symboliques par rapport aux relations d'échanges de biens) [...].'

315 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 16: 'positivisme (fréquentes en économie) et [...] constructionnisme (plus fréquentes en sociologie)'.

316 On *the concept of 'pragmatic structuralism'* ['structuralisme pragmatique'], see *ibid.*, pp. 16, 495–502, 503, and 522.

an analysis of *cognitive competences* that actors mobilize in order to act<sup>317</sup>. Such an explanatory framework studies reality from both a *structural* and a *pragmatic* (or *normative-pragmatic*) point of view.<sup>318</sup>

This twofold project, then, is concerned with both the *systemic* and the *cognitive* components of human life forms in general and of capitalist societies in particular:

- At the *systemic* level, it attempts to shed light on '*structures* in the sense that it examines the *configurations of constraints*, whose interaction produces a *field of forces*'<sup>319</sup>.
- At the *cognitive* level, it sets itself the task of drawing attention to the pivotal civilizational role played by '*the competences* upon which *actors* draw when they have to *act*'<sup>320</sup>.

Thus, Boltanski and Esquerre aim 'to reconcile the use of two types of approaches that are often conceived of as antagonistic'<sup>321</sup>: the *systems* approach and the *pragmatic* approach.<sup>322</sup>

The former designates a *macro*-sociological undertaking, focusing on sets of *structural relations*, whose influence largely escapes ordinary actors' common-sense perception of reality. The latter refers to a *micro*-sociological venture, which is '*closer to actors*'<sup>323</sup> in that it explores the everyday '*conditions of action and the processes of reflexivity*'<sup>324</sup> by which large proportions of their performances are guided. The former requires 'catch-

317 Ibid., p. 16 (italics added): '[...] permet d'articuler à la fois une histoire sociale et une analyse des compétences cognitives que les acteurs mettent en œuvre pour agir'.

318 See *ibid.*, p. 197: 'à la fois d'un point de vue structural [...] et du point de vue d'une pragmatique [...] d'une « pragmatique normative »'.

319 Ibid., p. 189 (italics added): 'des structures au sens où elle prend pour objet des configurations de contraintes dont l'interaction produit un champ de forces'.

320 Ibid., p. 189 (italics added): 'compétences que les acteurs mettent en œuvre quand ils doivent agir'.

321 Ibid., p. 496: 'concilier le recours à deux types d'approches souvent traitées comme antagonistes'.

322 See *ibid.*, p. 496: 'l'approche systémique' et 'l'approche pragmatique'.

323 Ibid., p. 189 (italics added): 'plus près des acteurs'.

324 Ibid., p. 189: 'conditions de l'action et les processus de réflexivité'.

all descriptions covering the *long term*<sup>325</sup>, thereby unearthing – 'in a causal fashion'<sup>326</sup> and at 'a macrohistorical level'<sup>327</sup> – 'the necessity generated by a *set of constraints* within a context of competition'<sup>328</sup>. The latter centres on '*reflexive individuals*'<sup>329</sup> and, in many cases, on 'the *decisions* of a small number of actors'<sup>330</sup> when seeking to explain societal trends and tendencies.

The former 'endeavours to shed light on *large-scale* processes'<sup>331</sup>, scrutinizing the extent to which they are, on a '*systemic* scale'<sup>332</sup>, permeated by structural asymmetries and power relations.<sup>333</sup> The latter centres on *small-scale* processes and 'seeks to grasp people's action by analysing the *cognitive* structures that sustain their exchanges'<sup>334</sup>. The former places the emphasis on the '*constraints* surrounding their field of action'<sup>335</sup>, in 'a historical sense'<sup>336</sup> of constant exposure to constellations of variables shaping behavioural, ideological, and institutional elements of human existence. The latter grapples 'not only with actors, but also with the dispositional structures that motivate their actions and give them *meaning*'<sup>337</sup>, which cannot be dissociated from the 'tests'<sup>338</sup> [*épreuves*] they undergo when making judgments about objective, normative, and/or subjective elements of their

325 Ibid., p. 191 (italics added): 'les descriptions surplombantes portant sur la longue durée'.

326 Ibid., p. 191: 'de façon causale'.

327 Ibid., p. 191: 'un niveau macrohistorique'.

328 Ibid., p. 191 (italics added): 'la nécessité engendrée par un jeu de contraintes dans un contexte de concurrence'.

329 Ibid., p. 191 (italics added): 'individus réflexifs'.

330 Ibid., p. 191 (italics added): 'les décisions d'un petit nombre d'acteurs'.

331 Ibid., p. 496 (italics added): 'envisage de mettre en lumière des processus de large ampleur'.

332 Ibid., p. 496 (italics added): 'l'échelle systémique'.

333 See *ibid.*, p. 496: 'les asymétries et les rapports de force'.

334 Ibid., p. 496 (italics added): 'vise à éclairer l'action des personnes en analysant les structures cognitives qui soutiennent leurs échanges'.

335 Ibid., p. 496 (italics added): 'des contraintes environnant leur champ d'action'.

336 Ibid., p. 496: 'un sens historique'.

337 Ibid., p. 496 (italics added): 'non seulement les acteurs, mais aussi les dispositifs qui motivent leurs actions et leur donnent sens'.

338 Ibid., p. 496: 'épreuves'. On *Boltanski and Esquerre's emphasis on the crucial role of 'tests' in the construction of the economy*, see also, for instance, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 68. In addition, see Fraser (2017), p. 60.

lifeworlds. The former takes into consideration 'a multitude of external so-called "social" variables'<sup>339</sup>, seeking to uncover 'the centre of *power relations* and *structures of domination*'<sup>340</sup> by which human practices are influenced or, in extreme cases, even determined. The latter focuses on the *communicative 'coordination between actors'*<sup>341</sup> and, thus, on the more or less *purposeful organization* of their practices.

The project of *pragmatic structuralism*, then, takes into account, on the one hand, 'global determinations'<sup>342</sup> of societal developments (at the macro-level) and, on the other hand, 'practical necessities of everyday life'<sup>343</sup> (at the micro-level). It contends that the very possibility of 'critique depends on actors' competence'<sup>344</sup> to engage with reality in a cognitive, reflexive, and discursive manner, enabling them to call the legitimacy of social arrangements into question and to shape their practices accordingly.

In short, the conceptual and methodological challenge faced by Boltanski and Esquerre consists in *combining, cross-fertilizing, and integrating macro-sociological structuralism and micro-sociological pragmatism*:

To many people, the expression *pragmatic structuralism* may appear to be a sort of oxymoron. In order to defend its validity, it is imperative to clarify the relationship between *structure and experience*, that is, the relationship between *structure and history*.<sup>345</sup>

Such an enterprise may permit us to dissolve the 'apparent incompatibility between a structural approach and a pragmatic approach'<sup>346</sup> in

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339 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 497: 'd'une multitude de variables externes dites « sociales »'.

340 Ibid., p. 497 (italics added): 'l'axe des rapports de force et des structures de domination'.

341 Ibid., p. 497 (italics added): 'coordination entre des acteurs'.

342 Ibid., p. 495: 'des déterminations globales'.

343 Ibid., p. 495: 'les exigences pratiques de leur vie quotidienne'.

344 Ibid., p. 495: 'La critique dépend de la compétence d'acteurs'.

345 Ibid., p. 497 (italics added; except for '*structuralisme pragmatique*', which appears in italics in the original): 'L'expression du *structuralisme pragmatique* paraîtra à beaucoup être une sorte d'oxymore. Pour en défendre la validité, il faut clarifier la relation entre structure et expérience, c'est-à-dire la relation entre structure et histoire.'

346 Ibid., p. 497: 'L'apparente incompatibilité entre une approche structurale et

the social sciences. This ambitious undertaking obliges us to recognize both the *historicity of structures* and the *structurality of history*: structures evolve across spatiotemporally contingent contexts, just as history unfolds through the interaction between different layers of structures. Irrespective of whether one considers social, cultural, political, judicial, demographic, or economic dimensions – *all* human life forms are permeated by the convergence of structurality and historicity.

In the social world, the existence of *structures* – notwithstanding their typological specificity – can be regarded 'as a prerequisite and even as a [pre]condition for all *experience*'<sup>347</sup>. One may even go as far as to suggest that, in the human universe, structures occupy a 'transcendental position'<sup>348</sup>, given that they are 'anchored in a collective entity'<sup>349</sup>, such as community or society, whose building blocks are passed from generation to generation by virtue of rituals, traditions, customs, and conventions – that is, by *culture*.<sup>350</sup> Social life, then, is sustained by 'circular relations between two levels, that is, "the objective" and "the subjective"'<sup>351</sup>, to which one may add 'the normative'. These realms of existence – that is, (a) *objectivity*, (b) *normativity*, and (c) *subjectivity* – are foundational in the sense that human experience is constituted by all three of them.<sup>352</sup>

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une approche pragmatique'.

347 Ibid., p. 498 (italics added): 'la structure comme un préalable et même comme une condition de toute expérience'.

348 Ibid., p. 498: 'position transcendantale'.

349 Ibid., p. 498: 'ancrée dans une entité collective'.

350 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 498: 'des traditions ou des « cultures »'. Cf. Susen (2007), pp. 287–292. Cf. also Sperber (1996).

351 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 498: 'des relations circulaires entre deux instances, dites « l'objectif » et le « subjectif »'.

352 *On the relationship between the objective, normative, or subjective dimensions of human existence*, see, for instance: Susen (2012b), p. 712 (see point c); Susen (2014 [2012]), p. 192 (see point c); Susen (2014c), pp. 349–350 (see point 13); Susen (2015a), pp. 101–103; Susen (2016e); Susen (2016b), pp. 50, 51, 52, 59, 62, 65, 68, 70, 72, 73, and 74; Susen (2016f), pp. 122, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, and 136; Susen (2017a), pp. 139, 140, and 146; Susen (2017c), pp. 104, 115, and 120; Susen (2017d), pp. 109–110; Susen (2017e), pp. 351, 362, 364, and 367; Susen (2017f), pp. 15, 37, 43, 54, 61, 63, 70, 78, 96n431, and 97n449.

Of course, the 'flow of life'<sup>353</sup> can be interrupted when actors are faced with situations of crisis and/or with unexpected circumstances.<sup>354</sup> It is in those moments that – instead of relying on implicit, taken-for-granted, and intuitive knowledge – they may be obliged to develop and to draw upon explicit, discursive, and reflexive knowledge. In fact, '*reflexivity*', when it detaches itself from *experience*'<sup>355</sup>, elevates actors – if only metaphorically – from the conditions in which they find themselves immersed. By virtue of their reflexivity, which is embedded in their linguistic capacity, actors are able to attribute meaning to the world – including 'their previously lived experiences'<sup>356</sup> – on the basis of 'language games'<sup>357</sup>, in which they engage in order to establish a symbolically mediated and hermeneutically informed relationship with their natural and social environment as well as with themselves.

*'Both experiences and structures are anchored within the "scheme of existence".'*<sup>358</sup> In other words, human existence is unimaginable without the confluence of experiential processes and structural constellations. This is not to suggest, however, that actors are always in a position to mobilize

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353 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 498: 'flux de la vie'. In this regard, the *relationship between 'pragmatism' and 'sociology'* is central. See, for example: Durkheim (1955); Durkheim (1983 [1955]); Durkheim (2010 [1898/1924]). In addition, see, for instance: Baert (2003); Baert and Silva (2013); Baert and Turner (2007); Deledalle (1959); Joas (1984); Karsenti (2012); Lapoujade (1997); Rawls (1997); Susen (2010c).

354 On this point, see Susen (2007), pp. 216 and 241. See also Cordero (2017) and Susen (2017c).

355 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 499 (italics added): 'la réflexivité, quand elle se détache de l'expérience'.

356 Ibid., p. 499: 'expériences vécues antérieures'.

357 Ibid., p. 500: 'jeux de langage'. Cf. Fraser (2017), p. 60 (italics added): 'Value, a Wittgensteinian might say, belongs to the *language game* of justifying and criticizing prices.' On Boltanski and Esquerre's *conception of language*, see, for instance, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 68. On the *concept of 'language game'*, see also, for example: Susen (2007), pp. 75 and 242; Susen (2011d), pp. 58 and 78; Susen (2012a), pp. 291, 295, and 313; Susen (2013d), pp. 202, 209, 212, 220, 221, 224, 225, 226, and 228; Susen (2013e), pp. 332, 338, 341, 344, and 371; Susen (2013b), p. 85; Susen (2015a), pp. 7, 8, 35, 44, 56, 60, 62, 63, 78, 101, 147, 171, 181, 184, 193, 200, 215, 231, 245, 248, 250, and 280; Susen (2016c), p. 202.

358 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 500 (italics added): 'Expériences et structures sont ancrées, les unes et les autres, dans le « plan d'existence ».'

their cognitive dispositions to attach meaning to their immersion in the world in an *insightful*, let alone *empowering*, fashion. In fact, often human subjects apply cognitive schemes to their experiences that prevent them from relating to and acting upon their environment in a perceptive and self-realizing manner.<sup>359</sup> This is particularly the case when they are faced with major changes that force them to confront high degrees of uncertainty.<sup>360</sup>

One need not be a phenomenologist to acknowledge that people's experiences of reality are shaped by 'what they conceive of as reality'<sup>361</sup>. *Pragmatic structuralism*, therefore, may be described as a form of *phenomenological structuralism*. For it not only takes people's interpretations of reality seriously, but also seeks to shed light on the extent to which their meaning-generating practices contribute to both the symbolic *and* the material construction of their lifeworlds. While they are 'constantly immersed in the universe of commodities'<sup>362</sup>, actors contribute to its reproduction by relying on perceptions and misperceptions, conceptions and misconceptions, representations and misrepresentations of that universe.

Human subjects possess 'a tacit competence'<sup>363</sup> based on 'interiorized structures'<sup>364</sup>, enabling them 'to orient themselves in the universe of commodities'<sup>365</sup>. Regardless of whether one conceptualizes the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in terms of '*habitus*' and '*field*' (à la Bourdieu) or in terms of '*competence/experience*' and '*structure*' (à la Boltanski and Esquerre), the development of the social world rests on the dialectics of internalization and externalization. Without a 'minimal

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359 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 500: '[...] les acteurs appliquent à leurs expériences des schèmes qui sont impuissants à leur ouvrir la voie d'une interprétation permettant la poursuite d'une interaction avec l'environnement'.

360 On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 500: '[...] et cela particulièrement quand la réalité est confrontée à des changements majeurs qui mettent directement l'expérience au contact du monde, c'est-à-dire de l'incertain, voire de l'inconnu'.

361 *Ibid.*, p. 9: 'de ce qu'ils conçoivent comme la réalité'.

362 *Ibid.*, p. 9: 'l'univers de la marchandise'.

363 *Ibid.*, p. 9: 'une compétence tacite'.

364 *Ibid.*, p. 9: 'structures, intériorisées'.

365 *Ibid.*, p. 9: 's'orienter dans l'univers de la marchandise'.

competence<sup>366</sup> to *internalize* key aspects of their positionally structured environments and to *externalize* key aspects of their dispositionally structured bodily apparatus, 'actors would be simply disoriented'<sup>367</sup> and incapable of taking part in *any* type of inter- and transactions, including 'economic transactions'<sup>368</sup>.

To be sure, praxeological capacities may be 'unequally distributed'<sup>369</sup> and, hence, asymmetrically structured.<sup>370</sup> Notwithstanding their uneven supply among actors, however, the existence of socio-ontological competences – that is, of foundational capacities with which human actors need to be equipped in order to be able to contribute to shaping their life forms – is a precondition for the consolidation of social order.<sup>371</sup> There is no social 'field of possibles'<sup>372</sup> without a series of human competences allowing for the realization of objective, normative, and/or subjective potential.

For Boltanski and Esquerre, then, the unfolding of social life is unthinkable without the pivotal 'role of *discourse*, regardless of whether it takes an *analytical* or a *narrative* form'<sup>373</sup>, upon which actors draw in order to attribute *meaning* to their lives and the world by which they are surrounded. In the human universe, power relations are permeated by discursive

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366 Ibid., p. 12: 'compétence minimale'.

367 Ibid., p. 12 (translation modified): 'un acteur serait simplement égaré et incapable'.

368 Ibid., p. 12: 'transactions marchandes'.

369 Ibid., p. 109: 'inégalement distribuées'.

370 On this point, see Susen (2013d) and Susen (2013e).

371 On this point, see Susen (2007), Chapter 10. See also Susen (2016e).

372 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 443: 'le champ des possibles'. On this point, see also, for example: Bourdieu (1979a), pp. 52, 55, 122, 230, and 536; Bourdieu (2000 [1997]), p. 151; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992a), pp. 152–153. In addition, see, for instance: Susen (2007), pp. 174–175 and 244; Susen (2011c), pp. 369 and 385; Susen (2013d), p. 228; Susen (2014c), p. 341; Susen (2014d), p. 690; Susen (2014e), p. 102 and 105; Susen (2014 [2015]), pp. 319, 322, and 325; Susen (2015a), pp. 178–179; Susen (2016a), p. 59; Susen (2017a), pp. 136 and 148n13.

373 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 497 (italics added): 'rôle du discours, qu'il prenne une forme analytique ou narrative'. On *the distinction between 'analytical form' (or 'analytical presentation') and 'narrative form' (or 'narrative presentation')*, see also, for example: *ibid.*, pp. 167–170; Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), p. 69.

– or, if one prefers, justificatory or noumenal – practices.<sup>374</sup> Thus, 'at the heart of power lies the power to develop a discourse about things'<sup>375</sup>. In capitalist societies, such a discourse – or, rather, set of discourses – involves the assumption that things have not only a *use value*, a *symbolic value*, or possibly a *personal value*, but also, crucially, an *exchange value*. Indeed, in any market economy, the worth of a commodity is defined by a *combination* of types of value, which may be discursively invoked by subjects capable of engaging in purposive processes of interaction and transaction.

In light of the above, there is no point in replacing *pragmatic structuralism* with *systemic structuralism*<sup>376</sup> if such a paradigm shift is motivated by the conviction that the only persuasive 'metanarrative'<sup>377</sup> is the one that puts systemic-structural constellations at the centre of the social universe. Instead of advocating such a narrow view, Boltanski and Esquerre, while insisting on the structural determinacy of human sociality, stress the vital role played by actors' critical and reflexive capacities.

### Limitations

Let us, by way of conclusion, reflect on the *limitations* of Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis. For the sake of clarity, it makes sense to follow the thematic structure of the preceding sections:

1. Boltanski and Esquerre offer a compelling interpretation of the central place *commodities* occupy in capitalist societies. Yet, their inquiry contains

374 See, for instance: Forst (2015a); Forst (2015b); Susen (2018a). In addition, see, for example: Susen (2007); Susen (2008a); Susen (2008b); Susen (2009); Susen (2011a); Susen (2012a); Susen (2012b); Susen (2013d); Susen (2013e); Susen (2014a); Susen (2014e); Susen (2014b); Susen (2016c); Susen (2016e).

375 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 497 (italics added): 'au cœur du pouvoir, se trouve le pouvoir de développer un discours sur les choses'. On this point, see also, for instance: Foucault (2002 [1966]); Foucault (2002 [1969]); Foucault (1980); Foucault (1988). In addition, see, for example: Habermas (1987 [1985]); Kögler (1996); Kögler (1996 [1992]); Susen (2008a); Susen (2008b); Susen (2013d), esp. pp. 205–208 and 223–225; Susen (2014b), esp. pp. 12–13; Susen (2014e); Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 2 and pp. 117–118; Susen (2017a); Susen (2018a); Susen (2018c); Susen (2018d); Torfing (1999).

376 On the concept of '*systemic structuralism*' ['*structuralisme systémique*'], see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 189–195, 496, and 500–502.

377 Ibid., p. 501: 'grand récit'.

little in the way of a systematic engagement with the question of whether or not there are *non-capitalist commodities* (and, indeed, *non-capitalist forms of commodity fetishism*). If so, a critical approach to reification should identify the qualitative differences between capitalist and non-capitalist commodities. In addition, it remains far from obvious what exactly determines which *type of value* (for instance, use value, exchange value, monetary value, personal value, reputational value, symbolic value, historic value, etc.) constitutes the *preponderant* force in defining the price of a commodity in a *particular* transactional context. Arguably, the worth of a commodity is the result not only of the *confluence of different types of value* but also of the *confluence of objective, normative, and subjective criteria*. A sociology of enrichment needs to provide a comprehensive account of the multifaceted composition of commodity value.

2. Boltanski and Esquerre rightly insist on the pivotal role played by *justification and critique* in the construction of prices and values. Yet, they tend to conceive of justification and critique as *system-immanent*, rather than *system-transcendent*, resources.<sup>378</sup> The question remains, however, to what extent the normative forces of justification and critique can serve not only *corrective* (and, ultimately, *affirmative*) but also *transformative* (and, potentially, *subversive*) functions, enabling actors to challenge – and, if required, to alter – the rules of the economic game in a *radical* manner.
3. Boltanski and Esquerre draw a *distinction between 'things' and 'persons'*, which is crucial to the values attached to the lifespan of objects and subjects. It is striking, however, that they fail to reflect on the degree to which *traditional boundaries* – such as those established between 'the non-human' and 'the human', 'the natural' and 'the cultural', 'the material' and 'the symbolic' – are *increasingly blurred*. Given the interconnectedness of integral elements of the world, it appears that classical conceptual dichotomies do not capture the ontological

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378 On this point, see Fraser (2017), p. 58: 'critique today is weak and disabled, its "artistic" strand recuperated and its "social" strand disoriented by a new type of capitalism'. On this issue, see also Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). In addition, see Boltanski (2009a), Susen (2012b), and Susen (2014 [2012]).

intertwinement of constitutive facets of our existence. It would have been interesting to scrutinize the extent to which, paradoxically, the rise of the enrichment economy has contributed to *both* the hardening *and* the blurring of traditional boundaries – not least because those participating in its exchange chains may use *eclectic* valorization criteria, which, in many cases, defy the stifling logic of semantic enclosure.

4. Boltanski and Esquerre offer an astute assessment of the social conditions experienced by cultural workers in the economy of enrichment, emphasizing that their *cultural capital*, which forms the basis of their commercial competences, is essential to their relative success or failure. It is noticeable, however, that their investigation does not entail a thorough consideration of *other* forms of capital that *also* determine the asymmetrical positioning of actors in the economy of enrichment. In stratified societies, power relations are shaped by access to, engagement with, and employment of *numerous* forms of capital: social capital, cultural capital, educational capital, linguistic capital, political capital, economic capital, erotic capital, reputational capital, symbolic capital – to mention only a few.<sup>379</sup> A critical sociology of enrichment needs to expose the extent to which, in terms of both opportunity and outcome, commodified exchange mechanisms are influenced by *various types of capital*, representing the multidimensional resources with which interconnected actors are equipped.
5. Boltanski and Esquerre give an insightful account of the spatiotemporal contingency permeating the *critique of capitalism*, which reached different levels of intensity and radicality in different historical contexts. As they point out, it climaxed during the 1968 protests, but it was significantly weakened by the collapse of state socialism in 1989/1990. The systemic capacity of capitalism to overcome crisis must not be underestimated, as illustrated in the hegemonic influence of neoliberal regimes of governance across the world. What the two French sociologists have not looked into, however, is the degree to

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<sup>379</sup> On this point, see, for example: Bourdieu (1975b); Bourdieu (1979b); Bour-

which *new ideological narratives* may evolve in the medium-term future, permitting individual and collective actors not only to call the seemingly triumphant status of global capitalism into question, but also to provide a credible alternative. The 'new spirit of capitalism'<sup>380</sup> may require a 'new spirit of anti- and/or post-capitalism'<sup>381</sup> to convert the economy of enrichment into a sphere of exchanges available to the many, rather than the few. And yet, it is far from clear how the creative energy, resourceful capacities, and cross-sectional potential of the 'multitude of actors'<sup>382</sup> can be mobilized in order to demonstrate that there *is* an alternative to the global hegemony of capitalism.

A broader problem arising in this regard relates to the question of whether or not Boltanski and Esquerre *overstate* the impact of enrichment economies – not only on social practices and structures, but also on collective struggles and antagonisms in the twenty-first century. They tend to *overestimate* the influence of the 'collection form' (enrichment economies) and to *underestimate* the influence of the 'standard form' (industrial economies), the 'trend form' (fashion economies),

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dieu (1986); Bourdieu (2013 [1978]). See also, for instance: Albrecht (2002); Aldridge (1998); Beasley-Murray (2000); Calhoun (1995); Gouanvic (2005); Hakim (2011); Hakim (2012); Herz (1996); Neveu (2013); Reay (2004); Robbins (2005); Shilling (2004); Sullivan (2001); Susen (2007), chapters 5–8; Susen (2011b), pp. 181, 194, and 195; Susen (2011c), pp. 368, 369, 370, 372, 384, 386, 387, 389, 390, 392, 403, 406, 408, and 409; Susen (2013d), pp. 210, 214–215, 219, 222, 226, and 229; Susen (2013e), pp. 324–325, 329, 349, 354, 370, and 371; Susen (2016a); Susen (2014e), pp. 105 and 107; Susen (2016b), pp. 53 and 71; Susen (2017a), pp. 135, 141–142, 143, and 146; Susen and Turner (2011), pp. xix, xxiii, and xxvi; Swain (2003); Urban (2003); Verter (2003); Wacquant (2004 [1997]); Wacquant (2013).

380 See Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). On this point, see also, for instance: Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010); Chiapello and Fairclough (2002); Fairclough (2002); Gadrey, Hatchuel, Boltanski, and Chiapello (2001); Susen (2012b); Susen (2012a); Susen (2015a), p. 201; Turner (2007).

381 On this point, see, for example: Browne and Susen (2014); Byrne (2012); Calhoun (2012); Castells (2011); Castells (2012); della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, and Reiter (2006); Holloway (1998); Holloway (2003); Holloway (2005 [2002]); Holloway (2010); Holloway, Matamoros Ponce, and Tischler Visquerra (2009); Holloway and Susen (2013); McDonald (2006); Pleyers (2010); Santos (2006); Streeck (2011); Susen (2008a); Susen (2008b); Susen (2010a); Susen (2012a); Taibo (2011); Torres López, Garzón, Ortega, Almenara, Roitman, and Tuduri (2011); Velasco (2011).

382 Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), p. 485: 'multitude d'acteurs'.

and the 'asset form' (financial economies) on contemporary societies. Granted, they rightly insist that these four principal forms of valorization hold sway in 'integral capitalism'<sup>383</sup>. This does not absolve them from the task of recognizing, however, that *all four* play a vital role in shaping power dynamics in advanced capitalist societies. The asymmetrical distribution of power under 'integral capitalism' hinges not *only* on 'exploitation through enrichment', but *also* on 'homogenization through industrialization', 'normalization through fashionization', and 'expropriation through financialization'.<sup>384</sup> The sociological 'critique of commodities'<sup>385</sup>, in order to be genuinely comprehensive, should avoid giving undue weight to one dimension, at the expense of acknowledging the far-reaching significance of the others.

6. Boltanski and Esquerre's study demonstrates that the *contradiction between authenticity and inauthenticity* lies at the core of the enrichment economy. This contradiction is reflected in the *tension between 'anti-market' attitudes and 'pro-market' actions*. It may (or may not) be possible to bridge the gap between, on the one hand, the pursuit of *authenticity, market-transcendence, and ends-in-themselves* and, on the other hand, the reality of *inauthenticity, market-dependence, and means-to-an-end*. Irrespective of whether or not one considers the task of resolving this discrepancy a worthwhile endeavour, however, a more fundamental issue concerns the very distinction between 'authenticity' and 'inauthenticity'. The term 'authenticity' is commonly

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383 On the concept of 'integral capitalism', see, for example: *ibid.*, pp. 26, 375, 399–400, and 566; Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b), pp. 68 and 73–75.

384 For instance, Fraser criticizes Boltanski and Esquerre for, in her view, failing to shed light on the 'unacknowledged *asymmetry* between *finance* on the one hand, and *industry* and *enrichment* on the other'; see Fraser (2017), pp. 63–64 (italics added). See also *ibid.*, p. 64 (italics in original): 'Whereas exploitation through enrichment must remain a relatively restricted, even provincial concern, *expropriation through financialization* is potentially of very broad interest.' On this point, see also Fraser (2016) and Lapavistas (2013). In addition, one may ask to what extent Boltanski and Esquerre's account applies more to some countries (e.g. France, possibly also Italy and Spain) than to others (e.g. Germany, whose economy continues to have a strong manufacturing base).

385 See the subtitle of Boltanski and Esquerre's book: 'Une critique de la marchandise'; see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a).

employed to designate the genuineness of physical attributes (*objective* level), social constellations (*normative* level), and/or personal intentions (*subjective* level). Hence, words such as 'originality', 'legitimacy', and 'sincerity' are often used to describe particular states of 'authenticity'. One need not be an Adornian philosopher to be suspicious of 'the jargon of authenticity'<sup>386</sup>. Regardless of whether or not one shares Adorno's critique of Heidegger's obsession with 'authenticity' [*Eigentlichkeit*], it is somewhat disappointing that Boltanski and Esquerre's book does *not* contain a concise definition, let alone a detailed explanation and an in-depth discussion, of this term.<sup>387</sup> *The experience of authenticity may be enriching, just as the experience of enrichment may be authentic.* Given the pivotal role that the relationship between 'authenticity' and 'enrichment' plays in Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry, their readers deserve to know what exactly the authors have in mind when attributing a special place to both the latter *and* the former in their investigation. One may allude to *objective* criteria (realism), *normative* criteria (constructivism), and/or *subjective* criteria (perspectivism) when making a claim about the (in)authenticity of something or somebody. A critical sociology of enrichment needs to flesh out the various (mis)understandings of (in)authenticity, in order to shed light on the wide-ranging parameters defining value creation in capitalist societies.

7. For Boltanski and Esquerre, a resource that is of supreme importance to the economy of enrichment is *the past*. Historicity constitutes a key factor in the valorization of luxury goods: the older a product, the higher its symbolic and monetary value. Unlike most industrial

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386 Adorno (2003 [1964]).

387 On *Boltanski and Esquerre's use of the term 'authenticity'*, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a), pp. 31, 34, 174, 209, 265, 268, 269, 283, 302, 331, 337, 341, 363, 393, 568, and 596. On *the concept of 'authenticity'*, see, for example: Adorno (2003 [1964]); Cooke (1997); Feldman (2015); Fleming (2009); Lindholm (2008); Varga (2012). See also, for instance: Susen (2007), pp. 109, 139, and 184; Susen (2010c), p. 75; Susen (2011d), pp. 60–61 and 70; Susen (2012a), pp. 311 and 325n170; Susen (2013e), p. 358; Susen (2015a), pp. 41, 42, 99, 230, 245, 259, 264; Susen (2016a), pp. 54, 73, and 95; Susen (2016b), p. 74; Susen (2016f), pp. 124, 125, 129, 135, and 136.

items, which tend to lose value over time, goods traded in the economy of enrichment tend to gain worth the longer they have existed. A central issue that Boltanski and Esquerre could have examined in more detail, however, concerns the ways in which goods can be situated *simultaneously* in (a) industrial economies of 'standard forms', (b) enrichment economies of 'collection forms', (c) fashion economies of 'trend forms', and (d) financial economies of 'asset forms'. The values attributed to an item may differ across 'form-specific' economies and across spatiotemporal contexts. To be precise, the set of values attached to a product is contingent not only on its historicity (that is, on *how long* it has been used for), but also on its socio-geographic location (that is, on *where* it is being used and *where* it is being sold).<sup>388</sup>

The past of a product may either increase or decrease its value, depending not only on its objective properties (*realism*), but also on the ways in which its worth is normatively assembled by members of cultural communities (*constructivism*) and/or subjectively perceived by performatively engaged individuals (*perspectivism*). In brief, it is not always obvious in which particular economy a product is placed, let alone by which set of criteria its value can, or should, be judged.

8. Boltanski and Esquerre highlight the *stratified constitution* of society. In this respect, the divisive function of *social hierarchies* constructed around conceptual *binaries* is crucial: 'rich' vs. 'poor' (class), 'male' vs. 'female' (gender), 'white' vs. 'non-white' (ethnicity), 'young' vs. 'old' (age), and 'abled' vs. 'disabled' (ability) – to mention only a few. Power relations – which, in their asymmetrical forms, can be converted into modes of domination – permeate the *multiple* ways in which different types of wealth are distributed. It is not self-evident, however, *why* human societies produce inequalities of different kinds, let alone *why* most of them generate binary patterns of material and symbolic differentiation, on the basis of which structural asymmetries are

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388 For instance, an old Chevrolet may have (a) a *high use value*, (b) a *medium exchange value*, and (c) a *low symbolic value* in twenty-first-century Havana, but (a) a *low use value*, (b) a *medium exchange value*, and (c) a *high symbolic value* in post-1989 Dresden.

justified. Constructivist truisms (such as 'anything that can be *constructed* can be *deconstructed* and *reconstructed*'<sup>389</sup>) will not get us very far in minimizing the detrimental effects, let alone in grasping the origins, of social inequality. Boltanski and Esquerre's interdisciplinary spirit, which seeks to combine insights from various areas of research in the *humanities and social sciences*, has to be extended to knowledge produced in the *natural sciences*, in order to demonstrate how social inequality can be not only theoretically explained but also practically challenged by recognizing the *multiple factors* shaping its existence.<sup>390</sup>

9. Boltanski and Esquerre's study is a powerful reminder of the deep *ambivalence of the modern condition*. For modern life forms are characterized by the contradictory confluence of positive and negative, bright and dark, empowering and disempowering dimensions. Experiences of alienation, anonymity, and anomie belong to the condition of modernity no less than experiences of fulfilment, connectedness, and community. The sociologically more difficult question, however, is to what degree these tension-laden experiences are integral to *all* technologically advanced large-scale societies. Admittedly, different societies are separated by significant behavioural, ideological, and institutional specificities. If *all* of them – in particular, capitalist *and* state-socialist formations – are marked by the aforementioned confluence of empowering and disempowering experiences, a key task for critical sociologists consists in identifying not only the necessary conditions for human self-realization, but also the root causes behind the emergence of social pathologies. The uncomfortable truth to which we may have to face up, then, is that many of the rather unpleasant aspects of social reality, far from being reducible to historically contingent consequences of modernity, are built into the human condition.

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389 On this point, see, for example: Susen (2007), pp. 174–175; Susen (2015a), pp. 4, 42, 67, 78, 106, 111, 146, 167–169, 173, 182, 201, 243, 269, 271, and 275.

390 On this point, see, for example, Pinker (2002). See also Flannery and Marcus (2012) as well as Price and Feinman (2010).

10. Boltanski and Esquerre give a solid account of the separation between markets of *mass production* and markets of *restricted production*. At least three questions arise when assessing the validity of their analysis:
  - (a) To what extent are the boundaries between these two spheres of production increasingly blurred?
  - (b) To what extent have more and more goods of 'markets of restricted production' become part of 'markets of mass production' (and/or vice versa)?
  - (c) To what extent would the separation between these two spheres continue (or cease) to exist in a post-capitalist world?

The point is not to overlook the fact that the economy of enrichment constitutes a sphere of material and symbolic exchanges. Rather, the point is to acknowledge that enrichment economies have existed long *before* the rise of modern capitalism (and, arguably, would continue to exist in a post-capitalist era), adjusting to different historical circumstances, including constantly evolving modes of production. Insofar as consumers' purchasing power increases over time, more and more sectors of society will be able to participate in the construction of the enrichment economy. This is not to suggest that one day it will be sufficiently widespread to colonize the sphere of economic exchanges to such an extent that it will effectively become the market of mass production *par excellence*. Rather, this is to recognize that, in the future, it may not retain the spirit of 'exclusivity' that Boltanski and Esquerre appear to attach to the *contemporary* enrichment economy.

11. Boltanski and Esquerre touch upon *central issues in the sociological analysis of capitalism*, especially in terms of paradigmatic tensions such as the following: (a) 'state capitalism' vs. 'private enterprise capitalism', (b) 'collectivization' vs. 'individualization', (c) 'commodification' vs. 'non-commodification', and (d) 'human' vs. 'non-human'. An important matter to which they pay hardly any attention, however, is the problem of *intersectionality*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of power relations in capitalist so-

cieties without scrutinizing their intersectional constitution, emanating from *multiple* sociological variables – notably class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability.<sup>391</sup> Indeed, the aforementioned tensions – between (a) 'the public' and 'the private', (b) 'the collective' and 'the individual', (c) 'the commodified' and 'the non-commodified', (d) 'the human' and 'the non-human' – are pervaded by the *intersectional*, rather than monolithic, *constitution of power relations*.<sup>392</sup> It would have been interesting to explore to what degree and in what ways intersectionally constituted power dynamics shape the economy of enrichment. In any capitalist society, processes of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption are based on people's asymmetrically structured access to material, symbolic, and financial resources – that is, on the intersectional interplay between foundational sociological variables (such as class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability). In this respect, the economy of enrichment is no exception.

12. Boltanski and Esquerre's theoretical framework, which they label *pragmatic structuralism*, is arguably the most disappointing aspect of their book. On several levels, this undertaking can be regarded as a synoptic repetition of Boltanski's previous attempt to reconcile his *sociology of critique* with Bourdieu's *critical sociology*:<sup>393</sup>

391 On the *problem of 'intersectionality'*, see, for example: Chow, Segal, and Tan (2011); Das Nair and Butler (2012); Doetsch-Kidder (2012); Fraser and Nicholson (1994 [1988]); Grabham (2009); Krizsán, Skjeie, and Squires (2012); Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik (2011); Lykke (2010); MacDonald, Osborne, and Smith (2005); Nicholson (1990); Oliver, Flamez, and McNichols (2011); Susen (2012b), p. 716; Susen (2012a), pp. 284 and 290; Susen (2015a), pp. 9, 36, 71, 91, 109, 110, 111, 173, 184, 185, 186, 200, 201, 208, 220, 263, 280, 302n187, and 320n58; Susen (2016f), pp. 136–137; Taylor, Hines, and Casey (2011); Young (1994 [1989]); Young (1997).

392 Cf. Fraser's perceptive remark that, in the contemporary world, we are confronted with 'a *congeries of different economies* – or, as I would prefer to call them, of different economic sectors, *each possessing its own form of value, mode of exploitation, and potential for conflict*'; see Fraser (2017), p. 63 (italics added). Arguably, this insight is relevant to the analysis of other – non-economic – social fields, whose relatively autonomous, and yet interconnected, logics of functioning can be studied in *intersectionalist* terms.

393 On the *controversial relationship between 'critical sociology' and the 'sociology of critique'*, see, for instance: Bénéatouil (1999a); Bénéatouil (1999b); Callinicos

- The former may be characterized as *pragmatic*, in the sense that it seeks to take ordinary actors seriously, acknowledging that they are equipped with fundamental socio-ontological – especially critical and reflexive – capacities.
- The latter may be called *structural*, in the sense that it insists on the preponderant force of underlying power constellations, by which agents are largely determined, but whose ubiquitous influence largely escapes their doxic perception of the world.

One may go a step further by contending that *the entire history of sociology is marked by the attempt to co-articulate – or even to reconcile and to cross-fertilize – pragmatist and structuralist approaches*. Debates on core sociological dichotomies<sup>394</sup> – such as 'interpretivism' vs. 'positivism', 'subjectivism' vs. 'objectivism', 'voluntarism' vs. 'determinism', 'methodological individualism' vs. 'social holism' – are intimately related to the paradigmatic opposition 'pragmatism' vs. 'structuralism'. It is far from obvious what Boltanski and Esquerre have contributed to these scholarly disputes in a genuinely original and thought-provoking manner. More importantly, unsympathetic readers may question whether Boltanski and Esquerre's *pragmatic structuralism* informs their analysis of the enrichment economy in an illuminating fashion. Unless it is possible to demonstrate that their theoretical framework permits them to make sense of their empirical data in a way that would not have been possible otherwise, it remains difficult to make a convincing case for its usefulness.

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(2006), pp. 4–5, 15, 51–82, and 155–156; Celikates (2009), pp. 136–157; de Blic and Mouchard (2000a); de Blic and Mouchard (2000b); Frère (2004), esp. pp. 92–93 and 97n4; Nachi (2006), esp. pp. 188–189; Nachi (2014); Robbins (2014); Susen (2007), pp. 223–224, 227n25, 228n50, 229n51, 229n52, and 271n24; Susen (2014e); Susen (2014 [2015]); Susen (2015c); Susen (2016c); Susen (2017e), pp. 355–356; Wagner (1999); Wagner (2000). On this debate, see also, for example: Boltanski (1990a), pp. 9–134; Boltanski (1990b), pp. 124–134; Boltanski (1998), pp. 248–253; Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), pp. 303–311; Boltanski (2002), pp. 276–281 and 281–284; Boltanski (2003), pp. 153–161; Boltanski (2008); Boltanski (2009a), esp. pp. 39–82; Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), esp. pp. 633–640; Boltanski and Honneth (2009), pp. 81–86, 92–96, and 100–114; Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010), pp. 152–154 and 160–162; Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), pp. 40, 41–43, 43–46, and 265–270; Boltanski and Thévenot (1999), pp. 364–365.

394 Cf. Jenks (1998).

On a concluding note, it seems appropriate to consider the following observation:

In choosing the term '*form*' [rather than '*spirit*'] to name the concept through which they identify and analyze capitalism's different '*economies*', Boltanski and Esquerre signal that they have *shifted the plane of analysis* from the *subjective-motivational-ethical level* [...] to the *structural-institutional level* [...].<sup>395</sup>

In Boltanski and Esquerre's defence, it must be said, however, that one of the principal aims of their project is to *co-articulate* these two levels of analysis, rather than to shift the emphasis from the former to the latter. In this sense, their '*two-level conception of capitalist society* [...] encompasses both "*spirit*" and "*form*"<sup>396</sup>, taking into account *both* the '*subjective-motivational-ethical*' conditions (à la Weber) *and* the '*objective-structural-institutional*' conditions (à la Marx) by which economic processes are shaped. This comprehensive diagnostic focus, especially given the breadth and the depth of Boltanski and Esquerre's study, is a major intellectual achievement, for which the authors are to be commended.

#### Note

All in-text translations of passages from Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a) are mine.

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<sup>395</sup> Fraser (2017), p. 59 (italics added).

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., p. 62 (italics added).

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## Finitude of Capitalism and the Perverse Charm of Denial

*Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In this essay we adopt a dual lens approach to argue that we live in an epoch of generalised perversion, to be intended as a time dominated by a collective strategy of denial *vis-à-vis* the valorisation crisis of contemporary capitalism and the attendant loss of symbolic efficiency of the “work society”. Following Marx’s insights into the de-socialising character of the capitalist economy, and Lacan’s discussions of the epistemic alliance between the discourse of modern science and the discourse of capitalism, we argue that understanding the delusive lure of denial is particularly urgent today, when the crisis of our mode of production threatens the devastating implosion of social life. The historical paradox we emphasise is that denial functions more and more as a “spontaneous” psychic compromise aimed at negotiating the anxiety generated by the valorisation deadlock of contemporary capitalism. The absurdity of our condition is that, to a spiralling productive capacity facilitated by technological innovation, there corresponds a drastically decreased ability to generate wealth as value in capitalist terms, which dramatically weakens the socio-symbolic narrative in which we dwell. Our perspective advocates the necessity to establish a connection with the symptomatic character of the crisis rather than rely on the delusion that capitalism possesses the ability to renew itself eternally. While in the first part of the essay we examine, *via* Lacan, the role of denial in negotiating the historical unfolding of the capitalist discourse, in the second part we dissect, within broader debates on green capitalism, the symptomatic management of the eco-economic catastrophe as it unfolds before our eyes.

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## Introduction

The present essay articulates the claim that *denial* should be regarded as a central ontological category of contemporary life. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, we understand denial both as the elementary enabler of subjectivity and as a collective strategy of disavowal that sets up a socially binding discourse. In respect of the latter, we are interested in the forms of negation at work in contemporary capitalist society. While we acknowledge that a degree of denial is ontologically necessary, at the same time we contend that its epochal crystallisation in modes of disavowal *vis-à-vis* capital's value-creation capacity, bears potentially catastrophic consequences. We therefore want to investigate the particular role played by the delusive lure of denial in shoring up our social link insofar as it is increasingly crippled by the *systemic exhaustion of the capitalist mode of production*. As we contextualise it, denial relates to the inherent contradiction that, in our current predicament, undermines the perceived efficiency of capitalism as a socio-historical formation based on the dominance of the economy over the rational organisation of social relations. Following Marx, we view capitalism as a "de-socialising social formation": a form of social reproduction increasingly asserted as a theology and inherently detached from the collective interests of the world it shapes. For this reason, understanding the discourse of denial is particularly urgent today, when the crisis of our mode of production threatens the devastating implosion of social life. Put differently, it is in times of crisis like ours that denial, *qua* ontological category, acquires decisive socio-political connotations.

Our dialectical reading of crisis invokes both *subject* and *social substance* (social link, discourse) as two sides of the same ontological coin, as such deeply interrelated and inseparable. The philosophical tradition we uphold in our approach to crisis is the one connecting Hegel's dialectical method of enquiry to Marx's critique of political economy. However, it is through the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan that we bring the Hegelo-Marxian link to bear on its fundamental dialectical presupposi-

tions. This is because Lacanian psychoanalysis allows us to grasp and explore the “libidinal fit” between subject and substance, inasmuch as this fit is secured by unconscious formations (symptoms) that are ultimately responsible for what we name “denial”. In other words, our subjective inseparability from our social substance (our “world”) is validated through symptomatic modes of attachment embodying our blindness to such inseparability.

In an effort to bring back the notion of *dialectical totality* within a cultural and political constellation dominated by the ideologically disingenuous and deeply delusional affirmation of difference and pluralism under capitalist conditions, we aim to foreground denial as an intrapsychic and collective mechanism intrinsic to the self-destructive reproduction of our social formation in crisis. The issue at stake is not only the progressive erosion of our socio-symbolic space and political horizon as consubstantial with economic crisis, but especially the contemporary subject’s wilful inability to recognise the internal limit of that colossal apparatus for the “self-valorisation of value” we call capitalism. Taking Marx’s critique further, we argue that what is ubiquitously disavowed today is the knowledge of the irreversible historical failure of the alchemic capitalist expedient that converts human labour into value, thus giving form to the specific alienating substance of our world. The enigma of our time, we claim, lies in this pervasive denial of the implosive socio-ontological trajectory of contemporary capitalism as rooted in the valorisation of wage labour.

While Lacan and Marx devoted their lives to the study of seemingly unrelated aspects of the human condition, they shared a profound concern with the crisis of capitalist modernity: Marx critically dissected the totalising discourse of capital in order to denounce its self-destructive inconsistency, and Lacan focussed on the implosive trajectory of the social discourse that supports the post-metaphysical subject. Although we are by no means advocating a “shotgun marriage” between the two thinkers, we are interested in their common preoccupation with the structural breach that is coterminous with the history of capitalism. In what follows, we track Lacan’s arguments on the “epistemic alliance” between capital-

ism and modern science in order to substantiate our Marxian analysis of the current crisis, looking in particular at the innovation paradox of green capitalism. In five steps, we seek to demonstrate how denial increasingly manifests itself through systemically conservative strategies of *perversion*, which enables us to throw fresh light on the perverse core of crisis management today. Our perspective advocates the necessity to establish a connection with the symptomatic character of the crisis rather than rely on the illusion that capitalism possesses the ability to renew itself *ad infinitum*.

### **1. In the beginning was the scientific drive**

Needless to say, Lacan was not a Marxist. However, or perhaps because of this, he was able to think through some of the most crucial consequences of Marx's insights into the capitalist mode of production and the value form. To the extent that, in the early 1970s, he spoke of a "discourse of the Capitalist" capable of revolutionising the rotatory logic of the four discourses he had previously devised (Master, Hysteric, University and Analyst). But what was the purpose of Lacan's discursive theory? Primarily, to capture the function of negativity, i.e. contradiction, in the dialectical constitution of a given social link. In the late 1960s, Lacan began to theorise his version of discourse as a dialectical structure characterised by the disruptive negativity of the unconscious enjoyment (*jouissance*) at its core. At its simplest, discourse for Lacan is the battleground between forces of preservation (the field of the Symbolic), and the peculiar contingency of the very ground from which these forces emerge, which they can never fully shake off (the Real). There is, however, no victor in this battle, since for Lacan the Symbolic and the Real are ultimately consubstantial. Indeed, from his perspective the most insidious illusion for humankind resides in the temptation to abolish one of these two sides in order to affirm the autonomy of the other.

Though Marx would hardly have considered himself a forerunner of psychoanalysis, he was in fact concerned with the Lacanian battlefield where symbolisation is antagonised by the Real. The critique of capital that we are interested in is one that begins with the acknowledgment

that the 'real abstraction' (Sohn-Rethel 1978) called value, which Marx exposed so powerfully, originates in a conflict that he himself caught a glimpse of, but was unable to place at the centre of his reflections. Lacan, particularly in Seminar XVI (*From an Other to the other*, 1968-69) and XVII (*The other side of psychoanalysis*, 1969-70), worked out the *silent presuppositions* of Marx's own critical discourse. That is to say, he showed how value is the specific capitalist abstraction rooted in the valorisation of human labour intended as *savoir-faire*, or unconscious knowledge. Lacan, then, took on the challenge of Marx's critique by supplementing it with two crucial observations: human labour as the substance of economic value is inextricably linked to a "knowledge that does not know itself" (the unconscious), and the capitalist revolution is fundamentally concerned with the spoliation of *this* knowledge from the worker. Put differently, the totalising abstraction performed by the Capitalist discourse sets itself the historical task of abolishing the troubling yet also potentially emancipatory Real of the human condition by converting it into a value that has to appear countable and quantifiable in order to be exchanged profitably. However, Lacan highlights that, despite its cleverness, this ruse might have a shorter life-span than we may reasonably assume.<sup>2</sup> But why should it implode? Let us begin from the beginning, i.e. from the historical episteme in which, for Lacan, the capitalist function is nestled: the "knowledge discourse" of modern science.

According to Lacan, modern science emerges through a momentous shift from the Master discourse to what he calls the University discourse, where the master-signifier (the commanding signifier responsible for symbolic efficiency) is repressed, i.e. pushed down into the place of the unconscious truth; it is from there, as unconscious truth, that S1 (the master-signifier) keeps operating. This means that modern science is sustained by an "epistemological drive" whose paradoxical satisfaction lies in amassing knowledge that always reveals itself to be insufficient, and

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2 As he remarks in his Milan talk of 1972, the discourse of the Capitalist is '*follement astucieux, mais voué à la crevaison*' (Lacan 1978: 48): wildly clever, but headed for a blowout.

therefore unable to appease the underlying “commandment to know”. For this reason, science (like capitalism) is destined *not* to have a human face, no matter how hard we try to confer ethical status on its practice. In this respect, Lacan’s University discourse epitomises the ambiguous dimension of modern science, the “back and front” of its epistemology. On the one hand, it tells us that science endorses the Real of *jouissance* (as a pulsating drive towards inextinguishable knowledge); on the other hand, it also affirms the triumph of the impersonal, neutral, objective and encyclopaedic knowledge that, as Lacan slyly remarks, is of the same kind as the one exchanged in the academia (Lacan 2007: 197-208). The “epistemological turn” performed by the scientific revolution is therefore contingent upon the structural exclusion of S1, which leaves S2 (supposedly neutral and objective knowledge) in the position of command, while S1 becoming stealthily operative as a drive.

Our Lacanian hypothesis here is that the Real of the new scientific discourse that began to emerge around the 17th century was able to reproduce itself within a social link by anchoring itself to the capitalist mode of production, which started to operate, as Lacan claims, through the systematic conversion of the Real of human labour into value. We argue, then, that initially the new economic discourse *qua* mode of socio-economic reproduction provided a degree of balance to the intrinsically traumatic breach opened up by modern science. Having emerged alongside the very epistemological turn of modern science, the capitalist discourse effectively activated a new “metaphysics of desire” that at least partly neutralised the unsettling novelty of the new scientific paradigm. Such operation hinged on a fetishistic ruse that, one might surmise, caught up like wildfire: the commodification of every aspect of human experience, beginning with the valorisation of labour. From that moment on, the meaning of the ‘metabolic interaction’ between man and nature (Marx 1976: 283 and 637-8) changed drastically, as the veritable tsunami caused by the new scientific discourse found its own self-mediation in that “secular cult” later named capitalism (see Benjamin 2004). While art, religion and politics became increasingly subordinated to the new eco-

conomic regime of compulsive extraction of surplus-values, the latter laid the groundwork for a new theology where human belief concerns the ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ (Marx 1976: 163) of the value-form, rather than a suprasensible God.

It is crucial to stress that Lacan’s critique of the modern epistemology of scientific objectivity is also, in one and the same move, a critique of the capitalist axiom of “labour valorisation”. This is to say that scientific objectivity is, for Lacan, inextricably linked to the advent of the new economic paradigm. When, however, he confronts the unconscious dimension of science, Lacan endorses an epistemology that does not shirk but fully assumes the contradictory nature of the Real, which makes science indifferent to any ideological appropriation or systematisation. It is clearly this second understanding of science that Lacan links up with his psychoanalytic project (for example, in his use of formalised structures) as a “return to Freud”, inasmuch as it is constructed on the inerasable antagonism of the Real (or the Freudian death-drive).

In various parts of his Seminar, Lacan refers to the traumatic nature of the scientific revolution, for instance when he discusses the cabbalistic paradox in Isaac Newton. If on the one hand, as Lacan puts in Seminar XII, Newton achieved the ‘decisive expulsion from the heavens [...] of any divine shadow’ (Lacan 1964-65, lesson of 12 May 1965), on the other hand he went rummaging through sacred texts, hoping to throw light on the mystery of divine creation, as stated in Seminar XVI: ‘Newton too, who had other things to think about, produced a big book [...] which is a comment on the Apocalypse and on Daniel’s prophecy’ (Lacan 1968-69, lesson of 12 February 1969). Or, again from Seminar XII: ‘the gravitational operation did not seem, to him [Newton], capable of being supported by anything but this pure and supreme subject, this sort of distillation of the ideal subject, which is the Newtonian God’ (Lacan 1964-65, lesson of 12 May 1965). Such “taking shelter” in religious texts goes a long way in explaining the difficulties initially encountered by the scientific discourse in damming its own tumultuous drive.<sup>3</sup>

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3 In Seminar XI (*The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*), Lacan (1998a:

If Newton's famous methodological principle *Hypotheses non fingo* (I do not pretend to have any hypotheses; I only rely on formulas that describe phenomena, without looking for inner causes), can be legitimately regarded as the "epistemological cut" that brought the scientific signifiers to the level of the Real, Lacan notes that this mutation could only subsist by virtue of the (more or less silent) presupposition of the Other's efficiency (Lacan 1998b: 141-42). In brief, modern science for Lacan (1968-69, lesson of 30 April 1969) makes its first steps within a 'theological envelope', relying on a transcendental mechanism in order to attempt to secure for itself a degree of socio-symbolic consistency.<sup>4</sup> Within a new scientific paradigm where the figure of a God-guarantor (as Descartes had it) is far from immediately relinquished, the subject of psychoanalysis asserts itself as "internally external" to science. It belongs to the same (scientific) paradigm, but the hypothesis it operates with is precisely the one negated by science, that is to say, the existence of the subject of the unconscious, which is proven by the way language functions. As Lacan (1998b: 142) puts it: 'It is because there is the unconscious [...] that the signifier can be called upon to constitute a sign.' The psychoanalytic critique that Lacan levels at the Capitalist discourse concerns precisely, as we shall see, the distortion of the unconscious *qua* missing cause – a distortion that takes the name of *valorisation*. Such distortion amounts to a fetishistic substitution that installs the new regime of abstract labour.

## 2. Foreclosure and the Capitalist discourse

Lacan claims that modern science tends to "suture" (reject, radically exclude) the subject of psychoanalysis (the unconscious) in order to establish itself as a rational enterprise intended as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (correspondence between reason and thing). This epochal attempt to

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152) claims that despite the revolutions of Descartes and Newton, Comte's positivism still hangs on to 'a religious theory of the earth as a great fetish.'

4 Perhaps, then, it is not accidental that, when Einstein was confronted with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, his often-quoted rejoinder was: 'God does not play dice with the universe.'

remove the subject of the unconscious is not, for him, without serious structural consequences. First of all, because in this way science prevents itself from getting in touch with its own truth as cause,<sup>5</sup> i.e. its drive, which is precisely what psychoanalysis aims for: to bring about the subject as symptom, which in turn allows for a momentary separation from the Other, thus opening the way to the potential reconfiguration of subjective identity. Scientific determinism is therefore founded on the rejection of the unconscious *qua* cause; or, which amounts to the same thing, on the exclusion of *impossibility* from its closed network of causes and effects.

Another way of putting this is by claiming that the scientific discourse forecloses symbolic castration. What is rejected in *forclusion* (Lacan's translation of Freud's term *Verwerfung*) is the master-signifier, the signifier of castration, which secures the symbolic efficiency of the Other, thereby supporting subjectivity: 'What is at issue when I speak of *Verwerfung*? At issue is the rejection of a primordial signifier into the outer shadows, a signifier that will henceforth be missing at that level. Here you have the fundamental mechanism that I posit as being at the basis of paranoia' (Lacan 1997: 150). Lacan, then, reads scientific knowledge as intrinsically conducive to the formation of the psychotic structure. More precisely, the discourse of modern science tends to set up, and rely on, a paranoid type of subjectivity, as such troubled by the perception of the intrusion of a malevolent Other. Although the acquisition of *any* knowledge for Lacan is intrinsically relatable to paranoia, since it is attained through imaginary identification with an Other that "returns" after being repressed, he suggests that the discourse of modern science exacerbates the elementary delusional mechanism at work in identity formation.

The paranoid subject of science wants a fully transparent, legible and quantifiable Other; that is to say, he wants to eliminate the *disturbing otherness* of the Other, the substantial negativity that constitutes its enigma

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5 In 'Science and Truth' Lacan (2006: 742) claims that 'our science's prodigious fecundity must be examined in relation to the fact, sustaining science, that science does-not-want-to-know-anything about the truth as cause.'

as set up by the mechanism of symbolic castration. Having rejected S1 (the signifier of castration), the paranoiac is convinced that he is confronted by an intrinsically malignant Other. For this reason, any perceived inconsistency in the Other is turned by the paranoiac into proof of its evil enjoyment at tormenting him. Lacan's formula is very clear: 'whatever is refused in the symbolic order, in the sense of *Verwerfung* [foreclosure], *reappears in the real*' (Lacan 1997: 13). Therein lies the difference between repression and foreclosure: if in repression the formations of the unconscious return in the Symbolic – i.e. the content of what is repressed remains articulated within the signifying chain of language – in foreclosure these returns are only possible in the Real, insofar as symbolic castration does not work as a dialectical mechanism of psychic stabilisation. Succinctly put, in the psychotic structure the subject is fully exposed to his inability to neutralise the raw immediacy of reality through language. In psychosis, language is deprived of its anchorage in the unconscious, which prevents it from being "naturalised" into that fictional screen (the Other) that structures our perception of the meaningfulness of reality.

What we are keen to develop, in this context, is the relationship between the Lacanian point concerning the psychotic tendencies within the discourse of modern science, and our argument that the Capitalist discourse originates in the same episteme as that of modern science as an attempt to counterbalance it, that is to say to recuperate a dialectical rapport with the Other which, as we shall see, at its most elementary level involves the structure of perversion. If science by definition operates through the *suturage du sujet*, therefore placing the signifier of castration off-limits and abolishing the subject-Other dialectic, the Capitalist discourse, which assumes the form of the scientific drive, desperately attempts to recreate that dialectical configuration in order to conceal, ultimately, its own blind, (self-)destructive dynamic of value accumulation. Put differently, through "commodity fetishism" the capitalist mode of production mobilises new psychosocial resources in order to attempt to fend off the trauma introduced by the drive of modern science, which

also continues to qualify capital's discourse at its most basic level. If commodity fetishism constitutes capital's internal, in-built contrivance for obtaining a minimum of transcendental cover, at the same time capital seeks the legitimisation of its compulsive discourse also externally. In this respect, the history of capitalism should *also* be seen as a reiterated endeavour to mask capital's own automatic, indifferent and ultimately self-destructive dynamism through various "camouflaging aids" ranging from religion to politics and ideology, whose fundamental task was always one of containment and validation. In its form, then, the capitalist discourse has never changed, for it has always been a drive, a blind compulsion to repeat the same movement of self-valorisation. Our specific argument here is that today we are witnessing a remarkable epochal shift, whereby the capitalist drive becomes fully visible in all its might and, by the same token, impotence. This is because, on the one hand, the global triumph of capitalism decrees its inevitability as fate, and therefore the pointlessness of any external (political, ideological, moral, etc.) "justificationism"; but on the other hand, it also comes to coincide, historically, with its exhaustion as a mode of production. In short, in our current predicament global capitalism has no substantial fiction with which to disguise its own growing unproductivity, which is why the only defence mechanism at its disposal is perversion.

### 3. Perverse measures for desperate times

We claim that the epoch of capitalist globalisation is the *epoch of generalised perversion*, to be intended in Lacanian terms as a time dominated by a specific subjective strategy of denial *vis-à-vis* the waning of the contemporary Other. The historical paradox to highlight is the following: perversion works more and more as a "spontaneous" psychic compromise aimed at negotiating the suffocating anxiety generated by the crisis of the capitalist drive, which is increasingly unable to rely on the metaphysics of the value-form and related fictions. As we will expand on in the following sections of this essay, today's economic crisis is, fundamentally, an epochal crisis of surplus-value creation. One of the ways this reveals

itself is as a return of the scientific drive in its “naked” epistemological alliance with capitalism: the third industrial revolution (digitalisation) has provided capital with unheard-of incentives to cut costs of production (variable capital, i.e. human labour), while also unwittingly curtailing capital’s ability to generate surplus-value and by extension profits – since surplus-value can only be generated by (the exploitation of) human labour. We therefore suggest that the global triumph of capitalism coincides ever more pressingly, and alarmingly, with the intensifying of its own self-destructive potential, which was always inscribed in the Real of its drive; a Real that becomes palpable today in the emergence of capital’s unmediated alliance with science and technology. The absurd paradox of our condition is that, to a spiralling productive capacity facilitated by technological innovation, there corresponds a drastically decreased capacity to generate wealth as value in capitalist terms. In turn, the weakness of the symbolic narrative in which capital operates indicates that perversion is in full swing as a desperate defence mechanism. Before taking a closer look at the innovation paradox and its economic implications, let us illuminate how perversion came to be a dominant libidinal response.

The secret objective of perversion, as theorised by Lacan, is not to transgress the law, but to bring back its authority, to the extent that it must appear explicit, inflexible and indestructible – as in the exemplary case of the masochist who stipulates a contract with the strict and uncompromising dominatrix who tortures him. The various displays of hyper-narcissistic exhibitionism flooding our everyday life are intrinsically perverse insofar as they betray the unconscious desire to surrender oneself to the gaze of the Other, with the surreptitious aim of securing the Other’s full satisfaction, generating the illusion of its indestructibility and in return safeguarding the ego (“they look at me, therefore I exist”). Offering oneself up to the Other is the most direct way, for a subject beleaguered by anxiety, to attempt to secure his or her own subjective consistency. One only needs to think of the rise of the “selfie” to the status of global phenomenon to gain an intuitive understanding of the function of exhibitionism today. The constant mediatisation of life, on which today’s

mass exhibitionism feeds, is based on the illusion that a physical Other (the media gaze) can be made to exist in place of the socio-symbolic Other (the virtual gaze), which is on the way out.

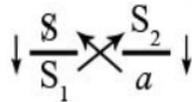
Lacan argues that the main feature of the pervert is to become an instrument of the Other's *jouissance* so as to establish or restore the Other's authority. This goes a long way toward explaining why perversion is rife in times of crisis, as for instance in the martyrdom of the religious fundamentalist (in the name of a God whose authority is vacillating), or in the behaviour of the postmodern subject who, boasting a cynical distance from ideological lures, sacrifices all his life, body and soul, to the altar of God-capital. This point is made by Slavoj Žižek (2006: 127) when he claims that perversion is a common feature of fundamentalism *and* western neo-liberalism, insofar as it relies on positive knowledge rather than belief: 'A fundamentalist does not believe, he knows it directly. Both liberal-sceptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision which installs every authentic belief, a decision which cannot be grounded in the chain of reasons, in positive knowledge'.

In short, the more symbolic efficiency deteriorates under the crippling blows of our valorisation crisis, the more the contemporary subject reacts perversely, self-immolating on the altar of the Other in the attempt to stem its draining. Differently from the neurotic, who endeavours to resist the interference of a powerful and invisible law that threatens to gobble him up, the pervert consigns himself to the Other in a desperate and paradoxical attempt to achieve identification. As the pervert cannot count on the arsenal of signifiers available to the neurotic, he instead tries to restore the authority of the Other libidinally, *via* his own active intervention in the Other's breach. In other words, the pervert utilises his own libido precisely as a cork, a filler or stopgap, aiming to close the chasm in the weakened Other.

If in the University discourse the attempt to totalize the field of knowledge encounters its limit in the tendency to produce the psychotic struc-

ture (subjectivities unable to intercept the truth of the discourse *qua* foreclosed master-signifier:  $S1 // \$$ ), with the advent of the capitalist nexus we witness the *simulated potentiation* of this depleted subject in the direction of a hyper-narcissistic personality “without unconscious”. Born out of the inversion of the first couple in the Master’s discourse ( $S1/\$$ ), the Capitalist discourse revolutionises the logic of the previous four discourses in the hope of transforming their intrinsic impotence into the productive engine of sociality itself. If the Master’s discourse generates an entropic residue approachable only *via* desire and fantasy ( $\$ \langle \rangle a$ ), the capitalist revolution proposes to valorise, produce and exchange this meaningless remainder, turning it into a universally achievable entity.

It is not accidental that the discourse of the Capitalist, as outlined by Lacan on the blackboard at Milan University, reproduces a circular, logical and seemingly uninterrupted movement among its four terms, one that effectively simulates the closed loop of infinity ( $\infty$ ).



### *Discourse of the Capitalist*

Here lies our utopia: in the illusion of creating a horizontal movement of perpetual acceleration fuelled by the valorisation of the Real. Bringing to completion the process of neutralisation of the Other that inspires the University discourse, in which it germinates, capitalism aims at the systematic abstraction of the Real. Its wide-open jaws require the endless commodification of excess, that is to say the incessant recycling, valorisation and ingurgitation of the Real of human labour, which Lacan, throughout Seminar XVII, captures with the term *savoir-faire*, “unconscious knowledge-at-work”.

While the Capitalist discourse wants to avoid castration, at the same time it needs to offer the illusion of actively achieved subjective fulfilment. It needs, in other words, to provide a range of objects (commodi-

ties) to fulfil, however temporarily this may be, the subject's desire. This is why at the helm of Capitalist discourse we find none other than the hystericized subject of the unconscious (\$) *qua* worker-consumer. However, the structural function of this divided subject is not, as in the discourse of the Hysteric, to challenge the knowledge possessed by the master-signifier (\$ - S1); rather, the subject aims to readily deliver himself as object of the Other's *jouissance*, embodied by the capitalist drive in the position of truth (hence the novelty of the downward vector from \$ to S1). Put differently, the subject of capitalism morphs into a fetish to partake in the only structure available to him, the one hinging on capitalist valorisation. The aim is precisely to validate the efficiency of such structure so as to gain, in return, a degree of subjective consistency. This is where perversion lies: in the desperate willingness to make the Other function (rather than to function through opposition to the Other). And the more this capitalist Other appears weak, the more the subject self-immolates. This ruse entails bypassing symbolic castration, in the attempt to establish a social ontology founded upon a relentless act of recycling: the transformation/distortion of *a* (the senseless residue of the signifying operation and as such object-cause of desire in the Master's discourse) into a universally countable and exchangeable *value* that may feed the capitalist's drive *ad infinitum*.

If this is the case, then surplus-value *qua* object of the capitalist drive matters only insofar as it performs the role of the invisible substance that sustains the gravitational orbit of the drive itself. The accelerating movement of capital, in other words, hinges on its blindness *vis-à-vis* the composition of its founding cause, namely surplus-value. '*Comme sur des roulettes*', says Lacan (1978: 36) in 1972: the discourse of the Capitalist runs very fast, as if on wheels, and yet... 'it consumes itself to the point of consumption' ('*ça se consomme si bien que ça se consume*'). Why? Because the blind acceleration inherent in the dynamic of capital accumulation works only insofar as the discourse of the Capitalist cannot fathom its own driving mechanism, i.e. the *necessity* of the exploitation of labour power. Let us take a closer look at this.

#### 4. The innovation paradox of green capitalism<sup>6</sup>

The historical shift towards perversion as a dominant libidinal response is not an accidental feature but an integral part of the exponentially growing destructiveness which the capital valorisation regime has exhibited since the 1970s. Today it manifests itself in a variety of ways. One of the most striking examples is the peculiar management of the eco-economic catastrophe which is unfolding in uncanny slow motion before our eyes. It ranges from the cynical socialisation of risks (“flexibility”) and costs (“austerity”), and the apocalyptic devaluation of the money medium through waves of “quantitative easing” and unbridled money creation more generally, to the unrelenting race for “competitive” rather than sustainable energy sources (“fracking”, “clean coal”). A lesser known but all the more remarkable facet of this is the *United Kingdom Deregulation Act*. It came into force in March 2015, i.e. a mere six and a half years after the fall of the US investment bank Lehman Brothers in September 2008 had made the solemn pledge to re-regulation a rhetorical mainstay of crisis management. While it did not attract much limelight at the time, the Deregulation Act constitutes a veritable piece of meta-legislation insofar as it makes ‘the desirability of promoting economic growth’ the ultimate criterion to which existing and future laws and regulations will have to conform (UK Deregulation Act 2015: section 108, 1). Its intent to streamline all areas of public life in Britain according to their contributions to corporate bottom lines and the GDP is in keeping not only with “trade agreements” like CETA, but with the corporate deregulation agenda of the reviled European Union more generally (see Kaucher 2015). Such crisis management, lest it escapes us, includes also the fate-bribing work regimes we impose on ourselves, individually as well as collectively, in the ritual belief that such sacrifice may be needed to protect, or restore, the orderly course of things.

The systemic illiteracy of the capital valorisation economy towards its social conditions of existence perpetuates itself most effectively in the

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6 An earlier version of the argument developed in sections 4 and 5 appeared in Feldner and Vighi 2015: 24-28.

shape of three powerful mythologies: *first*, the historical grand narrative of “1989”, which interprets the unceremonious demise of communism as a triumph of market economics and liberal democracy; *second*, the uncanny tale of “creative destruction” according to which only a new science and technology offensive can get us out of the current global economic crisis; and, *third*, the libertarian “end of work society” discourse, which renders the collapse of contemporary work society as a blueprint for a post-capitalist world beyond work. These mythologies shield us from the traumatic realisation of the depth of our eco-economic predicament. They are mutually reinforcing in their denial of the historical finitude of capitalism as a mode of production and way of life; a denial that speaks to us in many voices, from business-as-usual politics to post-apocalyptic voyeurism, while simultaneously oscillating between the neoliberal apotheosis of work on the one hand, and a hedonistic work-no-more hysteria on the other. In the following, we want to focus on the second mythology, which has become ever more prominent in public policy debates since the current economic crisis broke out in 2007–2008.

To be sure, while the ideological battle between neoliberalism and neo-Keynesianism has preoccupied much political thinking during the past decade, it has not gone unnoticed in either camp that the choice between “austerity” and “growth” is in reality a choice between suffocating and drowning. In fact, there is a growing suspicion that the current crisis might not simply be another Schumpeterian event of ‘creative destruction’ laying the foundations for new thrusts of economic expansion (see Schumpeter 1942: 71ff.). Is not the ubiquitous reluctance of policymakers to allow the finance and sovereign debt bubbles to burst, i.e. the destruction of “bad assets” to run its course as a prerequisite for productive investment and renewed growth, a tell-tale sign of the widespread premonition that the days of creative destructions – an egregious euphemism if ever there was one – might be numbered after all, and that “scorched earth” may be a more fitting metaphor for economic crisis in the 21st century? The 2016 report on living standards, poverty and inequality in Britain by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS 2016) illustrates this chang-

ing constellation. Robert Joyce, IFS associate director and co-author of the report, leaves no doubt that the present economic development is unusual, not least because of the protracted period of depressed earnings since the recession of 2008: this 'is not just unusual in international terms but also unusual historically for the UK. Real wages have fallen and have not recovered' (quot. in Allen and Elliot 2016). Paul Johnson, the director of the liberal think-tank, even predicts that 'real wages will, remarkably, still be below their 2008 levels in 2021. One cannot stress enough how dreadful that is – more than a decade without real earnings growth. [...] We have certainly not seen a period remotely like it in the last 70 years' (quot. in FT 2016). His sobering assessment is broadly shared by a diverse range of institutions, such as the Federation of Trade Unions in England and Wales (TUC 2016), the Bank of England (Carney 2016) and the OECD (2016).

However, the store of illusions is inexhaustible when social formations fall. Jared Diamond (2006) has explained with great lucidity how historical societies like the Maya and Viking Greenland collapsed. Regardless of their specific trajectories, they had one important trait in common. At the very moment when the insight arose that their conditions of existence had become precarious, they began to intensify all those strategies and practices which, until then, had appeared successful. They continued to operate on the basis of past experience and practical reason, while their conditions of existence had fundamentally changed. Similarly, today, while the neoliberal and neo-Keynesian cards have both been played to devastating consequences, there persists the unshakeable belief that a new science and technology offensive would save us, that 'growth in [...] the west will return when that combination of innovation and good capitalism is rekindled', as Will Hutton (2012a), one of Britain's leading Keynesian economists, has forcefully suggested. 'It is the great general purpose technologies (GPTs) – the steam engine, the aeroplane and the computer – that transformed our lives and economies', Hutton explains: 'In the 1930s, evolving GPTs helped drive economic recovery, aided by a capitalism that had been reformed after the excesses of the 1920s. Re-

covery from today's barely contained depression will require the same alchemy' (Hutton 2012b). Hutton's view is echoed across the globe by political economists and policy advisors alike (see e.g. Krugman 2013, Mazzucato 2014 and Stiglitz 2016). Conor D'Arcy of the British Resolution Foundation think-tank, for example, urges the necessity of a government strategy that stimulates productivity growth. In order to tackle the above-mentioned quandary of 'Britain's chronic low pay problem' successfully, the UK needs, in addition to policies such as the national living wage which will aid people in the low-income spectrum, to make strong productivity growth 'a central goal of government' (D'Arcy 2016; see also D'Arcy and Davies 2016).

If there is much agreement that the current calamities are in large part 'the result of a dysfunctional low productivity economy' (Economists for Rational Economic Policies 2015: 16), few have written about this as authoritatively as Nicholas Stern, the former chief economist of the World Bank, author of the influential *Stern-Report* on the economics of climate change (Stern 2007) and current chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics. In *The Global Deal*, he offered an accessible 'blueprint' of 'how to manage climate change whilst creating a new era of growth and prosperity' (Stern 2009a: 7), a green new deal which, since the onset of the economic crisis, he has further elaborated in a series of papers explaining the link between climate change, world poverty and economic recession. The results of this are summarised in his most recent book *Why Are We Waiting?* (Stern 2016). While the way we act on climate change and global poverty 'will define our generation', Stern argues, the current recession, severe and protracted as it may be, constitutes historically only a short-term crisis, which must be tackled within the framework of a strategic response to these two defining challenges of the 21st century. Furthermore, our current economic dilemma 'brings the critical opportunity and the requirement to find a driver of long-term sustainable economic growth to lead us out of this crisis', seeing that 'we do not want again to sow the seeds of the next bubble as we emerge from the crash of the last' (Stern

2009a: 9). With the support of a global fiscal stimulus, a new generation of green technologies would enable ‘new patterns of growth that can transform our economies and societies in much the same way as the railways, electricity, the motor car and IT did in earlier eras’. Provided that the green component of the stimulus is large enough, ‘this could enable us to grow out of this recession in a way that both reduces the risks for our planet and sparks off a wave of new technologies which will create 2 or 3 decades of strong growth and a more secure, cleaner and more attractive economy for all of us’ (Stern 2009a: 9 and 2009b: 195; see in detail Stern 2016: xxvii-xxxi, 33-88 and 93-95).

To avoid misunderstandings, the selected passages highlight the linchpin of Stern’s argument, which is indicative of a broader debate on green capitalism (see e.g. Porritt 2012 and Mathews 2016). They do not reflect its complexity. What is more, in the face of unreconstructed climate change deniers, such as Nigel Lawson, Ian Plimer and Donald Trump, we could not agree more with the urgency of his call that ‘climate change is here now’ and requires joined-up and decisive action, for the ‘scale of emissions reduction associated with avoiding grave risks of climate change implies nothing short of a new energy-industrial revolution’ (Stern 2014 and 2016: 33). And yet, Stern’s principal assumption that a new generation of green technologies would enable new patterns of growth that could transform our societies in the same way as railways, electricity, the automobile and information technology did in the past, is historically unfounded.

Even though it may be galvanising and politically expedient to suggest that ‘low-carbon technologies can open up new sources of growth and jobs’ (Stern 2009b: 5) – a belief shared by green-minded policymakers around the world (see e.g. Jaeger et al. 2011 and OECD 2015) – they cannot do either. Contrary to sanguine projections from all political quarters (see e.g. Kaletsky 2011, McAfee and Brynjolfsson 2017 and Srnicek and Williams 2015), we seek to explain why a new science and technology offensive cannot lead us out of our eco-economic dilemma: (1) why it provides neither a remedy for the global economic crisis, nor (2) ‘a blueprint

for a safer planet' (Stern 2009a) as promoters of green capitalism tend to suggest; and (3) why it cannot 'move the world economy beyond capitalism' (Mason 2016: 265) in a way that would put an end to the endemic problems of technological unemployment and abject poverty.

Much as railroading, electrification and the fordist automobile industry did exert a dynamising effect on employment and growth in the 19th and lengthy spells of the 20th century, this cannot be repeated historically. The impact of the digital revolution, which has inaugurated the post-industrial era, is fundamentally different. Its unprecedented economic rationalisation potentials were not only a central factor in the breakdown of the state-capitalist labour regimes of the Soviet bloc. They were also the technological driver of the neoliberal turn during the 1980s, the global class war against the working classes, and the concomitant escapism into simulated ("finance-driven") growth, which have led us economically to where we are today.

From a different angle, historian Robert Gordon (2016) has arrived at similar conclusions in his large-scale analysis of the rise and fall of economic growth in the United States since the Civil War. Using total factor productivity growth as his key performance indicator – i.e. the economic expansion over and above the growth of capital and labour, which prior to the First World War stood at less than 0.5% per year, then rose in the 1940s to over 3% and dropped after 1970 below 1%, leading to the slowing growth dynamic ever since – Gordon demonstrates that the impact the fundamental innovations between 1870 and 1970 had on productivity growth, employment and the material standard of living can no longer be replicated.

Whatever we might think of the nature and effectiveness of "good capitalism" or "sustainable growth", capitalism cannot return to a technological infrastructure with labour-intensive production lines and full employment. As long as we are stuck with a regime of social reproduction contingent on the creation of surplus-value, with solipsistic business enterprises locked in a civil war of "competition", neither the technological blind flight nor its social (unemployment and poverty) and economic (rev-

eneue squeeze and economic contraction) consequences can be stopped. With each and every technological innovation we will continue to saw remorselessly away at the branch on which we sit. But then again, is this not exactly the kind of brute economic determinism that makes a mockery of human creativity and free will? It surely is. The brutishness, however, lies not in the critique but in its object. We live in a world of globalised economic compulsions, the most insidious of which is the compulsion for human beings to convert themselves into little combustion engines of human energy that can be offered for hire, a fate which can only be borne if it is elevated to a moral virtue and aspirational way of life.

### 5. The great denial

What, though, lends such widespread plausibility to the belief that technological innovation would be the driver of long-term sustainable growth which leads us out of the current economic crisis? We want to stress three problematic premises on which the plausibility of this belief rests. The first one is the assumption that economics would be about the production and distribution of goods and services in the face of scarcity of resources, as every economics textbook from Samuelson (1976: 3, 18) to Krugman and Wells (2013: 6) contends. However, within the overwhelming majority of contemporary economies – if they are indeed the subject of economics – the production and distribution of utility values, such as goods and services, is little more than an epiphenomenon subordinated to the procurement of exchange-value (money) and money profit.

This leads us to a second, related misconception according to which we would live in a market economy, with all its illusions – such as freedom, choice and equal opportunity – attached to it (see e.g. Stern 2016: 95-105). In reality, the “market” is a fleeting, if crucial, episode within the economy of capital valorisation. It is the stage (arena and phase) where the surplus-value extracted through the exploitation of wage labour must be turned into money profit to be available for reinvestment. While the notion of the market economy affords us the illusion of historical timelessness (circularity, eternal return), the capital valorisation process

is characterised by a historical dynamic which does not simply repeat itself. The structural crises of capital valorisation are only superficially expressions of the ever same (“Minsky moment”, “overproduction”, “market adjustment”). While historically they might well have wiped the slate clean periodically and temporarily, they did so on an ever-increasing level of productivity, which, in turn, changed each time the historical conditions of capital valorisation fundamentally and irrevocably.

The belief that a new science and technology offensive could exert the same transformative impact on employment and economic growth as other general purpose technologies did in the past conflates, thirdly, the drivers of business success with the drivers of macroeconomic prosperity. Indeed, from the viewpoint of the business enterprise, technological innovation and rationalisation are the drivers of profitability and economic expansion. From the viewpoint of the capital valorisation economy as a whole, however, this is not necessarily the case. Why not? Because surplus-value is a social category, as Marx points out in volume three of *Capital*. Individual businesses do not produce it in the same way as they produce cars, computers or other goods and services. In fact, the surplus-value created by individual businesses is not a verifiable property of any single commodity they produce. Rather, it aggregates with the surplus-value created by other businesses to form the total social mass of surplus-value in existence at any given time. The individual commodities represent the spectral, socio-symbolic materiality of this social mass of surplus-value. Just how much of this mass an individual business manages to capture, however, depends on its competitiveness in the market place, which in turn is an expression of its technological capacity to cut labour costs – i.e. to displace human labour and thereby the only source of surplus-value – while forcing others to follow suit. Paradoxically, then, the businesses, which most successfully harness the spirit of innovation, are the ones that undermine the social mass of surplus-value, and with it the general foundation for employment and long-term sustainable growth, the most (see from a different angle also Smith 2012).

In light of where we are today, a new science and technology offensive can therefore yield the desired results merely for a short period

and only for some, while directly or indirectly pulling the plug on all the rest. Those who are able to bolster their technological competitiveness through economic (common markets and currency zones) and extra-economic violence (global governance and warfare) will control the remaining isles of prosperity. Here we can catch a glimpse of why Stern's forceful plea that 'the developed world must demonstrate for all, especially the developing world, that low-carbon growth is not only possible, but that it can be a productive, efficient and attractive route to overcome world poverty', that 'it is indeed the only sustainable route' (Stern 2009: 8), might send shivers down the spine of many. Ultimately, any green new deal remains doomed to fail as long as the gap between work to be had and work to be done keeps growing before our eyes.

If the third industrial revolution spells the end of the state-centred as well as the market-centred syntheses of the capital valorisation economy, what about the 'fourth industrial revolution' most vigorously advocated by the founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab (2016)? What are the prospects that artificial general intelligence technologies evolving at exponential speed will usher in a collaborative economic system beyond capitalism as Jeremy Rifkin (2011 and 2014) and Paul Mason (2015) suggest? Under the present conditions, this is most unlikely. Even though we contend that it is the compulsive historical development of the forces of production that ultimately seals the fate of capitalism as a system capable of reproducing social life, we do not share the belief in technological determinism that is rapidly gaining ground in futuristic debates. Techno-utopian visions tend to obfuscate the fact that the development of the productive forces is not some natural, or socially neutral, technology-driven process. Far from being techno-driven, the character, extent and direction of this development is primarily determined by the socio-pathological form of the capitalist mode of production itself. This has two important implications: first, the deterministic conviction that, under the conditions of a freewheeling market economy, everything that can be developed technologically would ultimately be developed, is historically unfounded. By the same token, second, we have no reason to

assume that the development of modern productive forces, such as ‘the Internet of Things [...] driven by extreme productivity’, would quasi-automatically bring about ‘a Collaborative Commons as the dominant model for organizing economic life’ (Rifkin 2014: 16) if helped along by smart policy frameworks, rhizomatic networks and all-out democratisation of social life (Mason 2016: 217-292; see also McChesney and Nichols 2016: 245-276). What both Rifkin’s and Mason’s illuminating accounts of the current technological transformation fail to consider is the self-referential expansion of abstract wealth as the formative matrix and developmental driver of modern capitalist society. While there is no reason to throw the baby out along with the bathwater and peddle some techno-phobic agenda, it is important to bear in mind that under the current conditions, with the ever tightening noose of the value-form around their necks, modern societies can do little more but accelerate their own disintegration into dystopian war-lord regimes (“work societies without work”) when they are reformatted by a fourth “industrial” AI revolution.

For all their differences and incongruities, what the above projections have in common with Nicholas Stern’s blueprint for a safer planet is the unswerving belief that the capitalist mode of production possesses the miraculous ability to renew itself eternally, unless it meets with an insurmountable external limit, such as the ecological finitude of earth, or is opposed and overthrown. Whatever their suspicions and doubts, they hold on to the belief, elegantly expressed in Anatole Kaletsky’s *Capitalism 4.0* (2011), that the current crisis is but another instance of “creative destruction”, which sooner or later will give birth to a new model of economic growth, provided we are smart enough. The common ground that makes this unintended alliance possible is the utopian vision of a universal social order without a symptom. As we have seen, this is precisely our Lacanian point about the structural overlap between science and capitalism: what both discourses aim at is the delusional foreclosure of the substantial negativity that inheres in any social ontology. This non-castrated utopia is rapidly turning into the collective nightmare of a social constellation unable to connect with its own cause.

In contrast to the perverse scenario that befits our times, we champion an alternative view of the current crisis, which can be summed up as follows. As a system of social reproduction, capitalism has not only entered its deepest crisis since World War Two, but has reached its developmental limit and is in terminal decline. Its demise does not depend on a cataclysmic breach of planetary boundaries ('limits to growth') or the rise of a political force that would overthrow it, as is widely presumed across the political spectrum. Nor does its decline in itself usher in a new social order, far from it. Capitalism's historic disintegration, which we experience today, is the irreversible result of its own intrinsic dynamic. It is caused, in essence, by the vanishing capacity to generate new surplus-value — the life blood and *telos* of capital valorisation economies (see e.g. Kurz 2012, Jappe 2017 and Konicz 2016). As a consequence, ever-larger parts of the world will be condemned to permanent unproductivity ("underdevelopment") and the fate of a surplus humanity drowning in survival ("unemployment"). However, while post-capitalist formations can no longer be based on the valorisation of human labour, we argue that the replacement of capitalism through hedonistic "work-no-more" utopias is both impossible and undesirable.

In other words, what we are witnessing today is not primarily a structural crisis of the postmodern or neoliberal *variant* of capitalism. Nor is it simply a systemic crisis of capitalism in the traditional Keynesian-Marxist sense of an economic system based on private property, market anarchy and class domination, leading to an endemic overaccumulation/underconsumption dynamic and a capital surplus absorption problem (see e.g. Harvey 2011 and Bellamy Foster and McChesney 2012). Rather, what we are seeing today is the onset of an all-out crisis of the generative matrix of capitalist society as such. To be sure, capitalism is beset by a growing capital surplus absorption problem — the dilemma that surpluses generated in the form of money profit cannot be absorbed productively by the capital valorisation economy. This is a genuine impasse with disastrous implications, as we have discussed elsewhere. It is, however, not the central underlying problem of the crisis facing us today. Rather than

by an absorption problem, the past five decades have been defined by an irreversible surplus-value creation problem, which is the root cause of our predicament (see e.g. Kurz 2009: 622-800).

Much classical critical theory of the 20th century was unable to shed the widely held assumption that capitalism would create an affluent society as it permanently revolutionised the forces of production. Indeed, before the 1970s it seemed inconceivable in the West that one day we might have to confront not only the dehumanising effects of a “too-much”, but also and more importantly the fatal consequences of a lack of surplus-value, i.e. that the economy of capital valorisation would no longer be able to reproduce the socioeconomic infrastructure required to maintain the elementary coordinates of social life.

Today, we will have to rid ourselves of the superstitious thought that capitalism creates affluence *per se*, if only it is managed properly. This misconception confuses the exceptional development of a limited number of countries during the “economic miracle” of the 1950s and 1960s with the entire history of capitalism as a social formation. Though capital will continue to be accumulated for quite some time, with new forms of fictitious capital being created and eagerly embraced as profit-generating “financial instruments”, it will increasingly suffer a lack of *valorisation* (the expanded reproduction of capital through the competitive extraction of surplus-value from human labour). The shortage of new surplus-value will eventually undermine the accumulation of capital to a degree that the reproduction of society at large becomes a practical impossibility (“unaffordable”) at all levels – locally, nationally and globally. The history of the grow-or-die society is coming to an end. The only question is how.

Although Marx did not foresee the secular financialisation of capitalist economies during the twentieth century and the attendant devaluation of the money medium, his concept of ‘fictitious capital’ goes a long way in explaining what is happening today: the accumulation of capital without value substance that defines the crisis of contemporary capitalism and the remedies pursued so far. Our psychoanalytic reference to per-

version captures the crux of the fetishistic illusion that captivates the era of financialisation, namely that capital could be valorised without the hassle, or scandal, of exploiting wage labour. In other words, that capital would have a life beyond labour. Money-begetting-money is the dream scenario of capitalist utopia. Needless to say that what we witness today is the practical proof of its impossibility.

If it is true, however, that fictitious capital has come to dominate the process of capital valorisation – not temporarily and by accident but irreversibly and by necessity – and that capital accumulation is to an overwhelming extent already fictitious (i.e. by no means “imagined”, but insubstantial), why should we wish to continue to apply the economic extraction of money profit as the yardstick for what we consider “efficient”, “realistic” and “affordable”? To question the notions of financial affordability, economic efficiency and fiscal realism is far more than a hysterical gesture. It is a precondition for transcending the logic of mere crisis management. The latter keeps us trapped in a perverse scenario, where perishing in the face of plenitude is a distinct possibility.

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## What Do We Owe Other Peoples?

### *On Amy Allen's The End of Progress Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*

J.M. Bernstein<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In chapters two, three, and four of *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen offers incisive and compelling critiques of the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst respectively, targeting in particular their unearned universalism and Eurocentrism. After stating agreement with Allen's critiques, this essay proceeds to interrogate three aspects of her argument: (1) Can the problem of progress be detached from the achievements of modern science? (2) Does not Kant provide better grounds for anti-colonialism than either Allen or Neo-Kantian critical theory? (3) Allen attempts a shot-gun marriage of the genealogical practices of T.W. Adorno and Michel Foucault; in so doing she empties Adorno's theory of its precise Marxist content.

In chapters two, three, and four of *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen offers incisive and compelling critiques of the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst respectively, targeting in particular their blithe, unearned universalism and Eurocentrism. Allen's critique of Habermas turns on the thesis that his formal pragmatics and theory of modernity provide mutual support for one another. The consequence of this strategy is that it "leads to worries about contextualism, since the methodology of rational reconstruction has to presuppose the superiority of the point of modernity and hence Habermas can give no independent justification of that standpoint; it also raises concerns about circularity"

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(78).<sup>2</sup> Forst dodges the circularity problem by going “straightforwardly Kantian” (78), which not only leads to an implausible cognitivist conception of power – on the model of blackmail – that can make no sense of the role power plays in “constituting the space of reasons in the first place” (149), that is, how political rule and social domination occur “*through* the constitution of the space of reasons” that prima facie sets in place ‘rightful’ relations of subordination (150), but because practical reason has been a priori bleached of the color of power, Forst must reduce political philosophy to applied ethics. Although there is a patent Kantian a priori formalism undergirding Honneth’s depiction of the modern world embodying the constitutive structures of mutual recognition in the family (love), market (self-esteem), and rights-based state (mutual respect), Allen opts to press Honneth from a different direction. She argues that his theory is caught in a double bind:

...he thinks he needs a robust conception of historical progress as a “fact” to avoid charges of conventionalism and relativism, but he can’t make this account of historical progress work without violating his attempt to give a Hegelian, immanent, contextualist account of normativity and hence running afoul of his own critique of the paradox of Kantian normativity. (119)

For Allen that paradox is direct: “a view of freedom understood as autonomous self-determination that already has normativity built into it” (109). From here, Allen can move on in chapter five to her effort to generate a new model of critical theory premised on the idea of “problematizing genealogy,” a view she generates from a shot-gun marriage between Adorno and Foucault which is premised on their shared thesis that the achievements of reason are not only not separable from power and domination, but carry domination/power within their very achieve-

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2 All non-annotated page references in the body of the text are to Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

ment. In light of the historically undeniable entanglement of reason and power, problematizing genealogy must involve a double movement in which normative reconstruction occurs through first-person participant self-understanding that is bound to or has third-person, observer critique as its reverse side: "...revealing the historical contingency of our own historically situated point of view; [and] showing how that point of view has been contingently made up and as such is bound up with particular relations of power" (190). Because the practices of instrumental reason, what Adorno terms identitarian practices, induce the deformations and exclusions of non-identity, 'the other' of identitarian of reason, or, in parallel, the installation of reason produces unreason as its excluded other, then problematizing genealogy must capture how the achievements of reason syncopate with the plaints of violative exclusion or domination.

This précis of Allen's argument has quietly dropped the ambition announced in her book's subtitle, *Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, because, so far as I can make out, it plays no actual role in the formation of the argument. While denying a peremptory universalism, including a claim to a universalist philosophy of history, is a necessary condition for squaring critical theory with postcolonialism, because the universalist pretensions of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst are implausible in themselves, philosophically illegitimate in precisely the ways Allen demonstrates, then going on to claim that the product of this critique achieves a decolonizing ambition, even including the promotion of the views of Adorno and Foucault, strikes me as, at the very least, equivocal. Now it may be that a decolonized philosophy is not an item in itself, but solely the satisfaction of a series of constraints and negative prohibitions: no grand narratives, no absolutist histories of moral progress, no ends of history teleologies, no a priori moral universalism, no fixed hierarchy of ethical systems, etc.; or it may be that the postcolonial situation has or will come to define an affirmative philosophical undertaking; or it may be that postcolonialism subtends a stance or attitude of hospitality toward ethnic, regional, linguistic, or cultural differences to be underwritten by an ethical stance, which is, perhaps, what Allen

means to be providing under the heading of “The Impurity of Practical Reason (Reprise)” (219-225); or these options misstate the demands and possibilities on offer. Without greater clarity on these alternatives, the project of decolonizing the foundations of critical theory remains a political metaphor rather than a discriminable philosophical project.

While clearly motivated by the project of decolonizing critical theory, Allen’s critique of contemporary critical theory powerfully succeeds in its own terms. My remarks will thus focus on her reconstructive story. In what follows I want, first, to advance a clarification about the concept of progress, which in Allen’s usage remains oddly de-contextualized and de-historicized; second, I want to argue that respect for other cultures and other peoples, and thus the wrong of colonialism, requires more normatively robust materials than Allen provides; and finally, I will argue that her attempt to marry Adorno and Foucault generates a critical formalism that empties Adorno’s theory of its precise critical target.

### Contextualizing Progress

Allen’s thought that achieving a decolonized philosophical stance turns on putting an end to the renewed role of progress in contemporary critical theory is not implausible since progressive philosophies of history are used to provide rational reassurance that a culture’s values are, because historically earned, morally valid. But critique here will wobble unless it can get into view a broader conspectus on why the idea progress has come to play the role it has in our self-understanding. Allen does not provide a genealogy of the idea of progress itself; had she, her narrative might have had different emphases.

Why progress? The idea of progress in its modern usage is a direct product of the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, that is, of the scientific revolutions that for all intents and purposes set modernity in place. With these revolutions something more than the possibility of a human understanding and shaping of the natural world emerged; they demonstrated the possibility of social and collaborative learning, the achievements of one scientist being confirmed, elaborated, and extended

by others scientists, while their of empirical methods and mathematical reasoning in the presentation and corroboration of their theories led to the utter disenfranchisement of traditional authority. With the scientific reorganization of the placement of heavenly bodies, and the establishment of a unitary set of laws of motion governing both terrestrial and celestial bodies, the authority of scripture and church over truths specific to the natural world, and over the disposition of secular life generally was shown to be hollow. That hollowness left ethical and moral norms groundless and abandoned, in patent need of rational reconstruction along either the type of empiricist or rationalist lines that were then taken as constitutive of the methods of science. And if the model of experimental or natural philosophy was to be sustained for or translated into political morality, then, *ceteris paribus*, some idea of empirical and/or rational foundations, and some conception of social learning and moral progress that could invoke the possibility of building on the accomplishments of predecessors would be necessary. Whether it was the empiricist approach of Turgot and Condorcet, or the rationalist systems of Kant and Hegel, given the overwhelming cognitive authority of the natural sciences, the moral sciences could not but follow suit. As a normative requirement and criterion of rational knowledge, the idea of progress emerged not as an effort of moral self-congratulation, but as an urgent response to the collapse of religious authority; in the first instance, progress was taken as, equivocally, a rational requirement for political morality and social learning to be on a par with scientific knowledge, or as evidence for the claim that moral truth was undergoing the same cumulative development as exemplified by scientific knowledge and its formation of social learning. It was the French Revolution, and not colonial conquests, that first announced political morality's coming of age, becoming universalist in a politically significant manner, with all the actual exclusions that universalism involved.<sup>3</sup> Without the French Revolution you do not get Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, and its role in the history of universalist philosophies of history.

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3 For a compelling telling of this moment see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

However that history develops – is Marx and Marxism too beholden to the erasure of colonial revolutionary history in Hegel?<sup>4</sup> – the role and significance of the idea of progress takes its pulse from and thus continues to turn upon the relationship between the unequivocal cognitive authority of modern science and the deeply contested but practically urgent cognitive status of moral norms. The external critique of ethnocentrism elides the primary issue of the cognitive authority of natural science, what Adorno terms the hegemony of instrumental reasoning over the meaning of reason as such in the West, and thus the social necessity faced by all other forms of social practice, but moral practices above all, to match up to the demands of reason and evidence exemplified by the natural sciences. Although the situation has not been constant, nonetheless throughout most of the past two centuries the thought has remained that to de-couple the rationality of morals from the forms of rationality exemplified by the natural sciences risked leaving the former without any meaningful rational authority, a dilemma palpable in the ricocheting from skeptical emotivism to the brutalities of utilitarianism and back as the insistences of scientific reason tore at or usurped moral rationality over and over again. Hence, in some fundamental way, there has been the continuing demand that practical reason be shown to be rational in a way commensurate with the rationality of scientific reason. There has thus remained a continuing pressure to show the possibility of moral progress and social learning; these items are essentially by-products and addenda to the rationality problem set by the cognitive triumphs of natural science.

We will only be able to avoid the presumption of progress if we can either fully decouple practical from theoretical reason, and/or deflate the progressivist pretensions of natural science without thereby impugning its achievements. Since Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), we have a more complex, historicized, discontinuous account of

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4 For the repression of anti-colonial revolution in the genealogy of universalist philosophies of history, see Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2009).

scientific rationality; the strong concept of progress has over the past fifty years receded from its formal role as requirement and criterion of moral knowledge and learning. In the next section, I will offer an argument that enables the decoupling of scientific and ethical reason.

That said, I do mean to be underlining the claim that because the meaning of rational authority for us, and hence the whole question of the objectivity of moral norms for us, is necessarily played out in relation to the cognitive successes and authority of scientific reason together with its technological applications, the fate of the idea of progress – whether it lapses altogether, or is re-installed, or rewritten – will continue to be lodged in relation to scientific rationality (whether through assimilation or justifiable departure), with the further question of how our morals affect other peoples and how they appear in relation to the moral schemes of other cultures a self-implicating but nonetheless fraught side-issue. But this is only to say that in the first instance our moral scheme must be authoritative *for us*, our morals must achieve a rationally compellingness for us, one sufficient to authoritatively govern practical life, where the secular *for us* of the West is effectively constituted in relation to the paradigm of scientific reason. Another way of saying the same thing would be to say that *all* moral schemes are local-centric, with their centrality governed by whatever the bestower of rational authority for that form of life is. Thus theocentric, custom-centric, and reason-centric moral systems will inevitably clash, and what will obviously be necessary when they do is some sort of accommodation, which in turn will depend on whether the systems of norms in question have space within their practice for accommodation; that we should propound an ethics that can tolerate and even learn from competing systems is a point Allen rightly insists upon.

### **The Wrong of Colonialism: On What 'We' Owe Other Peoples**

Does this claim that all moral systems are centric-oriented entail that Western rationalism, with its emphatic belief in progress, embedded or entailed a colonialist mentality? Allen seems to presuppose that the moral systems of modernity that espoused the idea of progress lacked space

for plurality and accommodation – that they were colonizers in-waiting, so to speak. Yet, when she comes to outlining an account of what we owe other peoples, Allen, following the model of Anthony Simon Laden’s conversational account of the space of reasons and reasoning practices, offers a surprisingly modest view that recommends we treat other peoples as contemporaries rather than as backward or primitive versions of ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Sure. But contemporaries can of course be wrong and deserve criticism, and we, in turn, can be judged as implacably wrong by their lights – our base materialism and disposing of gender hierarchy will appear morally suspect from the perspective of cultures still in the throes of a religious self-understanding. But this, while genial, is morally thin: we might think an other people are *so* wrong, say because their embrace of gender hierarchy licenses genital mutilation or marital rape or the marriage of young teens to older men, that our morality requires intervention. If the stakes concern colonial and imperial co-option, something stronger than humility, fallibilism, and conversational responsiveness are necessary.

And while it is true that colonization routinely and hypocritically flew under the flag of educating backward natives, of bringing progress to lands of darkness, Kant – who can reasonably be assigned the position as founder of scientific racism<sup>6</sup> – simultaneously espoused the claim of moral progress and *the absolute illegitimacy of all colonial enterprises*, including the illegitimacy of colonial enterprises with respect to non-state peoples of the kind that were at the time often labeled as civilizationally backward (even by Kant). That is, placing a spotlight on a founding moment in the installation of the discourse of moral progress (as a distinct but parallel process to progress in the sciences), the very account of progress that Honneth adopts for his own purposes<sup>7</sup> – and the true normative

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5 For Laden, see his *Reasoning: A Social Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6 Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race”, in R. Bernasconi (ed.), *Race* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 11-36.

7 Axel Honneth, “The Irreducibility of Progress: Kant’s Account of the Rela-

mainspring to the philosophies of Habermas and Forst – we find at the same time one of the most systematic critiques of colonization we have. If Kant is the moral source of these discussions, then Kantian Eurocentrism is the establishment of the *illegitimacy* of all practices of colonization, that is, the impermissibility of forcibly exporting Eurocentric progressivism. Which is to say that philosophically, at least, Eurocentrism cannot be what Allen claims it is. One obvious inference to draw here is that the savage history of colonialism that included the ideology of progress as an element in its justificatory apparatus, and the actual development of European philosophy may not be as tightly entwined as Allen's argument presumes.

I cannot here even begin to offer a full-scale reconstruction of Kant's argument;<sup>8</sup> but sketching the argumentative backbone should make evident its general importance. Kant's legal and political doctrine is narrowly concerned with external not internal freedom, that is, with an agent's capacity to physically act in a restricted social space with respect to other embodied agents. Because it concerns only external freedom and action, Kant's theory is not an application of the Categorical Imperative, which regulates solely the relation between a will and the normative principles governing it; nor do justice and right in Kant address empirical circumstances marked by scarcity and lack of benevolence; nor does his account concern consent to the principles of state governance. Rather right bears upon the *constitution* of free social action. This is spelled out in two principles; first, the universal principle of right: "Any action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with universal law" (MM

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tionship between Morality and History," *Critical Horizons* 8/1 (2007), pp. 1-17.

8 For an immensely useful collection of essays, see Katrin Flikschuh and Lea Ypi (eds.), *Kant and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See especially the essays by Arthur Ripstein, "Kant's Juridical Theory of Colonialism," and Anna Stilz, "Provisional Right and Non-State Peoples." The most important reconstruction of Kant's general theory is Arthur Ripstein, *Force and Freedom: Kant's Legal and Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). My reconstruction here will follow the argumentative lines supplied by Ripstein and Stilz.

230);<sup>9</sup> and second, the principle of the innate right to humanity: “Freedom (independence from being constrained by another’s choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with universal law, is the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity” (MM 237). Because this right can be broadly construed as the individualization of the universal principle of right, Kant directly goes on to offer a normative declension: the principle of innate freedom is “a man’s quality of being *his own master*” (MM 238).

Intuitively, Kant’s doctrine can be construed as working out the implications of the idea that each has the right to be his own master. The idea of being one’s own master derives its normative edge from the Roman law distinction between person and thing. One then gets the familiar Kantian thought that to be a mere means, that is, to have one’s choices determined by another is to be the other’s thing; when persons are things they are slaves. Hence republican freedom, in which each is his own master, makes each the equal of every other, each possessing an equal standing with respect to every other. Patently, being a master is a status in relation to others, which is what *right* provides. Having the status providing by right provides social freedom. Thus you are free and independent because “you decide which purposes you will pursue and no one decides for you.”<sup>10</sup> It is the emphatic character of no one deciding your purposes for you, of prohibiting you being at the bidding of another’s will, prohibiting another’s will becoming your will without your consent that is the normative pulse of Kant’s doctrine. Because being one’s own master is a status that is defined with respect to how others can treat you, then the status is relational as such; that is why right can be said to *constitute* free action. It follows that a right to be one’s own master is a “right to act independently of the choice of others, consistent with the entitlement of others to do the same. The principle of mutual restriction under

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9 All references to MM are to Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) to the marginally provided pagination of the Academy edition.

10 Ripstein, *Force and Freedom*, p. 33.

law applies unconditionally, because it is not a way of achieving some other end."<sup>11</sup> On this reconstruction, Kant's political morality is tightly historically indexed to the distinction between free man and slave, freedom as being nothing other than being recognized as being one's own master under conditions in which the historical justifications for slavery had collapsed.

It follows that for Kant external freedom cannot be *conceived* of except through a public legal order; the *actuality* of human freedom depends on humans being in a rightful condition, that is, on one's being recognized as free and equal in a civil condition, where by civil condition Kant meant nothing other than a thoroughgoing rule of law that makes each equal and free before the law (MM 311). It matters to the comprehension and significance of Kant's doctrine that a rightful condition is one that legally embeds, gives legal expression to or, more precisely, makes the rule of law itself the normative bearer of the idea of being one's own master: only if law alone rules does no one individual rule another, where, again, that idea processes the Roman law distinction between person and thing through the history of slavery, on the one hand, and through the history of civic republicanism, on the other. As Arthur Ripstein has underlined, if civic republicanism is premised on the idea the no matter how benevolent a despot might be, or how much freedom he allows his subjects, what makes despotism wrong is the ruler having the power to decide what his subjects can do irrespective of the content of the despot's decision. *Kant extends the civic republican idea of non-denomination to relations among citizens: "It insists that everything that is wrong with being subject to the choice of a powerful ruler is also wrong with being subject to the choice of another private person."*<sup>12</sup>

Kant propounds a formally republican state as the normative Idea of a state. In such a state the sovereign acts in the name of all, and there is an effective separation of powers. This conception of the state together with Kant's blanket proclamation that anyone willing to remain in a pre-civil

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11 Ripstein, *Force and Freedom*, p. 35.

12 Ripstein, *Force and Freedom*, p. 43.

state does “wrong in the highest degree” (MM 308) might naturally be thought to license the claim that because non-state peoples are committing wrong in the highest degree, outsiders already in a rightful condition are permitted to coerce any non-state people into a rightful condition; colonization would thus perform a permissible act of coercion. Kant raises this question explicitly in §15: when “neither nature nor chance” bring our will in the neighborhood of, even, “savages”, should we not be “authorized to found colonies, by force if need to be”? Should we not be entitled to “found colonies by fraudulent purchase of their land... making use of our superiority without regard for their first possession?” Whatever the excuse, Kant is unequivocal: “But it is easy to see through this veil of injustice (Jesuitism), which would sanction any means to good ends. Such a way of acquiring land is therefore to be repudiated” (MM 266). When he takes up the question again under the heading of “Cosmopolitan Right” (§62), he is equally emphatic that we cannot encroach on the land-use practices of indigenous peoples that they need for their sustenance, say hunting or farming or nomadic peoples, nor require peoples to change their practices, say from hunting to farming, nor conclude a fraudulent contract, nor take advantage of their ignorance (MM 353).<sup>13</sup> Such colonizing efforts, Kant states, “provide the occasion for evils and acts of violence in one place on our globe to be felt all over it” (MM 353).

What is it that underpins the absoluteness of Kant’s prohibition on colonial undertakings? Certainly, given the profundity and centrality of property rights in Kant’s theory, there is a focus on the relation between a people and their land. Following other eighteenth century thinkers, Kant appears to be operating with the convention that a state’s property is to be regarded as its body rather than as property owned by it. Under this conceit, to deprive a people of its land is to deprive it of the use of its own body, a form of coercion disallowed under all circumstances except self-defense.<sup>14</sup> But even if this analogical strategy is accepted, why should the analogy that fits the case of states also hold for non-state

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13 For a catalogue of prohibitions, see Stilz, “Provisional Right,” pp. 201-2.

14 See Ripstein, *Force and Freedom*, 228.

peoples? Isn't that the disputed question?<sup>15</sup> The only plausible and necessary premise for prohibiting colonizing enterprises is that "*any multitude of human beings must be assumed to be in a rightful condition.*"<sup>16</sup> Once that premise is in place, then it follows that the colonizer is unilaterally interfering with an existing rightful condition, deciding for the colonized on the disposition of their united will; and, what goes along with that, it cannot be up to any outsider to unilaterally decide even *if* a people with a recognizable form of life is in a rightful condition.

In effectively accepting this premise, what is Kant supposing? Minimally, Kant is drawing the line between the state of nature and a rightful condition in these instances differently than he does in his defense of the republican state. When faced with non-state peoples, Kant is assuming that the normatively effective distinction is between random individuals bent on following a will of their own, individuals for whom only the first person pronoun bears on their actions, and any peoples who can say of themselves "we". But what for Kant is presumed in a people being a "we"? Since he regards the caesura separating a random collection of individuals and a "we will" as one in which ideally each is collectively endowed with the status of being his own master, then, if we are willing to call the possession of that status as being recognized as having dignity or intrinsic worth, to adopt Hegel's labeling, it will follow that any people who possess a recognizable form of life, a form of life through which they can intelligibly say about their practices "we", and we outsiders are compelled to speak of "them", then *they have emphatically resolved the foundational normative dilemma of the human: collectively bestowing on each member dignity and intrinsic worth.*

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15 Stilz, "Provisional Right," runs the argument through a thickening and historicizing of Kant's concept of "provisional right," which is probably necessary since there are disanalogies as well as analogies between persons and their bodies, and states and their bodies. But that will bring up the issue I want to focus on here: what is involved in recognizing the rights of non-peoples as such?

16 Ripstein, "Kant's Juridical Theory," p. 149.

Kant is fully aware that this presumption is transgressed systematically and massively in all known states, and *pro tanto*, also by non-state peoples. Given his uncompromising strictures against revolution, however, we know that he thinks the distance between even the worst civil condition and the state of nature is normatively absolute even when difficult to judge in practice. But it is just this massive respect for normatively governed forms of life as such that underlines and supports Kant's prohibition on colonization. Of course, any people on Kant's account are, as a people, entitled to self-determination; but I am claiming that underlying that entitlement, Kant is claiming that the achievement of being a recognizable "we", a people with a recognizable form of life, deserves *respect* since being a reproducible form of life necessarily involves normatively governed, reproducible practices that, however fairly or unfairly, however equally or unequally, acknowledge the dignity and worth of its members.

Although it took some time to get here, it is just this thought that I find absent from Allen's account. There must be more to interacting with other peoples than treating them as contemporaries in a space of reasons; nor is granting the right to self-determination sufficient, since there are means of establishing that right which need not include a defeasible grant of moral respect.<sup>17</sup> I am unsure what decolonizing philosophy is, but Kant's parochial, Eurocentric account that is premised on a revision of Roman law categories joined to the inexpungible history of slavery provides what I take to be fundamental for a post-colonial condition, namely, how the very idea of a people sustaining a recognizable form of human living presupposes that they have satisfied the normative dilemma of providing each member of their society *some* dignity status; it is because they have found a broadly enduring solution to the dilemma of underwriting the worth of human living that their form of life is deserv-

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17 The hopelessness of the idea of forcing whole peoples to be free is sufficient to ground the right to self-determination; as is the political realist thesis that if the determination of who is in a rightful condition is determined by other states, then no state is secure from external usurpation.

ing respect. Such respect provides rational grounds for conversation and mutual learning.

### The Emptiness of Problematizing Genealogy

Allen argues that the goal of problematizing critique is “to reveal the dangers and promises contained in the values, concepts, or forms of life whose contingent history it traces” (191). Now at that level of generality, who would want to contest the claim of problematizing critique? Allen pointedly quotes crucial passages in which Adorno sounds as if he too is interested in problematizing critique in this sense. For example: “Interpretation...is criticism of phenomena that have been brought to a standstill; it consists in revealing the dynamism stored up in them, so that what appears as second nature can be seen to have a history...Criticism ensures that what has evolved loses its appearance as mere existence and stands revealed as the product of history.”<sup>18</sup> Allen then rushes to show how this thought tallies with Foucault’s “characterization of genealogy” as the attempt to “record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality,” an attempt, Allen states, “that requires us to seek the singularity of events “in the most uncompromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history”” (195).<sup>19</sup> The quoted passages sound alike, and, of course, both authors are deeply indebted to Nietzsche.

Nonetheless, it is, I think, an optical illusion to suppose that Foucault and Adorno are here making the same claim. Adorno’s critique is *narrowly targeted* at the regime of identity thinking and instrumental reason that are the form of the rationalization of reason that enable capital domination, while Foucault is deploying genealogy as a *general method of critique* that targets particular formations of power-knowledge as they appear in the modern world. If this way of distinguishing Adorno and Foucault is

18 Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures, 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 135.

19 The Foucault quotes are from his “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Vol. 2, Essential works of Michel Foucault*, James D. Faubion (ed.) (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 369.

correct – and it is certainly continuous with Foucault’s general resistance to rationalism and Marxism – then one cannot align or fuse their critical practices. On my reading, Allen subsumes Adorno under Foucault. Thus problematizing critique effectively becomes the transformation and reduction of Adornoian genealogy as the determinate negation of identity thinking – as the ideology and mechanism of capital domination – into a second order critical stance suitable for engaging any and all congealed formations of historical reason. In Allen’s usage, problematizing critique is a wholly formal reflexive method for enabling cognitive humility and fallibilism rather than, as is the case for Adorno, a critical regime that is bound by the dictates of instrumental reason and identity thinking it is seeking to displace.

Arguably, the whole of Allen’s book flies under the flag of Adorno’s dictum that “progress occurs where it ends.”<sup>20</sup> And this for good reason, since the idea of progress is for Adorno the ideological generalization of Enlightenment rationality that makes the expansion of scientific reason into instrumental reason normatively mandatory across all cognitively significant and practically determinative domains of social practice.<sup>21</sup> Progress, that begins with the achievements of modern science and seeks to leverage its cognitive success into a repeatable cognitive paradigm and normatively legislative societal mechanism, is one of the names for the hegemony of instrumental reason. But, and this may be a place where Adorno and Allen part company, Adorno’s reason for interrogating the spell of instrumental reason is because he thinks the critique of capital will fail without it; and further, it is the spell of instrumental reason that is the underlying unifying factor of modern social practices that enables capital domination to remain unchallengeable. Adorno never wavered

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20 Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 150.

21 The expansion is of course a reversion: scientific reason for Adorno is the full-blown form of instrumental reason under the heading of identity thinking, subsuming the particular under the universal, reducing the many to the one, the new to the old.

from the Marxist thought that capital was the driving force of modernity; what he denied was that the force of capital domination could be captured solely in class or even narrowly economic terms; and this meant too that Marx's own progressive philosophy of history was erroneous. Rather, with Weber (and Nietzsche), he argued that capitalism was the economic form of the more general striving of instrumental reason (identity thinking), that is, that form of reason that subsumes and reduces all particulars under universal forms indifferent to the defining features and qualitative characteristics of sensuous and living particularity; hence Adorno's chilling dictum that what died in Auschwitz was no longer an individual, but a specimen. The progress of instrumental reason, which is real and emphatic in the advances of science and technology that have led to the massive improvements in the living conditions of citizens of the North Atlantic civilization, is simultaneously the evisceration of qualitative life: "The more identity is posited by imperious spirit, the more injustice is done to the nonidentical."<sup>22</sup> But this is only to say that the overcoming of capital domination will require not just a critique of instrumental reason but also the institution of alternative rationalities that can systematically acknowledge the dependence of concept on object in a manner sufficient to enable the demands of sensuous particularity and the dignity of particular life to become ingredient in cognition and practice. No such effort at the systematic reconstruction of concept and reason is evident in Foucault's thought.

Allen rightly notes that it is because Adorno thinks that dialectical reason is bound to the insistences of identity thinking, he contends that dialectical reason will pass away when antagonistic society is finally overcome (194). But this presumes the justness of Adorno's judgment that the whole is false. Hence, something must be going awry when at the end of the same paragraph in which she notes Adorno's prognosis about the disappearance of dialectical reason, she goes on to suggest that problematizing genealogy "serves to reveal the fragmentary, fragile, and internally fractured nature of our current historical situation" (194). I can

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22 Adorno, "Progress," p. 149.

think of no place in which Adorno would consider our present historical situation fragmentary and fragile; it is its implacable unity and solidity that calls dialectical reason, critique, and genealogy into being, and with them the requirement for determinate negation.

For Adorno progress cannot end until instrumental reason and its avatars, including capital, are overcome and displaced. In regimenting genealogy to the decent purposes of a non-dominating conversation between the West and its others, Allen seems to me to have forgotten what is the primary purpose a critical theory of society.

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## Critical Theory's Colonial Unconscious: *Comments on The End of Progress by Amy Allen*

Linda Martín Alcoff<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The question of the relationship between European modernity and colonialism has been mystifyingly sidestepped in most of the writings by the major figures who sought to analyze the limits of Enlightenment thought, notably the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Amy Allen's book makes a substantial contribution to this project.

Allen's central claim is that the key reason for critical theory's inability to address coloniality is its persistent commitment to human historical and developmental progress, a commitment based in its quest for normative grounds and its worries about relativism. My suggestion is that we need more than an account of the history of critical theory's argumentation to explain the omission, but also an account of the ideological role that progress plays in ongoing global power relations that are manifest in academic trends even among Western progressive thinkers.

The European Enlightenment emerged in the midst of a period of empire building pursued through a scale of global barbarism never seen before in human history. European philosophers provided legitimating narratives to justify the colonizing mission. Some of those legitimating narratives continue to echo in today's progressive ethical principles, from the labor theory of value in the Marxist tradition to the classical liberal idea that rational beings should not be treated instrumentally. Most importantly, this period understood its intellectual and social developments to signify the achievement of human progress in both axiological and epistemological domains.

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The question of the relationship between European modernity and colonialism poses an obvious challenge to such optimism. Yet this topic has been mystifyingly sidestepped in most of the writings by the major figures who sought to analyze the limits and blindspots of Enlightenment thought, notably the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Ignoring the question of colonialism led to important errors in their diagnosis of the weaknesses of the Enlightenment, as well as their proffered solutions. For example, the idea put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer that positivism in the natural sciences led to the hegemony of instrumental rationality in the human science misses the mark. The focus on prediction and control was motivated initially by the need to exploit more thoroughly the human labor in the colonies. Bureaucratic management, data collection on human beings, the ability to predict mortality conditions given certain kinds of labor, and disciplinary technologies emerged of necessity in the colonial adventures, and the European's understanding of nature was enhanced considerably through gaining agricultural, navigational, shipbuilding and assorted craft skills from many peoples around the world. Adorno and Horkheimer not only missed this genealogy of modern European science, but also its governing motivations.

Critical theory developed as an immanent critique of the liberal Enlightenment ideology, and as such, has been an important ally for decolonial thinkers. As Rafael Vizcaino has recently pointed out, previous attempts to stage theoretical engagements, through a series of extensive conversations between Apel, Habermas, and Dussel, and through the writings of Eduardo Mendieta and Paget Henry, were not followed up by the central players in the critical theory tradition.<sup>2</sup> Serious engagement with the rich trove of postcolonial and decolonial thought developed over the last decades is scarce in the critical theory journals or theories. The tradition continues to have a colonial unconscious, and I'd argue this is manifest in the very assumption that *immanent* critique could be sufficient. The idea that immanent critique is the only kind that is possible

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2 Rafael Vizcaino "Towards a Decolonial Dialogue of Critical Theories" *The C.L.R. James Journal* 22: 1-2, Fall 2016, 297-301.

is itself an enactment of Eurocentrism: closing critical theory off from engaging with other voices and other theoretical traditions. The focus on immanent critique, as with the post-structuralist claim that there is no outside or no true exteriority, has played a role in sequestering the intellectual community of critical social theory in the global north.

To claim that the Enlightenment started in Europe, that the tools to critique its flaws and limitations are within the European tradition, and that the tools needed to critique Europe's treatment of the rest of the globe are all contained in Europe is wrong on all three counts.

I take the debauched genealogy of the Enlightenment, in which it emerges out of the radical rupture of European colonialism's encounter with the Other, as an incontrovertible fact of history, but this just opens up a large set of questions about how we should understand and evaluate Europe's intellectual legacy, and how we might avoid errors of the past. Amy Allen's book makes a substantial contribution to this project.

Allen's central claim is that the key reason for critical theory's inability to address coloniality is its persistent commitment to human historical and developmental progress. This is, as she points out, a major irony, given how seriously the first-generation Frankfurt school rebuked the mythic stature accorded to the inevitability of progress. Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin argued not only that the belief in progress was ill-founded, but that it was an idea that has played a quite nefarious role in instrumentalizing populations and excusing brutality. Yet she finds a powerful attachment to the fact of progress by the current generation, notably Habermas, Honneth, and Forst.

The idea of 'the fact of progress' is backward looking, but there is also a forward-looking claim about its likely continuation given certain social conditions. One interesting issue here is the relation between the two: as she notes, a number of critical theorists have suggested that if we cannot point to past progress people will lose hope about the future. Habermas further suggests that the "fact of progress" is what gives us an orientation for the future, a sense of the priorities. Thus, their inability to let go of the backward-looking claim is often made as a condition for the possi-

bility of forward looking normative theory: because they take the empirical facts about history as all we have to provide grounds for normative argument. Allen sees this as the deeper reason for the recalcitrance of the current generation, who took up the task of providing the missing grounds for Marxist normativity.<sup>3</sup> Anti-foundationalist accounts of normativity are taken to be inadequate since they are considered to lead inevitably to relativism. Thus, the fact of progress has been solidified as a necessary feature of critical thought, without which the account of social amelioration could not be justified.

Yet besides distinguishing backward and forward-looking claims, Allen points out there is also a distinction between the local and specific versus more global claims of progress. To contest the more global claim of socio-cultural and moral-political development does not endanger our ability to identify progress in more specific or local domains. It remains a question for me, then, why the recalcitrance to reconsidering the more global orientation toward progress persists. My suggestion is that we need more than an account of the history of critical theory's argumentation, but an account of the ideological role that progress plays in ongoing global power relations that are manifest in academic trends even among Western progressive thinkers.

The claim that European modernity has represented progress is understood, Allen explains, as meaning that there has been "a process of expanding social rationalization, whereby existing relations of power and domination and other pathological deformations of reason are progressively overcome."<sup>4</sup> Thus she argues that for Habermas and Honneth, progress is measured by the "progressive purification of reason from power relations"<sup>5</sup>, a feat that has been accomplished via an expansion in the understanding of how to pursue reasoned critique as well as praxis. But their emphasis is on reason and norm-governed communicative

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3 Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p. xv.

4 Allen, p. 88.

5 Allen, p. 219.

practice more than revolutionary movements: using reason we can loosen the grip of power to help engender progress through reforming our institutions and forms of life. Immanent critique performs the negative task of clearing the way of irrational legitimations, so that communicative practice can then take up the positive task of reform.

To return to the earlier analysis, Allen shows that the attachment to the implausible claim of historical progress is due to the way the major theoretical task has been defined: to legitimate normative critique and avoid relativism. This is the legacy that Habermas understood critical theorists of his generation to have inherited because of the inadequacies of the first-generation theorists, who continued Marx's critique of modern capitalist societies even though they had largely repudiated the naturalistic concepts such as "species being" and the dialectic of class struggle that Marx relied on for his normative critique of capitalism. Although it made sense to let go of these aspects of Marxism, as well as the ideas of natural law, natural rights, and natural man, this created a crisis for the normative grounds of critical theory. Like Marx, Habermas sought normative grounds from empirical reality, but unlike Marx he chose to focus on the nature of human linguistic practice, taking this as the subject of historical development and increased rationalization. So, even the empirical grounds for normativity became embedded for Habermas in a historical story of human progress.

Thus, contemporary critical theorists keep returning to the claim of progress because only if critique is founded in a form of life that can be established to be better than those that came before it can it provide normative direction and avoid relativism. And the fact that the sort of progress they think is supportable provides a basis for meliorism rather than perfectionism sounds reassuringly modest against the classical liberals or classical Marxism itself.

It is interesting to note that the project to find more realistic normative grounds has been formulated as an engagement with liberalism, while the project to avoid relativism has been formulated as an engagement with postmodernism and poststructuralism. In truth, these have been

critical theorists' most important competitors for the market share of a left leaning intellectual class. But this again keeps Eurocentrism alive as an uninterrogated frame, since they have not been concerned with the postcolonial and decolonial developments, and in fact, as Allen notes, these trends have been avoided on the presumption that they will lead to relativism.

Allen's careful analyses in this work of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst's commitments to varied accounts of progress, and her careful account of the problematic effects for decolonial progress that their positions entail, is a major contribution that I very much hope will stimulate more debate.

In what remains I will focus mainly on her anti-foundationalist alternative to the normative dilemma that she develops mainly with Adorno and Foucault. I will add some further considerations to expand the discussion. But I want to make just a couple of points about the critical arguments she makes prior to the development of her alternative.

Rainer Forst has responded to critics of his universalist account of rationality by charging those who would reject universalistic accounts as rendering the subaltern sub-rational. This may appear to beg the question on the meaning of rationality, but Forst attempts to define it minimally as a right to justification or to demand the giving of reasons. In this way, he hopes to retain its universal applicability. To counter Forst's charge, Allen takes a page from Charles Taylor to argue that while everyone gives and receives reasons or justifications, "the webs of value that suffuse [alternative] forms of life help to determine what can count as a reason in a particular justificatory context or order of justification" and that "indeed, one could argue that such a picture is required if we really want to understand justification as a social practice, as Forst himself suggests..."<sup>6</sup>

As Jorge Valadez has also argued in his work on deliberative democracy in multicultural societies, the challenge to universal justification is the non-universal nature of intelligibility.<sup>7</sup> Self determination for minoritized

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6 Allen, p. 157.

7 Jorge Valadez, Deliberative Democracy, Political Legitimacy, and Self-Deter-

communities is impossible without a recognition of the non-universal nature of meaningful forms of life, and the demand for all arguments to be translated into dominant concepts works to conceal hegemonic power rather than to moderate it. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo gave a compelling example of this from his investigation of Ilongot headhunters in the rural Philippines.<sup>8</sup> Rosaldo lived with them for a year in the 1960s, during which time he received a notice from the US government that he had been drafted to serve in Vietnam. His Ilongot hosts were shocked to discover that Rosaldo could be forcibly sent to kill men he did not know; their practice involved autonomous individual decision making and the targeting of specific known persons. As Valadez argues, intelligibility is in some cases incommensurable or untranslatable. This is simply to bring the issue of culture and identity to the fore, to pose the question: How can the practices of a universally applicable practical reason address the inevitable blocks to communicative practice that diversities of culture engender? To say, as Forst does, that we must assume universal discursive competence and the universal capacity to give and demand reasons does not provide an answer as to how the universal procedures of communicative practice can be elaborated given the particularity of meaning and understanding.

Habermas attempts to avoid these issues with a proceduralism that inspects the terms of communication prior to the contestation over meanings and truth. The proceduralism he develops is portrayed as an achievement made possible by the progress in social rationalization. In this way, Allen argues, Habermas persists in thinking that he can establish the universal validity of the positive aspects of Enlightenment modernity and produce a normative foundation for critique through a formalist pragmatics. Allen explains that "Formal pragmatics is presented as an empirical research program awaiting empirical confirmation" but the problem is that "this research program already presupposes the

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mination in Multi-Cultural Societies. New York: Routledge, 2000.

8 Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

superiority of the modern concept of rationality — by equating the intuitive knowledge of competent members of modern societies with the universal presuppositions of communicative action...<sup>9</sup> Habermas is thus simply assuming the progressive evolution of contemporary language users, with the result that formal pragmatics is not standing “on its own, independent of the theory of social evolution.”<sup>10</sup>

Allen further argues that the belief that *European* modernity is a developmental advance of human reason is a claim that counters the principle Habermasian solution to domination, since it figures the participants in communicative practice as unequal players: some are the beneficiary of rationality’s historical development, and others not. The Ilongot judgment of draft laws could then be dismissed. When one party to a dialogue assumes ahead of time that it is culturally advanced, the result is hardly an ideal speech situation, or a motivation for a serious exchange of views.<sup>11</sup>

This is the paradox of Habermas’s attempt to retreat to a formalist or proceduralist solution to the problem of normativity, and I think it indicates more of a colonial unconscious than Allen acknowledges. If metaphysical commitments to species being or natural man became implausible by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surely this was in part because of a more real and material source of relativism from the encounters with cultures that Europeans found so alien as to be unintelligible. These encounters instigated a critical series of debates in early anthropology over the fixed or variable status of reason and morality. Yet critical theory did not engage this new literature, and its debates remain to this day largely internal to Anglo-European interlocutors.

The anthropological debates were informed by substantive ethnographies, however flawed. It is notable that the sort of formal proceduralism such as Habermas advocates allows a disengagement with concrete cases of difference, heading off the potential of such encounters to challenge our way of thinking. Without doubt, formalism can be helpful at times

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9 Allen, p. 58.

10 Allen p. 60.

11 Allen, p. 74.

to ward off violent responses, if every interlocutor must be treated with similar dignity and respect. But as Dussel argues, proceduralism encodes a closed attitude toward change, setting a priori limits to an encounter, and affecting an attitude of control.<sup>12</sup> Formal pragmatics is not put in the form of a proposal but as a set of conditions. This is a performative enactment of colonial presumption, not a dialogic practice.

Yet what about the claim that normativity requires a belief in progress to give it some direction? In his book, Critique and Disclosure, Nikolas Kompridis comments that "At this point, it becomes clearer than ever before just how much our capacity to envision alternative possibilities depends on our expectation that the social conditions under which these possibilities can be successfully realized might one day obtain."<sup>13</sup> In other words, hope requires belief in the empirical possibility or feasibility of change. Kompridis considers Habermas's 1989 text, The New Conservatism, in which he describes the modern ailment of despair about the future, an ailment that we can see even more in evidence today. Habermas says "What is at stake is Western culture's confidence in itself."<sup>14</sup> Note that this is not a generic despair, or despair about universal humanity, but a despair about the *West's* capacity to solve problems. The form in which Habermas expresses this ("Western culture's confidence in itself") implies a specific "we" who will be charting the move toward progress. Habermas believes this despair defuses progressive movements, but from another point of view it might be viewed more positively, as a correction that could lead to a new opening.

In line with Allen, Kompridis argues that "we would be entitled to our confidence...only if our change of orientation to the future made us insightfully aware of a previously uncritical relation to the past."<sup>15</sup>

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12 Enrique Dussel, Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion. Translated by Eduardo Mendieta et al. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013.

13 Nikolas Kompridis, Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2006, p. 248.

14 Quoted in Kompridis, p. 248.

15 Kompridis, p. 13, emphasis added.

Yet we might first want to interrogate what accounts for the despair Habermas describes—is it the demise of Western culture’s confidence in its ability to engage ethically and productively with new challenges, as Habermas suggests, or is it also a sensibility about a chaotic global multiversality which cannot be managed or even judged by surefooted standards? Is it the loss of the illusion of mastery, in other words, or the sense of entering a world of unknowns?

Kompridis remarks that “social complexity and cultural pluralism” — the sort of things that engender this sense of unmanageable chaos, can be seen as “impediments to utopian thought” – since they unmoor us. But they can alternatively be viewed as “the new, potentially enabling constraints under which utopian thought must operate.”<sup>16</sup> And he suggests that it is “hard to see how such facts as might productively constrain utopian thought could be the source of radical self-doubt.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to suggest that the threat we feel from the openness of unpredictable futures and radical difference is because of our long-sedimented habits of control.

In light of these considerations, proceduralism begins to look like a strategy of rule.

Does normative critique actually need, or benefit from, a proceduralism that closes off future possibilities, that puts the highest value on control and predictability? Making creative use of Heidegger, against this orientation Kompridis suggests that critique “must reconceive itself as a possibility-disclosing practice.”<sup>18</sup> Notice how questions of validity retreat into the background of such a project. Before I turn to Allen’s proposal for how to reconfigure critical theory without the belief in progress, let me show how Kompridis’s approach is concordant with Dussel’s.

Enrique Dussel has offered the most sustained decolonial critique of critical theory, particularly in its Habermasian version; his analysis targets formalism as the main danger. Like Allen, Dussel finds helpful

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16 Kompridis, p. 249.

17 Kompridis, p. 249.

18 Kompridis, p. 254.

elements in Adorno for overcoming formalist arguments, but he also develops his own ethical counter to formal proceduralism. He shares with the tradition of critical theory its concern for normative grounds as well as its rejection of relativism, but he argues that this quest requires a substantively materialist solution rather than a proceduralist one. Metaethics, he argues, requires a formal principle of validity that involves, just as Habermas, Honneth and Forst espouse, an "intersubjective and communicative moral validity that is fulfilled in the symmetry of the affected parties..."<sup>19</sup> But this is insufficient. He avows two further requirements, one concerning feasibility and another concerning materiality, and it is this last requirement that departs most strongly from the contemporary Europeans. The material principle involves an affirmation of material life: "reproducing and developing the life of a subject, in a community, with a universal practical truth...always within a given culture...in a subjective state of happiness."<sup>20</sup> Hence, although Dussel, like Allen, agrees with Taylor's emphasis on substantive cultural difference, the material principle is universal, he says, because it will "facilitate the transcendence of [communitarianism's] particularistic incommensurability and open it up to a universalism of *content* beyond the merely historical, hypervalues, or the authenticity of a specific cultural identity."<sup>21</sup> In this way, he sets out a third way between foundationalist proceduralism that ignores culture and an anti-foundationalist culturalism that cannot avoid relativism.

Dussel's meta-ethical principles establish normative grounds for critique by holding that a form of society in which subjects' material life cannot be maintained, and more, in which group-specific forms of sustaining material life cannot be maintained, is invalid. "Ethics ... is realized when it shows and normalizes the compatibility of the ... formal system with the production, reproduction and development of human life of each ethical subject with the right to discursive participation. If such compatibility is not achieved (e.g. when there is an increase in cap-

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19 Dussel, p. 159.

20 Dussel, p. 202.

21 Dussel, p. xvi.

ital but a decrease in the life possibilities and democratic-discursive participation of the great majority of humankind) ethical-critical *intervention* becomes necessary."<sup>22</sup>

Dussel's approach does not legitimate every form of resistance against state coercion. It valorizes human life, and the varied forms of human ways of life, over a formalist or negative conception of freedom. It is a universalist approach that supports multiversality, a world in which many worlds are possible, without relativism. It does not require a notion of human development or progress. As Amos Nascimento has suggested, such an approach displaces the exclusivity of rights within nation-states and places more emphasis on humanity and communicative interactions.<sup>23</sup>

To be clear, the problem is not Europeans but what Dussel sometimes calls "Eurocentric Europeans." With that reminder let me turn to Allen's own contextualist alternative to the progress-based models, crafted with the help of Adorno and Foucault among others.

Adorno and Foucault each offer a meliorist and contextual approach to social change. For them the project is not about getting history back on track, as if, from a totalizing view, one can see the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a glitch from which we can recover our climb. Rather, both progress and the continuation of domination are taken to be contingent possibilities for the future. To project inevitable progress requires imagining some continuous process of development and some "we" that learns from its mistakes. But it is equally unjustified to claim that The Story of Human History is one of persistent wreckage (contra Benjamin). Rather, by jettisoning progress and positing contingency, we might be attuned to possibility of the new while yet retaining caution.

Though Allen focuses her argument around the issue of progress, her analysis points to further issues troubling the relationship between

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22 Dussel, p. 391.

23 Amos Nascimento, "Human Rights and the Paradigms of Cosmopolitanism: From Rights to Humanity," in Human Rights, Human Dignity, and Cosmopolitan Ideals: Essays on Critical Theory and Human Rights edited by Matthias Lutz-Bachmann and Amos Nascimento, Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2014, pp. 95-117.

decolonial theory and critical theory: especially in relation to totalizing accounts of power or domination. Decolonial theory has an ambivalent relationship to totalization since many theorists actually offer alternative macro-narratives of global history and political economy. A prominent example is Dussel's notion of transmodernity which is intended to counter the canonical developmental histories that place Europe at the center (to which others are peripheral) as well as to contest European postmodernism as the vanguard. One might read both Dussel and Mignolo's insistence that the "underside of modernity" is constitutive of modernity itself as an enlarging move that encompasses more of the globe in a singular narrative. But it is also the case that decolonial thinkers, including these, consistently describe their overall aim as a form of pluriversality.

The idea of human developmental progress requires a totalizing approach. Thus, even though Europe does not represent the totality of humanity, its development of rationality represents, somehow, the hope of humanity, as if the rest of humanity has no alternative development or alternative form of reason that might be used to designate a species-wide progress. Further, European critical theory shares with its post-modernist competitors the idea that there is no exteriority, no outside of power as Foucault might say, or no alternative to modernity as critical theorists purport. This claim contributes to the idea that only immanent critique is possible.

To work our way out of these dilemmas, Allen turns to Foucault and Adorno for an anti-foundationalist approach to normativity. Neither partake in the idea that European history is progressive, although they use only the catastrophes and ongoing forms of domination that persist in the interior of Europe to criticize this idea. Adorno references the Holocaust but also the more subtle creep of positivism's hegemony and the effects of this hegemony on cultural production and the terms of resistance, while Foucault points us to the negative effects of securitization, surveillance and discipline as these are entrenched as a purported benefit of a pastoral biopower. The upshot of these arguments is that neither be-

lieve that in modernity reason has become at all disengaged from power: rather, reason and power have become more securely entangled.

Allen concludes from their claims that, “we cannot, as critical theorists following Habermas have attempted to do, identify a use or a stratum of reason that is not so entangled.”<sup>24</sup>

I have always read Adorno as suggesting negative dialectics as an antidote to the forces of domination, holding out hope of a loosened tie. Foucault’s view I take to be different: not that one can aim to separate reason from power but that subjugated or minoritized knowledges operate to subvert the hegemonic forms of power that do the most damage. He suggests a geographical mapping of power that identifies centers and peripheries, hegemony seeking knowledges that actually pursue the alliances with force fields of power and other sorts of knowledges that are content to remain local and specific. This spatial imagery is, I think, useful for a decolonial mapping, especially given Foucault’s incessantly historical approach to philosophical analysis. His method intends to reveal the ways in which knowledges circulate, and how it is that some have impressive global mobility, precisely because of their entwinement with power. Lorraine Code’s concept of ecological thinking brings this kind of idea to fruition when she argues that we must situate not only the knower but also the known.<sup>25</sup>

Foucault has his own colonial consciousness in his almost exclusive European focus on the formation of power, as if its modern forms of disciplinarity and governmentality were not forged in transnational colonial projects. This oversight hampers his analysis particularly of race and cultural difference, key elements of modern capitalism’s construction of labor markets. Yet the specific approach he develops is in potential concordance with Dussel and Mignolo’s decolonial theory in two ways: by its contextualism, as Allen makes clear, and also by the fact that he refuses the claim that power is equiprimordial across language and the

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24 Allen, p. 186.

25 Lorraine Code, Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

social landscape, that its totalizing capacities are more aspirational than achieved.

Allen makes good use of Adorno to argue against the seriousness of the relativist challenge as Habermas et al understand it. For Adorno, she explains, it is more important to resist “the pull of the transcendent.”<sup>26</sup> Transcendence is a form of avoidance and erasure of the concrete and the particular, an arbitrary posit. In his view, and hers, relativism and absolutism “are correlates,” such that putting all our focus on achieving one will bring us into the snare of the other. The “contingent, context-immanent normativity” she draws out in the end of the book, though drawn from European thinkers, provides a means to link decolonial thinkers and this strand in contemporary European critical social theory.

In conclusion, I will make just two final points regarding the nature of possibility and of praxis and the link between the two. Rafael Vizcaino worries that Allen’s approach assumes “that problematizing critique frees us from the institutions or practices that one critiques.” In other words, self-reflexivity is sufficient. Vizcaino uses Fanon here to urge us to remember that it is praxis that opens up a “space for freedom within a context of domination” and not merely theory, much less meta-theory. Some take Fanon to be overly focused on resistant forms of praxis; Dussel interestingly puts the emphasis on other sorts of praxis. The activist oppressed, he claims, persistently create new forms of culture, institutions, life: “victims, when they irrupt in history, create new things. It has always been like this. It cannot be otherwise.”<sup>27</sup> If, as Kompridis says, the role of theory is the disclosure of new possibilities, our project must be to revive critical theory from its tranquil Eurocentric slumber. Allen’s book is a terrific help.

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26 Allen, p. 216.

27 Dussel, p, 355.



## Reconstructing Critical Theory (Beyond Methodological Eurocentrism):

### *Reply to Bernstein and Alcoff*

*Amy Allen*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper responds to the critical discussions of my book, *The End of Progress*, by J.M. Bernstein and Linda Martín Alcoff. In my response, I first clarify and defend my use of the term ‘decolonizing’ and elaborate a bit on the aims of my book. Then, I take up the issues raised by Bernstein: progress, what we owe to other peoples, and the relationship between Adornian negative dialectics and Foucaultian genealogy. Finally, in response to Alcoff, I discuss her extension of my critique of Habermas, her concerns about the idea that there is no outside to power, and the relationship between theory and practice.

First of all, let me say what an incredible honor it is to have J.M. Bernstein and Linda Martín Alcoff comment on my book. Had I been given the opportunity to assemble a “dream team” of commentators on this project, these two would most certainly have been on it, not only because I admire them both greatly and have learned so much from their work over the years, but also because this book has been deeply marked by their influence, in different ways. So, I feel incredibly privileged and a bit humbled to have them comment on it.

I’d also like to note at the outset that one of the main aims of *The End of Progress* was to generate a conversation between two critical intellectual traditions that have mostly not engaged with one another. Or, perhaps it would be better to say, as Alcoff helpfully reminds us, that there has been some engagement between Frankfurt School critical theory and post- and decolonial theory, but it has mostly been a one-sided exchange: the major thinkers of the Frankfurt School tradition have yet to respond in depth to the challenge of post- and decolonial theory. My book was an attempt to

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open up space for this important conversation: to show what is at stake in this exchange for those who (like myself) are committed to some version of Critical Theory as envisioned by the Frankfurt School, and also to consider how we might have to revise or rethink our theoretical commitments in order to facilitate such a dialogue. Here I think that Alcoff's point about how critical theory has been shaped by its engagement with liberal political philosophy on the one hand and poststructuralism on the other hand is crucial.<sup>2</sup> I think she's absolutely right to suggest that this has had a major structuring impact on the kinds of questions that have been on and off the table for critical theory for the last thirty years or so. So much of what we take as given, what we consider up for debate, and even what we talk about depends on who we are in conversation with, and one of the broader aims of this book has been to bring Frankfurt School Critical theory into conversation with a different set of interlocutors: particularly queer, feminist, and post- and decolonial theorists.

I thought and still think that this is important work to do, but it also has certain inherent risks, not least of which is the question of audience: for whom is a book like this written? I worried as I was writing it – and some of the critical responses to the book have borne out this worry – that the critical theorists who were perhaps my primary audience would never take this project seriously, that they would find my critique of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst too sharp and my contextualism too weak, and that while post- and decolonial feminists would likely agree with much of what I said they might also find it obvious and therefore uninteresting. I mention all of this because I think that the fact that the book attempts to straddle multiple, diverse audiences may account for the very different kinds of critical responses it has been generating. In this case, I think that although this exchange includes two very different kinds of responses to the book, I'm heartened by them not only because they both take very seriously what the book is trying to do and engage its argument on its own terms, but also because they are indicative of precisely the kind of conversation that I had hoped that the book might open up.

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2 Alcoff, pp. 153-154.

Before I respond to specific points in the papers, let me say a few words to clarify what I was trying to do in the book and what I wasn't trying to do, by unpacking for a moment the book's subtitle. The first issue has to do with my use of the term 'decolonizing'. Bernstein worries that this concept plays no actual role in the formation of my argument, and that it is nothing more than a political metaphor.<sup>3</sup> Although I think it would be possible to formulate a nearby version of my conceptual critique of the role that progress plays in securing the normative foundations of Habermasian and post-Habermasian critical theory that did not draw on the motif of decolonization – after all, as I argue in the book, a large part of the problem with the appeal to progress to ground normativity is simply that it is circular – I don't necessarily see this as a problem, nor do I think it means that the notion of decolonization plays no actual role in the formation of my argument. It may be fair enough to complain that I don't say enough in the book about my precise usage of the term decolonization and how it relates to other, nearby critical projects, but it seems to me that Alcoff has done a beautiful job – much better than I could have done myself – of showing not only how my book resonates with major strands of decolonial theory but also how and why the conceptual and political issues surrounding ideas of progress, imperialist logics, and practices of colonization are deeply entangled. In other words, much of what I might want to say in reply to Bernstein on this particular point has already been said by Alcoff, who not only brings out well the linkages between my book and the work of decolonial thinkers such as Dussel and Mignolo but also shows how those links could be developed and pushed much further.

To what Alcoff said I would just add the following clarifications: the aim of the book is not that of decolonizing critical theory writ large but rather "decolonizing" its normative foundations (as a careful reading of the book's subtitle attests). There is an important difference here in terms of the scope of the book's argument and ambitions (I'll come back to this

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3 Bernstein, p. 133.

point in a moment). Although I don't think this is anywhere stated quite this explicitly in the book itself, the basic idea is something like the following: critical theory can't be decolonized unless and until its normative foundations are decolonized, that is, unless and until its projects of normative grounding are purged of their blithe universalism and implicit or explicit commitments to a progressive philosophy of history. Which is to say that what I offer in the book could be understood as a necessary contribution to something like a decolonized (or – which may or may not be the same thing – a decolonial) critical theory but a contribution that makes no claim to being sufficient for that purpose.

If one wanted to press the point a bit further, one could ask: can the turn to Adorno and Foucault really underwrite this decolonizing move? How and why should we think that the solution to the problem of Eurocentrism is to be found in the work of two European thinkers, each of whom had their own well-documented Eurocentric blindspots? In response to this, I would say that I don't pretend to claim that the *only* solution to the problem of the Eurocentrism of the critical theory tradition can be found here – I'm utterly sympathetic to those who would take a different approach and make theorists such as Fanon, Dussel, or Quijano their primary interlocutors. But part of my aim was to show that there are resources within the critical theory tradition that enable one to start within that framework and get to a different place with respect to the question of 'the postcolonial'. I take seriously Alcoff's worries that there are limits to this kind of project of immanent critique – and I think it would be accurate to describe my book as a kind of immanent critique of the Frankfurt School tradition – and also the idea that what has been called the "Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism" is not sufficient for a radical decolonizing project. But this does not mean that it is unnecessary. Moreover, I think that my reconstructive move could be defended by drawing on Ina Kerner's discussion of methodological Eurocentrism. Kerner defines methodological Eurocentrism as the positing of a European history of progress as a developmental norm, and argues that "transcending methodological Eurocentrism clearly does not mean sim-

ply turning away from references to, and engagements with, theoretical knowledge of Western provenance: Western knowledge is not necessarily tainted by methodological Eurocentrism, and knowledge produced in non-Western locations may be tainted, not least through the legacy of the epistemic works of colonialism."<sup>4</sup> As Kerner argues, it is methodological Eurocentrism that is the real problem, and building on her argument I would contend that Foucault and Adorno offer views that are not only *not* methodologically Eurocentric but that also serve to *contest* methodological Eurocentrism. Moreover, this is precisely what makes their work productive for this sort of decolonizing project (and probably explains why their work, unlike that of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst, has been taken up extensively and sympathetically – though not uncritically – by post- and decolonial theorists, despite Foucault and Adorno's own Eurocentric views and blindspots).

Now, a few words about what I wasn't trying to do: I don't think I was trying to offer a "new model of critical theory" *tout court*.<sup>5</sup> Although I can see why one might think so given that I set up my own view by means of an immanent critique of the visions of critical theory offered by Habermas, Honneth, and Forst, I think my aims are more modest and more focused than this, and they have to do with addressing the specific (but fundamental) question of normativity in critical theory. I don't think that addressing this question satisfactorily is the same as offering a full-blown conception of critical theory, though I would readily admit that it puts constraints on what such a conception might look like. Related to this, Bernstein also presses another point here: the fact that I mostly elide the centrality of the critique of capitalism to Adorno's critical method, and that, as a result, I lose sight of what critical theory is supposed to be about in the first place. I'll come back to his concerns about Adorno versus Foucault below, but for now let me just note that, as far as I can tell, this would pose a serious problem for my argument only if my lack

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4 Ina Kerner, "Postcolonial Theories as Global Critical Theories" *Constellations* 2018, 1-15. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12346. p. 2.

5 Bernstein, p. 132

of emphasis on the role of the critique of capitalism in Adorno's work (or more generally) somehow undermines my attempt to rethink the normative foundations of critical theory. But I don't (yet) see any reason to think that this is the case, nor am I willing to concede that the fact that I don't foreground the critique of capitalism in this particular project somehow indicates that I find such a critique unimportant.

Now turning a bit more to specifics, I'll start with Bernstein, who focuses his critical attention on my reconstructive story, with specific emphasis on three elements: progress, normativity, and formalism. With respect to progress, Bernstein's concern is with my decoupling of normative from technical or scientific progress and with the resulting decontextualized understanding of progress – since, on his view, the whole problem of moral progress only emerged in modernity in the wake of the collapse of religious and traditional worldviews in the face of scientific and technological progress. (Alcoff offers some interesting complications to this story, I think, but for the sake of argument I'll let this stand for now). One might press this point from a Kantian direction and insist on the ineliminability of progress from both theoretical and practical reason – but this doesn't seem to be Bernstein's approach. Instead, he suggests his own strategy for de-coupling ethical and scientific reason, which I take to be congenial to the move that I make in chapter one. For my purposes, however, this decoupling is more strategic than substantive – it was part and parcel of my attempt to set up the problem of progress in a way that I felt equipped to answer it. Were I to try to tackle the question of the entanglement of scientific and normative progress more fully, I'd be inclined to do so by, as Bernstein suggests “deflat(ing) the progressivist pretensions of natural science without thereby impugning its achievements”<sup>6</sup> – following the trend of post-Kuhnian (and, I might add, Foucauldian) approaches to the history and philosophy of science. The principal reason that I didn't take this approach in the book is simply that I don't have the necessary expertise in the history and philosophy of science to make the argument in an informed enough way.

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6 Bernstein, p. 136.

With respect to normativity, Bernstein's main point is to drive a wedge between Kantian Eurocentrism and the defense of colonization as a historical-political-institutional form. Drawing on his discussion of Kant's argument for the illegitimacy of colonization, Bernstein suggests that what is missing from my argument is precisely what the Kantian framework provides: namely, a thicker understanding of what it is that makes peoples or moral and political communities deserving of respect, an understanding grounded in the acknowledgement that they have developed some normatively structured set of practices and forms of life that acknowledge (at least to some degree) the dignity and worth of their members. This is more than simply treating others as contemporaries in the space of reasons (which is the angle that I take) and also more than simply granting them rights to self-determination (which I don't discuss in my book). The kind of respect made possible here (via Kant's account), Bernstein writes, "provides rational grounds for conversation and mutual learning."<sup>7</sup>

Bernstein's reconstruction of Kant is fascinating and I think could largely be seen as congenial to my view – with one important caveat (which I'll come back to below). He is quite right that I don't offer the kind of thick account of dignity and respect that he sketches in his paper. However, as far as I can see, he fails to appreciate the reason for this omission, which is that my account is focused on the metanormative level of analysis rather than on first order normative or political questions. In other words, it is focused on how we come to justify or ground our first order normative commitments – to dignity or respect for peoples, or against colonization, or what have you – and whether we can possibly justify them via an appeal to a narrative of historical progress or an account of practical reason as such. This is, to be sure, a very abstract question but it is the attempt to answer this question that leads me to focus on the matter of how we might rethink the notion of the space of reasons in a more open-ended, pluralistic, and self-consciously political way. I take

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7 Bernstein, p. 145.

it that Bernstein's concern with dignity is one that arises at the level of first order normative political theory – and my book (for better or worse) largely attempts to set such questions aside.

However, there's an important caveat that prevents me from simply endorsing Bernstein's Kantian argument as a helpful supplement. It may well be important for the sake of historical accuracy and nuance to draw attention to Kant's steadfast critique of colonization and thus to the fact that that one can accept a Kantian philosophy of history without being committed to endorsing colonialism as a political form or project. Indeed, Honneth himself has offered something like this in defense of his own view – that is, he has claimed that it is not problematic to defend a Eurocentric idea of progress and modernity so long as one doesn't take the additional step of advocating imperialism or colonialism or forcing "backward" peoples to be free in the modern sense. And something like this thought is probably in the background of those who would complain that my argument about the Eurocentric notion of progress is a "guilt by association" argument. The thought behind this complaint, I take it, is that it is unfair to lump those philosophers who have defended the idea of European modernity as progress in with the practitioners and architects of colonialism and imperialism. It is not the fault of the former if the latter have used the discourse of progress as ideological cover for their historical misdeeds – any more than Stalin's horrific interpretation of the dictatorship of the proletariat can be blamed on Marx. Although I appreciate the distinction that is being made here, in the end I just don't buy this response, at least not in this instance, precisely because it assumes that there is nothing noxious in itself when a European or Euro-American claims that European modernity is developmentally superior to traditional or non- or pre-modern forms of life. *Of course* it is better to oppose colonization than to defend it; I assume all parties to this discussion would agree to that.<sup>8</sup> But, even if we assume for the moment that we can

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8 Though, as the recent publication of the article "The Case for Colonialism" in *Third World Quarterly* – an article that was subsequently withdrawn in the wake of the significant protests that its publication generated – there are still

so easily disentangle the conceptual and ideological from material, historical conditions and relations of power, this can't mean that we needn't worry about expunging colonial racism and imperialist logics as *forms of thought*. And, furthermore, isn't such a project absolutely essential for anyone who takes themselves to be a *critical* theorist, whose job, after all, is to reflect on their own embeddedness and entanglement within relations of power and domination, including (but certainly not limited to) racism and imperialism?

Last, with respect to formalism, this point mostly turns on the Adorno/Foucault conjuncture that I construct in chapter five, which Bernstein characterizes variously as a "shot gun marriage"<sup>9</sup> and an "optical illusion."<sup>10</sup> It may be true that there is more work to be done both to motivate and to establish the kind of theoretical conjuncture between Adorno and Foucault that I suggest in the book, and it may also be true that my reading of Adorno brings him closer to Foucault than vice versa, but I think it is entirely too strong to say that "one cannot align or fuse their critical practices."<sup>11</sup> (Note to Bernstein: sometimes so-called shotgun marriages work out!) Moreover, I think is a mischaracterization of my position to say that genealogy is "a second order critical stance suitable for engaging any and all congealed formations of historical reason."<sup>12</sup> To the contrary, I present both Foucault and Adorno as engaged in a determinate negation of modernity and what both take to be its defining Historical self-understanding. As a result, I don't agree that Foucaultian genealogy is "a wholly formal reflexive method"<sup>13</sup> – at least, not on my reconstruction of it. It is rather, a wholly *historically specific* critical method that is designed to enable us to get critical distance from/traction on our (modern, historically self-conscious, and post/neo-colonial) present. Still, I take Bern-

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those who would defend colonization on normative and political grounds.

9 Bernstein, p. 132.

10 Bernstein, p. 145.

11 Bernstein, p. 147.

12 Bernstein, p. 146.

13 Bernstein, p. 146.

stein's point that I don't really develop the Foucault-Adorno connection robustly in the book – to do so would take a book of its own, I think – but I also don't really think that I need to, for my purposes, which are not to offer a full scale reconstruction of the connections between their views but rather to draw on their critiques of progress and their reconceptualizations of normativity to develop a (radical Hegelian) alternative to the left-Hegelianism of Habermas and Honneth and the neo-Kantianism of Forst.

Turning now to Alcoff: my reply here will be a bit more brief, partly because I've already addressed some of her points along the way, and partly because, at least as I read her, her reply is less directly critical of the book – though she does aim to push some of my claims much further than I myself do. Like Bernstein, Alcoff's primary focus is on my reconstructive alternative but she does discuss some of my critical arguments against Habermas and Forst along the way. I'm thankful for her observations here as they mostly offer helpful resources for responding to people who have objected to my criticisms of these theorists. With respect to Habermas in particular, I think Alcoff is right to suggest that his retreat to formalism or proceduralism "indicates more of a colonial unconscious than Allen acknowledges."<sup>14</sup> She rightly reminds us that the whole worry about relativism within social theory emerged out of a colonial context, specifically from the encounter with 'alien' forms of life occasioned by colonial incursions. This sparked a wave of anthropological debates over rationality, morality, and relativism that spanned the middle of the twentieth century. The problem that this poses for Habermas specifically is even worse than Alcoff imagines, I think, because this anthropological context is actually quite explicit in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, where Habermas positions his entwined accounts of the rationalization of the lifeworld and the superiority of modernity over myth as a direct response to these anthropological debates (led by Peter Winch, Steven Lukes, and others).<sup>15</sup> This backdrop to the development of his theory of

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14 Alcoff, p. 156.

15 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, volume 1: Reason*

modernity hovers in the background of my discussion of Habermas in chapter two of my book and Alcoff is right to underline this point.

Indeed, Alcoff argues that for decolonial critics such as Enrique Dussel, formalism is the main danger of Habermasian critical theory, and that formalism or proceduralism, understood in historical context as a response to what Habermas diagnoses as the West's loss of confidence in itself in the wake of the breaking up of its global hegemony, "begins to look like a strategy of rule."<sup>16</sup> As she sketches his view, Dussel shares the concern for normative groundings and the desire to avoid relativism, but argues that what is needed is a "substantively materialist" rather than a proceduralist solution.<sup>17</sup> Alcoff's brief reconstruction of Dussel's position, particularly with regard to his understanding of the relationship between meta-ethics, first order normative principles, and the philosophy of history, is intriguing and maps some productive concordances that I hope to explore further in future work.

The two most critical points of Alcoff's response concern the questions of totalization and whether self-reflexive theory (or meta-theory) is sufficient for decolonizing political praxis. With respect to totalization, Alcoff raises questions about the oft-heard refrain that there is no alternative to modernity – that, like it or not, "we are all moderns now" – and suggests that this claim is a version of the Foucaultian idea that there is no outside to power. Both of these claims, on her view, are connected to a problematically insular understanding of immanent critique that continually reinscribes Eurocentrism. Although I appreciate the worry that Alcoff is raising here, I think it is important to distinguish between two different distinctions: immanent versus transcendent critique, on the one hand, and internal versus external critique, on the other hand. As I understand it, claiming an outside to power means claiming access to a wholly transcendent point of view – one that transcends historical, social, political,

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*and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 43-74.

16 Alcoff, p. 158.

17 Alcoff, p. 159.

and cultural context, that “blots out space and time,” as Habermas famously once put it<sup>18</sup> – from which critique can be launched and with reference to which it can be justified. One can be opposed to this vision of critique,<sup>19</sup> can insist that all critique is immanent to some particular context or form of life, without suggesting that all critique is therefore ‘internal’ to any particular form of life – whether ‘modern’ or otherwise.

What sense, then, can be made of the idea of “alternatives to modernity” and whether I’d be as willing as Alcoff to endorse this idea would all depend on how one defines ‘modernity’. Drawing on a distinction between systemic, structural, and functional features of modernity – capitalist markets, bourgeois legal structures and systems of rights, global structures of scientific research, communication, and education – and modernity as a thicker, more substantive set of cultural forms or instantiations, critical theorists from Habermas to Thomas McCarthy to Nancy Fraser have recently insisted that, like it or not, in the formal, functional sense, “we are all moderns now.”<sup>20</sup> The most striking consideration in favor of this claim is the triumph of global capitalism – which is hardly something that critical theorists should be expected to celebrate! – but the important subsidiary claim is that the emergence of capitalist markets brings with it a beneficial side effect: namely, the emergence of bourgeois rights and the democratic legal structures and institutions necessary to protect those rights. Thus, contained within the formal or structural features of global modernity is a normative core that critical theorists seek to protect when they claim that “we are all moderns now.” These formal or structural features of modernity can of course be instantiated in distinct, culturally particular forms in different cultural contexts but this

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18 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 323.

19 As Alcoff herself seems to be; see her comments about transcendent critique on p. 163.

20 See Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Nancy Fraser, “Publicity, Subjection, Critique: A Reply to My Critics,” in Fraser et al, *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, ed. Kate Nash (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 146.

does not challenge the basic normative framework that emerges hand in hand with the formal, structural aspects of modernity.

The claim that “we are all moderns now” is problematic insofar as it both flattens out the various power differentials that are contained within the very category of modernity – by downplaying, for example, the ways in which global capitalism is not only *compatible with* the continued existence of so-called “premodern” forms of political domination, but also *requires* a persistent, ineliminable gap and relation of subordination between a (democratic) center and subaltern periphery – and ignores the history of conquest and colonization by means of which non-Europeans were conscripted into modernity, to borrow David Scott’s phrase.<sup>21</sup> Thus, even if it is true in some sense that we are all moderns now, it is far from clear what follows from this claim normatively. That said I do find myself worrying a bit about the idea of “alternatives to modernity” if this entails an appeal to a notion of radical subaltern difference if only because this does seem to open one up to charges of essentialism, romanticization, and even of reverse orientalism. Although, as I argue in the book, I don’t think that the idea of ‘multiple modernities’ goes nearly far enough in decentering Eurocentric conceptions of modernity, I would hope for some sort of productive middle ground between the claim that “we are all moderns now” and (potentially essentializing) claims about radical subaltern difference – though I admit that I don’t yet have much more to say about how to stake out this middle ground.

Last, to the question of whether theory (or metatheory) is sufficient for opening up new possibilities, or whether praxis is also required: I don’t think self-reflexivity is sufficient, nor do I think I’m committed to this claim, even if working out a theory of self-reflexivity is clearly where my energy lies. I think that I would still want to insist that self-reflexivity is necessary for genuine and lasting transformation – though whether it leads or follows practical change or whether the causal relationship is more complex and bi-directional is an interesting and important ques-

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21 See David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

tion. In a way, this is a question that I am thinking about in my current project on psychoanalysis and critical theory, so I hope to be able to have a more complete answer to this question in the not too distant future.



## The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

Therefore, we are planning to link the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt school to the problems of our age. This means that we are looking for original and high-quality articles in the field of critical theory. To reach our goals, we gathered some of the leading scholars of critical theory in our editorial board to select the best articles for this journal.

ISSN: 2567-4056 (online) – 2567-4048 (print)