

# Engagement and Complex Domination: The Emancipatory Potential of Contingency

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## Introduction

128

This paper has two interconnected aims. The first is to explore the heuristic fruitfulness of Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique, in particular his conception of "complex (or managerial) domination", for understanding the contemporary political predicament characterized by a sense of an impossibility of any substantive social change. The second is to offer a form of preliminary expansion of Boltanski's perspective that would enable a greater appreciation of the emancipatory potential of the *contingency of social action* under the conditions of complex domination. On the grounds of a concise reconstruction and critique of Boltanski's perspective, we argue that the ordinary social actors in Boltanski seem completely powerless to prevent the mechanisms of complex domination from completely neutralizing any damage to the institutional order, and any subsequent opportunity for social change, caused by

the contingency of action. The emancipatory potential of contingency is theorized in the paper by means of the basic social-ontological concept of “common knowledge”, addressed by authors such as David Lewis and Margaret Gilbert. In the final section of the paper, we propose an outline of the concept of “negative common knowledge” that, we hope, sheds some light on the capacities of ordinary social actors to resist complex domination in those situations in which contingency has caused some social actors to radically doubt the validity of some (or most) societal norms. Finally, we argue that negative common knowledge provides the necessary initial foothold for non-authoritarian forms of *critique* and *engagement* in the context of complex domination, ones that are focused on preventing the closure of the space for substantive social change that contingency has opened, rather than aiming to provide ordinary social actors with blueprints for political action.

129

### The Diagnostic Potential of Boltanski's Pragmatic Sociology of Critique

When reflecting upon the above mentioned contemporary political predicament of the impossibility of radical social change, one notices that at the heart of modern and ever more differentiated societies lies a peculiar paradox. Namely, if we take even a superficial look at today's media discourse, it would undoubtedly seem to us that the world is constantly on the verge - if not in the midst - of profound (social) change. One would certainly not be wrong in having this impression, for it is hard to ignore the intensity of technological innovation, socio-economic crises and climate challenges at the start of this century. And yet, on the global scale political apathy remains ubiquitous, and is in fact on

the rise (Oxenham 2017). Consequently, taken at face value, one would also be safe to assume that when it comes to current socio-political regimes in fact nothing (truly) ever changes or is likely to change.<sup>1</sup> This paradox which presumes that change is both inevitable and impossible is the starting point of this paper. The first part of the paper will examine pragmatic modes of emancipation that were introduced by Luc Boltanski and try to argue that, although innovative, his understanding of the relation between contingency, emancipation and what he calls complex (or managerial) forms of domination has certain shortcomings in the conceptualization of common knowledge which cognitively fuels the “pragmatic critique”, as well as the overall social ontology which lies behind the subsequent acts of social engagement.

130

Before we tackle some of the central issues, we first need to take a closer look at the aforementioned paradox of the impossibility and inevitability of social change that characterizes so many contemporary societies integrated into the global Post-Fordist capitalism. The paradox seems to be based on three largely co-determined structural factors. On the one hand, the neoliberal turn, which started in the eighties, displaced or largely cut-down the institutional framework of the welfare state that once enabled a collective response to social issues (i.e. state housing projects, free public education and healthcare, etc.) and instead introduced the Thatcherist variation of extreme individualism in which we are all only inherently competitive individuals (Greenhouse 2012; Wacquant 2009). This process of fragmentation was only exacerbated with the development of new forms of communication in the information era (Bennett 2003; Bennett 2012). In other words, it doesn't take much insight to see that we are getting increasingly more

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<sup>1</sup> This is, for example, the normative credo of the regimes of so-called stabilitocracy currently present in some of the Western Balkans countries (Bieber 2018).

self-confined in various internet echo-chambers that are embedded in “the Feed” of various social media outlets.

For these reasons, it is increasingly more difficult to achieve common ground on even the most basic political issues. Finally, the increasing level of the fragmentation of modern society enables different forms of social domination through which structurally conditioned injustices (asymmetries of power between social actors) are reproduced. The phenomenon of *social domination*, which we will examine in more detail below, has the aim of furthering social fragmentation by negating or integrating various forms of *contingency* which inevitably occur during the course of (everyday) social interaction, as well as to impede or absorb any kind of critique of the current institutional order that could potentially enable isolated social actors to form groups which would foster a more disruptive collective agency.

131

### Boltanski's Social Ontology

In recent years, Luc Boltanski has explored the logic of new forms of social domination in some detail, on the grounds of an original social-ontological perspective. In *On Critique* (2011), Boltanski develops a heuristically fruitful social-ontological distinction between the *world* and *reality*. He maintains that the reality pertains to those situations that are, at least to some degree, semantically certain in the sense that the occurrence of contingency is manageable with the categorial apparatus which is already present in the given social interaction. As he points out: “reality tends to coincide with what appears to hang together, in a sense by its own strength” (Boltanski 2011: 57) and “is invariably oriented towards permanence (or, if you prefer, the preservation of order)” (2011: 58). Conversely, the world

pertains to the incalculable that cannot be integrated in the current schemes of interpretation: “something of the world precisely manifests itself every time that events or experiences whose possibility - or, in the language of modern governance, ‘probability’ - had not been integrated into the pattern of reality, make themselves present in speech and/or accede to the register of action, whether individual or collective” (2011:58). In other words, reality can be seen as a subset of the infinite set called the world, and although we can expand this subset infinitely, the two can never be equal, that is, if we stick to the mathematical analogy, they can never have the same elements.<sup>2</sup>

132

Boltanski’s main theoretical goal is to show that world and reality are incommensurable, and that the possibility of social change is created once the reality (inevitably) gets punctured by world, as well as that the scope of the social of change is proportional to the differential that is thus introduced into social reality. It is precisely through this differential that, during the course of our everyday life, we perceive contingency - which we colloquially refer to as “unpredicted circumstances” or “unforeseen consequences” of social action. Furthermore, as we shall see, Boltanski’s distinction between the world and reality will be very helpful in understanding how social engagement and critique emerge from contingency.

According to Boltanski, the fact that the contingency of social action is unavoidable has two important implications. First, the already institutionalized semiotic of social action is always trying to incorporate those new and experimental vocabularies of ordinary social actors which were developed after the world has unexpectedly entered into reality. In some sense, this resonates with standard (liberal) social dynamics: during the course of social life some of the

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2 See also: Stones 2014; Susen 2014.

procedures, protocols, conventions which are relevant to a concrete situation fail us, and upon feeling the “unease of uncertainty”, we either choose to rationalize and cope with this fact, or, if the failure is severe enough, we might try to formulate a critique that aims to reveal those inner inconsistencies of the given procedure, protocols and conventions.<sup>3</sup> The outcome of this act of critique can of course vary, but its scope always remains limited to the *modification* of the semantics and grammar of social life. This particularistic critique - which is based on “practical moments” as Boltanski calls them - is always inherently intersubjective, as it relies on the existing semantic resources in formulating the justification of its demands for institutional change. However, for that same reason it is more easily integrated into the current social order and is thus much more vulnerable to *social domination*.

In Boltanski’s perspective, domination means the neutralization of *critique* - of all processes that involve the questioning of the “reality of reality”, that is, the legitimacy of institutions by identifying the so-called “hermeneutic contradiction” that is inherent in every institution, its inability to completely subsume under itself the world, i.e. the contingency of action. For Boltanski, hermeneutic contradiction manifests itself in everyday life as a form of “unease”, which could only be “reduced if ... the semantic function of the institution genuinely had the power wholly to cover the field of experience and, as a result, abolish the multiplicity of points of view in favour of a single perspective that would end up saturating the field of significations” (Boltanski 2011: 87). Critique is for Boltanski an essential social activity, the basic complement of institutions, and can be practiced by all social actors, in other words it is not a privilege of intellectuals. Every social actor is capable of identifying the

133

<sup>3</sup> This is more in line with previous argumentation which Boltanski developed together with Luc Thévenot in *On Justification* (2006).

“hermeneutic contradiction” within institutional reality in the course of his or her everyday interactions - this is why *domination* is essential for maintaining the institutional reality in a given form. But if the world permeates reality, according to Boltanski, we are moving from the practical moments to the *metapragmatic* ones. In these instances of contingency, we have lost all of the semantic security that was guaranteed in practical moments, and find ourselves “head to head” with the incalculable nature of the world. Boltanski describes this encounter in the following way:

To distinguish them from moments that form part of a practical register, I propose to call metapragmatic moments those that are marked by an increase in the *level of reflexivity during which the attention of participants shifts from the task to be performed to the question of how it is appropriate to characterize what is happening*. The attention of the participants is then directed towards the action in common itself, its modalities, its conditions of possibility, the forms it is inscribed in. What people are in the process of doing, *as if they were doing it together, no longer seems self-evident*. (Boltanski 2011: 67) (emphasis added)

134

As we can see, metapragmatic moments are constituted once we stop following pre-given rules and procedures of social life and start paying attention to the patterns of social interaction that the world has introduced into our everyday life. This more intensive and focused reflection on the rules, norms and procedures - that is the lack of their formalization - is the first aspect of any social engagement (the second being the actual social action towards the conservation or change of those rules, norms and procedures).<sup>4</sup> Boltanski is of course more preoccupied with the

4 By “social engagement” we understand precisely this spectrum of ways in which the citizens of a given political community reflect on the norms and rules of social action (legally institutionalized, culturally dominant or specific to certain spheres of social action: professional, private or economic), which constitute the structure of their institutional reality, and ways in which they act, on the basis of this reflection, either in order to change parts of this institutional reality, or in order to reinforce them (see the Research Platform of the Group for Social Engagement Studies (Research Platform of Social Engagement Studies, 2018)).

progressive outcomes of social engagement and maintains that critique which is based on metapragmatic moments has a potential to bring about more radical modes of social engagement in which the totality of rules of social interaction are questioned or even denounced. This type of critique (or engagement) is also much more difficult to integrate into the current social order because its outcome is a radical *innovation* of the semantics and grammar of social life.

However, there are several important problems with Boltanski's account of metapragmatically founded critique. A crucial difficulty occurs once the contingency renders old rules and norms obsolete and the new ones lack proper vocabularies, since those who perceive this rupture in the reproduction of social reality can only, at least initially, act *as if* they are a group, which is to say that they need to attain the intersubjectivity of new norms and rules only as individuals who are actively trying to formulate them. In other words, it seems that, in Boltanskian sociology, the more the world permeates reality the less there is common ground and knowledge between the actors that would facilitate the formation of a socially engaged group. This is further exemplified in Boltanski's understanding of the so-called *existential test*<sup>5</sup> through which radical critique challenges the validity of the given social world: "...existential tests must not be regarded as having been subject to a process of institutionalization, so that they retain an individual - or, as people say, 'lived' - character even when they affect a large

135

<sup>5</sup> Boltanski makes a distinction between three kinds of tests (*épreuve*). First, there are the truth tests which, through routine and ceremony, aim to "make visible the fact that there is a norm" (Boltanski 2011: 104) thus stabilizing the current normative order. Reality tests, on the other hand, refer to the "material" application of this symbolic order in the reality of social interaction. According to Boltanski, these tests also have mild "...disruptive effect, either by unmasking contradictions between various forms of normative expression, or by revealing dimensions of reality that might be called forgotten" (2011: 106). Finally, in this paper we will focus on the existential tests which go beyond the current normative order (and the other two tests that they issue) and aim to completely construct new institutions and new tests.



number of people, *but each of them taken in isolation. Only their sharing can confer a 'collective' character on them.*" (2011: 107)

But how is this sharing exactly to be attained? We find that, faced with this issue, Boltanski turns to a very problematic nominalistic account of the intersubjectivity of social critique.

That is why radical critique is frequently based, at least in its early stages, on expressions used in forms of creation - such as poetry, the plastic arts or the novel - where it is socially more or less permissible... And this is perhaps also why philosophy, when it seeks to release critique from the iron cage of reality, often initially looks for its subject matter to an analysis of the work performed by writers on language itself, in such a way as to inscribe their uniqueness in it... But what philosophy does with writers is precisely what the sociology of critique intends to do with ordinary people, by working to make their existential experiences visible and intelligible (Boltanski 2011: 108)

136

As we can see, Boltanski's strategy seems to go as follows: during the course of our everyday life we encounter situations where the world in varying degrees ruptures reality. Through existential tests - that is when the reality fails them - we see beyond the current semantics. But even when this happens, we are still far from emancipation because these experiences are idiosyncratic and therefore cannot be mutually shared as some sort of a starting point of a radically new semantic. This is why, according to Boltanski, we need pragmatic sociology to interconnect these particular instances of emancipation caused by contingency, and thus provide fully intelligible radical critique which is not paternalistic and epistemologically authoritarian. However, this means that the radical critique (and engage-

ment) always remains an “aggregate of the actors’ idiosyncrasies” in Boltanski’s sociology, because the inherently particularistic “existential encounters with the world” can never constitute a common knowledge. In fact, it is only through the work of sociologists that these dispersed idiosyncrasies can ever become interconnected and mature into a radical critique. This makes the formation of radically engaged groups extremely difficult, since it is not clear how this aggregate might develop any form of reciprocity in using their own cognitive capacities which was the main goal of the “pragmatic turn” in sociology.

### Complex Domination and the Impossibility of Critique

Hence, it seems that although Boltanski provides useful analytical tools for exploring the relation of contingency and radical, epistemologically non-authoritarian critique, he fails to provide the ontological conditions of social engagement that will follow from the epistemology which introduces the very possibility of this type of everyday radical critique. And so we might, in Boltanskian terms, ask: is there a way in which social actors might relate to each other in order to engage reality? This question becomes particularly important in light of Boltanski’s argument that we are today witnessing, within the contemporary political communities characterized by high degrees of economic and societal development, what he calls regimes of “complex domination”. While critique exposes the hermeneutic contradiction, the goal of standard forms of domination is to *mask* it - either through direct repression of critique or some form of ideology (semantic incorporation of elements of the world which does not admit that there is a disconti-

nunity between reality and the world). *Complex domination*, on the other hand, does not negate the difference between world and reality (hermeneutic contradiction) - it attempts to show that the institutional reality is perfectly capable of absorbing all elements that emerge from the world without transforming itself radically.<sup>6</sup>

In Boltanski's account, complex domination unfolds primarily by means of "expert" or "managerial" authority - institutional spokespersons who hold the authority of experts are, within regimes of complex domination, those who have successfully arrogated to themselves an epistemologically privileged insight into the world itself (managers, technocrats, scientists). As Boltanski argues,

In a regime of domination of this type, the systems that ensure domination are not geared to slowing down change or incorporating it in such a form that it can be denied as such. On the contrary, they are based on the argument of constant change, while arrogating to themselves the privilege of interpreting it, thereby providing themselves with the possibility of propelling it in a direction favourable to the preservation of existing asymmetries and forms of exploitation. This process is made possible because institutions are grounded in a form of authority - that of experts - which aims to situate itself at the point of non-distinction between reality and the world (Boltanski 2011: 136).

138

When the contingency of everyday interaction ruptures institutional reality - whether it be a car collision at a crossroads or the financial breakdown of 2008 - the experts are tasked with interpreting this element of the "world" that has broken into reality and determining the right course of institutional modification (but never radical transformation). This is why Boltanskian sociology is useful for understand-

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<sup>6</sup> Complex domination is formative for the so-called "new spirit of capitalism" which, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, anticipates and incorporates particularistic modes of critique (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007; Chiapello & Fairclough 2002).

ing the paradoxical fact that “change becomes both inevitable and impossible”, a fact that accompanies the regimes of complex domination. It is inevitable because of the inevitable rupturing of institutional reality by the contingency of the world; it is impossible because the institutional reality itself (spokespersons) accepts the existence of contingency but claims a privileged insight into it, which means that only the existing institutions can be the “solution” to the problems caused by the world itself. Boltanski points out that regimes of complex domination are capable of producing the impression that the institutional reality itself is more dynamic and reflexive than the very forms of critique that challenge them:

This way of controlling critique, by incorporating it, is reinforced by the fact that domination through change itself identifies with the critique of which it deprives those who would like to oppose it. But it identifies with an internal critique, constructed in the image of scientific disputes between those who are the exclusive possessors of the requisite authority, licensed by their competence, or rather their titles, to give a relevant opinion (Boltanski 2011: 137).

139

The 2008 crisis and its aftermath in the European Union exemplify the logic of complex domination in a particularly acute way. In trying to deal with the crisis, to close the gap between the world and the institutional reality that it has opened, institutional spokespersons employed both the vocabulary of the more conventional, “ideological” domination and the more effective vocabulary of complex domination. Consider the following example which illustrates the difference between ideological and complex domination:

Margaret has worked hard all her life and played by all the institutional rules, but loses her job as result of a crisis caused by strange economic processes that have nothing to

do with her own profession - something “improbable” has happened in Boltanski’s terms, and Margaret does not quite know how to explain this to herself with the given semantics (vocabularies of justification).

1) Standard ideological domination would involve statements such as: for decades, the society in which Margaret lives has “lived beyond its means”, it was spending more than it was producing (welfare state, “parasites”, etc.), including Margaret herself, so that “the bubble had to eventually burst” - in the end, there was no contingency, there is a reason for the crisis that fits into the ideological narrative. Now, for this reason we have to introduce austerity measures - people will have to lose jobs, but the “best” ones will keep them (meritocracy). In other words, it must in the end be Margaret’s own fault that she did not after all keep her job, even in these difficult but understandable circumstances. In this case, theoretically informed critique can effectively challenge ideological domination by pointing to the fact that the causal explanation of the crisis in the ideological narrative is wrong, and that, therefore, what happened to Margaret is deeply unjust.

140

2) Complex domination works somewhat differently - it does not negate the contingency and normative deficiency of what happened to Margaret. What happened to Margaret is indeed a product of contingency, the crisis was caused by certain economic processes that have nothing to do with her. The crisis itself is not “deserved” by the broader society, it is indeed a product of contingent economic forces - in other words, there is a high degree of injustice and institutional deficiency at play. However, since these contingent economic processes are so complex, only experts (technocrats) within institutions can understand them and devise appropriate solutions that would prevent similar occurrences in the future. In the end, the imperfect and unjust

institutional reality is still the best means we have for solving the problem that contingency has created.

Boltanski's perspective, in our view, manages to correctly grasp the logic of the neutralization of critique that has emerged over the last decades. To put it in pragmatist terms, Boltanski offers us innovative theoretical tools for explaining to ourselves our own feeling of "apathy", of the impossibility of radical social change in the contemporary world (epitomized, for example, in the omnipresent rhetorical question "can we imagine a viable alternative to the market society?"). However, Boltanski's individualism when it comes to the possibility of an intersubjective articulation of radical critique implies that there really is no way of challenging complex domination. This is due to the fact that, in regimes of complex domination every rupturing of the institutional reality by contingency (the world) is, on the one hand, "interpreted" by institutional spokespersons (experts) while, on the other, it can only be experienced by individual social actors idiosyncratically.

141

### Possibility of Critique: Contingency and Negative Common Knowledge

Boltanski's diagnosis of late capitalism in terms of complex domination posits a radical asymmetry of power between the institutional spokespersons and ordinary actors when it comes to the possibility of articulating critique and engaging for social change. On the one hand, this seems to be empirically corroborated by current empirical reality - on the other, it runs counter to Boltanski's own imperative of treating ordinary actors as intelligent and capable of unmasking even complicated forms of social domination. A crucial question that his diagnosis thus opens is: can social

actors really experience the radical uncertainty created by the rupture of the world into reality only idiosyncratically, or could there be a kind of “immediate intersubjective understanding” between social actors even in this kind of uncertainty and - most importantly - what would be the political implications of this intersubjectivity.

For tackling this question, we need to turn to alternative social ontologies such as that of Margaret Gilbert who, in her *Sociality and Responsibility*, defines *common knowledge* and *joint commitment* as key notions for collective social action. Gilbert argues that joint commitment comes into being when, roughly speaking, each of the parties has expressed his or her personal willingness to be party to it in conditions of common knowledge. That is, it is *common knowledge* between the parties that each of them has expressed his or her personal willingness to be a party to the joint commitment (Gilbert 2000: 40).<sup>7</sup> The important point here is that all members of the group *G* *internally* know *p*, or as Gilbert states: if *p* is “out in the open” (*ibid.*) in the group *G*.

142

Now the really interesting question is whether an element from Boltanski’s world can ever be formulated as *p*, that is as Gilbert’s common knowledge - for example if, after some disruptive effect caused by the inherent contingency of action, we maintain that *p* stands for “the rule *R* doesn’t make sense anymore”. In other words, can there be something

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<sup>7</sup> There have been several important accounts of common knowledge that have been developed in game theory and logic. First introduced (in its philosophical variation) by David Lewis (1969), this term refers to a specific kind of knowledge that a group of agents might have. Namely, while some more colloquial notions like that of mutual knowledge simply refer to the fact that one or more agents know *p*, common knowledge refers to those situations where all agents within a group *G* know that they know *p*, they all know that they all know and so on ad infinitum (for more on defining common knowledge in set-theoretic and game-theoretic terms see also (Friedell 1969) and (Gilbert 1992, Chapter 3, 2000). It is interesting to notice here that although each of the members of the group might individually know the same thing, the fact that everyone knows that each member of *G* knows the same thing (this is, as Gilbert points out, what constitutes that the knowledge is “out in the open”) brings useful new information to the group *G*.

like a “negative” common knowledge that would provide a foundation for critique in regimes of complex domination? In regimes of simple domination, the inability of the institutional reality to react to the rupture otherwise than to negate it or attempt an ideological explanation leaves enough room in Boltanski’s perspective for the actors’ individual experiences to gradually become “aggregated” and for the actors to form a radically engaged collective. But in a regime of complex domination, there simply is no room (time) for this process of aggregation, as the institutional reality reacts to the rupture in more efficient ways (the admitting of contingency and injustice combined within an expert account of the event) and offers to the confused social actors generalized narratives (tools) for explaining to themselves their own experiences of existential discomfort before these can be articulated into normative claims.

In complex domination, radical critique (and radically engaged collectives) could only emerge on the basis of an *immediate intersubjective* understanding about the nature of the rupture of reality by world - in other words, to come back to Margaret Gilbert, critique needs a foothold in something that we have termed the “negative common knowledge” that the rule R (or the totality of rules Tr) does not make sense any more. In Boltanski’s perspective, we can only have negative *mutual* knowledge of this kind, a state in which the rupture of the world into reality causes a number of individuals to experience, each in her own idiosyncratic way, that the rule R doesn’t make sense any more. In our understanding, Boltanski does not recognize the potential of everyday language to provide an initial “negative intersubjectivity” between these actors that provides an initial unifying thread for these otherwise idiosyncratic experiences. Consider the following brief example: a very serious traffic accident happens on a crossroads X, the kind



of accident that puts in question not only the existing traffic regulations on the crossroads, but the much wider network of social rules pertaining to traffic and urban planning.

144 While social actors could easily communicate their experiences of the accident regarding truth tests and reality tests (modifications of the existing regulations at the crossroads - installing a traffic light or limiting speed), those actors who also formulate their individual existential tests in this situation have much more difficulty communicating their experience that the wider network of rules has somehow been challenged by the accident - these experiences are framed by their different ideological and cultural backgrounds, their class positions, etc. For example, some of these actors might be left-leaning and come to think that cars should be abolished in urban traffic in favour of free public transportation, others might be neoliberal and think that the existing urban planning and traffic regulations produce irresponsible and dependent subjects who are not capable of thinking creatively in difficult and unpredictable situations, such as the one on the crossroads X, etc. But even though their perspectives on the rupture of the world into reality that the accident on the crossroads has caused seem incommensurable, their *mutual* knowledge that the totality of rules regarding traffic ( $Tr$ ) doesn't make sense any more ( $Mkn = Tr < S$ ) can be transformed into a "negative common knowledge" about this totality ( $NCKn = Tr < S$ ) by way of placing the knowledge "out in the open" - by way of *declaring* ( $D$ ) that  $Tr < S$ . In other words,  $NCKn = Mkn \times D$ , so that now both our socialist and our neoliberal actor *know that each of them knows* that the totality of the rules of traffic doesn't make sense any more, that  $Tr < S$ . Now why does this modest "negative common knowledge", namely the fact that actors with seemingly incommensurable perspectives can at least agree that rules no longer make sense, possess

emancipatory potential in the context of Boltanskian complex domination? In our understanding, negative common knowledge is a crucial bulwark against the intervention of the institutional spokespersons who wish to close the gap between the world and reality by offering expert narratives to isolated social actors in order for them to make sense of what has happened. In our example, complex domination would function as follows: institutional spokespersons, such as experts on traffic regulations (E), intervene in the aftermath of the accident in such a manner as to acknowledge that the world has indeed ruptured reality and that changes need to be introduced not just in the limited context of the crossroads, but in the wider network of rules - however, this wider network (Wr) must necessarily be narrower than the totality of rules Tr that our socialist and neoliberal actors (A1 and A2) have in mind. In Boltanski's perspective, the experts would have little problem in convincing both actors A1 and A2, as there is no negative common knowledge between them, only mutual knowledge:

145

$$A1 \text{ ----}Wr\text{----}E\text{----}Wr\text{----} A2$$

However, if there is minimal common knowledge, NCKn, in other words, if one or both of the actors have declared that the totality of rules no longer make sense, both actors will not be satisfied with the Wr proposal, *because they will both share the awareness that not just Wr, but Tr < S*:

$$A1 \text{ ----}Wr\text{----}E\text{----}Wr\text{----} A2$$

$$|-----|$$

$$NCKn = Tr < S$$

This of course does not mean that the power of experts to close the gap between world and reality has been neutralized, it simply means that a crucial "opening" for critique and engagement is created through negative common

knowledge. Whether, and in what ways, this opening can be utilized depends, in our view, on the existence of *non-authoritarian forms of engagement*, on which we briefly reflect below.

### Conclusion:

#### The Role of Non-Authoritarian Engagement

The opening for social change that negative common knowledge creates is precarious for several reasons. First of all, the seemingly incommensurable experiences of actors A1 and A2 (socialist and neoliberal) that the totality of rules Tr no longer make sense do not seem to hold much promise of reaching any kind of “positive” common knowledge, i.e. an understanding about how to collectively act in order to change the totality of rules. Second, there are two kinds of “threats” to the opening that come from “reality” in Boltanski’s sense:

146

1) the first is the already mentioned power of institutional spokespersons, experts, to finally succeed in convincing both our actors that the proposed change to the wider network of rules (Wr) is the only legitimate solution. Wr remains a powerful tool of neutralizing critique even in the context of negative common knowledge, precisely because the actors with very different experiences of Tr cannot easily reach any kind of positive intersubjectivity. This means that the experts can always present Wr as a “scientific”, “non-ideological” solution to the crisis, especially if they incorporate elements of both actors’ worldviews. This is the continued “threat of complex domination”.

2) the second threat comes from what might be termed “commonsense quasi-theories” (see Prodanović 2017) that constitute much of our “weakly institutionalized” (culturally dominant) semantics of everyday interaction. Quasi-the-

ories are metaphysically laden vocabularies about social actors and reality that play a crucial role in reducing the uncertainty about the “reality of reality”, to use Boltanski’s terms, and constitute the “everyday” complement of institutional reality strictly speaking (formally institutionalized rules of interaction). We use the term “quasi-theory” because this kind of vocabulary must lay some sort of claim to positivistically grounded truth (often science or direct observation, compared to, for example, some kind of “theoretical mumbo-jumbo” of “leftists, feminists, cosmopolitans, etc”). Quasi-theories are exemplified by statements such as “Women are bad drivers (this is scientifically proven)”, or “non-European immigrants simply do not have the same standards of civilized behaviour as we do (this can be verified through direct observation)”.

Now let us turn back to the above example with the crossroads accident to briefly illustrate how the combined threats 1) and 2) work in complement to close the opening for critique and social change created by the negative common knowledge about Tr. Let’s say that the driver who caused the accident was a non-European immigrant, and let’s also introduce actor A3, who is a racist. Our racist actor immediately offers a quasi-theoretical explanation of the accident that aims to reduce the radical uncertainty that surrounds our neoliberal and socialist actors A1 and A2: the accident happened because non-European immigrants cannot be disciplined drivers.

Now, neither A1 or A2 are racists, but they are not immune to this kind of statements either - there is a lingering threat that they might adopt this explanation in order to reduce their own sense of unease created by uncertainty, and because they have difficulties reaching any kind of understanding between themselves. But - there is an even more promising alternative to uncertainty, one that even carries

a sort of “premium of cultural distinction”, in Bourdieu’s terms: namely, the experts’ (E) proposal  $W_r$ . It carries a premium of distinction because, by endorsing  $W_r$ , A1 and A2 can *distinguish themselves from A3 as anti-racists*. This, in our view, is a crucial component of complex domination not elaborated by Boltanski - the ability of the institutional spokespersons to present their own narrative as “superior” to various forms of quasi-theory that claim the role of “critique” of institutional reality (think of the so-called “radical centrism” that is now the main political contender of right-wing populism in much of Europe and America). So A1 and A2 now find themselves in-between the regime of complex domination and quasi-theory, where the latter two work in a complementary fashion to close the opening and reinforce institutional reality. Thus, the full model of complex domination in situations of radical uncertainty, where negative common knowledge is “attacked from both sides”, so to say, looks like this:

148

( $W_r$ ) E---A1-----A2-----A3 (Quasi-theory)

$N_{Ckn} = Tr < S$

When we consider this extended logic of complex domination, it is not difficult to see what kind of engagement is most suitable to countering the “two threats” to negative common knowledge that the totality of rules no longer makes sense. It is the form of non-authoritarian engagement that can simultaneously criticize the expert side (E) for the epistemological authoritarianism of  $W_r$ , and the quasi-theory side (A3) for essentialism (normative particularism). In other words, forms of engagement that aim to keep open the gap between world and reality and the possibility that actors A1 and A2 could gradually transform their negative common knowledge into a positive one. Forms of non-authoritarian social and political theory (neo-pragma-

tism, contemporary critical theory, Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique, etc.) can be fruitful in informing this kind of engagement. Engaged actors informed by such perspectives could persuasively argue in situations such as the crossroads accident against both expert narratives and quasi-theory by interconnecting distant elements of human experience (Dewey 1929; 1948) - for example, showing, contra E, that a much wider network of rules than Wr, namely Tr, is implicated in the accident, and at the same time fighting the prejudice of A3 by showing that his own quasi-theory about immigrant drivers serves precisely to reinforce Tr, an institutional system that justifies exploitation and class inequalities through racism and nationalism.

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