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# In the epicenter of politics: Axel Honneth's theory of the struggles for recognition and Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's moral and political sociology

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## **Abstract**

Axel Honneth's development of the Frankfurt School's Critical Social Theory has increased the amount of attention that is paid to the dimension of political praxis by emphasizing the social struggle for recognition. Nevertheless, the political-sociological axis of this tradition remains relatively unexplored and unclear. Taking this as a starting point, I investigate the contribution that the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot could make to the fortification of this political dimension. I do this by tracing a line of argument through several of Boltanski's studies in the direction of a political-sociological axis. I show that this aspect of Boltanski's sociology can be understood as a very fruitful analysis of processes of political articulation that may help Critical Theory overcome a political deficiency.

## **Keywords**

common sense of justice and acceptability, Critical Theory, political and moral sociology, political and moral suffering, political articulation

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## The struggles for recognition between moral and political sociology

A systematic reconstruction of the theory of the struggles for recognition developed by Axel Honneth (1995b [1992]) allows for the identification of two central and intimately related argumentative axes: the *moral sociological explicative axis* and the *historic philosophical reconstructive axis* (Basaure, 2007, 2011b). The first represents the conceptual effort to provide an explanation for the moral motives of the subjective action at the root of social struggles. In this theory, Honneth starts from a re-reading of Hegel and Mead and focuses on a non-utilitarian *moral sociological explanation* of social conflicts according to which the motivations for initiating or committing to social struggles can be traced back to experiences in which one was not recognized that generate negative moral feelings. The objective and cognitive nature of those feelings resides in the fact that they express the breakdown of the system of reciprocal expectations of behavior at the subjective level. That system is in turn based on values anchored in the inter-subjective structures of mutual recognition upon which the formation and development of personal identity are based. Honneth's theory of recognition describes the inter-subjective, historical-moral construction of a subjectivity that can be sensitive to forms of moral damage and can react to that damage with negative moral feelings. These feelings could potentially be the motivational basis for social struggles. This moral sociological perspective based on the link between *conflict* and *normativity* is summarized by the subtitle of Honneth's renowned book, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Honneth, 1995b [1992]; Basaure et al., 2009).

The *historic philosophical reconstructive axis*, on the other hand, is geared towards the proposal of a framework of historical interpretation of a process of moral construction within which specific and concrete struggles can be inscribed as moments of a larger process of moral development and learning. In this way, such struggles lose their purely contingent nature, ceasing to represent separate episodes, and are understood in the context of a deployment and historic broadening of the moral structures of reciprocal recognition or a process of moral learning (Honneth, 1995b [1992]; Basaure et al., 2009).<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that both axes assume a moral perspective and, as I have indicated, are intimately related to one another. Given that social struggles, which are morally motivated, develop and broaden moral structures of reciprocal recognition, those struggles would be rooted in history, which implies increasingly greater levels of inclusion and moral demands.

Within the conceptual space constituted by the two axes mentioned herein, one can distinguish a *third axis* in the architecture of Honneth's theory: a *political-sociological axis*. This is an axis whose sphere of investigation is the thematization of the highly complex and multidimensional phenomenon of the *social struggle as such*, that is, of the concept of *struggle in a strict sense*. In the political-sociological axis, what is at stake is not the sociological moral explanation of the motivations for social struggles or their inscription in a historical philosophical context of moral learning. This axis is not centered on the motivational *causes* of the social struggle or its *consequences* for the deployment of moral learning. Instead, it focuses on the modes of construction of collectives in an antagonistic position and the opportunities that they have to access the public political

space, intervene in it and transform social categories, value orientations, and practices that regulate social recognition and individual rights. Conceived in this way, the political-sociological axis is inserted between the moral sociological explicative axis and the historic philosophical reconstructive one (Basaure, 2007, 2011a, 2011b). In short, this axis does not refer to the motivational why of social struggles or their historic meaning but the how of them.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that the political-sociological axis is not duly developed in Honneth's work. He does not offer a complete theory of social struggles as such (Basaure, 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Sieverding, 2008). At the same time, it would not be accurate to ignore that Honneth has provided certain elements that – though in an embryonic manner – can be reconstructed in such a way that they appear to sustain what I call a political-sociological axis. These political-sociological elements possess a very specific characteristic: in order to develop them, Honneth (1995a [1984], 1995b [1992], 2003) mainly bases his perspective on the political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Basaure, 2011b). This reference to Bourdieu is symptomatic of what I perceive to be a paradigmatic dualism within Honneth's theory of the struggles for recognition: While the main and most fully developed axes of his theory – the *moral sociological explicative* and the *historic philosophical reconstructive* – are elaborated assuming a decidedly moral perspective, by anchoring the less developed axis of that theory, the *political-sociological axis*, in Bourdieu's political sociology, Honneth assumes social theoretical suppositions that are not rooted in a perspective of moral sociology. My thesis is therefore dual. On the one hand, I note that the political-sociological axis is underdeveloped in Honneth's theory of the struggles for recognition.<sup>3</sup> On the other, I state that the embryonic developments of that axis respond to a Bourdieusian non-moral perspective different from the one that characterizes the nuclear axes of said theory.

This second part of my thesis – which ascribes a paradigmatic dualism to Honneth's theory of the struggles for recognition – can be identified relatively easily in the way in which Honneth refers to Bourdieu's work. In his argument in function of the moral sociological explicative axis, Honneth (1995b [1984]) rejects the nucleus of economic and utilitarian theory that he sees as characterizing Bourdieu's theory of symbolic struggles. Honneth asserts that moral normative logic is at the basis of contestatory action and argues against all exclusively utilitarian strategic explanations of such motivations (Honneth, 1984, 1995b [1992]), which – correctly or not – he sees reflected in Bourdieu's work (Basaure, 2011b). To put it another way, Honneth rejects Bourdieu's sociology as partial because (using my terms) the phenomenon of the moral does not play a significant role in its sociological explicative axis. In his arguments in function of what I call the political-sociological axis of his work, Honneth (1995a [1984], 1995b [1992], 2003) turns to Bourdieu's political sociology in a purely affirmative manner. To put it differently, while Honneth rejects Bourdieu's sociology in regard to the *moral explanation for the motivations for action*, when he tries to understand the *how* of the struggles, he completely takes up Bourdieu's political sociology. In the conceptual system of that theory – which Honneth sees as a generalization of an economic model – the moral dimension of the action does not truly find its place.

Bourdieu's political sociology can be removed from its original utilitarian strategic framework and relocated in a specific place within a moral sociological model, or so

Honneth hopes. The supposition is that this kind of grafting does not pose an obstacle to or contradict the general framework of an elementally moral sociological theory such as Honneth's or at least that is what he seems to think. I am not certain that such an operation can be realized without anything more, that is, without having to engage in work on compatibility. Anyway, my thesis is that an ambivalence or paradigmatic dualism develops between moral sociology and political sociology about which Honneth himself does not seem to be aware. In fact, the following dualist figure of the relationship between the object of study and the discipline is formed: while the object of knowledge regarding the motivations of social struggles and the historical-philosophic consequences of those struggles remain linked to the strict limits of a moral sociology, the object of knowledge regarding the modes of political articulation and the construction of antagonistic collectives will be confined to the strict limits of a political sociology and thus removed from the normative moral dimension of social action.

Having identified this paradigmatic dualism in Honneth's work, here I posit the fundamental question regarding the degree to which it is also possible to adopt a perspective of normative sociology that allows for the importance of the moral phenomenon within the political-sociological axis of a theory of social struggles. In other words, my main concern is ascertaining the degree to which it is possible to contribute to resolving the ambivalence present in Critical Theory on Honneth's social struggles for recognition. I believe that certain conceptual and empirical tools offered by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's political and moral sociology are particularly useful for exploring – albeit in a tentative manner – a possible answer to that question.

## From political sociology to moral and political sociology

I will now interpret the pragmatist sociology of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot with the help of the reconstruction of Honneth's theory in terms of the three axes mentioned above. This will not only allow me to generate a certain degree of commensurability between these two very different perspectives, but also will let me identify certain similarities and differences between them. The first thing that becomes evident when we take up this triple perspective is that Boltanski and Thévenot's moral and political sociology not only lacks but also rejects the alternative of proposing a normative horizon based on the development of reason in history. To use my term, it does not possess a *historic philosophical reconstructive axis*. In fact, far from the left-wing Hegelian paradigm, Boltanski and Thévenot do not posit the issue of the historic consequences of social conflicts in terms of development and moral learning. It is not possible for me to expand on this substantive and radical difference between Honneth's theory of recognition – strongly based on Hegel's philosophy and a historic-moral normative interpretation of the sociology of Durkheim and Parsons – and the pragmatist moral and political sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot in this article. From this I simply obtain the architectonic conceptual result that, from the point of view of my objectives, it is more appropriate to focus on the two remaining axes: the *moral sociological explicative* and the *political-sociological*.

Without going into greater detail here, the following must be stated about the moral sociological explicative axis: In spite of the great social ontological differences between

them, the moral sociology of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth share a cognitivist notion of moral sentiments with the pragmatist sociology of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. In order to affirm the said notion, Habermas turns to Durkheim and Strawson. For his part, Honneth turns to Dewey. Although Boltanski and Thévenot do not explicitly develop a notion of this type, there is no doubt that it can be reconstructed based on the concept of the feeling of indignation with which both authors operate. Feelings of injustice can be traced back to the elemental notion of disrespect regarding certain grammatical-moral rules that structure forms of social coordination. In a Durkheimian-Hegelian tradition, that grammar is constituted by the inter-subjectively recognized value structures that act as an implicit contract of social life (Habermas 1995 [1983]; Honneth 1984, 1995b [1992]). In the other, the grammar involves regimes of justification, which can be differentiated in terms of *cités*, and an ‘adequate’ reference to them by the actors (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]).<sup>4</sup> In both cases, the cognitivist nature of the moral sentiments makes them stand as ordinary forms of moral judgment of situations of injustice and as a potential source of a critical-contestatory action through which said sentiments could be expressed.

Here I must be a bit more specific about my understanding of the moral sociological explicative axis of the pragmatist sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot. Based on a pluralist – but not culturalist, in the sense of cultural relativism – thesis of values, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) offer a systematic description of the motivational origin of feelings of indignation regarding quotidian situations that are considered to be unjust. The actors would have an ordinary sense of justice, a capacity for understanding what is just and adequate such that the negative feeling of facing injustice has its origin in an irritation of that sense. The ordinary sense of justice supposes an ideal moral order that can be reconstructed in terms of regimes of justification. One of the unique aspects of Boltanski and Thévenot’s model is that the very plurality of orders of value is part of the explicative model of moral sentiments. In fact, a specific form of provocation of a feeling of injustice is a transgression of the limits that each regime of justification should respect according to the ordinary sense of justice.

In a manner that is quite different from the theories of the differentiation of spheres of justice of Michael Walzer (1984) and the regimes of justification of Boltanski and Thévenot, Honneth identifies three spheres of recognition: love, legal rights and social esteem. I will not take the time here to explore the similarities and differences between these theories of the spheres of justice. In order to plausibilize my argument, however, I will refer to the work of Paul Ricœur (2005 [2004]), who sees in the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) an opportunity to internally differentiate, in different cities, the sphere of social esteem identified by Honneth: the notion of achievement can refer to six different principles of equivalence, to the six cities identified by Boltanski and Thévenot. In the same way, the legitimate hierarchical regimes into which the subjects could organize themselves are identified along with critiques of regimes that are considered to be illegitimate. This is sufficient to allow me to return to my argument. Citing this parallelism as a specific reference allows me to strengthen the idea that, based on an equivalent concept of moral-normative referents, the two theories that I have cited can conceive of the fact that the motivations of the social critique find their origin in the ‘irritation’ of an ordinary sense of justice. So far my comparative argument has referred

to the sphere of social esteem, but the same could be said in regard to the sphere of law. However, there the concept of justice refers less to the issue of the *just or unjust distribution* and more to the issue of *reparation* when rights are taken away or there is exclusion. These substantive aspects are not the ones that must be at the center of the argument. Here I am only interested in showing that, from my perspective and in spite of the socio-ontological differences between the theories cited above, a single cognitivist perspective of moral sentiments is found in the moral sociological explicative nucleus of the critique and social conflicts.

Above, I have borne witness to the presence of the moral sociological explicative axis in Honneth's theory of the struggles for recognition (1995b [1992]) and the central importance of that axis for his theory. I then showed that that axis also is present in the model of the ordinary sense of justice developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]). Now I must turn to the political-sociological axis and consider it in relation to Honneth's theory and Boltanski's pragmatist sociology.<sup>5</sup> Through a reconstructive analytical exercise, I showed that that axis is not duly developed in Honneth's work and that its relatively rudimentary development does not respond to a perspective of moral sociology. This generates a certain paradigmatic dualism within his work. In Axel Honneth's theory of the struggles for recognition, everything occurs as if the moral perspective could not *go beyond* the sociological moral explicative sphere of social struggles, as if that perspective could not truly *penetrate* the sphere of the study of political struggles, their preconditions and their forms of organization (Basaure, 2007, 2011a, 2011b). My thesis about this point is that this is different in Luc Boltanski's moral and political sociology. Here the political-sociological axis also adopts a normative perspective in which the moral phenomenon finds a place. This generates a unitary perspective: while Boltanski does not avail himself of a historic philosophical reconstructive axis, the other two axes, the moral sociological explicative and the political-sociological assume – equally, though differently – a perspective that incorporates the aspect of the morality of experience, action and judgment. In this way, these axes do not respond to dualist paradigmatic associations but to a unitary perspective. Although in a different manner, both the moral sociological explicative axis and the political-sociological axis respond to a perspective of moral-normative sociology. In this sense, from now on we must discuss the sociology of Boltanski not only in terms of a political-sociological axis but also in terms of a *moral and political sociological axis*. My thesis regarding this point is that the possibility of such a perspective resides in the affirmation of a single postulate: social practices and judgments of them are governed in a non-determinist manner by an implicit normativity that the sociologist can reconstruct in terms of grammars of moral and political action.

## Immanent normativity of political and moral judgment

Above I referred briefly to the moral sociological explicative axis in the model of the economies of worth developed by Boltanski and Thévenot. In that axis, what is conceived of as an ordinary sense of justice possessed by the actors presupposes the representation of a plurality of forms of common good that, as principles of equivalency, are at the same time forms of worth. I do not intend to present a detailed discussion of

this model. For me it is important to state that the moral sociological explicative axis of the model is based on the affirmation of the existence of an ordinary sense of justice possessed by the actors and that that sense refers to a normativity that is immanent to social practices. This normativity could be reconstructed in terms of a moral grammar that is made empirically evident in the way that the actors argue in function of critiquing or justifying their actions where there are disputes over the justice of the given social order. As in Honneth's model, the moral grammar can only be made evident by the negativity of the social, by the conflict. Here it is important to insist on the following: The critical judgment of the actors, which could potentially lead to an antagonistic practice, can be explained with the help of a cognitivist concept of moral sentiments in the sense that they constitute the typical subjective response to the transgression of an ordinary sense of justice anchored to a plural collective representation of the common good. In this way, moral sentiments are forms of judgment and those judgments are based on a pre-theoretical collective knowledge that constitutes moral normativity that is immanent to social practices.

This is relevant in that it helps me to reach the crux of my argument. I postulate that if the moral and political-sociological axis of a theory of social struggles can be conceived in such a way that it appears to assume a normative-sociological perspective that is open to the moral phenomenon, this must be due to the fact that in the said axis – as occurs with the moral sociological explicative axis – the notion of a normativity that is immanent to social practices also is pertinent.

In order to support this postulate, it is fundamental to establish a basic analytical distinction between Ego's *linguistic practical exteriorization* of a negative moral sentiment based on an experience of suffering or injustice and the *evaluative judgment* with which Alter reacts to the said exteriorization and on the basis of which there is or is not a predisposition to political convergence with Ego. Studies of that political-sociological sphere often consider only the exteriorization of the social critique and refer to the practices and strategies of self-promotion and self-referred work oriented towards ensuring that a demand for justice will be publicly recognized. As this is an essential dimension, it refers only to one aspect of the phenomenon of political coordination, that is, Ego's political practices or proposals, to put it analytically. But with its subjective exteriorization through the practices of the denunciation, the moral sentiments enter the world of the other beings and must submit to the objective rules of that world and to the reigning judgment. As such, it runs the risk of disqualification, the risk of misfortune and the calamity of the finite, to use Hegel's terms (Basaure, 2006). In this way, the other aspect of political coordination that must be considered is Alter's judgment of Ego's expressive practices or proposals.

Based on this argument, I can identify the basic problem of Boltanski and Thévenot's moral and political sociology in terms of the public acceptability of the actions that express sentiments of injustice and, with that, the possibilities that practical-linguistic expressions of sentiments of injustice can be generalized and access the political public space, represented by collectives in an antagonistic position. In this way, according to my reconstruction, the said moral and political sociology will transport the main problem from the political-sociological sphere to the relationship between the practices of the critique and judgments of those practices. I can now state the following: If we introduce Alter's judgment of Ego's expressive critical practices into the conceptual analytical



field of political sociology, a sociological-normative perspective that is open to the phenomenon of the moral could be introduced within that field. This is due to the fact that said perspective can be anchored in the study of the immanent normative referents that govern the said judgment. Two argumentative steps prove fundamental in order for the political-sociological axis to be able to leave its purely political determination – as can be shown in Honneth's theory of struggles for recognition – and become a moral and political sociological axis.

First, as I have said, the issue of evaluative judgment of the practices of critique must be introduced. The moral and normative aspect can come into play where one not only considers moral sentiments and how they are exteriorized in a practical linguistic manner but also how that exteriorization is evaluated from the point of view of the public moral conscience and how that evaluation makes possible, or fails to make possible, a political convergence among actors that had not previously been united by a social bond of the domestic order. That is where the normative and moral dimension in the sphere of the forms of convergence, coordination and political articulation, can enter into play, that is, in the objectual sphere of the political-sociological axis.

Second, this cannot be complete unless one establishes the additional and fundamental thesis that said evaluative judgment is far from arbitrary and responds to a certain implicit normativity, a form of pre-theoretical or unconscious collective knowledge. In function of this thesis, evaluative judgment can refer to inter-subjectively stabilized representations which are, in this sense, objective. The notion of normativity also can be conceived of as moral in the strict sense that it refers to pragmatic requirements of acceptability that, through the evaluative judgment of others, are imposed on pretensions of validity, expressed by actors in their critiques and denunciations in the form of objective evidence. As a result, here morality does not refer to more or less formal criteria that are exterior to social practices on the basis of which the universal justifiability of pretensions of discursive validity are evaluated. It is instead a matter of the set of pre-theoretical normative principles which, in the manner of an ordinary sense of acceptability, govern the evaluative judgment of actors when they find themselves in the situation of having to respond to proposals of commitment expressed through the practical-linguistic exteriorization of negative feelings of injustice and suffering.

According to my analytical reconstruction, the meeting of these two steps constitutes the most elemental nucleus of the moral and political sociological axis of Boltanski's sociology. The study of the implicit normativity that governs practices and the evaluative judgment of ordinary actors regarding the acceptability of proposals of political commitment will be addressed in that axis. Again, as was the case in the moral sociological explicative axis of Boltanski's sociological approach, this is a study that involves the grammaticalization of the normative bases of ordinary judgment. In the moral and political sociological axis, however, it is no longer directly a matter of the grammar of the ordinary sense of justice but rather the ordinary sense of the acceptability of the expression of the critique of injustice.

## **Conditions of felicity of public denunciation**

Based on all of this, it is possible to understand why one does not simply find linguistic, practical, empirical expressions of the moral sentiments of Ego or only the evaluative

empirical judgments of Alter on that expression at the center of the moral and political sociological axis of Boltanski's sociology of critique. If these practices and judgments constitute the empirical level of the field of study of Boltanski, there also exists in it a non-empirical objective level that governs, in a structural but not determinist sense, the manifestation of those subjective empirical expressions. From my perspective, the main purpose of Boltanski's sociological research is *to reconstruct the immanent* or implicit *normativity*, the *ordinary sense*, that governs the evaluative judgment of those expressive practices and, in that way, the *conditions of pragmatic felicity* of the said practices, to use terms from Austin's pragmatic linguistics (1962). This clearly implies the opposite possibility, that is, that such practices do not satisfy the pragmatic conditions of acceptability immanent to evaluative judgment of an ordinary subject and, as a product of that, are considered illegitimate, illusory, unbalanced, etc.<sup>6</sup>

It therefore becomes clear that, taking as our goal investigative access to the objective rules immanent to judgments and social practices, it should be possible to conceive of an empirical body, on the basis of which one could reconstruct the said implicit grammatical rules, whose non-empirical existence is postulated. The phenomenological empirical body in question will be constituted by the evaluative judgments of the ordinary actors, of Alter, when they find themselves in the specific situation of having to judge the practices of other ordinary actors, of Ego. As occurs in the study of the ordinary sense of justice (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]), this is a process of finding access to the unconscious or pre-theoretical and the non-empirical or pre-scientific through the study of an empirical body composed of intentional practices. In this context, the concept of the normative grammar of social practices finds its place. As in the case of linguistics, the concept of grammar refers to an effort of parametric systematization performed by the sociologist, and its object is pre-theoretical social knowledge that is possessed by ordinary actors. A grammar is an immanent, empirically informed reconstruction that consists of an objective and systematic presentation of the structuring principles of forms of distinction, differentiation, judgment that actors put into play in daily life. It is not an invention or external construction of principles developed by the sociologist or social philosopher, but rather a complex immanent reconstruction that the sociologist undertakes based on the actors' practices.

More than a purely conceptual discussion of the ontological status of the above-mentioned normativity, the relationship between rule and action, or the epistemological issues involved with this type of immanent reconstructive perspective, I believe it is more productive and interesting to present the specific empirical investigative proposal made by Boltanski in order to address this work of the reconstruction of the normativity immanent to social practices. In order to validate what has been said thus far, I will turn my attention to a systematic analysis of one of the key empirical studies of what I call the moral and political sociological axis of Boltanski's work: the study of public denunciation (Boltanski, 1984).

The main focus of 'La Dénonciation' is the way in which a denunciation of injustice can be formulated such that it may be judged by other impartial ordinary actors as something that is admissible, though not necessarily well-founded, legitimate or true, rather than being rejected as 'noise', meeting with indifference or being disqualified as irrelevant. Boltanski based his study on a very large and heterogeneous sample of

letters of denunciation that were submitted for publication in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. He treated the letters as empirical material that revealed innumerable ways of exteriorizing of a sense of injustice. Applying my reconstructive system, I associate those forms of exteriorization with Ego's critical expressions. Alter, for its part, was represented by a group of volunteers who were placed in the experimental situation of having to evaluate those letters on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is assigned if the author is found to be completely abnormal and 1 indicates that he or she was found to be completely normal. Not all of the letters that were made available to Alter had been published precisely because the journalists responsible for such matters had found them to be unfit for publication. A similar evaluation should now take place for common, ordinary subjects. Those called upon to evaluate the normality or abnormality of the messages of denunciation were not, nor should they have been, experts of any kind (psychologists, psychiatrists, political scientists, etc.) but ordinary actors.

In this way, Boltanski had, on the one hand, many examples of practices of denunciation made by Ego whose only common characteristic was having been written as letters to the newspaper. On the other hand, there was a variety of evaluative judgments made by Alter, quantified on a scale of normality. Following my reconstructive logic, the next step should have consisted of systematically linking the critical practices to evaluative judgments of those practices. This is due to the fact that, based on that link, it should be possible for Boltanski to obtain the grammatical rules that govern Alter's judgment. The object of the study of denunciation was specifically the ordinary sense of the normality of denunciation. In fact, the rules that guided empirical judgments rendered by actors on the normality or abnormality of the practices of critique and, with that, the imperatives that typically condition the performative success of said practices should have derived from that grammatical analysis. These imperatives, as I am interested in emphasizing, also refer to the epicentral conditions of political coordination in the sense that they govern the conditions imposed by the actors in order to positively respond to the proposals of commitment that denunciations of injustices express. In order to go beyond the general, one can speak of the conditions that a denunciation must meet in order to be objectified as a cause and embodied in the antagonistic discursivity of a group.

The purpose of the systematic linking of practices and judgments is to identify the characteristics of the letters that were considered abnormal or normal. According to my reconstruction, this is based on the cognitivist and realist theory that the ordinary judgment of normality responds in a stable manner to objects with certain qualities. Ordinary judgment responds to grammatical stability; that is, far from being arbitrary or purely subjective, it expresses a common unconscious knowledge that is possessed by all of the actors that is both cognitive and normative. The capacity for critique and the capacity for judgment of the practices of the critique are goods that the sociology of critique should conceive of as democratically distributed among all actors.

In order to identify the characteristics of texts that were considered normal or abnormal, Boltanski uses statistical analysis based on two elemental axes. The first establishes a *continuum* that runs from the specific or individual to the general or collective, an issue with which Boltanski again takes up the non-essentialist ontology on social groups (Boltanski, 1987 [1982]). According to this approach, there is no room for separating the individual from the collective, the private from the public or the specific from the general

in watertight terms. The second axis establishes a continuum in function of the levels of proximity between the different *actants*<sup>7</sup> implied in the denunciation. Here the object of the injustice that is denounced is oneself, a member of the family, a loved one or a person or group regarding which there was no relationship.

On the basis of these two axes, Boltanski was able to reconstruct the grammar of the judgment of the denunciation as normal or abnormal as follows. In regard to the first axis, a grammatically correct complaint, a good public complaint, implies engaging in the work of generalization (*monter en généralité*). The denunciation should be presented in such a way that it does not only refer to the individual and respond to his or her interests, but is relevant and applies to an entire collective. This issue will be expressed later on as one of the *civic city's* requirement for legitimacy. Turning now to the second axis, in a grammatically correct denunciation, the participants (victim, guilty party, complainant, judge) are as distant from one another as possible. This stands in contrast to the closeness of family bonds, community ties, etc. Similarly, grammatically incorrect denunciations – those that are rejected from the point of view of the ordinary judgment of normality – are those that are not sufficiently generalized and in which the actants present ‘undue’ closeness.

Both political-normative imperatives – *generalization* and *distancing* – are related. In his study, Boltanski determines the typical difficulty of generalizing denunciations that do not meet the imperative of distancing. He empirically observes the fruitless nature of the effort to validate complaints in which the actants are too close to one another either as a family or within the community (Boltanski, 1984). From this observation, Boltanski also obtains the elements that he needs to state that all actors possess the same ordinary sense of normality. Those actors judged to be abnormal would not possess an atrophied judgment of normality. This has led me to turn to the elemental figures of Ego and Alter. It is not a matter of a qualitative difference regarding the capacity of judgment of Ego and Alter, which would manifest in the fact that Ego does not make a ‘good’ denunciation, to put it in a way that accents the normative nature of the matter at hand. A grammatical error is an error regarding normativity that is imposed on practices and that is expressed in the ordinary judgment of third parties. That error therefore does not depend on Ego’s capacity for judgment or necessarily on the content, the true object of his denunciation, but on the formal and external circumstances that are normatively punishable: the excess in proximity among the actants or the practical failure of the generalization of a denunciation. At the same time, this failure can be categorically conditioned by the above-mentioned excess in proximity or circumstantially conditioned by difficulties of presenting a situation of injustice to others not as a specific or singular matter related to one or a few but as an example of a general problem that affects everyone.

The study of denunciation thus joins that of social causes and groups in the sense that they are conceived in terms of levels of objectification that, finding their generative epicenter in denunciations of injustice that are in principle individual, can reach the state of highly permanent and stable social objects. The problem of the judgment of normality is located in that continuum and the political-communicative epicenter in which a critical practice submits to the objective imperatives imposed by other actors in order to be convinced of their relevance, validity, legitimacy, etc.

## Legitimacy, facticity and admissibility of the critique

The specificity of this study by Boltanski resides in the practical-normative imperatives that weigh on the practices of the critique and, to a certain extent, regulate access to the public world of the demands that they make. Simply put, the specificity of this study lies in the accentuation of the issue of legitimacy in public action, which is a matter that allows for the incorporation of a moral normative perspective within the political-sociological axis of a theory of social struggles.

The perspective that I see Boltanski adopting based on his study of public denunciation could be found again in his later works. These texts reveal the basic issue of normative grammars that, in the epicenter of politics, sustain public evaluative judgment of the *legitimacy, facticity or even admissibility* of the expression of a critique and, with that, the possibility that that critique is in a position to access the public world, of being elevated to levels of generalization which also are, as I have said, levels of institutionalization and condensation of social objects. I propose to understand these three forms of judgment – legitimacy, facticity and admissibility – as three separate aspects of the justification of the critique. Each of them can be reconstructed in a more or less direct manner in function of Boltanski's seminal study on public denunciation.

An initial issue that should be noted and that involves the idea of justifiability on the basis of the moral *legitimacy* or validity of the denunciation is that the study of public denunciation is at the basis of the architecture of the *model of cities* developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]). With that study, Boltanski effectively contributed a first impetus for conceiving the elemental idea that the worth that people in the civic city (*cit  civique*) can access is directly related to the capacity that they demonstrate for de-singularizing or de-privatizing their relationships and, with that, for embodying and representing the general interest. From this point, the critique adopts the form of the denunciation of a *scandal*, which consists of showing the 'true nature', the domestic nature, of relationships among people who, presenting themselves as public and as procurers of the common good, actually serve interests that are private, specific, personal, etc. To put it another way, that denunciation of an injustice involves an effort to uncover the domestic (or personal) interest that lies behind the appearance of a public interest, the adhesion to the general interest and respect for the law (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]). Boltanski will use this issue to develop an entire research program dedicated to critique in the form of the *scandal* and the *affair* (Boltanski and Claverie, 2007).

Now, from the point of view of my reconstruction, what is important is not only the fact that the critique of injustice is expressed in the form of the denunciation or indignation about the scandal, but mainly the fact that the critique itself, as such, is required to provide a justification in function of the moral principles of the civic city, that is, in function of an evaluative justice based on a requirement of general interest and the common good. This second field refers to the conditions of moral validity of a demand for justice. The moral normative grammar that sustains Alter's evaluative judgment of the *justifiability* of a denunciation refers precisely to the work of generalization – or, if one wishes, of de-singularization – and the construction of a reference to the general interest that it should be in a position to provide and transmit lest it be judged as illegitimate (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]). This reference to the general interest would

be at the root of the possibility of the generation of political coordination and convergence. In this sense, 'La Dénonciation' (Boltanski, 1984) represents the intermediate step between the study of the historic construction of the category and the group of *cadres* (Boltanski, 1987 [1982])<sup>8</sup> and the model of economies of worth (Boltanski, 2006 [1991]). This is due to the fact that both the issue of the construction of collectives and the reference to the justification of the critique in function of principles of equivalency that are unique to a political metaphysics of justice are present in an indissociable manner.

This perspective, which is elaborated in the study on denunciation, introduces the matter of justifiability or moral validity within the problematic of the construction of collectives, which I associate with the moral and political sociological axis of Boltanski's work. Far from being a matter of formal criteria oriented towards the moral judgment of social practices, here the ordinary sense of the moral legitimacy of the practices represents an aspect that can constitute the possibility of coordination or, to put it differently, the objectification of causes and groups in an antagonistic position. My thesis is that the model expressed in *On Justification* can be read not only in terms of the moral sociological explicative axis, as I have done above, but also in terms of the moral and political sociological axis, as I do here.

From this, one can derive a second issue, which is linked to the demands of *facticity* or, to put it another way, the demands of objectivity imposed on the critique. The argument that is at the basis of the model of the economies of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]) presupposes a strong anchoring to reality and objects. Boltanski and Thévenot place this realist perspective in opposition to the discursive theories born of the linguistic turn, looking to establish one of the most outstanding differences between their perspective and that of Habermas. According to this model, the pretensions of validity of regimes of worth expressed linguistically should be tested so as to confirm or deny said pretension. These tests not only imply the reference to *principles of equivalency* unique to the sphere of justice, but also a *universe of objects* from those spheres that allow pretensions of validity raised by the actors to be contrasted with the real world.

The notion of *tests of reality* (*épreuves de réalité*) is not only relevant for the model of distributive justice in the sense of providing an instance for verifying regimes of worth in a meritocratic hierarchical order. It also is a central aspect of the modeling of those conflicts of justice that – in order to differentiate it from the distributive or meritocratic justice that belongs to the model of economies of worth – could be called criminal or reparative justice, in which actors utilize objective, solid evidence to support and justify their denunciations (Boltanski, 1990). The judgment that is at the basis of a rational acceptance of a proposal for commitment made in a language of justice also involves an examination of material evidence that can objectify a common judgment of the occurrences in the world. The pragmatic nature of this problematic is clear where Boltanski, in his study of *Distant suffering* (Boltanski 1999 [1993]), reveals the difficult task of objectifying a link between the suffering of the victim and the acts or omissions of a responsible party, that could serve as evidence to validate the reality of the harm. As a result, a condition of the pragmatic success of a cause will typically depend on the *level of objectification* of the occurrence reported and the causal link of responsibility that it can reach. That level will depend on the convergence of judgments of those occurrences, which in

turn will depend on their being able to present themselves as equivalents and material proof of a discourse and, as such, as exterior to the mere emotions of the people who make the complaint. The regime of justice (Boltanski, 1990) rests on a convention of objectivity (Boltanski, 1999 [1993]). To put it another way, the success of the critique of injustice will typically depend on the degree to which it manages to remove itself from the emotive interiority of the people involved and, through the work of constructing equivalencies, standardize, de-subjectify and stabilize common judgments.

Finally, in the third place, it is important to recognize a supplementary conceptual empirical yield of Boltanski's study on public denunciation regarding the most elemental *admissibility* of the critique to which I refer above in terms of ordinary judgment of the normality of the denunciation. Though directly related to the ordinary sense of justice, that yield can be differentiated with relative clarity from what I have said thus far. It is the most fundamental issue – in the sense of being chronologically prior to or referring to a more elemental level – of the description of a complaint as *normal*.

As I demonstrated above, the study of the ordinary denunciation offers a different criterion of acceptability of the critique when it is presented in terms of proposal for compromise, namely: not that it be legitimate, just or factually verifiable but that it simply be admissible, worthy of attention, of being listened to and followed. To put it categorically: the fact that a test could even be required and thus considered by those who receive a proposal of commitment based on the testimony of an injustice, ultimately depends, according to Boltanski, on the recipient(s) being convinced that the person who makes that proposal is not only demanding something just and telling the truth but that he or she is of sound mind and is worthy of being heard, not a paranoid being. It depends on the recipient believing that the denunciation is not just noise, to use Rancière's terms (Basaure, 2002), but rather the product of a reasoned discourse. In *On Justification*, the critique is assumed to be admitted critique because it gives rise to the conflict and provokes justification. In 'La Dénonciation', it is the very status of admissibility of the critique that is at play.

Analytically speaking, this places us in the most basic instance of the epicenter of politics. Based on what I have said, it is possible to establish a differentiation between evidence of reality and evidence of normality. Boltanski's thesis is that the former presupposes prior, more fundamental evidence regarding the normality of the person who makes a proposal for commitment through a testimony of an unjust situation.

## Moral suffering and political suffering

I would like to conclude with a brief reference to an aspect of my research program that is derived from the continuation of the study of the systematic links between what I call the moral sociological explicative axis and the moral and political sociological axis of a theory of social struggles, axes that I derive from a reconstruction of the theory of the struggles for recognition of Honneth and the pragmatist sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot.

If the sociology of critique clearly elevates the level of reflectivity of the practice of critique, there is no reason to believe that it does not do the same for the counter-critique. This relatively trivial matter shows that the epicentral location of politics is highly

uncertain in the sense that what is at stake is precisely the fact that a critical denunciation as a proposal for commitment may or may not acquire support, become generalized and access greater levels of publicity. In the context of a continuum – between an extreme in which the practices and judgments are defined as belonging to the order of the private and the singular and particular and an extreme in which they are expressions of public and general interest – a specific denunciation could potentially rise to the scale of generality by satisfying tests of normality or reality and moral legitimacy until it is established as a general cause, a *public issue* (Mills, 1959) and able to form a stabilized and recognized group. On the other hand, it may remain a *personal trouble* (Mills, 1959), be reduced and disappear in the fluid darkness of the private, as a story that does not manage to create discursive monuments or a cause for archive (Foucault, 2002 [1969]). Using innovative methods and approaches, Boltanski and Thévenot thus open the perspective of analysis such that the field of sociological visibility is not only entered by social objects with a high level of objectification but also by stories of suffering. While the latter are often condemned to invisibility, the door to occurrence and the possibility of being the initial rumor or sound that could develop into a storm is always open (Foucault, 2007 [2004]). The profoundly political nature of the sociology of the critique is expressed precisely in this understanding of the object of analysis, which is irreducibly indeterminist and anti-substantialist but not arbitrary.

Understood in this way, this indeterminism of the political is always associated with the possibility of an *extra* sentiment unique to the political field. This sentiment is positive if the denunciation is publicly recognized and negative if it is rejected. In a sense that is similar to Lemert's thesis (1951), Boltanski assumes that that which a critique does in a time *A* can manifest clearly paranoid characteristics in a time *B* without those characteristics having been present during time *A*. That is the performative failure of the critique and the normative weight that that failure brings with it, which will increase the possibilities of *actually* developing a paranoid attitude. It could be said that in this case it is a paranoia caused by the political failure, by the 'cruelty' that the implicit normativity of the public world can exercise over the subjects.

Based on this, I have developed (Basaure, 2007) the thesis that there exists a moral and political suffering that can be differentiated from moral suffering treated in the context of the moral sociological explicative axis as a motivational source of the critique. One could speak of the difference between an original suffering, which has a fundamentally moral nature – in the sense that it brings with it a moral grammar, the most exemplary case of which is moral indignation in the face of injustice (Honneth, 1995b [1992]; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]) – and a moral and political suffering produced as a result of the performative failure of the political act of making a proposal for commitment based on testimony of the moral suffering, that is, the original suffering. It is important to note that, based on my research, moral or original suffering has a different *locus* than political and moral suffering. It is original in the sense that the other is posterior; the latter is produced where public recognition of a demand for justice, that is, of moral suffering, is not found.

The most important aspect of these distinctions resides in the possibilities that they are open for a deepening of the pragmatist study of the phenomenon of social struggles. That deepening is linked to the conceptual and empirical analysis of the effects that the



actors' political experiences, which are secondary experiences according to my analysis, have on primary, moral experiences. Moral and political suffering is added to originary moral suffering, giving way to impotence (Basaure, 2007). But the reverse is also true: the performative success of the critique in the moral and political space has the effect of lightening and transforming originary suffering. This is the case because the mere fact that the practical-linguistic expression of suffering in the face of injustice is recognized by others as a legitimate, real and admissible expression is possibly already the cause of a form of *prior* recognition – of *political recognition*, as I call it to differentiate it from the concept of recognition used by Honneth (Basaure, 2011b). In other words, it is not the objectified result of a social struggle, but instead represents a prior moment, a sort of anticipated happiness that can be experienced in political life.

The importance of distinguishing between a moral sociological explicative axis and a moral and political sociological axis is not, as one can see, purely analytical. It mainly resides in the fact that the former cannot be understood as completely independent from the latter. From the perspective of a deepening of a pragmatist perspective for the analysis of the epicenter of politics, negative moral experiences seem to be transformed, made lighter or more serious, by subjects' political experiences.

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### Notes

1. Within the Honnethian theory of the struggle for recognition, I identify two different understandings of the historic philosophical thesis of a process of moral learning. The first refers to processes of development and broadening of the moral structures of reciprocal recognition that can be associated with the spheres of recognition of law and solidarity that take place through social struggles for recognition. The second refers to a more profound process that takes place in modernity according to which the three spheres of recognition (love, law and solidarity) come to be differentiated. Here it is important to note that what I identify as the historic philosophical reconstructive axis of the Honnethian theory of the struggles for recognition mainly refers to the first of these concepts of moral learning (Basaure, 2012).
2. In fact, the concept of struggle can be described differently depending on how one positions oneself from the perspective of the moral sociological explicative axis or the political-sociological axis. In the case of the former, the concept of struggle can be broadly associated with private or purely singular reactions or everyday subjective responses to negative moral experiences. However, according to the political-sociological axis, only reactions that are oriented towards the construction of politically active collectives are relevant. My thesis here is that there is no necessary continuity between these axes; on the contrary, that continuity is purely contingent. Accordingly, the fundamental issue for critical social theory and research is how to generate continuity between the two axes, that is, how to politicize reactions to experiences of social suffering that, in principle, are purely singular and private in nature (Basaure, 2011b, 2012).

3. This assessment must not be confused with the one put forth by Deranty and Renault (2007), who argue that Honneth did not know how to exploit the political potential of his critical theory. They find that Honneth does not see the radical political consequences of his own thinking and, in an effort to obtain the said consequences, they realize a series of reconstructive and conceptual proposals which, it is important to note, are of questionable analytical validity and limited clarity and interpretive utility. Whatever the relevance of these authors' arguments, they unquestionably fall under what I conceive of here as the moral sociological explicative axis. In no case do they refer to issues of political sociology in the sense that I give to this disciplinary aspect here.
4. Under the suggestive title 'Fluidifications of the Social' (*Verflüssigungen des Sozialen*), Honneth (2008) has recently tried to describe the social ontological difference between his perspective and that of Boltanski and Thévenot.
5. Though Boltanski and Thévenot developed their pragmatist sociology in parallel with each other, after writing *On Justification* they took different paths with respect to their empirical, conceptual and thematic strategy. From now on I mostly concentrate on the special perspective of Boltanski.
6. This is one of the argumentative pillars that can be found in the sociology of Bruno Latour who, for example, in the case of legal enunciates, cogently speaks of their 'conditions of felicity or infelicity (*conditions de félicité ou de infélicité*)' (Latour, 2010 [2002]). The study of the *conditions of felicity* also can be linked to the notion of the 'convenient action' (*action qui convient*) developed by Laurent Thévenot (2001, 2006) for the study of the convenience or inconvenience of actions in social situations, which can be described in terms of rules or implicit conventions (see Breviglieri et al., 2004).
7. Boltanski adopts the concept of 'actant' from the actor-network theory (ANT) developed by Bruno Latour, who is influenced by Garfinkel. This technical concept comes from the study of literature – from Greimas, specifically. Latour uses it to break away from the influence of what he calls 'figurative sociology' (Latour, 2005).
8. The category of *cadre* does not have a precise equivalent in non-French traditions of social classification. I use the original term in view of its specifically French nature.

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