



ON CRITIQUE

A Sociology of Emancipation



Luc Boltanski

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LUC BOLTANSKI

Translated by Gregory Elliott

polity

First published in French as *De la critique* © Editions GALLIMARD, Paris, 2009

Ouvrage publié avec le soutien du Centre national du livre – ministère français chargé de la culture

Published with the support of the National Centre for the Book – French Ministry of Culture

This English edition © Polity Press, 2011

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4963-4 (hardback)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4964-1 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound by MPG Books Group, UK

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ON CRITIQUE

For Jean-Elie Boltanski

I've got to tell you: me, all my life, I've thought for myself; free, I was born different. I am who I am. I'm different from everyone. . . I don't know much. But I'm suspicious of lots of things. I can say, pass it to me: when it comes to thinking ahead, I'm a dog handler – release a little idea in front of me and I'm going to track it for you into the deepest of all forests, amen! Listen: how things should be would be to get all sages, politicians, important elected representatives together and settle the issue for good – proclaim once and for all, by means of meetings, that there's no devil, he doesn't exist, cannot. Legally binding! That's the only way everyone would get some peace and quiet. Why doesn't the government deal with it? Oh, I know very well, it's not possible. Don't take me for an ignoramus. Putting ideas in order is one thing, dealing with a country of real people, thousands and thousands of woes, is quite another. . . So many people – it's terrifying to think about it – and not one of them at peace: all of them are born, grow up, marry, want food, health, wealth, fame, a secure job, want it to rain, want things to work. . .

João Guimarães Rosa, *Diadorim*

PREFACE

This book originated in three talks given at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in November 2008. Professor Axel Honneth, with whom I have kept up a very rewarding dialogue for several years now, took the initiative of entrusting me with the task, at once stimulating and intimidating, of making this contribution to the series of Adorno Lectures. I hope he will accept my warm thanks for having provided me with the opportunity to present, in synthetic form, some observations that have accompanied my thinking over the last three years.

In returning to these lectures with a view to publication, I have been unable to resist reintroducing a number of arguments that I had to eliminate so as not to exceed the time allotted me. In addition, I have integrated into the body of the text some more up-to-date considerations on contemporary forms of domination, which I had the opportunity to present in October 2008 at Humboldt University in Berlin, in the context of a lecture which the Centre Marc Bloch organizes annually to mark the start of the academic year. The three Adorno Lectures have thus, as it were, been opened up, giving rise to the six segments that make up this work. Nevertheless, conscious of the difficulty presented by the transition from lecture form to book form – a task virtually impossible in as much as the two formats involve different methods of argument and stylistic practices¹ – in writing them up I have sought to preserve, at least to some extent, their initial oral character. They must therefore be read as if they were a series of six talks. Consequently, readers should not expect to find a finished work, whose composition would have taken me many more years of labour and whose size would be (will be?) much greater, but only a series of remarks, whose articulation has certainly not yet

reached the desired level of integration and coherence, as if they had been set down on paper in preparation for composing a book. Or, if you like, at best a sort of *précis* of critique.

The six segments can be assembled in twos to form three different parts. The first two concern the issue of the relationship between sociology and social critique. This is a question that has never stopped haunting sociology since the origins of the discipline. Should sociology, constituted on the model of the sciences, with an essentially descriptive orientation, be placed in the service of a critique of society – which assumes considering the latter in a normative optic? If so, how should it go about making description and critique compatible? Does an orientation towards critique necessarily have the effect of corrupting the integrity of sociology and diverting it from its scientific project? Or, on the contrary, should it be acknowledged that it in a sense constitutes the purpose (or one of the purposes) of sociology, which, without it, would be a futile activity, remote from the concerns of the people who make up society? Questions of this kind have periodically arisen in the course of the history of sociology, hitching up with other pairs of oppositions en route – for example, between facts and values, ideology and science, determinism and autonomy, structure and action, macro-social and micro-social approaches, explanation and interpretation and so forth.

Having, in the first segment (which may be read as an introduction), rapidly presented some concepts that can be used to describe the structure of critical theories in social science, in the second I dwell on a comparison between two programmes to which, in the course of my professional career, I have sought to make a contribution. The first is the *critical sociology* of the 1970s, particularly in the form given it in France by Pierre Bourdieu. The second is the *pragmatic sociology of critique*, developed by some of us in the Political and Moral Sociology Group of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in the 1980s and 1990s, which was fashioned *both* in opposition to the first *and* with a view to pursuing its basic intention. In particular, in this chapter readers will find a reciprocal critique of each of these programmes, from the perspective of their contribution to social critique.

Segments 3 and 4 can be read as a second part, wherein is expounded in its main lines an analytical framework intended to formulate afresh the question of critique, such as it is given free rein not in the theoretical space of sociology, but in everyday reality. But this framework also has the aim of providing tools that make it possible to reduce

the tension between critical sociology and sociology of critique. It therewith pursues an objective of pacification. This framework is developed from the postulate (of the order of a thought experiment) that the organization of social life must confront a radical uncertainty as regards the question of *how things stand with what is*. It dwells on institutions, considered in the first instance in their semantic functions, as instruments geared towards the construction of reality through the intermediary, in particular, of operations for qualifying entities – persons and objects – and defining test formats. The possibility of critique is derived from a contradiction, lodged at the heart of institutions, which can be described as *hermeneutic contradiction*. Critique is therefore considered in its dialogical relationship with the institutions it is arrayed against. It can be expressed either by showing that the tests as conducted (i.e. as instances or, as analytical philosophy puts it, as tokens) do not conform to their format (or type); or by drawing from the world examples and cases that do not accord with reality as it is established, making it possible to challenge *the reality of reality* and, thereby, change its contours. The distinction between *reality* and *world* supplies the conceptual framework of these analyses.

Segments 5 and 6 form a third part, more sharply focused on current political problems. Segment 5 presents some summary applications of the analytical framework outlined in the two preceding segments, devoted to describing different regimes of domination. The term ‘domination’ – in the sense in which it is used in this little *précis* – refers to historical situations where the work of critique finds itself particularly impeded in various ways depending on the political context, and also in more or less apparent or covert fashion. In this segment I pay particular attention to a mode of domination – which can be characterized as managerial – that is in the process of being established in Western democratic-capitalist societies. Finally, Segment 6 (which may be read as a provisional conclusion) aims to sketch some of the paths critique might take today in order to proceed in the direction of emancipation.

To conclude, I shall add that the issue of critique and the problems posed by the relationship between sociology and critique, to which I have devoted much of my work for many years, have not only captivated me by their theoretical attraction. For me, and no doubt more generally for sociologists of my generation, who came into the discipline in the years immediately preceding or following May 1968, they have a quasi-biographical character. We have gone through periods when society was populated by powerful critical movements

PREFACE

and then through periods marked by their retreat. But today we are perhaps entering a phase that will witness their return.² This History with a capital 'h' is bound to have an impact on the little history of sociology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To thank all those who made a contribution to the development of this work is a task impossible to acquit without omitting or neglecting someone. My thanks go in particular to the members of the Political and Moral Sociology Group (GSPM), to my students at EHESS, and to the numerous researchers who have stimulated my thinking by intervening either in my doctoral seminar or in that of the GSPM. I am especially indebted to Damien de Blic, Eve Chiapello, Elisabeth Claverie, Bernard Conein, Nicolas Dodier, Arnaud Esquerre, Bruno Karsenti and Cyril Lemieux, who, with great generosity, have read, criticized and commented on earlier stages of this work. Tomaso Vitale of Milan University has also been an exacting reader and an impassioned (and stirring) interlocutor. I have also benefited from discussions with students or colleagues from history (Ariane Boltanski, Robert Descimon, Simona Cerutti, Nicolas Offenstadt), anthropology (Catherine Alès, François Berthomé, Matthew Carey, Philippe Descola), literature (Philippe Roussin, Loïc Nicolas), and law (Olivier Cayla, who was generous enough to trust me with the as yet unpublished manuscript of his thesis, Paolo Napoli, and especially my dear late friend, Ian Thomas). In addition to the attention of Axel Honneth, at Frankfurt my work benefited greatly from the help given by Mauro Basaure, who was an intermediary of inexhaustible intelligence and good will between the Institute for Social Research and the GSPM, but also from the observations of other researchers at the Institute – in particular, Robin Celikates and Nora Sieverding. I am grateful to Sidonia Blätter, Eva Buddeberg and to the two distinguished translators who rendered these lectures – written and delivered in French – into the language of Adorno: Bernd Schwibs and Achim Russer. I am also grateful to Gregory Elliott who, having

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

worked on eight hundred pages of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, has, once again, brought his elegant style to this English translation. I must finally add that this text could not have been finished without the vigilant skill of my brother, the linguist Jean-Elie Boltanski, who has followed every step of its preparation. But in order for it to become a book, friendly attention was once again required from my editor Eric Vigne, who perseveres against the current in publishing writings which, without his stubborn efforts, would simply be condemned to disappear in the incessant flow of messages saturating our computers.

Drafts of this work have been presented and discussed in various seminars or conferences and, in particular, in the conference in Frankfurt that assembled researchers from the GSPM and the Institute for Social Research in November 2006; in the conference on common sense organized by Sandra Laugier at Amiens University in December 2006; in the seminar organized in May 2007 at the Ecole normale supérieure (Lyon, literature and social science) by the directors of the journal *Tracés*, Arnaud Fossier and Eric Monnet, and, in the same month, during the important day school on 'Anthropology and Pragmatics' organized by Carlo Severi at the Musée de Quai de Branly in Paris; in the Hannah Arendt symposium at the New School for Social Research in New York in December 2007, on the initiative of Nancy Fraser; and then, at the same institution, during a workshop organized by Janet Roitman and Anne Stoler in May 2008; in Antonio Negri's seminar in January 2008; and in the conference on individualism organized by Philippe Corcuff, whose comments were very useful to me, at Cerisy in June 2008.

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THE STRUCTURE OF CRITICAL THEORIES

Power or Domination. Society or Social Order

I shall approach critical sociologies starting from the concept of *social domination*, a polemical notion if ever there was one, because it has been a major axis of critical theories while having often been rejected by other currents in sociology, at least when the term domination is used not only to refer to different ways of placing power in the service of politics, whatever it might be – as is more or less the case with ‘modes of domination’ in Max Weber – but also serves to identify and condemn manifestations of power deemed extreme and abusive. As we shall see in the next talk, critical sociology has made abundant use of it in this sense and the pragmatic sociology of critique has simply ignored it. However, do not expect me to outline a conceptual history of this notion, which would take me far beyond not only the time in which I shall address you but also, alas, my competence. I shall instead base myself on this problematic notion in order to seek to clarify the relationship between sociology and critique, and examine the ways in which they might converge in compromise formations that are never free of tensions.

An initial characteristic of sociologies of domination is that they fashion a synthetic object, in the sense that it cannot give rise to direct observation, so that revealing it is necessarily the result of a reconstruction on the part of the analyst. All sociology can observe is power relations. For standard sociology, reference to power goes hand-in-hand with the identification of asymmetries, but they are diverse, partial, local or transitory. The existence of different sources and sites of power creates a web in which these powers can become entangled, contradict and even neutralize one another. The fact of

exercising power or of being subjected to power does not escape the consciousness of actors and power relations are invariably visible to the eyes of an observer. Power can therefore easily form the object of an empirical sociology, on the one hand because social relations are shot through with forms of power that are fairly readily observable, at least in certain situations; and on the other hand because power relations are, in many cases, inscribed in pre-established formats that are themselves stabilized in the form of customs or registered in texts – for example, juridical texts and other forms of regulations. As Max Weber showed, power thus tends to be rationalized, whatever its modalities, in the sense that its structures and exercise are subject, at least formally, to *requirements of justification* that impart a certain robustness to them. It is by invoking these requirements that those who hold power can claim it to be 'legitimate', thereby compelling those who challenge it to *rise in generality* in such a way as to subject the very principles they invoke to critique.¹ By contrast, to characterize a form of power as 'arbitrary' signifies that it is impossible to take its measure by referring it to a pre-established format ensuring its exercise a certain consistency and thereby to stress the difficulties facing those who endure it in forming predictable expectations of it. Because it must be both asserted and justified, power speaks of power.

The same is not true of domination. Critical theories of domination posit the existence of profound, enduring asymmetries which, while assuming different forms in different contexts, are constantly duplicated to the point of colonizing reality as a whole. They adopt the point of view of the totality.² The dominated and the dominant are everywhere, whether the latter are identified as dominant class, dominant sex or, for example, dominant ethnicity. What is involved is not only not directly observable, but also invariably eludes the consciousness of actors. Domination must be unmasked. It does not speak of itself and is concealed in *systems* whose patent forms of power are merely their most superficial dimension. Thus, for example, contrasting with the demand *to get done*, rendered manifest by an order given in a hierarchical relationship, are manoeuvres or even, in still more tacit fashion, social conditions deposited in an environment, which combine to determine an actor to do something for the benefit of another as if she were doing it of her own accord and for herself. It is therefore as if actors suffered the domination exercised over them not only unwittingly, but sometimes even by aiding its exercise.

As a result, theories of domination must select an object slightly different from that of sociologies which, for convenience sake, we shall call standard. This discrepancy is the result of different forms

of totalization. As an empirical activity, sociology can describe different dimensions of social life (and different forms of power) without necessarily aiming to integrate them into a coherent totality – on the contrary, even seeking to bring out the specificity of each of them. By contrast, theories of domination unmask the relations between these different dimensions so as to highlight the way they form a system. Where sociology takes as its object *societies*, however it identifies them (and it could be shown that it invariably involves nation-states, as is obviously the case, for example, in Durkheim),³ theories of domination, relying on sociological descriptions, construct a different kind of object that can be referred to as *social orders*. In fact, it is only once this object has been constructed that an approach to society as a totality considered critically can be posited;⁴ and that a mode of domination can be described in its generality (and also, in numerous cases, that *contradictions* immanent in this order can be identified, whose exposure furnishes a basis for its critique. In fact, contradictions are distinguished from the disparate only within a unified framework).⁵ The substitution of social order – an object that is manifestly constructed – for social relations – an object supposed to follow from empirical observation – represents the strength and weakness of critical theories of domination. They are always liable to be denounced as illusory – that is to say, as not offering pictures which provide a good likeness of reality, but merely being the expression of a rejection of reality based on nothing but particular (and contestable) points of view or the desire (and resentment) of those who condemn it.⁶

Morality, Critique and Reflexivity

Compared with the so-called natural sciences, the specificity of the social sciences is that they take as their object human beings grasped not in their biological dimensions, but in so far as they are capable of reflexivity (that is why it is appropriate to distinguish between the social and the human sciences). Considered in this respect, human beings are not content to act or react to the actions of others. They review their own actions or those of others in order to make judgements on them, often hinging on the issue of good and evil – that is, *moral judgements*. This reflexive capacity means that they also react to the representations given of their properties or actions, including when the latter derive from sociology or critical theories.⁷

The moral judgements formulated by actors in the course of their everyday activities often take the form of *critiques*. Moral activity

is a predominantly critical activity. The sociological *doxa* taught to first-year students (often invoking a popularized form of Weberian epistemology) consists in making a sharp (if not always clear) distinction between, on the one hand, critical judgements delivered by so-called 'ordinary' people and sustained by 'moralities' or 'cultures', which form part of the legitimate objects of description, and, on the other hand, critical judgements made by sociologists themselves (renamed 'value judgements'), which are to be banished (axiological neutrality). This distinction is based on the Weberian separation of *facts* from *values*.⁸ Critical theories of domination necessarily rely on descriptive social science to paint a picture of the reality subject to critique. But compared with sociological descriptions that seek to conform to the vulgate of neutrality, the specificity of critical theories is that they contain critical judgements on the social order which the analyst assumes responsibility for in her own name, thus abandoning any pretention to neutrality.

Ordinary Critiques and Metacritical Positions

The fact that they are backed up by the discourse of truth of the social sciences endows critical theories of domination with a certain robustness in describing the reality called into question, but complicates the critical operation itself, which is essential to them. This confronts them with a dilemma.

On the one hand, it prevents them making judgements that rely directly on the resources, invariably exploited by ordinary critique, represented by spiritual and/or moral resources of a local character. Metacritical theories cannot judge the city as it is by comparing it with the City of God, or even by introducing a secularized but specific moral ideal that the metacritical theoretician naively adopts on her own account in order to judge (and condemn) society as it is, as if it involved not one moral conception among others, but the moral ideal in itself (which would contradict the comparativist requirement to place the moral ideals present in all known societies on an equal footing). That is why critical theories of domination are clearly distinguished from the very many intellectual movements which, basing themselves on moral and/or religious exigencies, have developed radical critiques and demanded from their followers an absolute change in lifestyle (e.g. primitive Christianity, Manichaeism, millenarian sects, etc.).

On the other hand, however, critical theories of domination are