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Towards the (Re)Making of Public Space?

Simon Susen¹

Abstract: This article provides a critical analysis of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century* (2025 [2022]). While their earlier work, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017]), is situated within economic sociology, their latest book – originally published as *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle* (2022) – marks a significant shift towards political sociology, broadly conceived. The article contends that *The Making of Public Space* represents a highly original contribution that will further consolidate the considerable influence of Boltanski and Esquerre's collaborative work on cutting-edge debates and research agendas in the contemporary social sciences. In particular, the book makes a strong case for examining the relationship between processes of “turning into current affairs” [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*]. The analysis is structured in two main parts. The first part summarizes the central arguments advanced by Boltanski and Esquerre in *The Making of Public Space*. The second part offers a careful assessment of the book's principal limitations and suggests possible ways to address them.

1 Simon Susen is Professor of Sociology at City St George's, University of London. Before joining City in 2011, he held lectureships at Birkbeck, University of London (2010–2011), Newcastle University (2008–2010), and Goldsmiths, University of London (2007–2008). He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2007. Prior to that, he studied sociology, politics, and philosophy at a range of international universities and research centres – including the University of Cambridge, the University of Edinburgh, the Colegio de México, the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Mexico City, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is Affiliate Professor of Sociology at the Universidad Andrés Bello in Santiago, Chile. In addition, he is Associate Member of the Bauman Institute and, together with Bryan S. Turner, Editor of the *Journal of Classical Sociology*.

I. Setting the Scene

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017])² is a study in economic sociology.³ By contrast, their new book – originally entitled *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle* (2022)⁴ – is marked by a shift towards political sociology, broadly conceived. Anyone who has read both the original French (Gallimard) edition and the subsequent English (Polity) edition of this important investigation will be able to confirm that the latter is a superb translation of the former. *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century* (2025 [2022])⁵ [henceforth *MPS*] is a highly original contribution that will further consolidate the significant impact of Boltanski and Esquerre's collaborative work on cutting-edge debates and research agendas in the contemporary social sciences. It is a *tour de force* that obliges us to reconsider the relationship

2 Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2020 [2017]). See also *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

3 See Nancy Fraser, "A New Form of Capitalism? A Reply to Boltanski and Esquerre", *New Left Review* 106 (2017). See also Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", *ibid.* In addition, see, for instance: Thomas Angeletti, "Capitalism as a Collection – Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement : Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris, Gallimard, 2017)", *European Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 3 (2019). Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, and Fabian Muniesa, "Grappling with the Economy of Enrichment", *Valuation Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015). William Outhwaite, "Book Review: *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017)", *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2018). Simon Susen, "The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?", *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 2, no. 2 (2018). Cf. Rainer Diaz-Bone, "Luc Boltanski und Arnaud Esquerre: Bereicherung. Eine Kritik der Ware", in *Schlüsselwerke der Wirtschaftssoziologie*, ed. Klaus Kraemer and Florian Brugger (2., aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021).

4 Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022).

5 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2024 [2022]).

between processes of “turning into current affairs” [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*].⁶

II. Turning into Current Affairs and Politicization

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre offer a thorough analysis of the relationship between two sets of processes that are constitutive of modern public space in general and modern public spheres⁷ in particular – name-

6 For a detailed (and critical) account, see Simon Susen, “Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 40, no. 7–8 (2023).

For alternative accounts, see, for instance: Bo Yun Park, “Public Opinion in the Making – Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle* (Paris, Gallimard, 2022, 352 p.)”, *European Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 3 (2023). Paul-Arthur Tortosa, «Luc Boltanski et Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*», *Questions de communication* 44 (2023). Peter Wagner, “Breaking News: Upheavals in the Formation of Public Opinion. *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ?* (Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre)”, *Journal of Classical Sociology* 23, no. 4 (2023). See also Alan O’Connor, “Review of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre’s Book *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*”, *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 23, no. 1 (2025).

While the present article draws on Susen, “Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?”, it focuses on Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, rather than on *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*.

7 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity, 1989 [1962]) and *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962). See also, for example: “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere”, in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992). “Überlegungen und Hypothesen zu einem erneuten Strukturwandel der politischen Öffentlichkeit”, *Leviathan* 49, Sonderband 37 (2021). “Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022). *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik* (Frankfurt am Main: Berlin, 2022). *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2023 [2022]). In addition, see, for instance: Simon Susen, “Critical Notes on Habermas’s Theory of the Public Sphere”, *Sociological Analysis* 5, no. 1 (2011). “A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas”, *Society* 60, no. 6 (2023).

ly, the relationship between processes of “turning into current affairs” [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*]. The former are based on present occurrences, permitting a large number of people to obtain knowledge about facts and events that, for the most part, they have *not* directly experienced. The latter manifest themselves in the problematization of facts and events and, thus, in a multiplicity of competing descriptions and interpretations conveyed in comments, commentaries, discussions, and controversies.

Given the thematic focus of their study, it is not surprising that the concept of public space [*espace public*] is central to Boltanski and Esquerre’s investigation. The two authors make it clear, however, that their analysis is *not* founded on a “normative definition of ‘public space’”⁸ or attached to a particular political philosophy. Rather, their approach is inspired by the bottom-up spirit of the “pragmatic sociology of critique”⁹. In accordance with this outlook, Boltanski and Esquerre are committed to shedding light on “the implicit notions underlying the competences that people draw on in order to act”¹⁰ when navigating everyday life. Far from treating these competencies as transcendental faculties, removed from the experiential realms of spatiotemporal contingencies, Boltanski and Esquerre regard them as “historically and socially situated ontologies”¹¹.

8 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 1. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 9.

9 On this point, see, for example: Simon Susen, “Luc Boltanski: His Life and Work – An Overview”, in *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the ‘Pragmatic Sociology of Critique’*, ed. Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner (London: Anthem Press, 2014). “Is There Such a Thing as a ‘Pragmatic Sociology of Critique’? Reflections on Luc Boltanski’s *On Critique*”, *ibid.* (2014 [2012]). “Luc Boltanski and His Critics: An Afterword”, *ibid.* (2014). Luc Boltanski, Juliette Rennes, and Simon Susen, “The Fragility of Reality: Luc Boltanski in Conversation with Juliette Rennes and Simon Susen”, *ibid.* (2014 [2010]). Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the ‘Pragmatic Sociology of Critique’* (London: Anthem Press, 2014).

10 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 1. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 9.

11 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Centu-*

Recognizing the distinctiveness of “the democratic public space”¹², Boltanski and Esquerre draw attention to the sociological significance of two aspects.

The first aspect concerns the relationship between public space and current affairs [*actualité*]. This dimension comprises anything that occurs in the present, hits the (local, national, and/or global) news, and may be (directly or indirectly) relevant to people’s lives. It is hard to overstate the extent to which digitalization has exacerbated the continuous circulation of news, shaping people’s perception and interpretation of reality. Owing to this accelerated digitalization process, the news cycle has become not only a critical part of, and vital reference point in, people’s everyday lives but also a fast-evolving sequence of reports and narratives, replacing each other in a matter of days, if not hours or minutes.

The second aspect concerns dynamics of politicization [*politisation*]. This dimension refers to “the way in which politics manifests itself today in the public space”¹³. Immersed in the news and current affairs, people are exposed to, and often participate in, processes of politicization. The political sphere would not come into existence without these processes. In accordance with their pragmatist account of reality, Boltanski and Esquerre conceive of *politics* not as *the political* but as *politicization*. In other words, they are committed to a relational and processual, rather than essentialist or substantialist, understanding of politics.

In brief, Boltanski and Esquerre examine the relationship between the production, circulation, and consumption of *news*, on the one hand, and processes of *politicization*, on the other. Instead of explaining one in terms of the other, the two scholars emphasize the relative autonomy of

ry, 1. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 9.

12 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 1. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 9.

13 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 2. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 10.

each side of this complex relationship: not every fact or event reported in the news is necessarily politicized, just as processes of politicization can unfold without being covered in the news. While they are closely intertwined, *processes of “turning into current affairs”* and *processes of politicization* are irreducible to each other.

III. Ontology and Politics

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre pursue two main objectives: first, to develop an ontology of actuality [*ontologie de l’actualité*]; and, second, to dissect the terrain of politics [*la politique*]. Let us consider each of these objectives in more detail.

1.

Boltanski and Esquerre’s ambition to develop an “*ontologie de l’actualité*”¹⁴ – that is, an “*ontology of actuality*”¹⁵ (which may also be described as an “*ontology of the present*” or an “*ontology of contemporary reality*”) – is inspired by Foucault’s commentary on Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”¹⁶. The two sociologists endorse a neo-Foucauldian approach aimed at exploring “multiple forms of knowledge concerning the world and what is happening in it”¹⁷. Given their emphasis on the intimate relationship between epistemological and ontological dimensions, Boltanski and Esquerre are not satisfied with the somewhat limited objective of delivering yet another version of media studies, as if the nexus between knowledge-seeking practices and the construction of social life were reducible to the functioning of digital information and communication technologies.

14 *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 10 (italics in original).

15 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 2.

16 Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 [1984]).

17 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 2. *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 11.

When different types of knowledge circulate and become part of the news agenda, the vast majority of recipients (that is, readers, watchers, and listeners) do *not* have direct and personal experiences of the facts and events about which narratives are being constructed. Consequently, there is a gap between their *direct* experiences of facts and events in their lifeworlds, on the one hand, and their *indirect* experiences of facts and events via digital media, on the other.¹⁸ Making sociological sense of this gap is one of the most challenging tasks that Boltanski and Esquerre set themselves in *MPS*.

One need not be a Heideggerian to recognize that all modes of engagement with the world – whether these be direct or indirect, intuitive or reflective, experiential or rational – have a *temporal* dimension. In their previous work, Boltanski and Esquerre¹⁹ have highlighted the pivotal role of temporality in the enrichment economy, notably with regard to the discursive construction of “the past” as a key reference point for value creation in “the present”.²⁰ In *MPS*, they reconsider this “canonical opposition” – which, in effect, reflects an “entrenched contrast”²¹ – between “the present” and “the past” in ontological terms: the former presents itself in a “superficial”²² manner, to such an extent that temporality is “deemed to be too short to be ‘true’”²³; the latter is associated with the

18 Cf. Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1993]).

19 See, in particular: Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*; “Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser”; *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*.

20 Cf. Susen, “The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?”.

21 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 12.

22 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 12.

23 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 12.

idea of a “long period”²⁴, in which “unfolds the silent but profound evolution of structures”²⁵, shaping – if not governing – the course of social actions.

2.

Drawing on their neo-Foucauldian approach to the ontology of actuality, Boltanski and Esquerre dissect the terrain of politics [*la politique*]. They do so by scrutinizing both the constitution and the function of politics, which have been profoundly transformed in societies that are marked by the constant production, circulation, and consumption of news. In the Western world, most citizens engage with politics through the lens of the media. One vital element of politics is to define – implicitly or explicitly – what counts (and what does not count) as “political”²⁶ or, more specifically, as a “political problem”²⁷. Part of this task is to grapple with political issues, differences, and struggles – notably in terms of their impact on the development of society.

Delimiting the terrain of politics, however, is more complicated than it may appear at first sight. Indeed, Boltanski and Esquerre are wary of the (arguably inflationary) notion that, in one way or another, “everything is political”. Since the French Revolution, this dictum has reinforced utopian expectations about the possibility of a “total revolution”²⁸. If everything were political, then politics would not have anything outside itself and, by implication, could be conflated with social life, or even with *any*

24 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 12.

25 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 12.

26 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13.

27 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 12–13.

28 See Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). See also Luc Boltanski, “The Left after May 1968 and the Longing for Total Revolution”, *Thesis Eleven* 69, no. 1 (2002).

aspect of human existence.²⁹ The realm of “the political” is more specific (and more limited) than the realm of “the social”. In terms of scope, the latter is far broader than the former.

Boltanski and Esquerre make a case for a “processual approach”³⁰. In their estimation, the claim that “everything is political” is no less problematic than the proposition that “everything is social”. On this view, the *normativist* contention that “*tout est politique*” is as questionable as the *socio-constructivist* assertion that “*tout est social*”, resulting in inflationary conceptions of “the political” and “the social”, respectively. Having distanced themselves from explanatory reductionism, Boltanski and Esquerre insist, however, that *everything is politicizable*.³¹ In principle, any facet of human existence – regardless of whether it may be classified as an objective, normative, or subjective dimension – *can* be politicized. In short, *not everything is political, but everything is politicizable*. Yet, the role of politics in our lifeworlds may vary significantly between different historical contexts and, hence, between different societies.³²

IV. Towards a Temporalized Sociology

Boltanski and Esquerre’s study is based on an extensive analysis of two main sources of data:³³

29 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13.

30 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13.

31 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13.

32 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4–5. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13.

33 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 15–203. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 23–241.

- approximately 120,000 comments, addressed to the daily newspaper *Le Monde* by its online subscribers in September and October 2019;
- numerous comments on past events, published on two online video channels in January 2021 by the *Institut national de l'audio-visuel* [National Audiovisual Institute] on *YouTube* – *INA Société* (approximately 7,000 comments) and *INA Politique* (approximately 1,300 comments).

In relation to the first source (*Le Monde*), it should be noted that approximately a sixth of these comments, because they had been rejected by the company in charge of their moderation, were *not* put online. This made it possible for Boltanski and Esquerre to compare, with respect to any one article, comments judged “acceptable” with those deemed to be “unacceptable”.

In relation to the second source (*INA*), it should be noted that its careful consideration has a twofold advantage: first, access to an audience whose members – demographically speaking (that is, particularly in terms of age and level of education) – are substantially different from the readers of *Le Monde*; second, the possibility of a systematic comparison – especially in cross-generational terms – between comments about the latest and, so to speak, “newsiest” news, on the one hand, and comments about what constituted the news of yesteryear, that of the “past”, on the other. This is due to the fact that these comments are posted online by Internet users conveying different opinions, having watched and interpreted the rebroadcasting of news images dating back several decades and archived by the *INA*. Unsurprisingly, the comments are of variable importance and quality (in both cases). Despite this variability, however, they are generally of short format (up to 1,000 characters for a post on *Le Monde*; on Twitter the limit was originally set at 140 characters, before it was increased to 280 characters in 2017).

Boltanski and Esquerre have succeeded in shedding light on opinion- and will-formation processes in pluralistic societies marked by high degrees of digitalization. A noteworthy element of their project is an

in-depth analysis of what – in accordance with more or less stringent editorial moderation policies – can and cannot be said, comparing accepted and rejected comments with each other. Throughout their investigation, Boltanski and Esquerre emphasize the *paradoxical* status of *actualité*:³⁴ it plays both a *central* and a *marginal* role in our lives. In terms of its *central* role, everyone is immersed in some form of contemporary reality, irrespective of whether it is experienced directly or indirectly. In terms of its *marginal* role, the kind of information that captures our attention obtains its prominence from the fact that it distinguishes itself from everyday experiences. One of the most remarkable features of *actualité* is that it often renders present what appears to be inaccessible.³⁵

The interpretation of the material examined in *MPS* poses a new challenge for the social sciences, since it obliges us to move beyond a pragmatic sociology that is limited to the study of journalistic practices and, hence, lacks a sustained engagement with the key focus of journalistic work: *actualité* (understood as “contemporary reality”) in general and *actualités* (understood as “news”) in particular. Boltanski and Esquerre dismiss reductive versions (and narrow conceptions) of media studies; at the same time, they reject any “explanatory routines of a classical sociology”³⁶ aimed at unearthing “so-called ‘social’ properties of actors”³⁷. In their assessment, approaches of this sort run the risk of succumbing to “identitarian essentialism and behavioural essentialism”³⁸.

34 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 5–6. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13–14.

35 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 5. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 14.

36 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 15.

37 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 15.

38 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*.

In line with this “uncovering mission”, it is common to draw a distinction between two levels of analysis in modern sociology³⁹: on the one hand, a *superficial* level, which is composed of observable facts, succeeding each other in time and resulting in the emergence of *actualité*, more or less ignored or treated as if they were contingent and escaped scientific investigation; on the other hand, a *profound* level, which is typically conceived of in terms of underlying structures – a point explored in *Enrichment*.⁴⁰ The second level is epitomized in different forms of structuralism – notably *social structuralism* (which tends to focus on social organizations and institutions) and *cognitive structuralism* (which presupposes the existence of invariant structures within the human mind, serving as a fixed point).

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre seek to resolve the opposition between these two levels of analysis. To this end, they defend the idea of a *temporalized sociology*⁴¹, capable of grasping “the way in which people co-exist and interact at a given moment”⁴² and, therefore, of understanding the contingencies permeating both the “actuality” and the “History” [*sic*] of their lifeworlds. The purpose of Boltanski and Esquerre’s inquiry is eloquently summarized in the following section:

We have taken comments on the news [*actualité*] seriously, viewing them both as the expression of singularities and as attempts to rise to a more general level [*montée en généralité*], testifying to the way in which different actors, immersed in the temporality of their lifeworlds, strive to adjust to the news

ry, 7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 15.

39 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 3–5. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 15–17.

40 See *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 338–342.

41 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 16.

42 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 7 (quotation modified). See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 16.

[*actualité*] – i.e. to what, like others, they know only by hearsay [*ouï-dire*]. This possibility of momentarily detaching oneself from one's lifeworld in order to pay attention to what is inaccessible is a central way of co-ordinating with others and thereby of "being part of society".⁴³

V. What Moment?

One of the most original contributions made by Boltanski and Esquerre in *MPS* is their proposal to distinguish three key historical periods, to which they refer as "moments":

1. the crowd moment [*moment foule*]: 1870–1914
2. the mass moment [*moment masses*]: 1930–1970
3. the network moment [*moment réseau*]: 1990–present

According to Boltanski and Esquerre, these three periods share several important features.

First, each of these periods is shaped by a new agent [*actant*]. This agent, however, is *not* tantamount to a peaceful, constructive, and co-operative subject, whose actions are aimed at securing the harmony and stability of social order. Rather, it represents a potentially destructive force that – "through its violent, blind, and harmful action"⁴⁴ – "threatens society and destroys the political structures that regulate it"⁴⁵.

Second, each of these periods is characterized by "a logic of gregarious association"⁴⁶. This curious logic brings people closer together, but

43 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 8 (quotation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 16.

44 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

45 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

46 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

it comes at a cost: it strips each person of their sense of singularity and uniqueness, implying a preponderance of the collective over the individual. As a consequence, actors – insofar as they lack a sense of personality – are, as it were, “freed”, if not “emancipated”, from the moral control mechanisms of the “*superego*”⁴⁷. Their capacity to internalize social and political taboos and restrictions is profoundly undermined, thereby fostering the emergence of deviant, transgressive, and criminal behaviour. Moreover, it becomes far more likely that particular social groups (notably minorities) refuse to accept the law (especially when it is perceived as conveying the will, and defending the interests, of a majority).

Third, in each of these periods, individual choices and the exercise of a person’s autonomy are severely curtailed by the *horizontal* logic of imitation and/or the *vertical* logic of intimidation or manipulation. Usually, this kind of dynamic benefits individuals who succeed in taking on the role of a leader, equipped with the power to impose their wishes and desires upon their (quasi-hypnotized) followers. Whether such a leader takes the form of “an opinion leader, a gangster, a star, or an influencer”⁴⁸, they are bestowed with the capacity to exert a considerable degree of power over those who follow them. From a realist point of view, it is irrelevant whether their power is (politically) legitimate or illegitimate, (socially) acceptable or unacceptable, and/or (morally) defensible or indefensible. The point is that these leaders *do* exercise a significant level of power over their followers.

In short, the three historical periods described above have a pronounced *destructive*, *normative*, and *imitative/manipulative* potential, which manifests itself not only in the radical transformation but also in the gradual synchronization [*Gleichschaltung*] of society.

47 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9 (italics in original). See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

48 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

In these three periods, the close relationship between social order and political order is at stake:

1.

The *crowd moment* (1870–1914) owes its rise, to a large extent, to revolutionary gatherings and movements. An illustrative example of this narrative is Hippolyte Taine's *Les origines de la France contemporaine* [*The Origins of Contemporary France*] (published in six volumes between 1875 and 1883)⁴⁹, exposing the social and political consequences of “national decadence”⁵⁰. Another example is Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* [*The Crowd*] (1895)⁵¹, grappling with the link between “the popular mind” and “criminal crowds”.⁵² The Paris Commune (1871) as well as the numerous strikes and riots that took place in late-nineteenth-century France are key reference points for this “crowd” narrative.⁵³ Paradoxically, to the degree that many of these forms of collective action were vigorously repressed by the state, the crowd moment – far from being obliterated – gathered momentum.

By definition, the crowd is made up of a variety of bodies that “physically approach each other until they mingle”⁵⁴. Yet, the crowd is composed not only of physically interconnected bodies but also of behaviourally,

49 See Hippolyte Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, 6 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1875–1883).

50 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 19.

51 See Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Alcan, 1895). See also *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Introduction by R. K. Merton, Penguin, 1977 [1895]).

52 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 19.

53 Cf. Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

54 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 19.

symbolically, and motivationally (or, in a metaphorical sense, spiritually) interconnected actors, whose actions, thoughts, impulses, and desires *converge* in the construction of a meaning-seeking collective. As such, the crowd's participants engage in a collective act of mimicry, characterized by *both* a sense of reciprocity, solidarity, and horizontality among members *and* a sense of unilaterality, asymmetry, and verticality in terms of the relationship between a leader and his (or her) followers. Leaders may employ techniques of hypnosis, suggestion, and/or manipulation to engineer the power (social, political, cultural, charismatic, and/or otherwise) they exert over their followers.

2.

The *mass moment* (1930–1970) is inextricably linked to the rise of fascism (notably in Italy, but also in other countries, such as Spain and Japan), National Socialism (in Germany), and Stalinism (in the USSR). During the spectacular public ceremonies of totalitarian regimes, the masses associated with this “moment” became increasingly visible; their impact was significantly amplified via highly effective propaganda mechanisms, especially on the radio and television. Having suffered different degrees of despair and alienation⁵⁵, these masses follow a leader, whose authority – which is typically reinforced by charismatic power – they confirm by recognizing him (or her) as their ultimate superior.

In this historical period, the masses are made visible through spectacular public ceremonies and mobilized through nation-wide radio programmes. Their leader uses his (or her) own voice with the aim of reaching and seducing – and, to a significant extent, controlling – his (or her) followers, who, in their plurality, remain largely isolated. They may be (physically) placed side by side (for instance, in a large venue, such as a square, an arena, or a stadium); they may be dressed in identical clothes; they may be performing the same actions and gestures; or

⁵⁵ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967 [1951]). Cf. also Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation*, trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith (edited by Frederick Neuhouser, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014 [2005]).

they may be (physically) isolated at home and/or work, experiencing a lack of control over — and meaning in — their lives. Given their sense of estrangement from the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of the world (that is, from their natural and social environment as well as from themselves as individuals), they suffer from “loneliness”⁵⁶ at an existential level.

Unlike the crowd, “the mass is made up of separate individuals who, because of their absolute similarity and the new techniques of communication and control to which they are subjected, compose a single body”⁵⁷. Far from being a peaceful, constructive, and emancipatory endeavour, however, this body — materialized in each individual and, by extension, in the collective as a whole — carries a potential for hatred, animosity, and destruction. In the crowd moment, this destructive capacity takes hold of people, in a major way, only in phases of collective madness — that is, when they are more likely to engage in acts of cruelty. In the mass moment, by contrast, this sort of disorderly and negative behaviour — even if it erupts only from time to time on a large scale — is the norm, rather than the exception.

3.

Within the network moment (1990–present), processes of deindividuation and depersonalization persist no less forcefully than in the preceding historical configurations. Digitally mediated lifeworlds are structured by disembodied — and inherently disembodifying — modes of interaction, in which corporeality is rendered secondary, if not altogether absent. While individuals continue to exist as embodied subjects, their presence within the logic of digital networks is articulated primarily through the inscription of textual and visual traces disseminated across the Internet. In numerous instances, such traces are mediated by pseud-

56 Cf. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 415.

57 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 19.

onyms, which function as nominative artefacts that simultaneously confer a name and obscure the referent, thereby rendering processes of identification virtually impossible.

An idiosyncratic feature of the logic of the network is that it generates a digital environment in which it is possible to separate the number of published contributions from the number of people to whom these are attributed and by whom they are consumed. This logic, however, is far from unproblematic: in principle, network participants can say and write whatever they want, unless their contributions are monitored, and potentially censored, by those who control the digital platforms on which they are published.

Network participants mostly enjoy this freedom, because their digital existence (especially if it remains anonymous) escapes the physical (and reputational) risks to which crowds and masses are exposed when engaging in socially “deviant” behaviour in the “real” world. This issue is reflected in the large amount of abusive behaviour that is widespread on the Internet. Those who participate in the construction of digital networks, whether they do so as influencers or as followers, have the freedom to express any opinion they like, since editorial policies are far less restrictive and prescriptive than in what is now known as the “old”, “traditional”, or “legacy” media.⁵⁸

Sociologically speaking, networks may be regarded as “agents” [*actants*]⁵⁹, given that they “act” *with, through, and upon* both “agents” and

58 See Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*. See also Susen, “A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas”.

59 On this point, see, for instance: Anders Blok, Ignacio Farias, and Celia Roberts, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory* (London: Routledge, 2020). Dave Elder-Vass, “Disassembling Actor-Network Theory”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 45, no. 1 (2015). Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013 [2012]). Idongesit Williams, ed. *Contemporary Applications of Actor Network Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

“actors” (and, hence, make them perform certain actions in particular ways, while preventing others). Historically speaking, networks – notably digital networks – may be considered “unparalleled”, due to the scope, pace, and significance of their influence. When turned into a largely malignant force, they are marked by “an unprecedented violence, rapidity of reaction, malfeasance, and robustness”⁶⁰. The proliferation of “trolls” – especially in the form of “troll factories” or “troll farms” – is a relatively recent phenomenon of major importance. Institutionalized groups dedicated to the creation of Internet trolls are able to interfere in political decision-making processes, thereby playing havoc with traditional channels, instruments, and procedures underlying the construction, maintenance, and legitimization of democratic systems.

A related – and extensively discussed – problem is the extent to which social and digital media have contributed not only to the rise of echo chambers but also to the rise of populism and authoritarianism across the world.⁶¹ Digital networks – their advantages and disadvantages notwithstanding – generate dynamic realms for processes of opinion- and will-formation in the twenty-first century. As a worldwide network of instant communication and 24/7 news provision, the Internet is an omnipresent feature of the global village. Arguably, the Internet has become so powerful that it can seriously destabilize not only political structures and practices associated with liberal democracy but also, in a more fundamental sense, society as a whole.⁶²

A noteworthy consequence of this logic is that the exercise of digital power in the network moment is, to a substantial degree, a numbers

60 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 11 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 20.

61 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 8. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 17.

62 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

game: in the “click culture” of “likes” and “dislikes”, those seeking to exert influence by virtue of attention capital “gain their significance by weight of numbers”⁶³. In terms of their success (or failure), influencers depend on those who follow and endorse them, echoing their views and opinions, taking their normative positions and prescriptive statements seriously, and providing them with high levels of legitimacy.

* * *

Given Boltanski and Esquerre’s concern with the production, circulation, and consumption of *political news*, including the *events* on which they are (presumably) based and the *opinions* through which they are (effectively) interpreted, it is worth mentioning that each of the aforementioned “moments” is associated with a dominant means of large-scale communication:⁶⁴ first, the *crowd moment* (1870–1914) with the *popular press*, particularly *tabloids and newspapers*; second, the *mass moment* (1930–1970) with *radio and television*; and, third, the *network moment* (1990–present) with the *Internet* and the rise of the *new (notably digital and social) media*.

A key challenge for contemporary sociologists consists in accounting for the degree to which technological transformations in the means of communication have triggered, and will continue to trigger, profound changes in prevalent modes of socialization, including both bottom-up and top-down dynamics of politicization. Different social scientists may formulate different hypotheses about both the causes and the consequences of the structural transformation of public space. Irrespective of one’s assessment of these hypotheses, the growing influence of AI (artificial intelligence) is likely to be one of the main ingredients of the next major historical transition, which may result in a new “moment”.⁶⁵

63 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 10. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 20.

64 On this point, see Susen, “A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas”, 857–858. See also “Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?”, esp. section IV (“Crowds, Masses, and Networks”).

65 See, for instance: Brian P. Bloomfield, ed. *The Question of Artificial Intelligence:*

VI. Hobbesian Pessimism: the Social *vs.* the Political?

Hobbes's pessimistic anthropology⁶⁶ is well known and popular among advocates of "realist" interpretations of social life. From a Hobbesian perspective, politics is an artificial arrangement designed to ensure that people, having left the state of nature, can co-exist in a more or less peaceful manner. If one shares this view, then one is confronted with a series of oppositions: the social *vs.* the political, state of nature *vs.* social contract, barbarism *vs.* civilization, war *vs.* peace. An important reason for questioning the validity of such a binary framework is that some political regimes produce forms of life that are closer to the imposition of the state of nature, barbarism, and/or war than to the defence of social contracts, civilization, and/or peace.

Bringing Boltanski and Esquerre's periodizing approach into the frame, it becomes possible to understand why sceptics – seeking to go *with Hobbes beyond Hobbes* – may conceive of crowd, mass, and/or net-

Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives (London: Routledge, 1987). Margaret A. Boden, *Artificial Intelligence and Natural Man*, 2nd (expanded) ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987 [1977]). *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). *Artificial Intelligence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Rosi Braidotti, *The Post-human* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019). "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities", *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2019). Rosi Braidotti and Matthew Fuller, "The Posthumanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences", *ibid.* Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, trans. Hella Beister, Max Pensky, and William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 2003 [2001]). Erik J. Larson, *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence: Why Computers Can't Think the Way We Do* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021). John C. Lennox, 2084: *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2020). Simon Susen, "Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?", *Social Epistemology* 36, no. 1 (2022), esp. 65–66.

66 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 11–12. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 20–21. In addition, see Thomas Hobbes, "Leviathan", in *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1996 [1651]).

work societies as out-of-control historical formations that should – but cannot – be mitigated, let alone regulated, by democratic politics. Such a critical view *converges* with Hobbesian pessimism, notably with regard to the conflictual, belligerent, and destructive potential of humans in general and human societies in particular; at the same time, it *diverges* from Hobbesian contractarianism, recognizing that state-governed formations – including those associated with crowd, mass, and/or network societies – may end up realizing humanity’s darkest potential, rather than preventing it from unleashing in the first place.

Sharing this kind of scepticism about the Hobbesian position, Boltanski and Esquerre refuse to conceive of *democracy* in terms of binaries, such as the following: real *vs.* false, authentic *vs.* fake, direct *vs.* indirect, deliberative *vs.* representative, perfect *vs.* imperfect, empowering *vs.* disempowering, liberal *vs.* authoritarian – to mention only a few.⁶⁷ To illustrate the importance of this point, they make reference to the position taken by numerous intellectuals in the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s. Many of these intellectuals, both on the right and on the left, were not willing to make the slightest effort to defend the Weimar Republic, because it did not live up to their (unrealistic) expectations – that is, to their somewhat limited, purist, and ultimately uncompromising view of what a “proper” democracy should look like.⁶⁸ Not only Germany but the entire world paid a heavy price for this dogmatic pursuit of ideological purity. It prevented democratic players from joining forces to defend liberal institutions and to thwart the rise of National Socialism. The lessons learnt from major historical events pose serious questions about the nature of interpretation – a central issue examined in *MPS*.

67 Cf. Simon Susen, “Jürgen Habermas: Between Democratic Deliberation and Deliberative Democracy”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner (London: Routledge, 2018).

68 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 12–13. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 21–22.

VII. The Interpretation of Interpretation

In *MPS*, Boltanski and Esquerre draw attention to Paul Ricœur's distinction between two fundamental types of interpretation: interpretation as *recollection of meaning* and interpretation as *exercise of suspicion*.⁶⁹

1.

Interpretation as *exercise of suspicion* is aimed at "the 'reduction of illusions', the laying bare of lies, and the exposure of simulacra"⁷⁰. This orientation – which is driven by the *demand for truth* – may be expressed in numerous ways: for instance, the radical critique of the media empire (by intellectuals), the illegitimate exercise of state authority (by journalists), or the systemic reproduction of elite power (by marginalized social groups). It is not uncommon that members of the public – as "critical citizens" capable of forming their own judgements on a variety of matters – call the validity of the information with which they are provided into question. In extreme cases, they may reject the legitimacy of this "information", especially when dismissing it as "misinformation", "disinformation", or "mal-information".

The epistemic outlook underlying the exercise of suspicion, however, is not reducible to a form of *objectivist realism*, which presupposes that "facts" can and should be regarded as "real" and requires that "tests" [*épreuves*] be undertaken to establish their veracity. Rather, it may be articulated in different versions of *categorical scepticism* and *conspiracy theories*, which tend to assume that self-serving narratives are being con-

69 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 205. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 246. Furthermore, see Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970 [1965]), esp. 33–35, and *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (edited by Don Ihde, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974 [1969]).

70 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 205 (punctuation modified). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 246.

structed by powerful groups to cover up their “true” interests and agendas.⁷¹

To be sure, interpretation as suspicion may take borderline forms. This occurs, in particular, when individual or collective actors seek to demonstrate that “facts” that are widely regarded as “authentic” and “established” are actually “fake” and “engineered”, insofar as they are products of the creative and manipulative “fabrication of truth”, designed to spread false accounts of specific events, conditions, and realities. In extreme cases (for example, the terrorist attack on, and destruction of, the Twin Towers in New York on 11th September 2001), conspiracy theorists may claim that an “ostensibly” seminal and devastating event of world-historic importance was “staged” in an intentional, dramaturgical, and sensationalist fashion.

Often, those supporting interpretations based on radical suspicion aim to gain credibility by relying on inventions and fabrications, rather than evidence. Ironically, however, they purport to do the exact opposite – that is, to expose the alleged inventions and fabrications of those whom they accuse of spreading “fake” news. As Boltanski and Esquerre illustrate in *MPS*, these (arguably worrying) trends are far more common among visitors to *INA* websites than among readers and commentators of *Le Monde*. Yet, the latter can be as critical of the articles published in their daily newspaper as the former of the material made available on digital video platforms.

2.

Interpretation as a *recollection of meaning* is guided by the conviction that “the most likely meaning of a text or utterance [...] may, considered in itself, appear mysterious or ambiguous”⁷² and may, in this sense, be above

71 Cf. Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2014 [2012]). Cf. also Simon Susen, “Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny”, *Società Mutamento Politica: Rivista Italiana di Sociologia* 12, no. 23 (2021).

72 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions*

and beyond one's immediate reach. A central dimension of this hermeneutic orientation lies in the pursuit of understanding texts and utterances not solely through the contextualization of "the interpreted" but equally through the contextualization of "the interpreter".⁷³ Within the framework of *actualité*, the interpretive process unfolds along two possible axes of contextual extension: one oriented towards *the past*, the other towards *the future*. The former (that is, the retrospective axis) entails the articulation of present phenomena in relation to prior events, thereby situating the contemporary within a diachronic continuum. Conversely, the latter (that is, the prospective axis) involves the projection of the present into its possible trajectories, enabling judgments concerning the (actual or potential) implications of current phenomena for medium- and long-term futures.⁷⁴

In either case, the domain of *actualité* manifests as "the scene of a trial"⁷⁵ – that is, that is, as an ongoing, dynamic process, a milieu perpetually in flux. When interpretation is oriented primarily towards the anticipation of future states of affairs, however, it eludes conventional binary classifications of "true" or "false", insofar as the phenomena to which it refers have not yet materialized and, therefore, lack the status of established reality.⁷⁶ In other words, future-oriented interpretations

in the Twenty-First Century, 206. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 247.

73 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 206–7. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 247–248.

74 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 207. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 248.

75 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 208. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 249. Cf. Luc Boltanski and Élisabeth Claverie, "Du monde social en tant que scène d'un procès", in *Affaires, scandales et grandes causes. De Socrate à Pinochet*, ed. Luc Boltanski, et al. (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2007).

76 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 251.

are – by their very nature – inherently provisional, epistemically tentative, and contingent, in contrast to their retrospective, past-oriented counterparts.

The question of the adequacy [*justesse*] of judgements based on common sense is inextricably linked to the question of the adequacy [*justesse*] of an interpretation.⁷⁷ Boltanski and Esquerre wish to “propose the idea that the feeling of adequacy [*sentiment de justesse*] that the interpretation of a news item can arouse is based on a synthetic judgement directed towards both the question of truth and the question of justice”⁷⁸. Put in Kantian terms, the pursuit of an accurate interpretation hinges on the confluence of theoretical reason and practical reason in the daily search for truth and justice.

The adequacy of an interpretation, however, is contingent not solely upon the interplay between *representational* and *moral* functions but also upon the relational dynamics that it enacts: first, between *the interpreter* and *the interpreted*; and, second, between *the individual* articulating the interpretation and *the interlocutor* seeking to comprehend it. In this sense, interpretive validity emerges not as a static, let alone transcendental, property of a statement but, rather, as a relational and contextually mediated achievement.

On this account, an interpretation – “the violence inherent in any interpretative procedure”⁷⁹ notwithstanding – can be considered *right*, *accurate*, or *adequate* [*juste*] insofar as it obtains a “degree of acceptability, which is itself partly a function of the convergence between the beliefs and prejudices of the person who proposes it and the beliefs and prej-

77 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 252.

78 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 252.

79 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 252.

udices of its addressees”⁸⁰. In brief, interpretation is, at once, a meaning-seeking, meaning-projecting, and meaning-reciprocating exercise.

VIII. Beyond “Right” and “Left”?

Dominant ideologies have the power to shape how members of a particular society interpret (and, crucially, how they do *not* interpret) key elements of the past, present, and future.⁸¹ Reflecting on the role of ideologies in modern societies, Boltanski and Esquerre examine the famous right–left divide, which emerged in the French National Assembly more than two centuries ago and, subsequently, spread to other parts of the world. Initially, it captured the divide between those who were in favour of establishing a constitutional monarchy, similar to the British model (sitting on the right side of the tribune), and those who were in favour of assigning a limited role to the King (sitting on the left side of the tribune). Different meanings can be attributed to the right–left divide:

1. As a *social* opposition: capitalism *vs.* socialism, noble *vs.* non-noble, top *vs.* bottom, rich *vs.* poor, elite *vs.* people, dominant *vs.* dominated, bourgeoisie *vs.* proletariat, bosses *vs.* masses, distinguished tastes *vs.* vulgar tastes. This opposition is central to the politicization of social hierarchies and inequalities.

⁸⁰ *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 210. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 252. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London: Sheed & Ward, 1989 [1960/1975]).

⁸¹ See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 211. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 253.

On this point, see also Luc Boltanski, *Rendre la réalité inacceptable. À propos de «La production de l'idéologie dominante»* (Paris: Demopolis, 2008) and Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, *La production de l'idéologie dominante* (Paris: Demopolis / Raisons d'agir, 2008 [1976]). In addition, see Simon Susen, “Reflections on Ideology: Lessons from Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski”, *Thesis Eleven* 124, no. 1 (2014) and “Towards a Critical Sociology of Dominant Ideologies: An Unexpected Reunion between Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski”, *Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 2 (2016).

2. As a *temporal* opposition: past *vs.* future, conservative *vs.* progressive, conservatism *vs.* progressivism, rear-guard *vs.* vanguard, tradition *vs.* invention/renovation, repetition of the same *vs.* exploration of differences. This opposition is central to the politicization of temporalities.
3. As a *normative* opposition: conformism *vs.* critique, alienation *vs.* emancipation, order *vs.* disorder, authoritarianism *vs.* democratism, docility *vs.* revolt/revolution. This opposition is central to the politicization of the question of freedom.
4. As a *transcendental* opposition: spiritualism/idealism *vs.* materialism, belief *vs.* reason, labour *vs.* work. This opposition is central to the politicization of the relationship between the religious and the secular.

One may seek to classify different values, principles, and/or characteristics in terms of the classical right-left taxonomy. Such an exercise would demonstrate that these classification patterns are variable and context-dependent:⁸² a term that may be situated on the left in one taxonomic field may be situated on the right in another field. The significance of this observation is illustrated in the “orientation towards difference”⁸³: it is situated “on the right” when associated with the deliberate search for “social distinction”⁸⁴, which manifests itself in social hierarchies and inequalities, and “on the left” when associated with “the logic of emancipation, freedom, and creativity”⁸⁵.

82 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 211–215. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 253–257.

83 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 212. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 255.

84 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 212. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 255. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979). Cf. also Simon Susen, *Pierre Bourdieu et la distinction sociale. Un essai philosophique* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

85 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 212. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 255.

In their interpretation of the right-left taxonomy, Boltanski and Esquerre favour a *relational(ist)* approach, thereby rejecting any kind of ontological or epistemological *substantialism*. It is no surprise, therefore, that they take issue with Jean-Michel Salanskis's (arguably substantialist) contention that the "pursuit of equality" lies at the centre of the ideological universe inhabited by "the left".⁸⁶ Actors on "the right" may also follow political agendas concerned with "equality", even if they may interpret this concept very differently (for instance, in terms of "equality of opportunity", rather than "equality of outcome"). A similar argument can be made in relation to other key principles and ideals – such as "freedom", "autonomy", "sovereignty", "solidarity", etc. If one accepts the validity of this (relationalist) view, then it becomes hard, if not impossible, to defend a rigid dichotomy along the lines of "left-wing sensibility" *vs.* "right-wing sensibility".⁸⁷ To a large extent, the terms "right" and "left" obtain their meaning from "the structure of the situation of utterance [énonciation]"⁸⁸ within which they are *used*. Drawing on valuable insights from (the later) Wittgenstein's contextualism and (the later) Foucault's poststructuralism, Boltanski and Esquerre make a strong case for "pragmatic structuralism", which is irreconcilable with any kind of "semantic substantialism"⁸⁹. Just as "[t]he meaning of a word is its use in the language"⁹⁰, the value of a principle is its use in a particular context.

86 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 213–214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 255–256. Cf. Jean-Michel Salanskis, *La gauche et l'égalité* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

87 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 256.

88 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 256.

89 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 214. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 257.

90 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (revised 4th ed., by P. M. S. Hacker and

The preponderance of practice will always remain practically preponderant.

IX. Processes of (De)Politicisation in the Digital Age

As a political system fostering deliberative empowerment, democracy is meant to provide people with freedom of expression – written and oral, private and public, informal and formal – and to guarantee this privilege within a judicial framework defining the limits of this right.⁹¹ In some cases, however, a red line may be crossed: hate speech, denial of major historical facts (such as genocide), and discriminatory discourses based on extreme forms of classism, sexism, racism, ageism, and/or ableism – to mention only a few examples.

Far from being governed exclusively by *dominant ideologies*⁹², people's cognitive and behavioural modes of functioning may be influenced, if not engineered, by *nudging strategies*⁹³. These processes encompass the strategic deployment of emotion, framing, and anchoring to influence decision-making processes, thereby supplanting established patterns of behaviour with alternative configurations and re-orienting (and, so to speak, "re-biasing") predominantly unconscious preferences and dispositions. This trend acquires particular significance in the digital age, wherein algorithmically mediated modalities of engagement profoundly shape human interactions with the world, as illustrated in their capacity to regulate human cognition and behaviour, including both its noninstitutionalized and its institutionalized forms.

Joachim Schulte, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 [1953]), §43.

91 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 215. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 257.

92 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 215. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 258.

93 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 217. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 260. Cf. Nicholas Gane, "Nudge Economics as Libertarian Paternalism", *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021).

Aware of the far-reaching consequences of this trend, Boltanski and Esquerre highlight the *ambivalent* character of politics: on the one hand, it shapes everyone's lifeworld, exerting its power as "a superior principle of reality"⁹⁴, from which nobody can escape; on the other hand, it may be perceived as a special(ist) kind of concern – that is, as something that is imposed upon ordinary people from the outside and that, consequently, may be largely ignored, or at least not taken seriously, by them.⁹⁵ Paradoxically, then, politics is both an endogenous and an exogenous (and, by implication, both a universal and a contingent) element of everyday life.

During periods of intense politicization, the boundaries between "the political" and "the non-political" are increasingly blurred. In periods of this sort, the spontaneous – and often accelerated – development of lifeworlds indicates that *all* (including the seemingly most trivial) aspects of people's existence can be politicized – from their shopping habits and sexual behaviour to their domestic lives and personal identities. Just as politicization processes can be an expression of progress and emancipation, they can be retrograde and, hence, be used as an instrument of control and domination.⁹⁶ "In democracies, it is always possible to escape politicization campaigns by ignoring them."⁹⁷ Given their tension-laden nature, democracies can be marked by varying degrees of politicization *and* by varying degrees of depoliticization. The balance of power within a particular political regime notwithstanding, democratic societies are

94 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 219. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 263.

95 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 219. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 263.

96 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 263.

97 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 263.

shaped by struggles for recognition and by competition between different agendas.⁹⁸

One need not be a psychologist to understand that the rise of populism and authoritarianism, exacerbated by the echo chambers of social and digital media⁹⁹, is at least partly a result of the profound sense of existential uncertainty and vulnerability, if not fragility and insecurity, experienced by more and more people across the world.¹⁰⁰ Especially those

98 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 263. Cf. Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes. Génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997).

99 See Susen, "A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas". See also, for instance: Adrian Athique, *Digital Media and Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). Marco Bastos, *Spatializing Social Media: Social Networks Online and Offline* (London: Routledge, 2021). Anne Kaun, "'Our Time to Act Has Come': Desynchronization, Social Media Time and Protest Movements", *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2017). Simon Lindgren, *Digital Media and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2021 [2017]). Hartmut Rosa, "Social Media Filters and Resonances: Democracy and the Contemporary Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022). Kai Shu et al., eds., *Disinformation, Misinformation, and Fake News in Social Media: Emerging Research Challenges and Opportunities* (Berlin: Springer, 2020). Philipp Staab and Thorsten Thiel, "Social Media and the Digital Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022).

100 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220–221. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 264. On this point, see also, for example: Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen, "The Fragility of Reality: Luc Boltanski in Conversation with Juliette Rennes and Simon Susen". Rodrigo Cordero, *Crisis and Critique: On the Fragile Foundations of Social Life* (London: Routledge, 2017). Stephen Crook, "Change, Uncertainty and the Future of Sociology", *Journal of Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2003). Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott, and Michael Gibbons, *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). F. David Peat, "From Certainty to Uncertainty: Thought, Theory and Action in a Postmodern World", *Futures* 39, no. 8 (2007). Giovanni Stanghellini and René Rosfort, *Emotions and Personhood: Exploring Fragility – Making Sense of Vulnerability*, International Perspectives in Philosophy and Psychiatry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Simon Susen, *The "Postmodern Turn" in the Social Sciences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Bryan S. Turner, *Vulnerability*

who regard themselves as “politically consistent and responsible”¹⁰¹ may find that they have “lost the meaning of [global] History”¹⁰² as well as “the meaning of their [local] history”¹⁰³ and, thus, of their capacity to attribute meaning to their existence in the context of their lifeworlds. It is one of the greatest challenges for human actors, therefore, to attach meaning to both History (as a lifeworld-transcending process) and history (as a lifeworld-emanating process) and to grasp the possible tensions between them.¹⁰⁴

Inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt, Boltanski and Esquerre are adamant that we need to differentiate between *factual truths* and *interpretations* to avoid falling into the traps of relativism, nihilism, conspiracy theories, and/or mere propaganda.¹⁰⁵ This distinction makes it possible, and indeed necessary, “to subject politics to constant demands for justification despite the plurality of temporal spaces with which it is confronted”¹⁰⁶. On this view, it is imperative that politics – insofar as it is oriented towards social change and, by extension, towards the construction of a better future – be attentive to *factual truths of the past*, established by

and Human Rights (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

101 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 264.

102 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220 (italics in original). See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 264.

103 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 221. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 264.

104 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 220–221. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 264.

105 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 223–224. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 267.

106 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 224. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 267.

historians, and *factual truths of the present*, guaranteed by the guardians of current affairs, from journalists and commentators to academics and researchers. If, however, factual truths are treated as if they were tantamount to “imaginary creations”¹⁰⁷, then we enter the territory of “fake actuality” based on “fake news”.

The “the dialectic of Enlightenment” means for modernity what “the dialectic of the Internet” means for late modernity: both are indicative of the deep *ambivalence* built into technologically advanced forms of life. On the one hand, the social networks created through the Internet have generated spheres of communication and discussion that are more accessible, inclusive, and global than any of their predecessors. On the other hand, these networks have produced echo chambers on an unprecedented scale as well as an accelerated (and algorithmically monetized) flow of data. Given the velocity and ease with which information (and, by implication, mis-, dis-, and mal-information) can circulate without undergoing serious editorial processes of “fact-checking”, the reliability and veracity of online content may, in many cases, be questionable. A relatively benign (but nonetheless problematic) manifestation of this trend is infotainment.¹⁰⁸ The spread of hate speech, denial of major historical facts, conspiracy theories, and discriminatory discourses as well as the rise of populism and authoritarianism – intensified by the diffusion of mis-, dis-, and mal-information – are malign manifestations of this trend.¹⁰⁹

107 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 224. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 267.

108 See Susen, *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 227, and “A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas”, 849, 850, and 853. See also, for instance: Kees Brants, “Who’s Afraid of Infotainment?”, *European Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (1998). Lloyd S. Davis et al., “Transformation of the Media Landscape: Infotainment versus Expository Narrations for Communicating Science in Online Videos”, *Public Understanding of Science* 29, no. 7 (2020). Daya Kishan Thussu, *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (London: SAGE, 2007).

109 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 224–226. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité*

Digital technologies have profoundly reconfigured the nexus between the circulation of news and the articulation of social critique. The Internet, in particular, functions as a principal medium for the politicization of reality, insofar as it constitutes a privileged site for the production, dissemination, and contestation of meaning. As an ever-expanding proportion of the world population derives its knowledge of local, national, regional, and global events from online sources, the very perception of reality becomes mediated by the digitalization of subjectivity. Through “the dialectical relationship between facts known by experience and reported facts”¹¹⁰, which underpins the symbolic construction of reality, “the main objects of struggle”¹¹¹ are perpetually reconstituted. Under these conditions, actors are compelled to mobilize both the cognitive and the normative dimensions of their critical capacities in order to sustain a sense of agency within their increasingly digitalized lifeworlds. Without the use of these reflexive capacities, subjects are rendered susceptible to the erosion of rational freedom¹¹² and, consequently, to intensified forms of systemically induced heteronomy.

politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle, 268–270.

110 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 226. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle, 270.*

111 *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 226. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle, 270.*

112 On the concept of “rational freedom” [*vernünftige Freiheit*], see Jürgen Habermas, *Also a History of Philosophy, Volume I: The Project of a Genealogy of Post-metaphysical Thinking*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2023 [2019]), *Also a History of Philosophy. Volume II: The Occidental Constellation of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2024 [2019]), and *Also a History of Philosophy. Volume III: Rational Freedom. Traces of the Discourse on Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2025 [2019]).

X. Critical Remarks¹¹³

1.

As outlined in the preceding sections, Boltanski and Esquerre's analytical framework is anchored in two foundational concepts: *processus de mise en actualité* and *processus de politisation*. The authors emphasize that, in their view, while not everything is political, everything is politicizable – that is, while not all phenomena are inherently political, they are potentially subject to politicization.¹¹⁴ This reflection evokes the well-known slogan “the personal is political”, which gained prominence during the student movement and second-wave feminist activism of the late 1960s (and which continued to shape the discourses of numerous – especially progressive – forms of social engagement in subsequent decades).

Boltanski and Esquerre rightly caution against the pitfalls of an arguably reductive “pan-politicism” – that is, the notion that *all* aspects of social life are *intrinsically* political. Instead, they advocate for a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the *politicizable* nature of various domains. Nonetheless, some critics may contend that this observation is self-evident and that, in fact, similar arguments apply across other spheres of social experience. For example, while not all phenomena are moral, aesthetic, or commodified by default, they *may be* subject to processes of moralization, aestheticization, or commodification. These issues are key concerns in moral, cultural, and economic sociology as well as in some areas of philosophy. In a similar vein, the difference between “the political” and “the politicizable” is an object of controversy in both political sociology and political philosophy. Thus, the analytical challenge lies in elucidating the interplay between transformative social

113 This section draws on Susen, “Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?”, section IX (“Critical Reflections”).

114 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 4. See also *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 13.

processes (including processes of politicization, moralization, aestheticization, and commodification) and, by implication, in examining their impact on the constitution and evolution of forms of life.¹¹⁵

2.

Boltanski and Esquerre delineate four primary “forms of valuation”¹¹⁶, which they conceptualize as a “distinctive pragmatics of value-setting”¹¹⁷.

These forms of valuation, whose “relationships can be articulated as a set of *transformations*”¹¹⁸, may be categorized as follows:

- a. the “*standard form*”, which is vital to *industrial economies* and which allows for the possibility of mass production¹¹⁹;
- b. the “*collection form*”, which prevails in *enrichment economies* and which

115 Cf. Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018 [2014]). Cf. also Simon Susen, “Between Forms of Life and Immanent Criticism: Towards a New Critical Theory?”, *Journal of Political Power* 15, no. 2 (2022).

116 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, esp. Ch. 4. See also “Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser”, 67–70 and 72–73.

117 Nancy Fraser, “A New Form of Capitalism? A Reply to Boltanski and Esquerre”, *ibid.*, 59. Cf. Susen, “The Economy of Enrichment: Towards a New Form of Capitalism?”, 325–330.

118 Boltanski and Esquerre, “Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser”, 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 *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 4 and 110. See, in particular, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962). See also Patrice Maniglier, *Le vocabulaire de Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Ellipses, 2002), 55–56. On the relevance of Lévi-Strauss’s work to Boltanski and Esquerre’s argument, see, for example: Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 4, 79–80, 110–111, 132, 163, 190–191, 336–337, 388n1, and 410–411n3. “Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser”, 68–69. Cf. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*; cf. also *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: PUF, 1949) and *L’homme nu. Mythologiques*, tome IV (Paris: Plon, 1971).

119 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, esp. Ch. 5 and Ch. 6.

- is based on a narrative attached to an object's past¹²⁰;
- c. the "*trend form*", which is crucial to *fashion economies* and whose principal reference points are contemporary high-profile individuals, such as present-day celebrities¹²¹;
 - d. the "*asset form*", 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 future¹²².

The distinctiveness of their "specific arenas of transaction"¹²³ notwithstanding, these four modes of valuation converge around a noteworthy commonality: the prices of the commodities that they uphold remain subject to legitimation and contestation through a plurality of justificatory frameworks, meaning that they "can be *justified* or *criticized* according to a range of *different arguments*"¹²⁴. The development of these "forms of valuation"¹²⁵ is conditioned by the justificatory and critical practices enacted by market participants, who – above all, in their social roles as buyers and/or sellers – sustain the distinctive logic of interaction and transaction that characterizes each modality. In light of its engagement with the digitalization of society (particularly the digitalization of political life), Boltanski and Esquerre's most recent work would have been strengthened by a more detailed analysis of the aforementioned "forms of valuation" (and of the social dynamics triggered by them). In this regard, the following considerations merit attention:

First, an important question that arises is whether *digital economies* warrant recognition as a distinct "form of valuation", grounded in what may be termed the "*virtual form*". These economies are situated within a globally interconnected matrix of commercial interactions and trans-

120 See *ibid.*, esp. Ch. 7 and Ch. 8.

121 See *ibid.*, esp. Ch. 9.

122 See *ibid.*, esp. Ch. 10.

123 "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 70.

124 *Ibid.*, 70 (*italics added*).

125 See *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, esp. Ch. 4. See also "Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser", 67–70 and 72–73.

actions, whose operations are not merely facilitated but significantly accelerated by advanced information and communication technologies. Owing to the pervasive digitalization of social life, it becomes increasingly plausible to suggest that the traditional (Marxist) distinction between “base” and “superstructure” has become blurred, if not obsolete.¹²⁶

Second, it is pertinent to examine the broader implications of this fifth “form of valuation” – not only within the domain of economic sociology, as explored in *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017])¹²⁷, but also within the realm of political sociology, which constitutes the focus of MPS. Boltanski and Esquerre underscore the profoundly *ambivalent* nature of the digital age. Arguably, its ambivalence is rooted in the striking tension between its progressive and its regressive dimensions. This tension manifests itself in technologically mediated forms of life and is reflected in the dominant “forms of valuation” that characterize contemporary societies. The key question, then, concerns the trajectory of these developments: what future do these (constantly evolving) “forms of valuation” portend for society and, more generally, for humanity as a species?¹²⁸

Third, in order to delineate the distinctive characteristics of a form of capitalism that mobilizes *all* four – or, arguably, five – forms of valuation,

126 On this point, see, for instance, Susen, *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 90–92, 97–98, and 100–101. For excellent discussions of the Marxist distinction between “base” and “superstructure”, see, for instance: Philippe de Lara, “Superstructure”, in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, ed. Gérard Bensussan and Georges Labica (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982). Stuart Hall, “Rethinking the ‘Base-and-Superstructure’ Metaphor”, in *Papers on Class, Hegemony and Party: The Communist University of London*, ed. Jon Bloomfield (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977). Georges Labica, “Base”, in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, ed. Gérard Bensussan and Georges Labica (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982). Jorge Larrain, “Base and Superstructure”, in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1991 [1983]). Thomas Weber, “Basis”, in *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus (Band 2)*, ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1995).

127 Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*. See also *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*.

128 Cf. Susen, “Reflections on the (Post-)Human Condition: Towards New Forms of Engagement with the World?”.

Boltanski and Esquerre introduce the concept of *integral capitalism*.¹²⁹ The co-articulation of these diverse “valuation regimes” is pivotal to the emergence of a novel capitalist configuration. What renders this multilayered economic organization both remarkably resilient and exceptionally adaptable is its capacity to exploit “new lodes of wealth and interconnecting different ways of valorizing things”¹³⁰, thereby facilitating their circulation within market systems to maximize profit extraction. A central concern for contemporary sociological inquiry involves the multifaceted positioning of goods across diverse economic regimes. Specifically, goods may be *simultaneously* embedded within (a) industrial economies characterized by “standard forms”, (b) enrichment economies structured around “collection forms”, (c) fashion economies driven by “trend forms”, (d) financial economies organized through “asset forms”, and – as a recent addition – (e) digital economies predicated on “virtual forms”. This overlapping configuration underscores the complexity of valuation processes in late capitalist societies and invites further analysis of how these types of value-setting interact, compete, and coalesce in shaping market dynamics and cultural meaning. Indeed, the values ascribed to a given item may vary not only across distinct “form-specific” economies but also across different spatial and temporal contexts. This multi-layered dynamic arguably applies – drawing on Bourdieusian terminology – to multiple *social fields*.¹³¹ It is not confined to the *economic field* and its various subfields; rather, it extends to other social fields – for example, the *journalistic field* and the *political field*. A crucial dimension

129 On the concept of “integral capitalism”, see, for instance: Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, 26, 375, 399–400, and 566; “Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser”, 68 and 73–75.

130 “Enrichment, Profit, Critique: A Rejoinder to Nancy Fraser”, 74.

131 On Bourdieu’s “field theory”, see, for example: Pierre Bourdieu, “Some Properties of Fields”, in *Sociology in Question*, Pierre Bourdieu (London: SAGE, 1993 [1984]) as well as Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “The Logic of Fields”, in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). See also, for instance, Simon Susen, *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology* (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2007), esp. 171–180.

that warrants further investigation is the degree to which these diverse “forms of valuation” influence individuals’ *concurrent* engagement with *actualité* and processes of *politicization*.

3.

It is reasonable to support Boltanski and Esquerre’s adoption of the term “lifeworld” [*monde vécu*], particularly in view of its philosophical lineage. While acknowledging the foundational contributions of thinkers such as Dilthey¹³² and Husserl¹³³, Boltanski and Esquerre emphasize that their own interpretation of the concept aligns primarily with a Habermasian framework.¹³⁴

In line with Habermas, Boltanski and Esquerre conceptualize “social interaction” in general and “communicative action” in particular as integral components of the lifeworld. They diverge from Habermas’s perspective, however, insofar as they reject the dichotomy between “lifeworld” and “system”. Instead, they propose to distinguish between “people’s relationship with what is *accessible* to them”¹³⁵ and “people’s relationship with what is *inaccessible* to them”¹³⁶. The former refers to individuals’ direct and “lived” experience of reality, while the latter emerges through their technologically mediated engagement with the world. Nevertheless, this alternative conceptualization is not necessarily

132 See, for example, Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (Erster Band, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1883).

133 See, for example, Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik* (4. Auflage, redigiert und herausgegeben von Ludwig Landgrebe, Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1972 [1939]).

134 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 297–298n7.

135 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 298n7.

136 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 298n7.

less problematic than the lifeworld–system model proposed by Habermas; in fact, it raises its own set of theoretical and empirical challenges.

First, one may have doubts about the validity of Boltanski and Esquerre’s interpretation of Habermas’s conception of the lifeworld, which is considerably more differentiated than they appear to acknowledge.¹³⁷ The relationship between “lifeworld” and “system” – and, by extension, between hermeneutics/phenomenology and functionalism/systems theory – is more complex than Boltanski and Esquerre’s account suggests. Equally intricate is the internal structure of the lifeworld itself, comprising the components *culture*, *society*, and *personality*, each of which serves a species-constitutive function by providing sources of *interpretation*, *integration*, and *identity formation*. Admittedly, Habermas conceives of communicative action as the lifeworld’s driving force; he recognizes, however, that other forms of action – such as teleological action, normatively regulated action, and dramaturgical action – are *also* “always already” embedded (and, hence, ubiquitous) within the lifeworld. Crucially, these forms of action exist *prior to* their colonization by the steering mechanisms of the system’s two principal realms: the state and the market.¹³⁸ This insight underscores that *some* (but by no means all) of the most problematic dimensions of social life – such as the context-specific dominance of instrumental action – are not merely *exogenous* impositions inflicted on the lifeworld by the system (in accordance with Habermas) or the result of “people’s relationship with what is *inaccessible* to them”¹³⁹

137 For a detailed and critical account, see Susen, *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*, Chs. 3 and 4. See also “Jürgen Habermas”, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory. Volume I: A Contested Canon*, ed. Peter Kivisto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 381–382 and 389–392.

138 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1987 [1981]), and *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1987 [1981]).

139 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 298n7.

(in accordance with Boltanski and Esquerre). Rather, they are *endogenous* components of the lifeworld and/or of “people’s relationship with what is *accessible* to them”¹⁴⁰.

Second, despite its limitations, Habermas’s “colonization thesis” offers a more perceptive analytical framework than Boltanski and Esquerre, who reject the lifeworld–system architecture, are willing to concede. According to Habermas’s thesis, lifeworlds are increasingly colonized by the functionalist rationality of the system – above all, by the administrative logic of state bureaucratization and the profit-driven logic of market competition. Arguably, this framework can be fruitfully expanded to scrutinize the pervasive influence of technological networks. In the current “network moment”, the colonization of lifeworlds by digital technologies has reached unprecedented levels, raising profound questions about the nature of “agency”. Advanced technologies function as non-human or extended forms of human agency, thereby affirming Boltanski and Esquerre’s claim that each historical “moment” is shaped by a new agent [*actant*], capable of transforming society in a fundamental sense. To their credit, Boltanski and Esquerre acknowledge that the boundary between “lifeworld” and “system” is often blurred. For example, when engaging with digital technologies – such as using a computer or browsing the Internet – individuals are *simultaneously* immersed in (an experiential) “lifeworld” and (a digital) “system”. Yet, it is precisely the degree to which the former is *colonized* by the latter that lends explanatory power to Habermas’s “colonization thesis”.

Third, a more nuanced understanding of the lifeworld reveals that the notion of a “direct” or “immediate” experience of reality is philosophically (and sociologically) problematic. Even our most immediate experiences are *mediated* – if not by systemic or technological forces, then by our sensory apparatus. Kant’s transcendental idealism famously highlights this epistemological limitation: we can access only the “phenomenal

¹⁴⁰ See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 298n7.

world" (that is, the world as it appears to us), not the "noumenal world" (that is, the world as it is in itself).¹⁴¹ The former is the world that we *perceive* and *experience*, whereas the latter is the world of things as they "really" *are*. While Boltanski and Esquerre's distinction between "the accessible" and "the inaccessible" is not equivalent to Kant's distinction between "the phenomenal" and "the noumenal", a potentially fruitful challenge lies in examining the ontological, epistemological, and sociological implications of the fact that this tension is *always already* present within the lifeworld – that is, *prior to* any kind of systemic or technological mediation.

Finally, building on the preceding point, everyday life is characterized by a "constant back-and-forth movement [...] between what can be known through experience and what can only be known in a mediated fashion"¹⁴² – that is, by a continuous oscillation between knowledge derived from experience and knowledge acquired in a reason-guided fashion. This oscillation reflects the interplay between sensory immediacy and rational abstraction – that is, between the seemingly direct access we gain to the world by virtue of our senses and the indirect ways of obtaining knowledge about the world by virtue of reason and logic. This matter lies at the core of the long-standing empiricism-*vs.*-rationalism debate. Empiricists seek evidence derived from experience; rationalists prioritize logical reasoning; and Kantians aim to synthesize sensory data with insights derived from the triadic interplay of *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilstkraft*.¹⁴³ A further (empirical and theoretical) challenge for

141 See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995 [1781]). Cf. Michael Oberst, "Two Worlds and Two Aspects: On Kant's Distinction between Things in Themselves and Appearances", *Kantian Review* 20, no. 1 (2015). Cf. also Andrew Ward, *Kant: The Three Critiques* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), Part I.

142 Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, 229. Cf. Susen, "Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny", 33.

143 Cf. Susen, "Between Forms of Life and Immanent Criticism: Towards a New Critical Theory?", 305. On the triadic interplay between *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilstkraft*, see, for instance: "The Philosophical Significance of Bina-

Boltanski and Esquerre is to explore the extent to which *both* “people’s relationship with what is *accessible* to them”¹⁴⁴ and “people’s relationship with what is *inaccessible* to them”¹⁴⁵ are fundamentally shaped by their relationship with *both* experience *and* reason. The interdependence between knowledge derived from experience and knowledge acquired in a reason-guided fashion is built into the human condition.

ry Categories in Habermas’s Discourse Ethics”, *Sociological Analysis* 3, no. 2 (2009), 104–105. “Remarks on the Concept of Critique in Habermasian Thought”, *Journal of Global Ethics* 6, no. 2 (2010), 112–113. “A Reply to My Critics: The Critical Spirit of Bourdieusian Language”, *Social Epistemology* 27, no. 3–4 (2013), 326 and 330–331. *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 13, 105, 215, 219, 234, 236, 259, and 275. “Emancipation”, in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed. Michael T. Gibbons, et al. (Vol. 3, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 1027–1028. “Further Reflections on the ‘Postmodern Turn’ in the Social Sciences: A Reply to William Outhwaite”, 432–433. “Reflections on Patrick Baert’s *The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*”, in *The Sociology of Intellectuals: After “The Existentialist Moment”*, Simon Susen and Patrick Baert (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 18 and 43. “Saussure, Ferdinand de”, in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S. Turner, et al. (Volume V, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 28. *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 10–11. “Intimations of Humanity and the Case for a Philosophical Sociology”, *Journal of Political Power* 13, no. 1 (2020), 131, 137, and 138. “No Escape from the Technosystem?”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46, no. 6 (2020), 745 and 755. “Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny”, 39. “The Case for a Critical Hermeneutics: From the Understanding of Power to the Power of Understanding”, in *Hans-Herbert Kögler’s Critical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lubomír Dunaj and Kurt C. M. Mertel (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 18 and 35. “Between Forms of Life and Immanent Criticism: Towards a New Critical Theory?”, 283, 299, and 305. “Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?”, 47.

144 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 298n7.

145 See *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 251n7. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 298n7.

4.

Boltanski and Esquerre make a strong case for rejecting reductive approaches within the social sciences – particularly those grounded in substantialist, essentialist, behaviourist, and determinist paradigms. As they rightly point out, sociological inquiry often involves distinguishing between a *superficial* level, constituted by observable phenomena, and a *deeper* level, comprising underlying structural mechanisms. Upon closer examination, however, this dichotomous framework reveals several conceptual limitations that warrant critical scrutiny.

First, the distinction between the “superficial” and the “profound” levels of reality is considerably more complex (and controversial) than Boltanski and Esquerre seem to suggest. This conceptual dichotomy has deep roots in the history of ideas, traceable as far back as Ancient Greek philosophy.¹⁴⁶ Across all major domains of intellectual inquiry – including the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the formal sciences – scholars have long grappled with the notion that reality is composed of two fundamental levels: the level of *surfaces* and *appearances*, on the one hand; and the level of *essences* and underlying *substances*, on the other. In philosophy – particularly its Kantian and neo-Kantian traditions – this dualism is often articulated through the opposition between “phenomenal realms” and “noumenal realms”. In sociology – especially its structuralist and critical variants – a comparable distinction emerges in the contrast between what is perceived as “apparent”, “illusory”, “deceptive”, or “misleading”, on the one hand, and what is regarded as “hidden”, “real”, “genuine”, or “authentic”, on the other. In one of his previous works¹⁴⁷, Boltanski has provided a fine-grained examination of these tensions, notably in terms of the “REALI-

146 Cf. A. C. Grayling, *The History of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2020 [2019]), Part I. Cf. also Susen, “Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny”, 44.

147 See Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*.

TY *vs. reality*" antinomy.¹⁴⁸ Given the importance of this matter for the analysis of the relationship between *actualité* and *politisation*, MPS would have benefitted from a more nuanced assessment of this issue.

Second, Boltanski and Esquerre refer to both *social structuralism* (which emphasizes the role of social organizations and institutions) and *cognitive structuralism* (which posits the existence of invariant mental structures as cognitive anchors). Their treatment of structuralist traditions, however, remains somewhat underdeveloped. A more in-depth account could have acknowledged the diversity of structuralist approaches, all of which rest on a foundational distinction between "a *superficial* level" (of observable phenomena) and "a *profound* level" (of underlying structures). These frameworks include – among others – linguistic structuralism, anthropological structuralism, economic structuralism, biological structuralism, and genetic structuralism. It would have been analytically fruitful had the authors delineated the principal areas of (a) convergence, (b) divergence, and (c) cross-fertilization between their own formulation of "pragmatic structuralism"¹⁴⁹ and other structuralist perspectives.

Third, Boltanski and Esquerre posit that the contemporary social sciences tend to *undervalue* the study of *the present* and to *overvalue* the study of *history*. Within this framework, the present is often reduced to a *superficial* domain of observable phenomena, whereas history is elevated as the locus of *deeper, structural* insights – particularly through genealogical analysis.¹⁵⁰ This diagnosis, however, appears to contrast with prevailing

148 See *ibid.*, xv; cf. *ibid.*, Ch. 1.

149 See Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, 5–6, 338–342, and 343.

150 On this point, see, for instance: Samantha Ashenden and David Owen, eds., *Foucault contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory* (London: SAGE, 1999). Patrick Baert, "The History of the Present: Foucault's Archaeology and Genealogy", in *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century*, Patrick Baert (Cambridge: Polity, 1998). Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979 [1975]). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon [et al.], Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980). Raymond Geuss, "Nietzsche and Genealogy", *European Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1994). Robert Layton, "Lévi-Strauss et la quête

tendencies in contemporary sociology (especially in Anglophone circles), exhibiting an increasingly short-sighted preoccupation with the present, commonly framed through the lens of purported “epochal shifts”. This orientation is accompanied by a relative neglect of historical inquiry, thereby undermining a granular understanding of the present and its embeddedness in broader temporal trajectories. The dominance of a “presentist lens”¹⁵¹ is evident in the extent to which much of sociology’s disciplinary agenda fails to foster a genuinely historical comprehension, let alone historical examination, of social reality. In the early twenty-first century, historical sociology is frequently relegated to the status of a niche subfield, rather than recognized as a foundational component of social and political analysis. This conceptual and methodological marginalization is further exacerbated by the widespread reliance on reductive periodizing categories – such as “premodern”, “modern”, “late-modern”, and/or “postmodern”. These labels tend to obscure, rather than to illuminate, the complexities inherent in large-scale socio-historical transformation processes. Consequently, a paradox emerges: while mainstream sociology continues to exhibit a strong “will to periodize”¹⁵², it privileges the study of the present over the study of the past. Both “stagist” and “presentist” approaches dilute the critical and historicist ethos that characterizes classical sociological thought.¹⁵³ Ironically, this

des structures élémentaires de la société. *Généalogie intellectuelle*”, *Les Temps Modernes* 628, no. 3 (2004). Andreas Rasche and Robert Chia, “Researching Strategy Practices: A Genealogical Social Theory Perspective”, *Organization Studies* 30, no. 7 (2009). Martin Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik. Geschichte und Theorie des Subjekts nach Nietzsche und Foucault* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007).

151 On “presentist lens(es)”, see Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, xix and 153. See also David Inglis, “What is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology”, *Cultural Sociology* 8, no. 1 (2014), 101.

152 On “the will to periodize”, see Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, xix and 162. See also Inglis, “What is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology”, 111–113.

153 See Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, Ch. 7.

trend resonates with Boltanski and Esquerre's emphasis on individuals' immersion in and engagement with *actualité*. Yet, to their credit, Boltanski and Esquerre's commitment to empirical and genealogical research stands in stark contrast to the superficiality associated with the kind of headline-grabbing boasting (and opportunistic theorizing) prevalent in catchy forms of *Zeitgeistsurfing*.

5.

Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis of the ideological divide between "the right" and "the left" offers several valuable insights:

- a. It underscores the conceptual complexity of this divide, which can be examined across multiple dimensions – particularly social, temporal, normative, and transcendental.
- b. It elucidates the multifaceted nature of this divide, revealing how it is constituted both within and across the aforementioned analytical domains.
- c. It highlights the contingent and context-laden character of the classificatory schemes linked to this divide, challenging notions of their alleged "universality" and "fixity".

In broad terms, Boltanski and Esquerre are justified in rejecting any form of *substantialist* reduction of the right–left political taxonomy, opting instead for a *relationalist* mode of interpretation. Nonetheless, several critical issues pertaining to the right–left divide remain insufficiently addressed and warrant further investigation:

- a. Owing to its *dichotomous* structure, the right–left framework fails to capture the intricately differentiated political landscapes characteristic of pluralistic societies in the twenty-first century. In such contexts, political arenas are typically marked by a wide-ranging spectrum of positions and dispositions whose diversity, complexity, and interrelations resist reduction to the binary logic of a simple right–left antinomy.
- b. Owing to its *anachronistic* structure, the right–left framework fails to account for the processes of political hybridization that have shaped – and continue to shape – pluralistic societies in the twenty-first cen-

tury. The “major” ideological traditions of modernity (that is, anarchism, communism/socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and fascism), alongside their “sub-major” counterparts (such as nationalism, feminism, and environmentalism) and intersectional elements (including [anti-]classism, [anti-]sexism, [anti-]racism, [anti-]ageism, and [anti-]ableism), have increasingly undergone cross-fertilization. These developments have given rise to political projects and alliances that, to varying degrees, transcend the conventional right–left antinomy.¹⁵⁴

- c. Owing to its *essentialist* structure, the right–left framework fails to capture the intersectional constitution of highly differentiated societies in the twenty-first century. The classificatory patterns associated with this dichotomy must be re-evaluated in light of the multiple meanings that they acquire through the dynamic interplay of key sociological variables – such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, “race”, age, and (dis)ability. These intersecting dimensions of identity and social positioning complicate any attempt to impose a rigid binary taxonomy on contemporary political formations.

Importantly, the previous remarks are *not* intended to suggest that contemporary societies have entered a “post-ideological” era.¹⁵⁵ Rather, they are meant to acknowledge that – in light of the increasing pluralization of social fields (and, by extension, of positions, dispositions, interests, identities, and discourses) within complex forms of life – classical conceptions of the right–left divide fall short of capturing the multiplicity of factors that shape the behavioural, ideological, and institutional configurations prevalent in polycentric societies.

154 Cf. *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 192–194.

155 On this point, see, for instance: Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, revised ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960]). Leonidas Donskis, *The End of Ideology & Utopia? Moral Imagination and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: P. Lang, 2000). W. D. Rubinstein, *The End of Ideology and the Rise of Religion: How Marxism and Other Secular Universalistic Ideologies Have Given Way to Religious Fundamentalism* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2009). *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 192–195. Chaim Isaac Waxman, ed. *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968).

6.

The distinction between the three key periods – namely, the “crowd moment” (1870–1914), the “mass moment” (1930–1970), and the “network moment” (1990–present) – constitutes a central analytical pillar of *MPS*. This tripartite model, however, is not without its limitations and warrants critical scrutiny.

a.

The *destructive* potential that ostensibly characterizes all three “moments” – that is, the “crowd moment”, the “mass moment”, and the “network moment” – may be central to the former two, but it is less evidently a constitutive feature of the latter. The emergence of historical periods is inconceivable without the transformative force of *Aufhebung*: each new “moment” both incorporates and replaces – that is, both preserves and cancels, both confirms and contradicts, both reinforces and transcends – elements of its predecessor, involving a seemingly contradictory process of simultaneous affirmation and negation. Arguably, this tension-laden dynamic of epochal succession is captured not only in Hegel’s concept of “sublation” but also in Schumpeter’s idea of “creative destruction”.

Yet, as evidenced by the wars of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, the destructive capacities of the “crowd moment” and the “mass moment” far exceed those associated with the “network moment” (at least until now). This is not to deny that digital networks possess *transformative* dimensions – most notably, the digitalization of virtually every aspect of social life – as well as highly *problematic* features – such as the proliferation of hate speech, historical denialism, conspiracy theories, discriminatory discourses, and the widespread dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. It is an overstatement, however, to assert that such phenomena amount to a form of societal or political *destruction* comparable to that witnessed in earlier periods. The “network moment”, although it may be profoundly disruptive in certain respects, does not embody the same level of existen-

tial threat to social order and/or institutional stability as its predecessors.

It is worth adding that the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) is likely to play a pivotal role in the next major historical transition, potentially giving rise to a new socio-technological “moment”. While the “network moment” has been defined largely by the proliferation of digital connectivity and information exchange, the increasing integration of AI into virtually all domains of social life suggests the emergence of a qualitatively distinct phase. This prospective transformation may not only reshape existing institutional, communicative, and epistemic structures but also challenge canonical conceptual (and methodological) frameworks through which we interpret (and study) historical change.

b.

The claim that each of the three “moments” – that is, the “crowd moment”, the “mass moment”, and the “network moment” – is defined by “a logic of gregarious association”¹⁵⁶, which purportedly draws individuals into quasi-collectivist formations and diminishes their sense of singularity and uniqueness, may be applicable to “crowds” and “masses”, but applies only partially to (digital) “networks”. The rise of digital networks has significantly contributed to processes of *hyper-individualization* and has reinforced an ideology of *hyper-individualism*.¹⁵⁷ This tendency has been extensively theorized in terms of the transformation of the self in late-modern – if not postmodern – societies.¹⁵⁸

From a Durkheimian perspective, the *shift from premodern to modern society* cannot be dissociated from a *transition from “mechanic” to “organic”*

156 Boltanski and Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, 9. See also *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*, 18.

157 Susen, *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 36 and 120.

158 See *ibid.* See also “Further Reflections on the ‘Postmodern Turn’ in the Social Sciences: A Reply to William Outhwaite”, “Following the Footprints of the ‘Postmodern Turn’: A Reply to Gregor McLennan”, *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2017), and “Postmodernism”, in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Political Sociology*, ed. Maria Grasso and Marco Giugni (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023).

solidarity. From a post-Durkheimian perspective, the *shift from modern to late- or postmodern society* requires a *transition from “organic” to “liquid” solidarity*.¹⁵⁹ In this context, one can trace a historical trajectory from the premodern “cult of God”, through the modern “cult of the unitary subject”, to the postmodern “cult of the fragmented individual”. In late (or post-) modern societies, actors are increasingly expected to construct and to reconstruct their identities by selectively engaging with a wide array of sociological variables – such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, “race”, cultural preferences, lifestyle, religion, age, ability, and political ideology – thereby cultivating a sense of unique subjectivity.

Rather than reversing this trend, the “network moment” has exacerbated and accelerated it. The impact of the digital age on the constitution of personhood has been the subject of scholarly inquiry for several decades.¹⁶⁰ The emergence of the “digital self” has given rise to a novel and increasingly pervasive form of “digital subjectivity”¹⁶¹. Boltanski and Esquerre’s analysis of the “network moment” would have been strengthened by a more sustained engagement with the degree to which the digitalization of subjectivity entails a series of contradictory processes – such as individualization *vs.* standardization, personalization *vs.* homogenization, fragmentation *vs.* unification, exclusion *vs.* inclusion,

159 Cf. Dariusz Gafijczuk, “The Way of the Social: From Durkheim’s Society to a Postmodern Sociality”, *History of the Human Sciences* 18, no. 3 (2005).

160 On the “digital age”, see, for instance: Russell W. Belk and Rosa Llamas, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption* (London: Routledge, 2013). Hubert Burda, ed. *The Digital Wunderkammer: 10 Chapters on the Iconic Turn* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2011). Barbara Junge et al., eds., *The Digital Turn: Design in the Era of Interactive Technologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995). Pille Runnel et al., eds., *The Digital Turn: User’s Practices and Cultural Transformations* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013). Wim Westera, *The Digital Turn: How the Internet Transforms Our Existence* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2013). Shanyang Zhao, “The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others”, *Symbolic Interaction* 28, no. 3 (2005).

161 See, for example, Zhao, “The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others”. See also Belk and Llamas, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption*.

isolation *vs.* integration, alienation *vs.* self-realization, and domination *vs.* emancipation.¹⁶²

c.

A further reservation likely to be raised – particularly by critics adopting a postcolonial perspective – is that Boltanski and Esquerre’s inquiry is marked by a pronounced *Eurocentric*, and more specifically *Francocentric*, orientation. This limitation is evident in the empirical data, historical reference points, and theoretical frameworks underpinning their study. The scope of their project is largely confined to Western, and predominantly French, socio-historical contexts, thereby neglecting the diverse trajectories, epistemologies, and political formations that characterize non-Western societies. As such, the applicability of their tripartite framework – comprising the “crowd moment”, the “mass moment”, and the “network moment” – may be questioned in light of its limited engagement with global and transnational dynamics:

- The sources of empirical data employed in *MPS* are predominantly French, notably *Le Monde* and the *Institut national de l’audiovisuel* (INA), including its YouTube channels *INA Société* and *INA Politique*.
- The vast majority of illustrative examples are drawn from European – primarily French – contexts, and the proposed periodization is grounded in a Eurocentric historical narrative that, while arguably pertinent to the “Western” world, may not be applicable to other (non-Western) regions, with distinct socio-political trajectories.
- Their theoretical orientation – best described as a form of “pragmatic structuralism” – does not engage with approaches that seek to challenge Eurocentric paradigms in academic discourse, particularly those developed within postcolonial and decolonial studies.¹⁶³ As a result,

162 See Susen, *The “Postmodern Turn” in the Social Sciences*, 116.

163 See Gurminder K. Bhabra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) and *Connected Sociologies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). See also, for instance: Manuela Boatcă and Sérgio Costa, “Postcolonial Sociology: A Research Agenda”, in *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Encarnación

the framework presented in *MPS* risks reproducing epistemic parochialism by overlooking the plurality of historical experiences and intellectual traditions beyond the European context.

This is not to undermine (i) the substantial body of empirical data that Boltanski and Esquerre have meticulously compiled and dissected, (ii) the diagnostic relevance of their tripartite periodization, or (iii) the theoretical contributions of their “pragmatic structuralism”. Rather, this is to reflect on the normative implications of the fact that the empirical, historical, and theoretical foundations of their project remain predominantly Eurocentric, and in many respects, Francocentric. Addressing this issue should not be construed as a superficial gesture of political or sociological correctness. If motivated by the desire to broaden our horizons and to take sociological inquiry to the next level¹⁶⁴, such an engagement would expand the analytical scope of Boltanski and Esquerre’s innovative and conceptually rich research programme, contribute to the (de)provincialization of the social sciences¹⁶⁵, and foster the development of a genuinely global sociology.¹⁶⁶

Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Manuela Boatcă, and Sérgio Costa (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Manuela Boatcă, and Sérgio Costa, eds., *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). Gregor McLennan, “Complicity, Complexity, Historicism: Problems of Postcolonial Sociology”, *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 4 (2014). Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Routledge, 2010). Martin Savransky, “A Decolonial Imagination: Sociology, Anthropology and the Politics of Reality”, *Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2017).

164 Cf. Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, and Jeanne Lazarus, *Comment s’invente la sociologie. Parcours, expériences et pratiques croisés* (Paris: Flammarion, 2024).

165 Cf. Michael Burawoy, “Provincializing the Social Sciences”, in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), and Ina Kerner, “Beyond Eurocentrism. Trajectories Towards a Renewed Political and Social Theory”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 5 (2018).

166 Cf. Susen, *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges*, Part II.

Conclusion

The question of the relationship between processes of “turning into current affairs” [*processus de mise en actualité*] and processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*] is central to Boltanski and Esquerre’s investigation in *MPS*. We are constantly exposed to and influenced by the former, just as we are directly or indirectly affected by the latter. In the present era, our lives are increasingly colonized by digital information technologies. At the same time, facts and events are being politicized and, hence, discursively incorporated into our everyday imaginaries and conversations.

One of the key objectives pursued in *MPS* is to elucidate the sociological (and, to some degree, philosophical) implications of the epistemic and experiential gap between *direct* experiences of facts and events in people’s lifeworlds, on the one hand, and *indirect* experiences of facts and events via digital media, on the other. Processes of politicization arising from the latter modality are potentially problematic, insofar as they tend to lack the qualitative depth, existential intensity, and grassroots involvement provided by the former. Conversely, processes of politicization anchored in the former modality are potentially problematic, insofar as they remain circumscribed by contextual immediacy and, thus, lack the global scope and sense of interconnectedness generated, and reinforced, by the latter.

As I have argued above (and in a previous article¹⁶⁷), *MPS* – despite its considerable strengths – has significant limitations. This article is not the place to overcome these limitations. In essence, most of the weaknesses and shortcomings of *MPS* can be overcome by sharpening and broadening the empirical, historical, and theoretical dimensions of Boltanski and Esquerre’s work. Given the breadth and depth, as well as quality and originality, of their research, one can only hope that these two highly creative and prolific scholars will embark on further collaborative ventures in the future.

167 See Susen, “Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?”, esp. section IX (“Critical Reflections”).

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