



**Citation:** Simon Susen (2021) *Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny*. *Società-MutamentoPolitica* 12(23): 25-62. doi: 10.36253/smp-12996

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

## Mysteries, Conspiracies, and Inquiries: Reflections on the Power of Superstition, Suspicion, and Scrutiny

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**Abstract.** The main purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of Luc Boltanski's account of the multifaceted relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries in modern societies.<sup>1</sup> It is striking that, although this important aspect of Boltanski's oeuvre has been commented on by several scholars<sup>2</sup>, his principal contributions to this area of investigation have been largely overlooked and received hardly any serious attention by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. This paper is an attempt to fill this noticeable gap in the literature. Thus, rather than covering the entire breadth and depth of Boltanski's writings, the paper will focus on the valuable insights his work offers into the relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries.<sup>3</sup> To this end, the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part comprises an overview of Boltanski's central theoretical contributions to our understanding of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries. The second part offers some critical reflections on important issues arising from Boltanski's examination of the relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries – especially with regard to its limitations and shortcomings.

**Keywords.** Conspiracies, Inquiries, Karl Popper, Luc Boltanski, Mysteries, Power, Reality, World.

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### I. SETTING THE SCENE

In the modern world, the 'thematics of mystery, conspiracy, and inquiry'<sup>4</sup> can hardly be ignored. At least since the late nineteenth and early

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on Boltanski (2014 [2012]); cf. Boltanski (2012). See also, for example: Boltanski and Claverie (2007); Boltanski, Claverie, Offenstadt, and Van Damme (2007). In addition, see, for instance: Boltanski (1973a); Boltanski (1975); Boltanski (1987 [1982]); Boltanski (2002a); Boltanski (2002b); Boltanski (2008); Boltanski (2011 [2009]); Boltanski and Browne (2014); Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 [1999]); Boltanski, Darré, and Schiltz (1984); Boltanski and Esquerre (2014); Boltanski, Honneth, and Celikates (2014 [2009]); Boltanski and Maldidier (1970); Boltanski and Maldidier (1977); Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2014 [2010]); Boltanski and Thévenot (1983); Boltanski and Thévenot (1999); Boltanski and Thévenot (2000); Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]); Bourdieu and Boltanski (2008 [1976]).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: Bessière (2012); Corcuff (2014); Latour (2012); Meyer (2012); Ossandón (2016); Russell (2016); Shams (2016); Strand (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. xiv–xviii (Preface), pp. 1–39 (Chapter 1: 'REALITY versus Reality'), and pp. 224–267 (Chapter 6: 'Regulating Sociological Inquiry').

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

twentieth centuries, these subjects have occupied a central place in ‘the representation of reality’<sup>5</sup> and, thus, in ‘the political metaphysics’<sup>6</sup> of modern societies. More specifically, they have profoundly shaped the ways in which reality has been described, analysed, interpreted, explained, and assessed – not only by *laypersons* navigating social life and *researchers* studying particular aspects of human existence, but also by *fiction authors*, notably those producing crime novels and spy novels, two of the most popular literary genres of the modern age. One of the most important differences between, on the one hand, *academic researchers* and, on the other hand, *laypersons and fiction writers* concerns the quest for different kinds of validity. Indeed, it is the pursuit of ‘scientific’ validity through which the former seek to distinguish themselves from the latter, including from the many other (pseudo- or non-scientific) modes of inquiry that, over the past centuries, have emerged in the societies they examine. In this context, one may differentiate between three principal epistemic forms:

- a. *ordinary* epistemic forms, which are produced, reproduced, and transformed by everyday actors, seeking to cope with the various demands thrown at them in the course of their everyday lives;
- b. *fictional* epistemic forms, which are constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed by writers, aiming to tell stories based – in most cases – on a combination of imaginary worlds and real worlds, with the former being directly or indirectly inspired by the latter; and
- c. *scientific* epistemic forms, which are generated and employed by researchers and experts, allowing for an analytic, logical, methodical, rational, explanatory, evidence-based, and/or evaluative immersion in, engagement with, and understanding of the world and/or the universe or multiverse.

Interestingly, in each of them, different *types of inquiry* may play a more or less significant role in the symbolically mediated and discursively filtered representation of reality. There are not only (a) ordinary and common-sense-based types of inquiry, (b) fictional and literary types of inquiry, and (c) scientific and research-based types of inquiry, but also numerous other variants of inquiry – such as political, cultural, economic, judicial, criminal, technological, military, demographic, and environmental ones. In terms of both form and substance, these types of inquiry may overlap, implying that their respective classification is not always unambiguous. A key feature that, to a greater or lesser degree, all types of inquiry share is the ambition to uncover the consti-

tution of an underlying reality, which tends to be concealed beneath the veil of everyday modes of perception, appreciation, interpretation, and action.

Undoubtedly, both the natural sciences and the social sciences are, to a considerable extent, motivated by the goal to penetrate into core, if not noumenal, levels of reality, thereby challenging the assumptions derived from people’s everyday engagement with the realm of appearances. Three fields of investigation are crucial to Boltanski’s project<sup>7</sup>: (a) *psychiatry*, notably its nosological construction of paranoia, reflected in the explosion of countless inquiries, in many cases protracted to the point of delirium; (b) *political science*, notably its attempt to shift issues around ‘paranoia’ from the psychic to the social level, thereby moving from the scientifically inspired terrain of ‘mystery’ to the ideologically driven terrain of ‘conspiracy’, including ‘conspiracy theories’<sup>8</sup>; (c) *sociology*, notably its determination to shed light on subjacent causal mechanisms, structures, and forces, whose existence largely escapes common-sense modes of existing in, engaging with, and attributing meaning to the world.

At the heart of Boltanski’s approach lies the thesis that the task of ‘the representation of reality’<sup>9</sup> is inextricably linked to the challenge of grasping the ‘changes that affected the way reality itself was instituted during the period in question’<sup>10</sup>. Particularly important in this respect is the relationship between reality and the nation-state, including both their material and their symbolic (re-)construction. Mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries have been – and will continue to be – essential ingredients of this deep intertwinement between reality and the state.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing on both the natural sciences and the social sciences, including educational sciences and population studies (especially their use of large data sets and statistics), key variants of the nation-state project began to impose themselves on the course of modern history, ‘eliminating the gap between lived reality and instituted reality, between subjectivities and the objective arrangements that served as their framework’<sup>12</sup>, between *the world as it appears to, and is experienced by, ordinary actors* and *the world as it is empirically structured and factually organized by solidified, and partly formalized, modes of action and interaction*. Arguably, the removal of this chasm is inherent both in the idea and in the realization of the nation-state.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. xiv–xv.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. Chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiv and xv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16 (italics removed from the word ‘subjectivities’)

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 16 and 276n17. See Sassen (2008 [2006]), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiv and xv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

Put in Habermasian terms, the nation-state embodies a curious synthesis of lifeworld and system. Put in Foucauldian terms, the nation-state constitutes ‘an agency of self-awareness, control, and governance’<sup>14</sup>, capable of guaranteeing ‘the organization, stability, security, and consciousness of that [seemingly] natural order’<sup>15</sup>, within which a given population is placed and by which it is defined. Through this ‘utopian synthesis between state and nation’<sup>16</sup>, reality was at once *lived* by everyday actors and *instituted* by sets of organizational structures, ‘treated as *already* in existence and as requiring a *supplementary* effort to bring it into being’<sup>17</sup>, as always-already-there and as always-still-to-be-constructed. Irrespective of whether or not one conceives of this constellation in terms of ‘biopolitics’<sup>18</sup>, culminating in the establishment of the welfare state<sup>19</sup>, it is hard to overlook the convergence and alliance ‘between state projects and scientific projects’<sup>20</sup> in large-scale attempts at controlling, classifying, and disciplining territorially bound populations.<sup>21</sup>

## MYSTERIES

*Mysteries* come into being as ‘specific objects’<sup>22</sup> that, in order to assert their presence, are ‘being *detached* from the background of a stabilized and predictable reality whose *fragility* is revealed by *crimes*’<sup>23</sup> and other outside-the-norm happenings. Thus, mysteries are a sort of barometer for gauging the material or symbolic boundaries of a particular normative order, including the parameters by which to make judgements about infringements that violate the (implicit or explicit) values, principles, and conventions on which it is based and by which it is sustained.<sup>24</sup> One of the main functions of

the nation-state is reflected in ‘the project of organizing and unifying reality’<sup>25</sup> or – put in sociological terms – ‘of *constructing* reality for a given population in a given territory’<sup>26</sup>. This undertaking, of course, was met with several obstacles – not least capitalism’s inherent tendency to transcend local, regional, national, and continental borders.

‘A *mystery* arises from an event, however unimportant it may seem, that stands out in some way against a *background*’<sup>27</sup> or ‘against the traces of a past event’<sup>28</sup>, which is not immediately accessible to those who seek to shed light on its enigmatic constitution. Such a background is composed of taken-for-granted assumptions, ordinary understandings, and human (that is, both individual and collective) experiences. The phenomenology of the lifeworld is defined by the spatiotemporal constellations brought about by a constantly evolving ensemble of sociohistorical backgrounds. A mystery is associated with attributes such as ‘singularity’, ‘irregularity’, ‘abnormality’, ‘deviance’, and ‘rupture’.<sup>29</sup> It stands for ‘an irruption of the *world* in the heart of *reality*’<sup>30</sup> – that is, for an uncanny event, or set of events, failing to fit the normative structure of a particular situational, interactional, or societal order.

We may draw a distinction between ‘ordinary’ and ‘enigmatic’ (or ‘mysterious’) events. The former confirm and reinforce the apparent normality and regularity of a particular set of social practices, structures, and arrangements. The latter escape – and potentially undermine, if not subvert – ‘the normal attributions of a specific entity’<sup>31</sup>. An event may be regarded as ‘enigmatic’ or ‘mysterious’ if – in exceptional circumstances – ‘the nature of the entity to which it can be attributed is unknown’<sup>32</sup>, implying that both the occurrence in question and the subject or object presumably associated with it remain unidentified. If the entity and/or reasons behind an event cannot be explained in a plausible fashion and if, in addition, the event itself falls outside the spectrum of ordinary happenings, then it can be characterized as ‘enigmatic’ or ‘mysterious’.

Strictly speaking, then, an *event* does not have a *meaning* unless it is possible ‘to *attribute* it to a given

<sup>14</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 16 (punctuation modified).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16 (punctuation modified).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17 (italics added).

<sup>18</sup> See Foucault (2004). See also, for instance: Dean (2013); Esposito (2008); Lemke (2011 [2007]); Lemke (2008); Lemke (2010); Pieper, Atzert, Karakayali, and Tsianos (2007); Rabinow and Rose (2006).

<sup>19</sup> See Swaan (1988). See also, for instance: Barry (1990); Cavanna (1998); Cochrane and Clarke (1993); DeMartino (2000); Dwyer (1998); Esping-Andersen (1990); Forder (1984); Hewitt (1992); Kumlin and Rothstein (2005); Leonard (1997); Marshall (1981); Mommsen (1981); Pinker (1979); Soederberg, Menz, and Cerny (2005); Thane (1982).

<sup>20</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> See Wagner (1992) and Wagner (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. xv.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv (italics added).

<sup>24</sup> On the concept of ‘*normative order*’, see, for instance: Forst (2013); Forst (2015), esp. pp. 117, 118, 119, 121n30, 125, and 126; Forst and Günther (2011a); Forst and Günther (2011b). See also, for example: Allen, Forst, and Haugaard (2014); Forst (2002 [1994]); Forst (2012

[2007]); Forst (2013 [2011]); Forst (2017); Forst, Hartmann, Jaeggi, and Saar (2009); Haugaard and Kettner (2020); Susen (2018a), esp. pp. 4, 11–12, 13–14, 26–27, 28, 31, and 33n57.

<sup>25</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. xv.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv (italics in original) (quotation modified).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 (italics in original).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 (italics in original). Cf. Boltanski (2011 [2009]), pp. xi and 57–61.

<sup>31</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

entity or, when that entity is already known, to determine that entity's *intentions*<sup>33</sup>. In order for an event, as a singular happening, to acquire 'full meaning'<sup>34</sup>, it has to be – rightly or wrongly – 'related to an entity credited with an identity, a certain stability across time, and an intentionality'<sup>35</sup>. Irrespective of the question of whether intentional processes can, or cannot, be attributed to both conscious and non-conscious beings and mechanisms<sup>36</sup>, an *event* obtains *meaning* insofar as its very occurrence can be brought into connection with a given *entity* and, more broadly, be explained in terms of specific 'reasons behind it'<sup>37</sup>.

### CONSPIRACIES

*Conspiracies* enter the stage of history as focal points 'for *suspensions* about the exercise of *power*'<sup>38</sup>. The two central questions posed by conspiracy theorists are as follows: (a) Where does power *really* lie? (b) Who *really* holds and exerts power?<sup>39</sup> In response to these fundamental questions, one may seek to locate power in different *spheres of society*: the state, the government, the economy, the banks, the media, and/or specific social groups. When aiming to associate the location, possession, and exercise of power with particular social groups, one may classify these according to different *sociological variables*: class, profession, ethnicity, 'race', culture, nationality, language, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, and/or (dis-)ability – to mention only a few.

On the basis of such a multidimensional and intersectional perspective, one may differentiate key *types of power*: social, economic, political, ideological, cultural, judicial, educational, religious, spiritual, emotional, rational, mental, intellectual, physical, sexual, charismatic, linguistic, rhetorical, epistemic, scientific, technological, military, and so on. Furthermore, one may identify key *dichotomies of power*: 'power to' vs. 'power over', 'soft power' vs. 'hard power', and 'power for' vs. 'power against'<sup>40</sup>.

The crucial point in conspiracy theories, however, is to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, a '*sur-*

*face reality*'<sup>41</sup>, which is 'apparent but probably illusory even though it has an official status'<sup>42</sup>, and, on the other and, a '*deep, hidden, threatening reality*'<sup>43</sup>, which, while remaining largely or completely unofficial, is 'much more real'<sup>44</sup> than its epiphenomenal counterpart, which is designed to conceal it. The tension, if not conflict, between these two realities is expressed in the fact that they tend to be at odds with each other, leading – in Boltanski's terms – to the 'REALITY vs. *reality*'<sup>45</sup> antinomy, which serves as the guiding thread of his analysis.

The *conspiracy form* implies the suspicion that an *event* may be linked to an individual or collective *entity* – that is, usually a group of people – responsible for a development taking place in *reality*, but *outside the boundaries of normality*. A conspiracy is, by definition, 'perceived as such – as distinguished from ordinary human relations – from the outside'<sup>46</sup>. Conspiracies are supposed to be laid bare through systematic operations of *unveiling*. In this sense, conspiracy theories hinge upon a distinction between 'an *apparent* but *fictitious reality*'<sup>47</sup> and 'a *hidden* but *real reality*'<sup>48</sup>. In light of this binary categorization, conspiracy theories follow the modern-day spirit of *dévoilement* – that is, the mission of uncovering, unmasking, unearthing, revealing, disclosing, and exposing mostly or entirely *concealed*, but nonetheless *substantial*, aspects of reality, which escape people's common-sense perceptions, conceptions, and interpretations of the world. Conspiracy theories are based on 'big claims' insofar as they purport to cast light on the *noumenal* realm, composed of *entities* capable of triggering certain *events* within the sphere of 'real reality' *without* being inferable by, let alone knowable to, ordinary actors, who remain caught in, and seemingly dependent upon, the appearances of the *phenomenal* realm, which manifests itself in the construction of a 'fictitious reality'.

Thus reality, social reality as initially perceived by a naïve observer (and reader), with its order, its hierarchies, and its principles of causality, reverses itself and unveils its *fictitious* nature, revealing another much more *real* reality that it had been concealing. This second reality is inhabited by things, acts, actors, levels, connections and especially powers whose existence, indeed, whose very possibility, had not been suspected by anyone.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 4 (italics in original).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> On this point, see, for instance, Dennett (1987). See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 275n3. Cf. Susen (2020a), pp. 10–13, 29–30, 150, and 182.

<sup>37</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. xv (italics added).

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>40</sup> See Susen (2018a), esp. pp. 5–7. See also Susen (2014b).

<sup>41</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. xv (italics added).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. xv (italics added).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. xv (italics in original). See *ibid.*, Chapter 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 13 (italics added).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 13 (italics added).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 13–14 (italics added) (punctuation modified).

Conspiracy theories – and, in parallel, inquiries based on suspicion – claim to be capable of identifying, examining, and explaining *once and for all* ‘the causal determinations that forge reality’<sup>50</sup>. Similar not only to detective fiction and spy fiction but also to sociologies of suspicion, in conspiracy theories hidden powers, and those who possess and exert these powers in an obscure and unaccountable fashion, are allegedly being exposed. Through this uncovering process, conspiracy theories seek to redefine ‘*the whatness of what is*’<sup>51</sup> – that is, to replace ‘the whatness of what *appears* to be the case’ with ‘the whatness of what *is* the case’, thereby ostensibly grasping ‘*the reality of reality*’<sup>52</sup>. Paradoxically, the pseudoscientific underpinnings of conspiracy theories are both antithetical and complementary to the modern quest for scientific discovery. *Weltanschauungen der Enthüllung enthüllen den Weltgeist der Enthüllung*.<sup>53</sup>

### INQUIRIES

Before elaborating on the various dimensions attached to their *sine qua non* role in the social sciences, let us – at this point – briefly consider at least some basic aspects of *inquiries*. In a general sense, ‘inquiries’ designate investigative processes concerned with asking questions and/or seeking information about someone or something. *In the social sciences, ‘inquiries’ may be defined as terminologically precise, epistemologically reflexive, conceptually sophisticated, methodologically rigorous, and empirically substantiated investigations aimed at describing, analysing, interpreting, explaining, and – if desired – making judgements about particular aspects of reality in a systematic fashion*. Insofar as they are inspired by ‘ontologically strong’ – notably positivist, functionalist, and/or determinist – conceptions of the world, scientific inquiries tend to be motivated by the ambition to uncover the underlying mechanisms, structures, and forces that are believed to shape, if not to govern, the constitution and development of reality, or particular aspects of reality, in a fundamental manner.

### ‘THE WORLD’ AND ‘REALITY’

Exploring the relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries in modern societies, Boltanski insists on the historical significance of ‘the foundational ties that link the apparatus of state power with this apparatus of knowledge’<sup>54</sup>. This issue poses ‘the question of social causality’<sup>55</sup> – notably with respect to the connection between *entities* and *events* in the construction of human reality. In this regard, Boltanski’s distinction between ‘*the world*’ and ‘*reality*’ is crucial.<sup>56</sup> The former designates ‘everything that happens’<sup>57</sup>: in a Wittgensteinian sense, it is everything that is the case; in a Boltanskian sense, it is everything that is the case as a product of previous occurrences that unfold ‘in a sporadic and ontologically uncontrollable fashion’<sup>58</sup>. The latter refers to ‘a network of causalities based on pre-established formats that make action predictable’<sup>59</sup> and, consequently, allow for the emergence of relatively stable and solidified modes of sociality.

To be clear, ‘the world’ and ‘reality’ – understood in this way – are intimately interrelated. The latter is founded on ‘a selection and an organization of certain possibilities offered by’<sup>60</sup> the former. At the same time, the former is shaped by both the material and the symbolic constructions generated by both the subjective and the normative components of the latter. Every time ‘the world’ and ‘reality’ are out of sync to a degree that becomes objectively, normatively, and subjectively unsustainable, actors experience a crisis situation: the representations, interpretations, and expectations held by inhabitants of the latter have to be re-adjusted to meet the practical requirements and constraints [*Sachzwänge*] imposed upon their lives by the ineluctable ontological preponderance of the former.

Crucially, however, ‘the world’ comprises not only ‘everything that happens’<sup>61</sup> but also ‘everything that might possibly happen’<sup>62</sup> and, hence, ‘an “everything” that cannot be fully known and mastered’<sup>63</sup>. In this sense, it reflects an immediately accessible horizon of the present *and* an emerging horizon of the future, a dis-

<sup>54</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. xvii.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, p. xvii. See also Boltanski (2011 [2009]), esp. pp. xi and 57–61. In addition, see, for instance: Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2014 [2010]), pp. 597 and 602–606; Susen (2014 [2012]), pp. 175 and 184–185.

<sup>57</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 3. See also *ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii. See also *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also *ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14 (italics in original).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15 (italics in original).

<sup>53</sup> This sentence may be roughly translated as follows: *Worldviews of disclosure disclose the world spirit of disclosure*. Or, alternatively: *Worldviews of revelation reveal the world spirit of revelation*.

cernible realm of actuality and a latent realm of potentiality, a sphere of availability and controllability [*Verfügbarkeit*] and a sphere unavailability and uncontrollability [*Unverfügbarkeit*].<sup>64</sup>

The main function of ‘reality’, by contrast, is to provide a socially constructed sphere of ‘pre-established formats [...] sustained by institutions’<sup>65</sup> of different kinds. Some of these institutional arrangements have ‘a legal or paralegal character’<sup>66</sup>, especially in Western societies. Most importantly, however, the formats upon which the social construction of ‘reality’ is contingent ‘constitute a semantics that expresses *the whatness of what is*’<sup>67</sup>. As such, they make available a treasure of collectively shared meanings, permitting actors to ‘establish *qualifications*’<sup>68</sup>, to ‘define *entities and trials*’<sup>69</sup>, as well as to carry out *proofs and tests* [*épreuves*]. The interplay between *entités, événements, qualifications, and épreuves* is the key dynamic that – provided it contains the potential for socio-ontological attunement, as the subjacent telos inherent in the ineluctable confluence of structural and agential forces in the construction of human forms of life – can give normatively codified constellations a certain degree of legitimacy from the point of view of those involved in the construction of ‘reality’. Given its structuring and meaning-donating function, ‘reality’ allows for the emergence of ‘a *network of causal relations* that holds together the *events* with which *experience* is confronted’<sup>70</sup>. It bestows actors with a sense of stability, solidity, and predictability, while they find themselves immersed in the world-laden experience of ontological instability, fragility, and unpredictability:

Reference to these relations makes it possible to *give meaning* to the *events* that are produced by identifying the *entities* to which these events must be *attributed*.<sup>71</sup>

The social construction of ‘reality’, in other words, is inconceivable without the everyday projection of *meaning* upon the alleged *relationship* between the occurring of *events* and the presence of *entities* in ‘the world’. The causal relations permeating the construction of ‘reality’ are ‘tacitly recognized in general as unproblematic’<sup>72</sup>. Their legitimacy tends to be taken for granted and to remain unchallenged. In crisis situations, however, ‘the

trust placed in the validity of the established formats’<sup>73</sup> can be called into question by virtue of tests [*épreuves*]. In this sense, the relationship between ‘the world’ and ‘reality’ is constantly being redefined by the interplay between, on the one hand, the *objectivity* of everything that happens and, on the other hand, the *normativity* and *subjectivity* of everything that is being socially codified and individually experienced.

#### ‘THE REAL’ VS. ‘REALITY’

Boltanski distinguishes between ‘the *real*’ and ‘*reality*’:<sup>74</sup>

He employs the concept of ‘the *real*’ to emphasize the ‘*circumstantial and singular* character’<sup>75</sup> of ‘real entities and states of affairs’<sup>76</sup>. By definition, these remain ‘*attached* to the particular events through which they manifest themselves and to the situations that these events bring about’<sup>77</sup>. On this view, real things are tied to events, while different situations generate ‘different, and often incompatible or contradictory, real things’<sup>78</sup>. We are confronted, then, with the intertwining of, on the one hand, *real entities and things* (that is, subjects and objects) and, on the other hand, *events and situations*.

Boltanski uses the concept of ‘*reality*’ to stress the existence of ‘*regularities* that are *maintained* no matter what situation is envisaged and that *frame* each event’<sup>79</sup> irrespective of its (alleged or confirmed) singularity. Owing to their defining power, regularities permit both observers and participants ‘to trace the boundary between the possible and the impossible’<sup>80</sup>. In any reality, the conditions of possibility delineate the conditions of impossibility, allowing for the possibility of some, and the impossibility of other, conditions of (im-)possibility. In terms of their functional value, regularities provide ‘a *general framework* for action’<sup>81</sup> that, due to its structural constitution, makes possible a certain degree of stability, solidity, and predictability, thereby contributing to the emergence of ‘a certain *order*’<sup>82</sup>. The whole point of inquiries – regardless of whether these are ordinary, scientific, or fictional – is that they endeavour to uncover

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Rosa (2020 [2018]).

<sup>65</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 3 (italics in original).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 3 (italics in original).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 3 (italics in original).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 3 (italics added).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 3–4 (italics in original).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 9 (italics added).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 9 (italics in original).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (italics added).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (italics added).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (italics added).

the workings of ‘reality *in itself*’<sup>83</sup> – that is, of a noumenal level of existence that, effectively, fulfils the ontological function of ‘a *substratum* for the various situations confronted by the action, *independent* of the “subjective” interpretations developed by the actors’<sup>84</sup>. The key components of this reality possess ‘an *all-encompassing* character’<sup>85</sup>, allowing for the existence of ‘a relatively coherent whole’<sup>86</sup>, in which all particular elements – including irregular, deviant, and mysterious ones – are embedded. Mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries acquire attentional currency against this taken-for-granted background of reality.

In summary: ‘The *real*’ refers to the ‘phenomenal level’ of existence, which is not only infused with normativity and subjectivity, but also characterized by varying degrees of circumstantiality, singularity, and contingency. ‘*Reality*’ designates the ‘noumenal level’ of existence, which is constituted by underlying elements of objectivity and, consequently, marked by high degrees of regularity, constancy, and predictability.

The concept of ‘reality’ may be differentiated further by drawing a distinction between ‘physical reality’ and ‘social reality’.<sup>87</sup> These two kinds of reality are ontologically interconnected and, arguably, the boundaries between them are increasingly (and, possibly, have always been) blurred.<sup>88</sup> Both of them play a pivotal role in ordinary, scientific, and fictional inquiries. An inquiry may be undertaken by ordinary actors in their everyday lives, by trained researchers in expert-led projects, or by detectives or spies in novels (or, indeed, by police officers in criminal investigations, by judges in court rooms, or by specialists in other contexts). In most cases, the search for ‘evidence’ will depend on scrutinizing relevant elements from both ‘physical reality’ and ‘social reality’. It remains an open question whether or not both types of reality are governed by underlying ‘laws’: from a positivist point of view, the answer is ‘yes’; from an interpretivist point of view, the answer is ‘no’. Notwithstanding the lawfulness or lawlessness of different spheres of existence, the *ontological* distinction between ‘natural reality’ and ‘social reality’ is reflected in the *methodological* distinction between research strategies in the natural sciences and research strategies in the social sciences.<sup>89</sup>

## INTERESTS, INTENTIONS, AND STRATEGIES

Arguably, one feature that ‘the sociology of suspicion’, ‘conspiracy theories’, and ‘paranoia’ share is their reliance on the ‘intentionalist hypothesis’.<sup>90</sup> According to this hypothesis, a particular set of human actions can be deduced from, if not reduced to, ‘a conscious (but preferably hidden, thus malevolent) intention’<sup>91</sup>. On this view, *causality* can be subsumed under *intentionality*. In socially stratified scenarios characterized by struggles for power and influence, ‘behind every effect there is a *hidden strategy* that is dissimulated so as to maximize a personal *interest*’<sup>92</sup> and/or a group-specific *interest*. These interests, or sets of interests, may be based on class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability/disability, and/or any other key sociological variable. On this account, actors possess and pursue both individual and collective (a) *interests*, (b) *intentions*, and (c) *strategies*, which motivate them towards developing and following particular patterns of functioning and, eventually, towards embarking on certain courses of action.

Even if one questions their validity, intentionalist accounts raise a number of important questions, in particular in relation to ‘the access that human beings have to their own inner lives’<sup>93</sup> and the degree to which they are able to justify their actions. It is part of the critical mission of large parts of modern sociology to call the *motives* people provide for their actions into question and to avoid regarding them as the real *reasons* for their actions.<sup>94</sup> Instead of taking their narratives at face value, critical sociologists will examine, and possibly doubt, their cogency and persuasiveness. To be sure, people may be perfectly sincere when giving reasons for their beliefs, values, and actions. It is the task of the critical sociologist, however, to expose the extent to which ordinary perceptions, conceptions, and interpretations are based on misperceptions, misconceptions, and misinterpretations.

Not dissimilar to ‘real’ life, in detective stories and spy stories, the actors – notably those rightly or wrongly classified as ‘criminals’ or ‘spies’ – ‘either act *strategically* and *know* what they are doing, or else – when they are *unaware* of the real purposes of their actions – [...] *deceive* themselves because they have been deliberately deceived or “manipulated” by others’<sup>95</sup>. Epistemically,

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (italics in original).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (italics added).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 10 (italics added).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Thomas (1998). On this point, cf. Susen (2020b).

<sup>89</sup> See Susen (2014 [2012]), pp. 176–182, 184, 185, 193, and 200n35.

<sup>90</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 224.

<sup>91</sup> Heinich (2009), p. 35. Cited in Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 225.

<sup>92</sup> Heinich (2009), p. 35 (italics added). Cited in Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 225.

<sup>93</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 225.

<sup>94</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225–226 (italics added).

this tension-laden situation may be described in terms of several dichotomies: conscious vs. unconscious, deliberate vs. accidental, autonomous vs. heteronomous, endogenous vs. exogenous – to mention only a few. The issue of ‘suspicion’ arises insofar as the social scientist, the detective, and the spy seek to shed light on the reasons behind an action – including the extent to which it was performed in a conscious or unconscious, deliberate or accidental, autonomous or heteronomous, endogenous or exogenous fashion.

This implies that, paradoxically, ordinary actors have to be taken seriously *and* not to be taken seriously. When taken seriously, they are depicted as entities equipped with critical, reflective, and moral capacities. When not taken seriously, they are portrayed as entities largely unaware of the structural forces by which their actions – and, by implication, the resources of their dispositional apparatus – are governed, if not determined. Either way, they are regarded with *suspicion* because, irrespective of whether they fall into the former or the latter category, the true reasons behind their actions are hidden beneath the performative veil of both their public ‘frontstage’ *and* their private ‘backstage’.<sup>96</sup> If suspicion lies at the core not only of crime novels and spy novels but also of the social sciences (above all, sociology), then it reflects a concern that generates a profound crisis – namely, a crisis ‘in the transparent reality that the modern nation-state claims to guarantee’<sup>97</sup>. In a more fundamental sense, however, it results in the binary construction of a reality: on the one hand, an *apparent* and *accessible* but *fictitious*, *deceptive*, and *misleading* reality; on the other hand, a *hidden* and *underlying* but *real*, *authentic*, and potentially *threatening* reality.

#### CAUSALITY AND CAUSALITIES

It is far from clear to what extent sociology can (or cannot) attribute different degrees of causality to the relationship between events and entities in the construction of reality. Crucial in this respect is the distinction between *methodological individualism* and *social holism*.<sup>98</sup> The former tends to explain events by reference to *actions performed by individual entities*, capable of engaging with and attributing meaning to the world by virtue of normatively mediated and subjectively moti-

vated interventions. The latter tends to explain events by reference to *actions performed by collective entities*, capable of organizing the structural and agential components of reality as a whole, including the actions carried out by individuals situated within it. One of the main reasons sociology has never been able to ignore, let alone to abandon, the ambition to provide ‘proof of causal relations’<sup>99</sup> shaping the composition of the social universe is that most of its advocates continue to demand their discipline ‘be recognized as a science’<sup>100</sup>.

Granted, several approaches within sociology have questioned the ‘scientific ambition’ of the discipline, positing that its epistemic underpinnings may be weakened by different forms of implicit or unconscious bias. Among the most influential perspectives articulating this kind of criticism are social constructivism, intersectionalism, feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. To this list one may add micro-sociological and interpretive (or interpretivist) frameworks – such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, existential(ist) sociology, social phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Last but not least, Boltanski’s attempt to develop a research programme known as ‘the pragmatic sociology of critique’ is, to a large extent, motivated by the desire to overcome the shortcomings of Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’, especially with respect to the accusation that his ‘genetic structuralism’ suffers from a noticeable degree of social determinism and, by implication, socio-ontological fatalism.<sup>101</sup> None of these (or any other major) trends and developments in the discipline, however, have undermined the *scientific* spirit permeating sociology. It is no accident, then, that sociology continues to be classified as a *social science*.<sup>102</sup> In fact, given its commitment to conceiving of human reality as an essentially *social* state of affairs, sociology may be regarded as the foundational discipline of the social sciences *par excellence*.

The scientific spirit of the discipline may be illustrated by reference to both micro- and macro-sociological approaches. If, for instance, sociology decides to embrace psychology as its main disciplinary partner, then its principal objects of study will be individuals, including the motives and intentions that undergird their actions.<sup>103</sup> Even if it goes down this path, however, sociology must continue to examine the role of ‘entities of larger size and greater stability that are not persons properly speaking’<sup>104</sup>

<sup>96</sup> See Goffman (1971 [1959]). See also Susen (2016d).

<sup>97</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 226.

<sup>98</sup> See, for example: Brown (1987); Bulle (2019); Bulle and Phan (2017); Efaw (1994); Herfeld (2018); Ingram (1976); Jacobs (1983); Lukes (1973); O’Neill (1992 [1973]); Kincaid (2016); Ramström (2018); Steel (2006); Szmátka (1989); Tilley (1982); Tilley (1984); Wettersten (1999); Zahle (2003).

<sup>99</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 227.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>101</sup> On this point, see, for instance, Susen (2007), Chapter 8.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Susen (2011c).

<sup>103</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 227.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.



and yet influence their lives in a profound manner. By contrast, if, for example, sociology decides to embrace history and geography as its chief disciplinary allies, then its thematic focus will be on ‘objects of great size’<sup>105</sup> – such as social systems, institutions, economies, politics, nation-states, empires, populations, regions, and continents. These might – or, indeed, should – be examined over extensive periods of time and by virtue of comparative-historical research. More generally, it is difficult, if not impossible, for sociologists to make informed judgements about key variables relevant to their discipline, unless they take into account the role of collective entities and structural forces.<sup>106</sup>

Sociologists, in order to provide explanations about the social world, need to be committed to undertaking several key operations: (a) identifying and classifying events; (b) relating these events to one another; (c) identifying and classifying entities; (d) relating these entities to one another; (e) establishing a relationship between these entities and events in a more or less systematic fashion; (f) attributing the occurrence of a particular event to the action performed by a given entity.<sup>107</sup>

Far from representing a procedural privilege monopolized by sociologists, however, these operations are remarkably similar to those carried out by ‘ordinary persons’ in their everyday lives, especially when confronted with situations characterized by high degrees of uncertainty, which may result in specific forms of crisis.<sup>108</sup> To a greater or lesser extent, ‘ordinary persons’ are required to draw upon their epistemic capacities when coping with, and attaching meaning to, the challenges thrown at them in the course of their daily lives. This task involves identifying and classifying *events* and *entities* as well as, crucially, seeking to explain the occurrence of the former in terms of actions performed by the latter. Similar to the complementary functions of empirical research and theoretical system-building in sociology, everyday life comprises a ‘constant back-and-forth movement [...] between what can be known through *experience* and what can only be known in a *mediated fashion*’<sup>109</sup>, 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.

The more terminologically precise, epistemologically reflexive, conceptually sophisticated, methodologically rigorous, and empirically substantiated sociological inquiries can claim to be, the more they distinguish

themselves from the sphere of common-sense knowledge generated, and relied upon, by ordinary actors in their everyday lives. And yet, sociology cannot, and should not aim to, distance itself entirely from, let alone transcend, its principal object of study: society. If it sought to do so and, by implication, endeavoured to ‘forge a language that would be exclusively its own’<sup>110</sup>, it would risk embarking on a project whose fruits would become ‘unintelligible’<sup>111</sup> to the wider public and to neighbouring disciplines. As is often pointed out under the rubric ‘reflexivity’<sup>112</sup>, sociological discourse is not confined to the ivory towers of the university. Inevitably, ‘it rebounds into the everyday world, especially through the intermediary of political decisions that draw their authority from the opinions of “experts”’<sup>113</sup>, including social scientists. This is, without a doubt, the case in contemporary society, in which – as an expression of ‘reflexive modernity’<sup>114</sup> – the boundaries between ordinary knowledge and scientific knowledge appear to be increasingly blurred.<sup>115</sup>

The blurring of traditional epistemic lines of demarcation has always been part of the social sciences, as illustrated in ‘the inevitable proximity between *ordinary intrigues* and *sociological explanations*, and between events and the entities that are the focal points in each case’<sup>116</sup>. The proximity is a sign of ‘shameful promiscuity’<sup>117</sup>, in the sense that it shifts the boundaries between science and non-science, between the (external) perspective of the observer and the (internal) perspective of the participant. The issue of this curious proximity raises a central question:

[...] if the most notorious sign by which persons accused of *paranoia* are recognized is the fact that they attribute *historical or personal events* to the action of *large-scale entities*, on which they confer a sort of *intentionality* and

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>112</sup> On this point, see, for instance: Susen (2007), esp. Chapter 5; Susen (2011a); Susen (2016a).

<sup>113</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 230.

<sup>114</sup> See, for instance: Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994); Beck and Lau (2005), esp. pp. 550–555; Kyung-Sup (2010); Susen (2015a), esp. pp. 143–145 and 238–239.

<sup>115</sup> On the distinction between ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’, see, for example: Boltanski (1990b); Boltanski (1998), esp. pp. 248–251; Boltanski (1999–2000), esp. pp. 303–306; Bourdieu and Eagleton (1992), esp. p. 117; Celikates (2009), esp. pp. 12, 25–28, 39–40, 56, 72–81, 89–92, 116–122, 138–152, 159–160, and 187–247; Cronin (1997), esp. pp. 206–207; Mesny (1998), esp. pp. 143–190; Susen (2007), esp. pp. 25, 102, 135–137, 138, 139, 140, 146 n. 8, 153, 156, 157, 204, 205, 224, and 311; Susen (2011b), esp. pp. 448–458; Susen (2011a), pp. 8, 27, 33–36, and 40; Susen (2012b), pp. 713–715; Susen (2015a), esp. pp. 7 and 282–283n30.

<sup>116</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 230 (italics added).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>106</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>107</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>108</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229 (italics added).

*capacity for action*, how could we manage to keep similar accusations from being addressed to sociologists?<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, there are striking similarities between, on the one hand, the narratives constructed by ordinary actors in relation to alleged *mysteries* and *conspiracies* and, on the other hand, the explanatory frameworks designed by sociologists to shed light on the underlying factors shaping, if not determining, *social realities*. All attempts to uncover mysteries, conspiracies, or hidden social causalities are motivated by the ambition to expose sets of adjacent links between *events*, taking place in society, and *entities*, equipped with different degrees of intentionality. To be clear, ‘intentionality’ may be attributed to *individual actors* (notably powerful ones), *collective actors* (notably those defined by key sociological variables – such as class, profession, ethnicity, ‘race’, culture, nationality, language, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ability/disability), and *social structures* (notably economic, technological, political, cultural, ideological, linguistic, institutional, and civilizational ones). Regardless of whether intentionality is an expression of individual or collective, human or non-human, tangible or intangible forms of agency, the presumption of its existence is essential to all investigative projects concerned with uncovering mysteries, conspiracies, and/or hidden social causalities.

#### THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEGAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND NARRATIVE ENTITIES

The relation between sociology and law is revealing in that one major commonality between the two is their interest in regulatory arrangements put in place to provide social life with viable degrees of stability, solidity, and predictability.<sup>119</sup> Human actors can be regarded as responsible and accountable *entities*, capable not only of meeting certain basic expectations, but also of being socially and/or legally sanctioned for failing to do so.<sup>120</sup> Similar to implicit or explicit normative agendas attached to social roles, laws and legally binding rules ‘specify the set of *events* that can be expected from these entities’<sup>121</sup> and, crucially, those that cannot, or must not, be expected from them.

Unlike social roles, however, legally defined roles leave hardly any room for ambiguity. From a judicial point of view, ‘an individual does not belong *more or*

*less to an entity*’<sup>122</sup> – for instance, to a state, organization, association, foundation, corporation, or institution. From a sociological perspective, by contrast, it is obvious that individuals may participate *to different degrees* in the running of these entities. Unlike social roles (most of which are characterized by high degrees of flexibility and contingency), legally defined entities possess ‘clear contours’<sup>123</sup>, *remits*, and *missions*. Within their normative universe, membership relations are ‘governed by explicit rules of incompatibility, by prohibitions on “double dipping”’<sup>124</sup>, especially with regard to the possibility of obtaining benefits, advantages, or income from different sources in illicit – that is, morally objectionable, procedurally problematic, and legally punishable – ways. The importance of the social functions of law, especially in terms of its capacity to contribute to the normative stabilization of reality, can hardly be overstated:

Law [...] plays an essential role in the processes that *stabilize* reality. It helps make reality at once *intelligible* and *predictable* by pre-forming causal chains that can be activated to interpret events that occur. Obligated to *link events to entities*, the legal system has to have at its disposal an encyclopedia of entities that it recognizes as valid. It is the law’s responsibility [...] to *express the whatness of what is* and to associate these *judgements about being* with *judgements of value*.<sup>125</sup>

Hence, from a sociological point of view, law serves several key *social* functions: (a) to stabilize and to solidify reality; (b) to make reality relatively predictable; (c) to make reality intelligible and meaningful, not only to legal experts but also, more fundamentally, to ordinary actors, navigating social life within the limits set by normatively codified boundaries; (d) to establish conceptual and empirical links between events and entities; (e) to cross-fertilize judicial notions of legality, epistemic notions of validity, and socio-political notions of legitimacy; (f) to place the principles of responsibility and accountability at the heart of human agency; (g) to determine the relationship between ‘facts’ and ‘values’; (h) to define both ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ – and, thus, the conditions of possibility – of the social fabric.

The overlap between legal and sociological interpretations of entities, however, comes at a significant cost. The construction of *legally* defined entities hinges on ‘a sort of tacit shifting back and forth between “moral per-

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 230 (italics added).

<sup>119</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 230–234.

<sup>120</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 231 (italics in original).

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 231 (italics in original).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 232 (italics added; ‘*express the whatness of what is*’ is italicized in the original).

sons” and “physical persons”<sup>126</sup>. The construction of *sociologically* defined entities depends on a kind of latent conceptual commute between ‘social actors’ and ‘embodied actors’. Yet, both in legal discourses and in sociological discourses, it is highly uncommon to portray, let alone to conceptualize, entities in terms of ‘uncertain persons’ or ‘uncertain actors’ – that is, as beings ‘that do *not* constitute clearly defined sets’<sup>127</sup>. In ordinary discourses, by contrast, references to undefined and indeterminate entities of this seemingly ‘atypical type’ are rather frequent, ‘especially in situations of utterance that have a private character’<sup>128</sup> and, more generally, in everyday story-telling practices. Hence, these entities may be classified as ‘narrative entities’<sup>129</sup>.

If sociologists (and, more broadly, social scientists) construct, endorse, and rely on conceptual ‘schemas in which only already recognized entities appear’<sup>130</sup>, then they are in danger of ‘merging with the fields of law or business administration and generating doubts about the added value of [their] contributions’<sup>131</sup>. If so, sociology risks not only losing its intellectual autonomy and institutional identity<sup>132</sup> but also, more importantly, its capacity to grasp the social world in a truly enlightening and original manner.

Sociology’s critical mission, however, consists not only in exploring uncertain, or hitherto undefined, entities and actors. In addition, it involves the task of exposing the extent to which ‘the official character of certain entities conceals reality while appearing to describe it’<sup>133</sup>, similar to the *camera obscura* effect inherent in the misrepresentations and distortions generated by dominant ideologies.<sup>134</sup> This issue is reflected in the fact that, in many cases, the contours of *official* entities do not coincide with those of *existing* entities. If they are out of sync, sociologists must ‘forge their own entities and establish their validity with the means of inquiry at their

disposal’<sup>135</sup>, whether these are based on quantitative or qualitative methods (or a combination of both). When this process is successful, a discipline’s nascent terminology is tantamount to an ‘emergent property’<sup>136</sup> – that is, it takes on a life of its own. The appearance of a specifically sociological vocabulary may make the evolutionary leap to disciplinary consciousness and, subsequently, to social consciousness, confirming that some of its jargon and nomenclature may be converted into naturalized elements of ordinary language.

This process tends to confer a real and undeniable existence on the entities in question, in a way, since the actors themselves eventually use the terms and recognize themselves in the sociological descriptions [...].<sup>137</sup>

When this happens, sociology switches from an ‘about-and-above-society mode’ to a ‘within-and-through-society mode’. Following this transition, its conceptual toolkits are no longer merely epistemic devices but, rather, acquire an empirical function: they are incorporated into everyday discourses and practices. In this case, the ‘sociologist’s construction of the object’<sup>138</sup> – far from being reducible to an abstract component of his or her terminology, epistemology, or methodology – becomes part of everyday reality and, thus, of the empirically constituted ontology known as human agency.

#### THE SUSPICIONS AND SUPERSTITIONS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

In a well-known lecture delivered in 1948<sup>139</sup>, Karl Popper addressed two key issues: (a) the role of *entities* in sociological analysis and (b) the role of *conspiracies* in social and political history.<sup>140</sup> In essence, Popper was highly critical of ‘sociological conspiracy theories’<sup>141</sup>, which he associated with those approaches in the humanities and social sciences that, in one way or another, subscribed to the ‘intentionalist hypothesis’<sup>142</sup>. In a more general sense, Popper sought to defend a conception of the social sciences that emphasized their ‘scientific’ nature and their capacity to serve as a key instru-

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 233 (italics added).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>129</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 233–334 and 251.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Susen (2020a), esp. pp. xxi, xxii, 3, 213, 220, 227, 228, 261, 262, 270, 325, 347, and 349.

<sup>133</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 234.

<sup>134</sup> See, for instance: Susen (2014d); Susen (2016b); Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 2 (section iii). On the ‘dominant ideology thesis’, see, for instance: Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1980); Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1990); Boltanski (2008); Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976); Bourdieu and Boltanski (2008 [1976]); Browne and Susen (2014); Conde-Costas (1991); Eagleton (2006 [1976]); Eagleton (2007 [1991]); Holloway and Susen (2013); Larrain (1991 [1983]); Marx and Engels (1953 [1845–1847]); Marx and Engels (2000/1977 [1846]); Rehmann (2004); Reitz (2004); Susen (2008a); Susen (2008b); Susen (2012a); Susen (2014a); Weber (1995); Žižek (1989); Žižek (1994).

<sup>135</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 234. Cf. De Cock and Nyberg (2016), pp. 478–480.

<sup>136</sup> See, for instance, Aziz-Alaoui and Bertelle (2009).

<sup>137</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 234.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>139</sup> Popper (2002 [1948]).

<sup>140</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 234–235.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 235. Cf. Pigden (1995).

<sup>142</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 224.

ment for ‘a rational politics’.<sup>143</sup> At the core of this project lay Popper’s critique of ‘*historicism*’<sup>144</sup>, the antithesis of his ‘methodological naturalism’. The critique was based on three main assumptions:

First, there is the opposition between *holism* and *atomism*, which, broadly speaking, is congruent with the distinction between *social holism* and *methodological individualism*.<sup>145</sup> According to Popper’s account, scholars advocating a historicist position contend that ‘the objects of sociology, social groups, must never be regarded as mere aggregates of persons’<sup>146</sup>. From a holistic viewpoint, [t]he social group is *more* than the mere sum total of its members, and it is also *more* than the mere sum total of the merely personal relationships existing at any moment between any of its members<sup>147</sup>. From this perspective, social groups possess and exert different modes of power that transcend individual agency. On this interpretation, agency constitutes a property derived from and performed by the ‘organic whole’ of social groups, rather than individuals as isolated entities. In this sense, Popper conceives of ‘holism’ as a form of *organicism*.<sup>148</sup>

Second, there is the opposition between *methodological essentialism* and *methodological nominalism*. In Popper’s eyes, the latter has been introduced and employed ‘so successfully in the natural sciences’<sup>149</sup>, whereas the former carries considerable weight in the social sciences. According to Popper, methodological essentialism posits that ‘the task of social science is to understand and explain such sociological entities as the state, economic action, the social group, etc., and that this can be done only by penetrating into their *essences*’<sup>150</sup>. Such an essentialist view is also universalist, in the sense that it ‘presupposes *universal terms*’<sup>151</sup>, which, by definition, ‘distinguish the essential from the accidental’<sup>152</sup>.

By contrast, methodological nominalism *negates* the existence of universals and abstract objects and, at the same time, *affirms* the existence of general or abstract terms and predicates. It regards as pointless the attempt to penetrate into the alleged essence of things, let alone of universals or abstract objects, maintaining that such endeavours result in reductive accounts of reality, which are motivated by the futile ambition to search for, and to identify, the ‘ultimate causes’<sup>153</sup> of existence, including those of social life.<sup>154</sup>

Third, there is the opposition between *determinist utopianism* and *anti-determinist realism*. According to Popper, historicism remains trapped in the former, rather than the latter, insofar as it presupposes that ‘social science can establish “laws” and general tendencies’<sup>155</sup> and even uncover ‘the law of evolution’<sup>156</sup> that permeates society as a whole. To a large extent, the social sciences have endorsed this view, because they are expected to make substantial contributions to ‘social improvements’<sup>157</sup> and ‘civilizational progress’<sup>158</sup>. This grand vision of ‘holistic or Utopian engineering’<sup>159</sup> – whose tangible, and arguably detrimental, impact on modern history is reflected in the pursuit of metanarratives<sup>160</sup> – ‘aims at remodelling the “whole of society” in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint’<sup>161</sup>. In this large-scale venture, the end justifies the means. In opposition to this determinist utopianism, there is a strategy based on anti-determinist realism: namely, ‘piecemeal social engineering’<sup>162</sup>, which stands for a much more realistic, modest, and case-by-case problem-solving approach. It is motivated by the conviction that individual and collective actors learn from their mistakes and that, in accordance with this insight, step-by-step progress is possible<sup>163</sup> – but *without* counting on, let alone proselytizing utopian ideas about, macro-social projects, blueprints, or metanarratives.

Popper’s critique of ‘historicism’ can be considered a direct attack on Marxism and fascism<sup>164</sup>, but also, in a

<sup>143</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 224. See also, for instance: Popper (2002 [1948]); Popper (2002 [1957]); Popper (2002 [1963]); Popper (2013 [1945]); Popper (1966 [1934]); Popper (2002 [1959/1934]). In addition, see, for example: Fuller (2004); Magee (1973); Passeron (2010 [2006]).

<sup>144</sup> See Popper (2002 [1957]). See also, for example: Borghini (2015); Fuller (2004); Habermas (1987 [1968]); Jacobs (1983); Keaney (1997); Lefevre (1974); Magee (1973); Passeron (2010 [2006]); Ray (1979); Shaw (1971); Tilley (1982); Tilley (1984).

<sup>145</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 235.

<sup>146</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 15. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 235.

<sup>147</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 15 (italics in original). See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 235.

<sup>148</sup> See Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 17. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 235.

<sup>149</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 26. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 235.

<sup>150</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 26 (italics added). See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 235–236.

<sup>151</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 26 (italics added). See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 235–236.

<sup>152</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 27. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Little (1998).

<sup>154</sup> On the concept of ‘nominalism’, see, for example: Field (1980); Goodman and Quine (1947); Gosselin (1990); Knuuttila (1988); Tooley (1999); Veatch (1954).

<sup>155</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>156</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 97. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>157</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 53. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>158</sup> See, for instance: Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 4; Susen (2020a), esp. pp. xxii, 7, 9, 32, 84, 113, 115, 243, 353, 363, 402, and 437. See also Allen (2016). In addition, see Feenberg (2017) and Susen (2020c), esp. pp. 735–739, 744–745, 747, 748, 752–753, 757–758, and 763.

<sup>159</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 61. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>160</sup> See Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 4. See also Susen (2016c) and Susen (2017b). Cf. Lyotard (1984 [1979]).

<sup>161</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 61. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>162</sup> Popper (2002 [1957]), p. 58. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>163</sup> For a critical overview, see Pinker (2011) and Pinker (2018).

<sup>164</sup> Similar arguments (as well as important counterarguments) can be

broader sense, on Hegelianism (notably Hegel's philosophy of history).<sup>165</sup> In Popper's opinion, these approaches are guilty of endorsing doctrinal thinking, oriented towards the perilous and toxic temptation to make predictions, prophecies, and promises founded on seductive, but ultimately erroneous, teleological views of history.<sup>166</sup> For Popper, this '*historicist doctrine of the social sciences*'<sup>167</sup> was complemented by a '*historicist doctrine of politics*'<sup>168</sup>, according to which 'the task of politics is to lessen the birthpangs of impending political developments'<sup>169</sup> and, thus, to confer teleologically inspired meanings to social transformations. In Popper's eyes, these historicist inclinations<sup>170</sup> have colonized the social sciences not only through Hegelianism<sup>171</sup> and Marxism<sup>172</sup> but also through John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism<sup>173</sup> and Auguste Comte's positivism<sup>174</sup>.

Historicism, then, is the belief in unavoidable, predictable, progressive, directional, and universal developments, indicative of underlying forces driving social evolution.<sup>175</sup> For Popper, however, historicism is not 'the sole enemy of rational social science'<sup>176</sup>. To his mind, the impact of the doctrine of 'naïve collectivism' – or, if one prefers, 'social holism' – on the social sciences has been equally detrimental. Instead of analysing social phenomena, including their collective behavioural and institutional expressions, 'in terms of individuals and their actions and relations'<sup>177</sup>, such a holistic approach defines as its main object of inquiry the 'behaviour of social wholes, such as groups, nations, classes, societies, cultures, civilizations, etc.'<sup>178</sup>. Arguably, this holistic perspective overlooks the fact that, ultimately, there

are no social actions without individuals responsible for embarking on them and no social structures, including institutions, without individuals who construct them.

To be clear, Popper was opposed to *both* crude forms of social holism (such as *Vulgärmarxismus*) and crude forms of methodological intentionalism (which may be described as *Vulgärintentionalismus*). In his view, both have an inherent tendency to advocate variants of *conspiratorial thinking*<sup>179</sup>, according to which 'the principle of causality'<sup>180</sup>, which drives the development of social constellations, can be associated with powerful individual or collective entities, capable of imposing their will and authority on the rest of society. Challenging both sources of 'superstition'<sup>181</sup>, which falsely attribute the causes behind the emergence of social phenomena to all-controlling individual or collective entities, Popper rejected both *holism* and *intentionalism*. The former is based on the belief in the existence of 'wholes', which are portrayed as 'subjects of social action'<sup>182</sup> – a property that, according to Popper, remains a privilege of individuals and of individuals only. The latter is founded on the supposition that individuals, when acting in a sustained and co-ordinated fashion, are sufficiently powerful to bring about the emergence of social phenomena by virtue of their intentions.

Popper discarded both positions, arguing that events could be attributed *neither* to individual entities *nor* to collective entities, possessing and exerting significant degrees of power. On his account, events are the result of 'the *fortuitous encounter of a multiplicity of individual actions* in a hypothetical space constructed on the model of the market'<sup>183</sup>. In other words, in Popper's opinion, events are irreducible to individual or collective entities; they are, in fact, generated by the accidental confluence of an array of actions performed – some deliberately, others intuitively – by individuals.

In terms of the similarities between 'social holism' and 'conspiracy theories', Popper's chief contention is as follows: there is a potential, if not actual, link between 'reference to collective entities' and 'reference to conspiracies'.<sup>184</sup> From a Popperian point of view, these two reference points are both conceptually and methodologically congruent, in the sense that they stem from 'equivalent operations'<sup>185</sup>. In this respect, the notion of

found in the famous *Historikerstreit*. See, for instance: Nolte (1977); Nolte (1987). See also, for example: Habermas (1989 [1985/1987]); Kienel (2007); Kronenberg (2008).

<sup>165</sup> See, for instance: Hegel (1975 [1837]); Hegel (1977 [1807]); Hegel (1990 [1825–1826]); Hegel (1991 [1820]).

<sup>166</sup> See, for instance: Popper (2013 [1945]); Popper (2002 [1948]); Popper (2002 [1957]); Popper (2002 [1963]).

<sup>167</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236 (italics in original).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236 (italics in original).

<sup>169</sup> Popper (2002 [1948]), p. 455. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 236.

<sup>170</sup> See Popper (2002 [1948]), p. 455. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 236–237.

<sup>171</sup> See Hegel (1975 [1837]), Hegel (1977 [1807]), Hegel (1990 [1825–1826]), and Hegel (1991 [1820]).

<sup>172</sup> See Marx (2000/1977 [1844]), Marx (2000 [1845]), Marx (2000 [1857–8]), Marx (2000 [1859]), Marx (2000/1977 [1867/1885/1894]), Marx and Engels (2000/1977 [1846]), and Marx and Engels (1985 [1848]).

<sup>173</sup> See Mill (1989 [1869]) and Mill (2002).

<sup>174</sup> See Comte (2009 [1844/1865]) and Comte and Martineau (1853 [1830–1842]).

<sup>175</sup> See Susen (2015a), Chapter 4 (esp. pp. 136–139).

<sup>176</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>177</sup> Popper (2002 [1948]), p. 459. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>178</sup> Popper (2002 [1948]), p. 459. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>179</sup> See Popper (2002 [1948]), p. 459. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>180</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>181</sup> See Popper (2002 [1948]), p. 459. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>182</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 237.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238 (italics added).

<sup>184</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

*intentionality* plays a pivotal role. In a conspiracy, a specific (usually rather limited) number of individuals come together ‘to co-ordinate their actions with the intention to seize power’<sup>186</sup>. Conspiracies tend to be conceived of as (a) secretive, (b) collective, (c) co-ordinated, (d) intended, (e) goal-oriented, (f) power-driven, (g) illegitimate, and – in most cases – (h) subversive.

As Boltanski points out, it is noteworthy that Popper does not distinguish between *legally constituted entities*, *sociologically constituted entities*, and *narrative entities*.<sup>187</sup> Popper’s reading of the alleged affinities between ‘social holism’ and ‘conspiracy theories’ may apply to the second and third category, but it is hard to see how it may be relevant to the first category. By definition, ‘the very orientation of the law [...] must allow, through deliberation, for the co-ordination and implementation of a common decision, which a *spokesperson* makes public’<sup>188</sup>. Insofar as the judicial decision-making process has followed appropriate rules and regulations, it can be regarded as a rational procedure based on key democratic principles – such as public accessibility, transparency, and accountability.<sup>189</sup>

#### AGAINST AND BEYOND ‘POPPER’S CURSE’

Boltanski offers a provocative account of the extent to which, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the development of sociology as a discipline was, in several respects, a response to what he describes as ‘Popper’s curse’<sup>190</sup>. As part of his critical overview of recent trends in sociology, Boltanski identifies various key approaches:

a.

*Methodological individualism* places a strong emphasis on the role of individual actors, capable of making informed decisions by virtue of their rational faculties. To a greater or lesser degree, most versions of this doctrine are inspired by microeconomics, founded on statistical tools and/or mathematical modelling, and expressed in ‘rational actor’ or ‘rational choice’ theories – especially those prominent in the United States (in the 1960s and 1970s) and, under the influence of Raymond Boudon<sup>191</sup>, in France. From this perspective, social phe-

nomena – including social practices, structures, and constellations – are the product of individual choices, which are irreducible to actors’ membership in communities or collectives.

Methodological individualism, however, is fraught with difficulties. One problem attached to this framework is that it is based on a somewhat distorted conception of sociology. Making reference to communities or collectives is ‘hardly the sole prerogative of sociologists’<sup>192</sup>. Indeed, most sociologists – even those who subscribe to some form of structuralism – emphasize – or at least accept – ‘the self-reflexiveness of social action’<sup>193</sup>, which is derived from the critical capacities with which ordinary people appear to be equipped. Another problem arising from methodological individualism is that it lacks a viable alternative to accounting for the empirical significance of the ‘fictions’ associated with ‘collectives’: ‘sociology has to recognize that these fictions seem to be in some sense necessary, and that they must be granted a place in sociological theory’<sup>194</sup>. It is difficult to see how methodological individualism can convincingly conceptualize, let alone explain, the existence of institutions. Arguably, these can be regarded as solidified forms of action and interaction that ‘social life cannot do without’<sup>195</sup>. Another major issue is that its statistical tools and/or mathematical models will struggle to make sense of the actors’ experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, which are crucial to the ways in which they relate to, engage with, and attribute meaning to the world.<sup>196</sup>

b.

*Analytic Marxism* was developed, above all, in Anglo-Saxon countries during the 1980s.<sup>197</sup> Among its key authors were Gerald A. Cohen<sup>198</sup>, John Roemer<sup>199</sup>, Jon Elster<sup>200</sup>, and Philippe van Parijs<sup>201</sup>. The common aim of the different advocates of this project was to renew Marxism by cross-fertilizing it with those approaches that appeared to be opposed to, and incompatible with, its own presuppositions. Among these approaches are logical positivism, rational choice theory, and game theory. Broadly speaking, analytic Marxism converges with

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239 (punctuation modified).

<sup>187</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239 (italics in original) (punctuation modified).

<sup>189</sup> See, for instance: Habermas (1989 [1962]); Habermas (1996 [1992]); Habermas (1998); Habermas (2018 [2009]). See also, for example: Alexy (1998); Rosenfeld and Arato (1998); Susen (2010); Susen (2011b); Susen (2018b); Susen (2021).

<sup>190</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 240–251.

<sup>191</sup> See, for instance: Boudon (1971 [1968]); Boudon (1972); Boudon (1974 [1971]); Boudon (1980 [1971]); Boudon (1981 [1979]); Boudon (2005).

<sup>192</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 241.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241. Cf. Boltanski (2011 [2009]), pp. 50–82.

<sup>196</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 241.

<sup>197</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 241–242. See also, for instance: Balibar, Bidet, Lecercle, and Texier (1990); Carver and Thomas (1995).

<sup>198</sup> See Cohen (1995) and Cohen (2000 [1978]).

<sup>199</sup> See Roemer (1986) and Roemer (1994).

<sup>200</sup> See Elster (1985), Elster (1986a), Elster (1986b), Elster (2000), and Elster and Hylland (1986).

<sup>201</sup> See Parijs (1993).

atomism in that it seeks to dispose of ‘superfluous entities’<sup>202</sup> and to use ‘simple logical forms’<sup>203</sup> as a conceptual foundation of its undertaking. Crucially, it regards – as in the case of Jon Elster – ‘the actors’ choices, actions, and strategies’<sup>204</sup> as fundamental to the unfolding of social life in general and economic life in particular. On this account, ‘methodological collectivism’ suffers from a naïve trust in the quasi-metaphysical notion that ‘there are supra-individual entities that are prior to individuals in the explanatory order’<sup>205</sup>.

One of the main problems with this framework, however, is that it deradicalizes Marxism, to the degree that, in essence, it replaces its original emphasis on exploitation and class antagonism with a (reformist) ‘theory of distributive justice’<sup>206</sup>. In brief, Marxism is replaced with Rawlsianism. Analytic Marxism, since it uses the weapons of those opposed to Marxism, ‘ends up gradually turning into a trial of Marxism’<sup>207</sup>, if not – as fierce critics may add – into the burial of Marxism.

c.

Given its emphasis on the importance of different sets of social structures, both moderate and radical versions of *structuralism* are diametrically opposed to methodological individualism. As such, structuralism may be regarded as the intellectual epitome of social holism and, consequently, as one of the main targets of Popper’s aforementioned critique. The key theoretical question that poses itself in this context is how to make sense of the relationship between structure and agency – that is, between sets of *structures*, which are portrayed ‘as if they existed independently of the individuals’<sup>208</sup>, and sets of *actions*, which are performed by agents immersed in the production and reproduction of more or less solidified forms of sociality. In extreme – and, arguably, determinist – versions of structuralism, actors are reduced to mere ‘carriers’ or ‘bearers’ of structures, which exert their power ‘behind people’s backs’.<sup>209</sup> On this account,

<sup>202</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 242.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>204</sup> See Elster (1985), pp. 10–15. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 242.

<sup>205</sup> Elster (1985), p. 6. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 242.

<sup>206</sup> Elster (1985), p. 516. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 242.

<sup>207</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 242.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>209</sup> See, for example: Althusser (1969 [1965]); Althusser (1971); Poulantzas (1973 [1968]); Poulantzas (1980 [1978]). On *structuralism in the humanities and social sciences*, see, for instance: Ashenden (2005); Baert (1998); Baert and Silva (2010 [1998]-a); Boudon (1971 [1968]); Bourdieu (1968); Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982); Frère (2004); Joas and Knöbl (2009 [2004]); Karsenti (2011 [2007/2011]); Lévi-Strauss (1993 [1963]); Lévi-Strauss (1993 [1973]); Peters (1999); Susen (2015a), pp. 3, 42, 71, 73, 74, 94, 97, 129, 162, 168, 216, and 263.

actors produce and reproduce social structures (notably economic, technological, political, cultural, ideological, linguistic, institutional, and civilizational ones) in a largely unconscious fashion.

A significant shortcoming of this mode of analysis, however, is that it understates the extent to which social actors are equipped with critical, reflective, and moral capacities, permitting them to acquire a sense of agency, autonomy, and responsibility when engaging in the construction of social reality. One need not be a Kantian to recognize that human beings, unlike other living creatures, have the species-constitutive capacity to draw on the triadic power of rationality – namely *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilkraft*<sup>210</sup> – to build their place in the world as purposive, co-operative, creative, and projective entities.<sup>211</sup>

d.

Bourdieu’s *genetic structuralism*, notably his theory of the *habitus*, sought to overcome the antinomy between objectivist and subjectivist frameworks in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>212</sup> It aimed to accomplish this by drawing on multiple sources, leading to Bourdieu’s famous ‘outline of a theory of practice’<sup>213</sup>. The question of whether or not Bourdieu succeeded in bridging the gap between objectivist and subjectivist perspectives has been discussed, often in great detail and from different angles, by numerous commentators and remains an issue of contention.<sup>214</sup> In this respect, the interplay of ‘habitus’, ‘field’, and ‘capital’ is essential, although there is a danger that, over time, these conceptual tools could

<sup>210</sup> On this point, see, for instance: Susen (2009), pp. 104–105; Susen (2010), pp. 112–113; Susen (2013), pp. 326 and 330–331; Susen (2015a), pp. 13, 105, 215, 219, 234, 236, 259, and 275; Susen (2015b), pp. 1027–1028; Susen (2020b), pp. 131, 137, and 138.

<sup>211</sup> See Susen (2007), Chapter 10 (esp. pp. 280–283).

<sup>212</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 243–245. See also, for example: Bourdieu (1980), pp. 43, 46, 78, 87, 103, 178, 202, 234, and 242; Bourdieu (1982), pp. 35–37; Bourdieu (1993 [1984]-b), pp. 55, 57, and 59; Bourdieu (1994), p. 169; Bourdieu (1997b), pp. 16–17, 43, 77, 122, 157, 159–160, 163–167, 185, and 225; Bourdieu (1998), pp. 9 and 110; Bourdieu (2005 [2000]), pp. 210–213; Bourdieu (2001b), pp. 7, 24, and 31; Bourdieu (2001a), pp. 76, 151, and 153; Bourdieu (2002b), p. 353; Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1968), pp. 34, 93–94, and 101; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992a), p. 66; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992b), pp. 121–122; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992c), pp. 151 and 162.

<sup>213</sup> See Bourdieu (1977 [1972]).

<sup>214</sup> See Susen (2007), Chapters 5–8. In the secondary literature see, for example: Accardo (1997), pp. 200, 229, and 257–258; Addi (2002), pp. 127 and 131; Boltanski (2003), pp. 156–157; Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), p. 40; Bonnewitz (1998), pp. 2, 12–13, 30–31, 59, and 66; Bronckart and Schurmans (1999), pp. 153, 155, and 164; Brubaker (1985), pp. 746 and 749–753; Calhoun (1995), pp. 133 and 144–145; Ebrecht (2002), p. 230; King (2000); Mouzelis (2000); Pinto (1998), pp. 26, 55–56, and 151; Wacquant (1992).

be converted into dogmatic devices – an undesirable scenario of which Bourdieu was aware.<sup>215</sup>

It is far from clear, however, whether or not Bourdieu's approach permits us to bypass, let alone to transcend, 'Popper's curse'. The principal contributions and limitations of Bourdieu's 'critical sociology' have been extensively scrutinized and documented.<sup>216</sup> Adding to this debate, Boltanski distinguishes two fundamental types of habitus: understood in the *strong* sense, the concept of 'habitus' may designate an objectively determined and subjectively internalized programme; understood in the *weak* sense, the concept of 'habitus' may refer to the rather vague idea of 'social personality' or 'basic personality'.<sup>217</sup> Irrespective of the question of which of these two interpretations is more useful, Boltanski posits that Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, since 'it was intended to dramatize structures and persons together, was not enough to silence Popper-inspired reservations and may even have stimulated them'<sup>218</sup>. Ultimately, Popperian scholars may have good reason to reject Bourdieu's structuralist approach for remaining trapped in the premises of 'a sociology of suspicion and conspiracy'<sup>219</sup>, not least because of his claim that habitus reflects a form of 'non-orchestrated orchestration'<sup>220</sup>.

e.

*Micro-sociological approaches* are another case in point.<sup>221</sup> In Boltanski's eyes, they can be regarded as part of the general attempt, shared by a large proportion of modern sociologists, to escape 'Popper's curse'. Micro-sociological frameworks are intellectually related to – and, in some cases, inspired by – ethnomethodology<sup>222</sup>, social phenomenology<sup>223</sup>, symbolic interactionism<sup>224</sup>, and pragmatism<sup>225</sup>. They may be interpreted as having the capacity to circumvent 'the Popperian curse' for one overriding reason: *they take ordinary actors seri-*

*ously*. Obviously, this is the motto of Boltanski's own enterprise, commonly labelled 'the pragmatic sociology of critique'<sup>226</sup>. It is, however, *also* both an ontological and a methodological commitment of micro-sociological approaches:

- *ontological*, because it conceives of the very nature of human actors as protagonists equipped with species-constitutive capacities (such as culture, language, consciousness, self-awareness, selfhood, personhood, identity, subjectivity, agency, morality, aesthetic judgement, and reason);<sup>227</sup>
- *methodological*, because it posits that the specificity of the human condition, including human forms of life, needs to be reflected in the idiosyncrasy of the scientific tools by means of which social practices, including symbolically mediated interactions, are studied.<sup>228</sup>

Micro-sociological approaches recognize that 'the "actors themselves" designate the beings that make up their environment, [...] *qualify* those beings, and in so doing contribute to "performing" the social world'<sup>229</sup>. Thus, not only are human actors spatiotemporally situated in the world, but, in addition, they contribute to constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing it. Micro-sociological approaches may be criticized for underestimating the importance of 'large collective entities or institutions'<sup>230</sup>. Unlike methodological-individualist approaches, however, they cannot be accused of denying their existence.

Yet, even if – in line with Boltanski's account – one acknowledges that micro-sociological approaches should be praised for highlighting the socio-ontological significance of 'the actors' competencies'<sup>231</sup>, including their moral sense or sense of justice<sup>232</sup>, and for rejecting a rigid dichotomy between 'a clairvoyant sociologist and a transparent and invisible actor (in the classic versions of structuralism) or an actor who has been deceived (in its critical versions)<sup>233</sup>, one needs to be aware of their limitations. Arguably, among their most significant weaknesses is that they leave little, if any, room for the possibility of providing 'a cartographic representation of the social world as a pre-existing cosmos'<sup>234</sup>, in which subjects are *inevitably* exposed

<sup>215</sup> On this issue, see, for instance, Bourdieu, Schultheis, and Pfeuffer (2011 [2000]).

<sup>216</sup> For an overview, see, for example, Susen (2007), Chapter 8. See also Susen and Turner (2011).

<sup>217</sup> See Boltanski (2003). See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 245.

<sup>218</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 245.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245. Cf. Heinrich (2007).

<sup>220</sup> On this issue, see, for instance: Emirbayer and Johnson (2008); Susen (2007), p. 187. See also, for example: Bourdieu (1980), p. 187; Bourdieu (1990 [1980]), p. 109.

<sup>221</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 245–247. Cf. Baert and Silva (2010 [1998]-b) and Roberts (2006).

<sup>222</sup> See, for instance: Garfinkel (1984 [1967]); Heritage (1984).

<sup>223</sup> See, for instance: Chelstrom (2013); Schütz (1962).

<sup>224</sup> See, for instance: Joas (1987); Plummer (1991); Plummer (1996); Rock (1979).

<sup>225</sup> See, for instance: Baert and Turner (2004); Baert and Turner (2007); Durkheim (1983 [1955]); Joas (1993); Karsenti (2012 [2006]); Rorty (1982).

<sup>226</sup> See Susen and Turner (2014).

<sup>227</sup> See Susen (2020b), esp. pp. 125, 131, 137, 138, 142, 144, and 147.

<sup>228</sup> See Susen (2014 [2012]), pp. 176–182, 184, 185, 193, and 200n35.

<sup>229</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 246 (italics in original).

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>232</sup> See Boltanski (2012 [1990]). See also Boltanski (1993), Boltanski (2009b), and Boltanski and Thévenot (1989).

<sup>233</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 247.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.



to, dependent upon, and limited by ‘a *system* of constraints’<sup>235</sup> and of underlying structural forces, which, by definition, transcends the narrow horizon of their immediate environment.

f.

The sociology of social networks is captured in the label *network analysis* – a paradigm that began to gain traction from the 1980s onwards and represents a firmly relational ontology.<sup>236</sup> This approach, which is arguably another way of bypassing ‘Popper’s curse’, draws on the works of seminal scholars, such as Harrison White, Scott Boorman, and Ronald Breiger<sup>237</sup>, but also – although admittedly less directly – Jacob Levy Moreno<sup>238</sup>. Strictly speaking, network analysis presupposes that ‘there is no way of knowing in advance how groups or social positions come about, i.e. how combinations of relations are formed’<sup>239</sup>. If this is true, then all social phenomena, including social formations, are characterized by a degree of unpredictability that makes it impossible to know in advance if, let alone how, they enter the theatre of co-existence, composed of both human and non-human agents. Furthermore, it is not things-in-themselves (at the noumenal level) but, rather, the network-structures-established-between-agents (at the relational level) that, as both empowering and constraining forces, are ‘capable of engendering “emerging effects”’<sup>240</sup>. Put differently, agency is derived not from ‘substances’ or ‘essences’, which – in terms of their ontological status – depend entirely on themselves, but, rather, from the networks established *between* different (both human and non-human) entities.<sup>241</sup>

Thus, network analysts may claim to be able to overcome the opposition between methodological individualism and social holism, since their framework is founded on the assumption that ‘structure is the emerging effect of interactions’<sup>242</sup> – and, as one may add, agency is *also* the emerging effect of interactions. In this sense, networks are equivalent to ‘modes of totalization based on a generalized connectivity’<sup>243</sup>: their universality transcends the particularity of the

relations established between entities or groups of entities. Given its focus on webs of social relations, network analysis – similar to structuralism – is capable of going beyond ‘cumbersome and unseemly objects’<sup>244</sup>. In his critique of ‘naïve collectivism’, Popper vehemently rejected *both* the ontological claim that these objects existed in the social world *and* the epistemo-methodological claim that that they ought to play a pivotal role in sociological analysis.

Regardless of whether or not network analysis provides the conceptual, methodological, and empirical resources to do justice to ‘the open character of modern societies’<sup>245</sup>, it suffers from serious limitations. One of these limitations is reflected in the fact that its implicit radical constructivism makes it hard to grasp the *ontological* status of constitutive (that is, both human and non-human) elements of existence. If ontology were reducible to relationality, then ‘beings’ and ‘relations’ would be the same thing (and there would be no point in differentiating them). All entities are both *relational* beings and relational *beings*.

#### ACTORS, ENTITIES, AND MULTIPOSITIONALITY

Boltanski stresses the significance of *multipositionality* for a comprehensive understanding of social life.<sup>246</sup> An individual actor ‘may belong to an unlimited number of entities’<sup>247</sup>. These may be legally constituted entities, sociologically constituted entities, narrative entities, or other types of entities. Actors occupy multiple positions in society. These positions are represented by particular entities, each of which has its contours and goals. For instance, an actor may take on numerous positions: child, parent, friend, relative, employer, employee, buyer, seller, native, foreigner, and so on. These positions are located in different social fields: cultural, political, economic, linguistic, and so on. These fields may be classified according to different criteria: collective vs. individual, public vs. private, visible vs. concealed, open vs. closed, and so on. These positions and fields may be composed of legally defined entities, sociologically defined entities, narrative entities, and/or other – typologically distinct – entities.

One of sociology’s difficulties stems from the fact that it studies both persons and entities that are not persons. We may qualify persons by referring to these entities [...].

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 247 (italics added).

<sup>236</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 247–248. See also, for instance, Parrochia (1993).

<sup>237</sup> See White, Boorman, and Breiger (1976) as well as Boorman and White (1976).

<sup>238</sup> See Moreno (1947).

<sup>239</sup> Degenne and Forse (1999 [1994]), p. 2. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 248.

<sup>240</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 248.

<sup>241</sup> See, for instance: Callon (1989); Latour (1987); Latour (1993 [1991]); Latour (2005); Latour (2013 [2012]).

<sup>242</sup> Degenne and Forse (1999 [1994]), p. 10. See also Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 248.

<sup>243</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 248.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>246</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 251–253. See also Boltanski (1973b).

<sup>247</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 251.

But (and this is fortunate) no entity is so globalizing or so totalizing that reference to it can condense the entire identity of a person [...].<sup>248</sup>

Sociology engages with both *human* and *non-human* entities. The former may be qualified by reference to the latter – not only from the perspective of ordinary actors, participating in the construction of their lifeworlds, but also from the perspective of social-scientific observers, examining the practices and structures making human forms of life possible in the first place. The latter, however, may never completely overpower the former: even the most totalizing forms of domination cannot eliminate the potential for agency possessed by every human being.

Irrespective of the potential for agency inherent in all members of humanity, it is important to debunk the myth of full self-control and final-instance comprehensibility. If there is an ‘ordinary metaphysics of members of our societies’<sup>249</sup>, it needs ‘to recognize as *persons* beings that cannot be reduced to an accumulation of properties and therefore cannot be known in their totality, and cannot be known once and for all, even by the actor involved’<sup>250</sup>. In practice, every actor ‘must be willing to risk the disclosure’<sup>251</sup> without knowing ‘whom he [or she] reveals when he [or she] discloses himself [or herself] in deed or word’<sup>252</sup>. The presentation of self in everyday life<sup>253</sup> is a risky business, in the sense that the moment we interact with others we reveal something about ourselves, even – or, perhaps, especially – if we make a sustained effort to avoid doing so. As interdependent and intersubjective beings, we cannot escape our social condition.

Whatever the underlying intricacies of this condition may be, sociology is not reducible to ‘a detective story, still less a spy story, even if it sometimes tries to solve mysteries and even if it finds itself confronting the question of conspiracy’<sup>254</sup>. Undoubtedly, there are important historical and intellectual parallels between, on the one hand, investigations into alleged *mysteries* and *conspiracies* and, on the other hand, *sociological inquiries* – notably the urge to uncover structural and agential forces whose existence (and influence) may escape our common-sense perception of reality. And yet, there remain substantial differences between the

assumptions made about the nature of *mysteries* and *conspiracies*, purportedly exposed in detective and spy stories, and the assumptions made about the nature of different levels and components of *social reality*, identified and explored in sociological inquiries.

## II.

### CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

This final section offers some critical reflections on important issues arising from Boltanski’s examination of the relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries – notably with regard to its limitations and shortcomings.

#### 1.

It is striking that Boltanski’s account is based on numerous *core dichotomies*<sup>255</sup>: essence vs. appearance, hidden vs. visible, genuine vs. deceptive, unofficial vs. official, unconscious vs. conscious, ordinary vs. scientific, micro vs. macro, particular vs. universal, contingent vs. transcendental, phenomenal vs. noumenal, world vs. reality, nature vs. culture, individual vs. society, methodological individualism vs. social holism, fact vs. value, knowledge vs. opinion, experience vs. reason, empiricism vs. rationalism, materialism vs. idealism, objectivism vs. subjectivism, and substantialism vs. relationalism – to mention only a few. Even if some of them are *not* explicitly mentioned, all of these dichotomies are directly or indirectly relevant to Boltanski’s approach. One may defend his allusions and references to these (and other) dichotomies on several grounds:

- a. It is hard, if not impossible, to grasp the history of the humanities and social sciences without a critical understanding of these dichotomies, especially in terms of the degree to which they have structured and codified ground-breaking modes of inquiry in the modern age.
- b. Even if, in some areas of research, they have gone out of fashion or even been rejected outright, they continue to play a pivotal role in the humanities and social sciences.
- c. Owing to their enduring importance, they remain crucial to making sense of the key debates shaping intellectual thought and scientific investigations in the early twenty-first century.

What is missing from Boltanski’s outline, however, is a critical engagement with the extent to which these dichotomies should, or should not, be overcome. Dif-

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 252 (italics in original).

<sup>251</sup> Arendt (1998 [1958]), p. 180. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 252.

<sup>252</sup> Arendt (1998 [1958]), p. 180. See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 252.

<sup>253</sup> See Goffman (1971 [1959]). See also Susen (2007), pp. 84–85, and Susen (2016d). In addition, see Habermas (1987 [1981]) and Habermas (1992 [1988]).

<sup>254</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 260. Cf. Eckert (2016), p. 245.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. Jenks (1998).

ferent commentators will come to different conclusions when reflecting on the validity of the aforementioned (and thematically related) dichotomies: ‘erroneous’, ‘misleading’, ‘Western-centric’, ‘anthropocentric’, ‘malstream’, ‘reductive’, or – if judged in a more favourable light – ‘increasingly blurred’.<sup>256</sup> Given that – perhaps unwittingly – these dichotomies are attributed a quasi-foundational status in Boltanski’s framework, an in-depth examination of their validity in contemporary intellectual discourse would contribute to the conceptual and methodological strength of his analysis.

2.

The *distinction between ‘the ordinary’ and ‘the scientific’* is central to Boltanski’s oeuvre in general and to his post-Bourdieuian paradigm shift in particular.<sup>257</sup> The transition from Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’ to Boltanski’s ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’ contains various important facets, including a radical reconceptualization of the relationship between, on the one hand, *ordinary people and laypersons* and, on the other hand, *scientists and experts*. Boltanski is right to question the project of erecting an epistemic hierarchy according to which scientific knowledge is superior to ordinary knowledge (and, by implication, scientists and experts are necessarily more insightful than ordinary people and laypersons). Moreover, he convincingly emphasizes the degree to which, in contemporary societies, the boundaries between these two types of epistemic engagement with the world are increasingly blurred, as expressed in the concept of ‘reflexive modernity’<sup>258</sup>.

Still, he could have provided a more *systematic* account of the relationship between ‘ordinary knowledge’ and ‘scientific knowledge’. Arguably, such an

<sup>256</sup> See, for instance, Susen (2015a), esp. pp. 11, 41, 90, 100, 115, 136, 259, and 298n32. Cf. Dascal (2008).

<sup>257</sup> On *the relationship between ‘critical sociology’ and the ‘pragmatic sociology of critique’*, see, for instance, Susen (2014 [2015]) and Susen (2015b). In addition, see, for example: Atkinson (2020); Bénatouïl (1999a); Bénatouïl (1999b); Callinicos (2006), pp. 4–5, 15, 51–82, and 155–156; Celikates (2009), pp. 136–157; de Blic and Mouchard (2000a); de Blic and Mouchard (2000b); Frère (2004), esp. pp. 92–93 and 97n4; Nachi (2006), pp. 188–189; Susen (2007), pp. 223–224, 227n25, 228n50, 229n51, 229n52, and 271n24; Wagner (1999); Wagner (2000). On this debate, see also: Boltanski (1990a), pp. 9–134; Boltanski (1990b), pp. 124–134; Boltanski (1998), esp. pp. 248–253; Boltanski (1999–2000), pp. 303–311; Boltanski (2002a), pp. 276–281 and 281–284; Boltanski (2003), pp. 153–161; Boltanski (2008); Boltanski (2009a), esp. pp. 39–82; Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), esp. pp. 633–640; Boltanski and Honneth (2009), pp. 81–86, 92–96, and 100–114; Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010), pp. 152–154 and 160–162; Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), pp. 40, 41–43, 43–46, and 265–270; Boltanski and Thévenot (1999), pp. 364–365.

<sup>258</sup> See, for instance: Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994); Beck and Lau (2005), esp. pp. 550–555; Kyung-Sup (2010); Susen (2015a), esp. pp. 143–145 and 238–239.

endeavour needs to recognize that, when seeking to grasp the relationship between these two orders of epistemic construction, we are confronted with three fundamental options:<sup>259</sup>

- a. *Scientific knowledge is superior to ordinary knowledge*, because the underlying structural mechanisms and causalities of both the natural world and the social world escape people’s common-sense understanding of reality.
- b. *Ordinary knowledge is superior to scientific knowledge*, because the authenticity of subjective and intersubjective experiences, derived from actors’ bodily involvement in both the natural world and the social world, escapes conceptually sophisticated, methodically detached, and predictably formulaic explanations of reality.
- c. *Both scientific knowledge and ordinary knowledge are legitimate and potentially insightful*. Their epistemic value depends on the kind of knowledge one intends to produce, because the search for cognitive validity always takes place from a particular position in, and in relation to specific aspects of, reality. In other words, the point is not to oppose but to cross-fertilize scientific and ordinary ways of engaging with the world.

Thus, a comprehensive sociology of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries needs to provide a systematic account of (a) the epistemic *power and resources* emanating from both ordinary and scientific knowledge, (b) the epistemic *illusions and limitations* stemming from both ordinary and scientific knowledge, and (c) the *epistemic zones of cross-fertilization* that have been, or can be, established between ordinary and scientific knowledge.<sup>260</sup> The study of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries may be inspired by the scientific pursuit of *positivity* (derived from the reliability of experience-based knowledge), *objectivity* (founded on the possibility of value-free knowledge), and *universality* (expressed in the validity of context-transcending knowledge). Critical sociologists of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries, however, need to highlight the extent to which the scientific quest for positivity, objectivity, and universality is inevitably permeated by historically contingent variables, such as normativity and subjectivity, which imply that the specifically *human* access to reality is symbolically mediated, socially constituted, and spatiotemporally situated. In short, a comprehensive sociology of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries requires a critical epistemology.

<sup>259</sup> See Susen (2014 [2012]), esp. p. 193.

<sup>260</sup> For a brief outline of such a project, see *ibid.*, pp. 193–194.

3.

Boltanski stresses that both everyday life and scientific research comprise a ‘constant back-and-forth movement [...] between what can be known through *experience* and what can only be known in a *mediated fashion*’<sup>261</sup>. This contention, however, hinges on a crude distinction between naïve empiricism (‘known through experience’) and idealism (‘known in a mediated fashion’). This distinction is reductive – and, possibly, misleading – in that it fails to account for the fact that, ever since Immanuel Kant<sup>262</sup> entered the scene of intellectual life, it is no longer tenable to maintain that we, as humans, have direct access to the world, let alone to ignore the major – and, arguably, transcendental – role played by our mental and physical (pre-)dispositions in processing information derived from our senses.

Put differently, the whole point of Kant’s project was to synthesize *empiricism* (à la Francis Bacon, John Locke, and David Hume) and *rationalism* (à la René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz), arguing – within the framework of his *transcendental idealism*<sup>263</sup> – that all we have access to is the ‘phenomenal world’ (that is, things as they appear to us in space and time), rather than the ‘noumenal world’ (that is, things-in-themselves). On this view, the ‘phenomenal world’ depends on, but is not congruent with, the ‘noumenal world’. Crucially, whereas the former is knowable, the latter is only inferable. Kant’s account of (a) ‘analytic propositions’ and ‘synthetic propositions’ and (b) *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge demonstrates that *empiricism* on its own is blind, just as *rationalism* on its own remains empty. The two approaches need to be combined to grasp the *complementary* functions of *experience* and *reason* in human forms of life. The key point in relation to Boltanski’s above-mentioned statement, then, is to recognize that ‘sense-based experience’ is not tantamount to ‘direct access to the world’ and ‘reason-guided reflection’ is not equivalent to ‘pure logic about the world’. Just as empiricism and rationalism should be synthesized by philosophy, experience and reason have always already been synthesized by humanity.

4.

Boltanski’s analysis rests on a crucial distinction between two levels of reality: on the one hand, the level of *surfaces* and *appearances*; on the other hand, the level of *essences* and *substances*. In philosophical terms, this

distinction may – *at first glance* – be captured in the opposition ‘phenomenal’ vs. ‘noumenal’. In sociological terms, this distinction has major socio-cognitive implications, insofar as it hinges on the following twofold assumption: the former is not only ‘official’ but also – at least potentially – ‘illusory’, ‘deceptive’, and ‘misleading’; the latter is not only ‘unofficial’ but also ‘real’, ‘genuine’, and ‘authentic’. Conspiracy theories tend to go a step further by portraying the latter, contrary to the former, not only as ‘deep’, ‘hidden’, and ‘concealed’ but also as ‘threatening’, ‘menacing’, and ‘malevolent’ as well as ‘controlling’, ‘power-driven’, and ‘secretive’ – if not ‘plotting’, ‘devious’, ‘insidious’, and ‘unlawful’. The distinction between these two fundamental levels of ontology, then, lies at the core of Boltanski’s ‘REALITY vs. *reality*’<sup>264</sup> antinomy.

Boltanski’s framework may benefit, however, from incorporating philosophical intuitions into his sociological approach. The foundational distinction between ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’ can be traced all the way back to Ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>265</sup> Marx’s famous dictum that ‘all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’<sup>266</sup> touches upon the same issue. On Marx’s account, one of the main objectives of scientific activity is to go *beyond* the surface level of appearances by penetrating *into* the substance level of essences. Insofar as scientific inquiries are terminologically precise, epistemologically reflexive, conceptually sophisticated, methodologically rigorous, and empirically substantiated, they increase the chances of delivering on this front. If so, they are capable of describing, analysing, interpreting, explaining, and – if desired – making judgements (and, in some cases, making partially – if not entirely – accurate predictions) about the constitution, functioning, and development of reality, or of particular aspects of reality, in a more or less systematic fashion. Of course, this is not the end of the story.

Large parts of the social sciences have abandoned a positivist self-conception by accepting the Weberian contention that ‘[s]ociology [...] is a science concerning itself with the *interpretive understanding* of social action’<sup>267</sup>. In this sense, Boltanski’s ‘pragmatic sociology

<sup>261</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 229 (italics added).

<sup>262</sup> See Kant (1995 [1781]), Kant (1995 [1788]), and Kant (1995 [1790]). See also Kant (2009 [1784]).

<sup>263</sup> See, for instance: Allison (2004 [1983]); Gram (1984); Senderowicz (2005); Watkins (2002); Waxman (1991).

<sup>264</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. xv (italics in original). See *ibid.*, Chapter 1.

<sup>265</sup> See, for instance, Grayling (2020 [2019]), Part I.

<sup>266</sup> Marx (2000/1977 [1867/1885/1894]), p. 532 (from Volume III of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*) (quotation modified). On this point, see, for instance: Holloway and Susen (2013), p. 27; Larrain (1996); Susen (2011a), p. 451; Susen (2011c), pp. 74–75; Susen (2015a), pp. 51 and 167.

<sup>267</sup> Weber (1978 [1922]), p. 4 (italics added). On this point, see, for instance, Susen (2011c), p. 75.

of critique' stands in the Weberian tradition, emphasizing the perspective-taking ('soft') insights obtained from *Verstehen*; by contrast, Bourdieu's 'critical sociology' is firmly situated in the Marxian tradition, stressing the perspective-transcending ('hard') knowledge gained from *Erklären*.<sup>268</sup> The story gets far more complicated, however, if the Kantian concern with the relationship – and potential discrepancy – between 'the phenomenal' and 'the noumenal' is taken into consideration. Indeed, from a Kantian point of view, even the most erudite, refined, and cutting-edge forms of scientific investigation cannot undo the fact that, while 'the phenomenal' may be knowable, 'the noumenal' is only inferable.<sup>269</sup> This insight lies at the core of the fallibilist spirit permeating critical epistemologies.<sup>270</sup>

If Kant is right, then the epistemological implications – not only for the study of mysteries and conspiracies, but also for the status of scientific inquiries – are of an order of magnitude whose far-reaching significance can hardly be overstated. Our scientifically informed grasp of 'the essence of things' may be as limited, if not deceptive and misleading, as our ordinary grasp of 'the outward appearance of things'. In this respect, the point is not to make a case for radical epistemological scepticism – let alone relativism, nihilism, or fatalism. Rather, the point is to concede that fundamental epistemic distinctions – such as 'common sense' vs. 'critical thinking', 'ordinary knowledge' vs. 'scientific knowledge', 'appearance' vs. 'essence', 'illusion' vs. 'reality', 'REALITY' vs. 'reality' – acquire a remarkable level of complexity if one shares the Kantian position. Although this may sound counterintuitive, from a Kantian perspective, *both* elements of *each* of these conceptual pairs remain caught at the 'phenomenal level'. On this account, the 'noumenal level' – that is, the world of things-in-themselves – has always been, and will always remain, inaccessible to the human senses and human reason and, hence, to human understanding. The real mysteries are not those that can or cannot be uncovered, but those about which knowledge can only be inferred.

## 5.

A key question arising from Boltanski's analysis is *why, by and large, sociologists are not accused of conspiracy*.

The inquisitive and critical attitude advocated by most sociologists – especially those interested in the role of power relations – is based on reflection, suspicion, and scepticism. This orientation obliges them to scrutinize vital epistemic components of people's lifeworlds – such as tradition, doxa, and common sense. In addition, it requires them to unmask the ideological tools designed and employed to defend, and to conceal, the 'real' interests of particular individual and collective actors, notably those occupying powerful positions in society.<sup>271</sup> Moreover, sociologists tend to attribute the occurrence of micro-, meso-, and macro-historical *events* to the actions performed by different *entities*. These entities may be classified as 'human' or 'non-human', 'individual' or 'collective', 'substantial' or 'relational', 'ephemeral' or 'structural', 'symbolic' or 'material' – to mention only the most common ways of categorizing them. Sociologists tend to confer different kinds and degrees of *intentionality*, and thus the *capacity for action*, to these entities.

The pressing question that poses itself in this context is why, by and large, sociologists are not accused of conspiracy. One may challenge the presuppositions underlying this question by arguing that, in effect, sociologists *can* be accused of conspiratorial – or at least quasi-conspiratorial – thinking, insofar as they are committed to the project of *uncovering* underlying power relations, which are shaped by the interests pursued by different social groups (whether these be defined in terms of class, profession, ethnicity, 'race', culture, nationality, language, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and/or other key sociological variables). Indeed, Popper's critique of 'sociological conspiracy theories'<sup>272</sup>, including their alleged endorsement of the 'intentionalist hypothesis'<sup>273</sup>, is indicative of this uncharitable reading.

A more straightforward response to the preceding question, however, suggests that sociologists are not in the business of *conspiracy*<sup>274</sup> but, rather, in the business of *science*<sup>275</sup>. Science – at least in its ideal-typical version, epitomized in the inquisitive pursuit of knowledge – is

<sup>271</sup> See, for instance: Susen (2014d); Susen (2016b); Susen (2015a), esp. Chapter 2 (section iii).

<sup>272</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 235. Cf. Pigden (1995)

<sup>273</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 224.

<sup>274</sup> See, for instance: Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, and Gregory (1999); Aupers (2012); Bartlett and Miller (2010); Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen (2017); Brotherton (2015); Butter and Knight (2015); Carroll (1987); Clarke (2002); Harambam and Aupers (2014); Harder (2018); Heins (2007); Moore (2018); Pigden (1995); Renard (2015); van Prooijen and Douglas (2017); van Prooijen and Douglas (2018); van Prooijen and van Lange (2014).

<sup>275</sup> See, for instance: Bourdieu (1993 [1984]-a); Bourdieu (2002b); Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991 [1968]); Susen (2011c); Swedberg (2012).

<sup>268</sup> On the distinction between the paradigm of 'explanation' [*Erklären*] and the paradigm of 'understanding' [*Verstehen*], see, for instance: Apel (1971); Apel (1979); Bourdieu (1993); Delanty (1997); Delanty and Strydom (2003); Dilthey (1883); Habermas (1970); Outhwaite (1986 [1975]); Outhwaite (1987); Outhwaite (1998); Outhwaite (2000); Susen (2011a); Susen (2011b); Susen (2013), p. 326; Susen (2015a), pp. 48 and 66–67.

<sup>269</sup> See Kant (1995 [1781]). See also Ward (2006), Part I.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. Brown (2018), Cooke (2006), and Frederick (2020). Cf. also Susen (2020c), pp. 756–757.

characterized by terminological precision, epistemological reflexivity, conceptual sophistication, methodological rigour, and empirical evidence. In addition, science is supposed to be motivated by the ambition to reach the highest possible standards of reason, argument, logic, justification, critique, and peer review. What is needed, in other words, is a robust defence of the *epistemic foundations of scientific inquiry*<sup>276</sup>, illustrating that it has little, if anything, to do with a speculative, let alone fictional, engagement with mysteries and conspiracies.

6.

Boltanski is right to insist on the socio-ontological centrality of *ambiguity*. As he notes, legally defined roles leave little, if any, room for ambiguity: from a judicial point of view, it is not possible that an individual belongs *more or less* to an entity – for example, to a state, organization, association, foundation, corporation, or institution. Arguably, sociological discourses are more flexible than their judicial counterparts, since they accept, or indeed highlight, the fact that *ambiguity* is a constitutive feature of social life. On this interpretation, different individuals participate *to different degrees* in the construction of different entities. An issue that Boltanski could have explored in further detail, however, is the extent to which *ontological ambiguity* can, and perhaps should, be translated into *methodological ambiguity* and *conceptual ambiguity*.

Due to its capacity to expose the messiness of human affairs, fiction – for instance, in the form of novels and short stories – may provide more accurate accounts of reality than sociological studies. In this sense, works of fiction are more persuasive in translating people's everyday *ontological ambiguity* (at the experiential level) into *methodological ambiguity* (at the operational level) and *conceptual ambiguity* (at the representational level) than social-scientific narratives. Granted, fiction has its own rules and parameters. One of its main strengths, however, is that it is not constrained by the formulaic conventions of science, notably those associated with the straitjackets of reason, argument, logic, justification, structure, coherence, and systematicity. Fiction is not confined by the widely accepted 'standards' of scientificity – such as terminological precision, episte-

mological reflexivity, conceptual sophistication, methodological rigour, and empirical evidence (not to mention reason, argument, and logic). In brief, fiction escapes the rigid architecture imposed by scientific criteria.

To be clear, scientific criteria can be just as *enabling and empowering* as *constraining and disempowering* for anybody seeking to provide an insightful account of social reality. The point, therefore, is not to abandon science but, rather, to recognize its limitations – not from a religious or spiritual angle, but from the perspective of everyday life. In many ways, the experiential constitution of everyday life is more genuinely reflected in fiction than in science. *Fictional* narratives leave more room for facing up to the inherent messiness, ambiguity, and fragility of human existence<sup>277</sup> than their *scientific* counterparts.

It is true that, in many respects, the latter may appear superior to the former – especially in terms of their capacity to identify underlying *patterns* of behavioural, ideological, and institutional functioning. Pattern-seeking activities, however, belong as much to the sphere of ordinary life as to the sphere of science. Admittedly, the pattern-seeking spirit of ordinary actors may be taken to a higher level when translated into the pattern-seeking inquiries carried out by scientists. Pattern-seeking activities may be inspired by praxis-driven concerns expressed by *laypersons* in their everyday lives or, alternatively, by methodologically equipped and theoretically informed investigations conducted by *experts* in the sphere of science. Since they are inevitably shaped by 'habits of the mind'<sup>278</sup>, however, pattern-seeking activities – irrespective of whether they are pursued by laypersons or experts – are by no means guaranteed to generate infallible and irrefutable representations of the 'noumenal world', hidden beneath the experientially accessible level of the 'phenomenal world'. The question of whether or not *both* ambiguity *and* certainty, indeterminacy *and* determinacy, randomness *and* causality are constitutive features of *both* the 'phenomenal world' (things as they appear to us in space and time) *and* the 'noumenal world' (things-in-themselves) remains a mystery that, without the need for a philosophical conspiracy, will continue to haunt us in future inquiries into the condition of humanity.

7.

Boltanski's analysis obliges us to reflect on different forms and degrees of cognitive distortion, particularly in relation to the concepts of *deception*, *self-deception*, *wish-*

<sup>276</sup> See, for instance: Baert (2005); Benton and Craib (2001); Bernstein (1983); Bourdieu (1983); Bourdieu (1995); Bourdieu (1997a); Bourdieu (2001a); Bourdieu (2002a); Bunge (1996); Chalmers (1999 [1976]); Couvalis (1997); Delanty (1997); Delanty and Strydom (2003); Dreyfus and Rabinow (1999); Fabiani (2005); Fay (1996); Flyvbjerg (2001); Giddens (1987); Habermas (1988 [1967/1970]); Heller (1986); Hesse (1980); Hollis (1994); Ladyman (2001); Outhwaite (1987); Outhwaite (1996); Rosenberg (2008 [1988]); Susen (2015a), Chapter 1; Winch (2008 [1958]); Yearley (2004); Ziman (2000).

<sup>277</sup> See Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2014 [2010]). See also, for instance, Cordero (2017) and Susen (2017a).

<sup>278</sup> See Hume (2007 [1748]).

*ful thinking, bad faith, manipulation, and ideology.*<sup>279</sup> In this respect, the following questions arise:

- How can each of these types of cognitive distortion be defined?
- What are the main similarities and differences between them?
- To what extent do they overlap?
- To what extent do they feed off each other?
- To what extent do they serve specific functions at different levels of our existence?
- To what extent are they shaped by objective, normative, and/or subjective factors?
- To what extent do they play a significant role in ordinary, fictional, and/or scientific accounts of reality?
- To what extent are they necessary to establish epistemic boundaries between truth and falsehood, fact and opinion, knowledge and faith, reason and experience?

The aforementioned questions are relevant to exploring the epistemological and sociological constitution of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries – not least because they presuppose a fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, *a misleading surface reality of appearances* and, on the other hand, *a deep, hidden, and potentially disconcerting reality of underlying structural and/or agential constituents*. A comprehensive sociology of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries needs to address the preceding questions in order to grasp the social ramifications of cognitive distortion.

8.

At the core of Boltanski's account of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries lies the relationship between *entities* and *events*. The link between the two is mediated by, and contingent upon, *intentions* and *meanings* as well as *structures* and *actions*. In this respect, the role of *causality* is central, raising important philosophical questions. One may suggest that, in practice, both natural scientists and social scientists are 'naïve realists', or at least 'pragmatic realists', since they tend to take the existence of reality – and, by implication, the variables by which it is shaped, if not governed – for granted. One need not be a Humean to call the validity of such a naïve or pragmatic approach – which is based on unargued assumptions – into question.<sup>280</sup>

One of the legitimate questions that defenders of 'methodological individualism' may pose when reflecting on the premises that undergird 'methodological collectivism' and 'social holism', however, is how it is possible

to prove the *ontological status of collective entities*. Arguably, it is even more difficult to corroborate the thesis that collective entities exert causal, let alone purposive, power. And yet, sociology, although it is essentially an empirical science, contains an abundant amount of key concepts referring to 'entities' whose existence cannot be confirmed by means of our senses or scientific experiments, but whose existence it nonetheless presupposes.

Consider, for instance, the following concepts: the economy, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, and the state. It is not possible to touch, to see, to hear, to smell, or to taste any of these 'entities' *directly*. Sociologists (and non-sociologists) have access not to these 'entities' themselves but, rather, only to the symbolic and material *manifestations* of their existence. Nevertheless, most sociologists (and non-sociologists) assume not only that these 'entities' exist but also that they exert a considerable degree of power – notably in terms of shaping behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning. Similar to fundamental concepts in philosophy, such as 'consciousness' or 'mind', one may endorse a naturalist or materialist position by arguing that the universe is full of 'emergent properties'<sup>281</sup> and that, in this respect, the social world is no exception. In other words, the fact that we cannot prove the actuality of an 'entity' by virtue of our senses is not a strong enough reason to exclude the possibility of its existence.

Scientists – regardless of their area of specialization – need to provide robust (a) ontological, (b) epistemological, (c) terminological, (d) methodological, and (e) theoretical grounds on which to defend the following assumptions: (a) an 'entity' *exists* in some way and on some level; (b) its existence and constitution can be *known* or at least *inferred*; (c) it can be appropriately *defined* and *described*; (d) it can be *studied* by suitable methods; and (e) it can be *explained* within a more or less systematic conceptual framework. Unless a particular concept passes all five of these 'tests', it is hard to see how its inclusion in a specific disciplinary vocabulary, let alone canon, can be justified. Both in the natural sciences and in the social sciences, any serious inquiry into a given 'entity' (or set of 'entities') needs to offer solid ontological, epistemological, terminological, methodological, and theoretical grounds on which its (or their) existence can be empirically and/or rationally substantiated.

9.

Boltanski's analysis obliges us to reflect on the construction (and reconstruction) of *key concepts* in the humanities and social sciences. Boltanski is right to be wary of

<sup>279</sup> Cf. Geuss (1981), Geuss (1994), Geuss (2001), Geuss (2014), Geuss (2017), and Geuss (2020).

<sup>280</sup> See Hume (2007 [1748])

<sup>281</sup> See, for instance, Aziz-Alaoui and Bertelle (2009).

a pronounced tendency among scholars and academics – who wish to focus on ‘getting on with their research’ – to take the meanings of key concepts for granted. Let us consider some issues related to this problem in further detail.

First, Boltanski posits that sociologists risk ‘merging with the fields of law or business administration and generating doubts about the added value of [their] contributions’<sup>282</sup> if they construct, endorse, and rely on conceptual ‘schemas in which only already recognized entities appear’<sup>283</sup>. If, in other words, sociologists fall into the trap of *conceptual conventionalism*, whereby they make reference to, and aim to study, only those entities that, in terms of their representational status, are already incorporated into a particular canon or discipline, then they risk jeopardizing not only their intellectual autonomy and institutional identity but also, crucially, their capacity to grasp the social world in a truly enlightening and original manner.

While, in principle, this is a legitimate point and, indubitably, a concern that sociologists (and social scientists more generally) should take seriously, it is equally important to acknowledge that, over the past centuries, there has been a *proliferation of new concepts, assumptions, and paradigms* in the humanities and social sciences, some of which have succeeded in transcending the stifling logic of academic ivory towers and in finding their way into ordinary language. There is a danger in reproducing canonized conceptual ‘schemas in which only already recognized entities appear’<sup>284</sup>. At the same time, there is a danger in being driven by fashion or by the ambition to make sweeping claims, wrapped up in provocative terminology. Academic window-dressing practices may give the *misleading* impression that something hitherto undiscovered is being discovered, or that an original contribution is being made when, in fact, this may *not* be the case. As illustrated, for instance, in the widespread use of catchy terms such as ‘postindustrialism’, ‘postmodernism’, and ‘posthumanism’, it has become fashionable to proclaim ‘that we [...] live in a *post-something era*’<sup>285</sup>. In short, rigid conceptual conventionalism can be as problematic as playful semantic creationism, representing two complementary manifestations of opportunistic *Zeitgeist*-surfing.<sup>286</sup>

Second, Boltanski states that ‘[o]ne of sociology’s difficulties stems from the fact that it studies both per-

sons and entities that are not persons’<sup>287</sup>. He fails to spell out, however, that in *all* three main branches of knowledge – that is, in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences – there are numerous academic disciplines concerned with the study of ‘both persons and entities that are not persons’<sup>288</sup>, that is, of both human and non-human entities.

Moreover, Boltanski asserts that ‘no entity is so *globalizing* or so *totalizing* that reference to it can condense the entire identity of a person’<sup>289</sup>. In his own work, however, Boltanski draws a useful distinction between ‘*simple domination*’ and ‘*complex domination*’.<sup>290</sup> In the former, subjects are partially or wholly deprived of basic liberties, while their interactions are marked by profound material and symbolic asymmetries, which are generated and reinforced by virtue of top-down physical force. In the latter, subjects are entitled, and even encouraged, to benefit from their basic liberties and to manage their lives as relatively free and autonomous agents, while accepting that inequalities of opportunity may translate into inequalities of outcome and that, crucially, structural asymmetries remain in place, but without being enforced in a top-down, let alone violent, manner.

One need not be a Foucauldian to acknowledge that, both in regimes of ‘simple domination’ and in regimes of ‘complex domination’, entities *can* be ‘so globalizing’ and ‘so totalizing’ that reference to them *can* (at least ostensibly) condense the entire identity of a person – precisely because their modes of governmentality, expressed in the establishment of normative orders and regulatory regimes, confirm the ubiquity of biopower through the effective disciplinary control of the human body.

10.

According to Boltanski, the development of sociology as a discipline from the mid-twentieth century onwards can, in several respects, be regarded as a response to what he describes as ‘*Popper’s curse*’<sup>291</sup>. As illustrated above, Boltanski seeks to provide a critical overview of

<sup>282</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 233.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>285</sup> Wagner (1992), p. 467 (italics added). On this point, see also Susen (2015a), p. 18, and Susen (2020a), p. 170.

<sup>286</sup> See Susen (2020a), pp. 156 and 328.

<sup>287</sup> Boltanski (2014 [2012]), p. 252.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252 (italics added).

<sup>290</sup> On the concept of ‘*simple domination*’, see, for example: Boltanski (2008), esp. pp. 149–158; Boltanski (2009a), pp. 186–190; Boltanski (2011 [2009]), pp. 124–126. See also, for instance: Susen (2012b), pp. 707–710; Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2014 [2010]), pp. 188–190; Susen (2014c), pp. 652–656; Susen (2016b), pp. 212–215. On the concept of ‘*complex domination*’, see, for example: Boltanski (2008), esp. pp. 149–158; Boltanski (2009a), pp. 190–193; Boltanski (2011 [2009]), pp. 127–129. See also, for instance: Susen (2012b), pp. 707–710; Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2014 [2010]), pp. 188–190; Susen (2014c), pp. 652–656; Susen (2016b), pp. 212–215.

<sup>291</sup> See Boltanski (2014 [2012]), pp. 240–251.



recent trends in sociology, arguing that the emergence of various key intellectual currents is symptomatic of the legacy of this ‘Popperian curse’. More specifically, he maintains that the following perspectives reflect the degree to which, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, sociologists have sought to find a convincing response to the challenges posed by Popper’s philosophy of science: methodological individualism; analytic Marxism; moderate and radical versions of structuralism; Bourdieu’s theory of practice; micro-sociological approaches; network analysis; and, perhaps less obviously, sociological theories of multipositionality. The way in which Boltanski’s argument concerning ‘Popper’s curse’ is set up, however, is problematic for at least three reasons.

First, unsympathetic critics may contend that Popper’s account is based on a gross misrepresentation of the social sciences, especially sociology. In order to make his line of reasoning work, Popper presents a caricature of social-scientific research, especially when identifying large parts of it as guilty of falling into the traps of ‘social holism’, ‘methodological essentialism’, and ‘determinist utopianism’ (and, by implication, ‘intentionalism’ and ‘historicism’). In the mid-twentieth century, the historical context in which Popper delivered his famous 1948 lecture, several important modes of inquiry had entered the scene, some of which did *not* fit his unfavourable diagnosis of the intellectual landscape prevalent at the time: interpretive sociology, critical theory, micro-sociology, ethnomethodology, existential(ist) sociology, social phenomenology, and hermeneutics. These (and other) approaches had already gained traction and were largely at odds with Popper’s straw-man depiction of the social sciences in the mid-twentieth century. Despite being aware that making reference to communities or collectives is ‘hardly the sole prerogative of sociologists’<sup>292</sup>, Boltanski does not expose the *distortive* aspects of Popper’s analysis in a detailed, let alone evaluative, fashion.

Second, Boltanski overstates the impact of Popper’s critique on the development of sociology from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Undoubtedly, Popper’s account touches upon crucial issues with which sociologists, in different ways and from different angles, have been grappling for some time. This does not mean, however, that the frameworks they have developed in recent decades – notably those mentioned by Boltanski – are a (direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious) response to ‘Popper’s curse’. In other words, Boltanski seems to give Popper more credit than he deserves, at least in

terms of his alleged impact on the emergence of new sociological approaches from the mid-twentieth century onwards.

Third, even if – broadly speaking – one shares Boltanski’s assessment of the lasting legacy of ‘Popper’s curse’, it is noticeable that key sociological perspectives that may be interpreted in the same vein have been omitted. Consider, for instance, the following influential sociological frameworks: social constructivism, intersectionalism, feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Of course, they do *not* share the basic assumptions underlying methodological individualism; if anything, they are opposed to it. Similar to the other currents of thought mentioned by Boltanski, however, they articulate the need to challenge the validity of canonized dichotomies in the social sciences<sup>293</sup> – including paradigmatic antinomies such as ‘social holism’ vs. ‘methodological individualism’, ‘methodological essentialism’ vs. ‘methodological nominalism’, and ‘determinist utopianism’ vs. ‘anti-determinist realism’ (not to mention ‘objectivism’ vs. ‘subjectivism’, ‘determinism’ vs. ‘voluntarism’, and ‘structuralism’ vs. ‘intentionalism’).

Arguably, they are also opposed to crude versions of ‘historicism’, not least because all of them are, to a greater or lesser degree, inspired by Foucauldian critiques of modernist notions of reason, science, and progress.<sup>294</sup> In this sense, they *share* Popper’s rejection of the collective pursuit of metanarratives, epitomized in the belief that history is reducible to an ensemble of unavoidable, predictable, progressive, directional, and universal developments, indicative of underlying forces driving social evolution. Admittedly, it would be misleading to characterize the aforementioned sociological frameworks (that is, social constructivism, intersectionalism, feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism) as ‘Popperian’. It is hard to ignore, however, that there is a substantial amount of *overlap* between their and Popper’s respective criticisms of intentionalist and historicist forms of reductionism.

## CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper has been to provide a critical analysis of Boltanski’s account of the multifaceted relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries in modern societies. The first part has given an overview of Boltanski’s central theoretical contributions to our understanding of mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries. The second part has offered some critical

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>293</sup> Cf. Jenks (1998).

<sup>294</sup> See Allen (2016).

reflections on important issues arising from Boltanski's examination of the relationship between mysteries, conspiracies, and inquiries – especially with regard to its limitations and shortcomings. As demonstrated above, this key aspect of Boltanski's work should not be overlooked, as it illuminates our grasp of the similarities and differences between central – notably ordinary, fictional, scientific, criminal, and judicial – types of investigation. Most, if not all, modes of inquiry are motivated by the ambition to uncover the constitution of an underlying reality, which tends to be concealed beneath the veil of everyday modes of perception, appreciation, interpretation, and action. If there is a lesson to be learnt from the preceding analysis, it is that inquiries into the unknown, including those seeking to shed light on alleged mysteries and conspiracies, require as much scrutiny as their objects of study.

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