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Special Section: Boltanski-Esquerre on Enrichment

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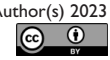
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Towards an Ontology of Contemporary Reality?

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to provide a critical overview of the key contributions made by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre in *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique? Événements et opinions aux XXI^e siècle*. Whereas *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* is essentially a study in economic sociology, Boltanski and Esquerre's latest book reflects a shift in emphasis towards political sociology. As demonstrated in this paper, their inquiry into the *ontologie de l'actualité* – that is, the ontology of contemporary reality – contains valuable insights into the relationship between the production, circulation, and consumption of news, on the one hand, and the emergence of processes of politicization, on the other. The first half of this paper comprises a summary of the central arguments developed in Boltanski and Esquerre's investigation, before moving, in the second half, to an assessment of its most significant limitations.

Keywords

actualité, Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, news, ontology, politicization, reality

I. Introduction: Between *Actualité* and *Politisation*

Whereas *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities* (2020 [2017]; 2017a) [henceforth *ECC*] is a study in economic sociology,[1] Boltanski and Esquerre's most recent book, entitled *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique? Événements et opinions aux XXI^e siècle* (2022) [henceforth *QAP*], reflects a shift in emphasis towards political sociology, but not in a narrow sense. In this inquiry, the two authors focus on the relationship between two sets of processes that are constitutive of modern public spheres (cf. Habermas, 1989 [1962]): on the one hand, processes of newsmaking [*processus de mise en actualité*], in the sense of framing and presenting selected contemporary occurrences as newsworthy, thereby permitting a large number of people to obtain knowledge about facts and events

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that, for the most part, they have *not* directly experienced; on the other hand, processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*], which, through the problematization of facts and events, manifest themselves in a multiplicity of interpretations conveyed in commentaries, discussions, and controversies.

Boltanski and Esquerre spell out that their analysis is *not* founded on a 'normative definition of the public sphere' (p. 9) or attached to a particular political philosophy. Rather, in accordance with the bottom-up spirit of the 'pragmatic sociology of critique' (cf. Susen, 2012, 2015b, 2017; Susen and Turner, 2014), their approach seeks to shed light on 'the implicit notions on which the competences that people implement to act depend' (p. 9). Given their context-dependence, these notions are treated as 'historically and socially situated ontologies' (p. 9).

For Boltanski and Esquerre's examination of 'the democratic public sphere' (p. 9), two aspects are particularly important:

1. There is the relationship between the public sphere and current affairs [*actualité*] – that is, anything that is happening in the present, hitting the (local, national, and/or global) news, and (directly or indirectly) relevant to people's lives. Crucial in this respect is the fact that digitalization has exacerbated the continuous circulation of news, shaping people's perception and interpretation of reality.
2. There is the dynamic of politicization [*politisation*], which refers to 'the way in which politics manifests itself today in the public sphere' (p. 10). When engaging with current affairs, people are exposed to, and often participate in, processes of politicization. Without these processes, the functioning of the political sphere would be inconceivable. In line with their commitment to a pragmatist understanding of reality, Boltanski and Esquerre conceive of *politics* not as *the political* (in an essentialist or substantialist sense) but as *politicization* (in a relationalist and processual sense).

In short, the relationship between the production, circulation, and consumption of *news*, on the one hand, and the emergence of processes of *politicization*, on the other, lies at the core of Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry. As part of this undertaking, the two sociologists stress the relative autonomy of each side of this complex relationship: *not every fact or event reported in the news is necessarily politicized, just as processes of politicization can unfold without being covered in the news*.

II. The Ontology of Contemporary Reality: Political or Politicizable?

In *QAP*, Boltanski and Esquerre pursue two main objectives:

1. Inspired by Foucault's (1986 [1984]) comments on Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?', they seek to develop an '*ontologie de l'actualité*' (p. 10, emphasis in original) – that is, an ontology of contemporary reality. Rather than offering yet another version of media studies, dealing with the functioning of digital information and communication technologies, Boltanski and Esquerre endorse

a neo-Foucauldian approach aimed at exploring 'the multiple knowledges concerning the world and what is happening' (p. 11). When these knowledges circulate in the form of news, however, most people do *not* have direct and personal experiences of the facts and events about which narratives are being constructed. In other words, there is a gap between their *direct* experiences of facts and events in their lifeworlds, on the one hand, and their *indirect* experiences of facts and events via digital media, on the other (cf. Boltanski, 1999 [1993]).

Both forms of engagement with the world have a *temporal* dimension. In their previous work, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a, 2017b, 2020 [2017]) have highlighted the pivotal role of temporality in the enrichment economy, notably with regard to the discursive construction of 'the past' as a key reference point for value creation in 'the present' (cf. Susen, 2018). In their new book, they reconsider this 'canonical opposition' (p. 12) between 'the present' and 'the past' in ontological terms: the former occurs 'in a "superficial" manner' (p. 12), to such an extent that 'temporality is judged too short to be true' (p. 12); the latter is associated with the idea of a 'long period' (p. 12) – that is, the processes in and through which 'the silent, but profound, evolution of structures takes place' (p. 12), shaping, if not governing, the course of social actions.

2. Boltanski and Esquerre dissect the terrain of *politics* [*la politique*], drawing attention to its constitution and function in a society marked by the constant production, circulation, and consumption of news. In the Western world, the vast majority of citizens engage with politics through the lens of the media. One vital element of politics is to define what counts (and what does not count) as 'political' (pp. 12–13). Part of this task is to grapple with political issues, differences, and struggles – notably in terms of their impact on the development of society.

   Delimiting the terrain of politics, however, is more complicated than it may appear at first sight. Indeed, Boltanski and Esquerre are wary of the (arguably inflationary) notion that, in one way or another, 'everything is political'. Since the French Revolution, this dictum has reinforced utopian expectations about the possibility of a 'total revolution' (Yack, 1986; cf. Boltanski, 2002). If everything were political, then politics would not have anything outside itself and, by implication, could be conflated with social life, or even with *any* aspect of human existence (p. 13). Challenging this view, we need to recognize that the realm of 'the political' is more specific (and more limited) than the realm of 'the social'.

   Making a case for a 'processual approach' (p. 13), Boltanski and Esquerre insist that suggesting that 'everything is political' (in a normativist fashion) is no less problematic than contending that 'everything is social' (in a socio-constructivist fashion). They stress, however, that 'everything is *politicizable*' (p. 13, emphasis in original). In principle, any facet of human existence – regardless of whether it may be classified as an objective, normative, or subjective dimension – *can* be politicized. In short, *not everything is political, but everything is politicizable*. Given this high degree of contingency, it is no accident that the influence of politics on our lifeworlds may vary significantly between different historical contexts (p. 13).

III. The Idea of a Temporalized Sociology

Boltanski and Esquerre's study is based on an extensive analysis of two main sources of data (see pp. 23–241): (a) 120,000 commentaries, published between September and October 2019, in *Le Monde*; (b) numerous commentaries on past events, published on two online video channels in January 2021 by the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* on YouTube – *INA Société* (approx. 7000 commentaries) and *INA Politique* (approx. 1300 commentaries). The two authors provide an in-depth analysis of what – in accordance with editorial moderation policies – can and cannot be said, comparing accepted and rejected commentaries with each other, thereby shedding light on opinion- and will-formation processes in pluralistic societies.

In terms of their theoretical angle, Boltanski and Esquerre stress the *paradoxical* status of *actualité* (pp. 13–14): on the one hand, it plays a *central* role in our lives, in the sense that everyone is immersed in some form of contemporary reality, irrespective of whether it is experienced directly or indirectly; on the other hand, it plays a *marginal* role in our lives, in the sense that the kind of information that captures our attention obtains its prominence from the fact that it distinguishes itself from everyday experiences. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of *actualité* is that it often renders present what we may experience as inaccessible (p. 14).

The interpretation of the material examined in *QAP* poses a new challenge for the social sciences (p. 15), since it obliges us to move beyond a pragmatic sociology that is limited to the study of journalistic practices and, hence, lacks a sustained engagement with the key focus of journalistic work: *actualité*. Just as Boltanski and Esquerre discard reductive versions of media studies, they reject any 'explanatory routines of classical sociology' (p. 15) aimed at unearthing 'so-called "social" properties of actors' (p. 15) and leading to 'identitarian essentialism and behavioural essentialism' (p. 15). In line with this 'uncovering mission', it is common to draw a distinction between two levels of analysis in modern sociology (p. 16): on the one hand, a *superficial* level, which is composed of observable facts, succeeding each other in time and resulting in the emergence of *actualité*, more or less ignored or treated as if they were contingent and escaped scientific investigation; on the other hand, a *profound* level, which is commonly conceived of in terms of underlying structures – a point explored in *ECC* (2020 [2017]: 338–42). The second level is epitomized in different forms of structuralism – notably *social structuralism* (which tends to focus on social organizations and institutions) and *cognitive structuralism* (which presupposes the existence of invariant structures within the human mind, serving as a fixed point).

Seeking to resolve the opposition between these two levels of analysis, Boltanski and Esquerre make a case for a *temporalized sociology* (p. 16), capable of grasping 'the way in which people co-exist and interact at a particular moment in time' (p. 16) and, therefore, of understanding the contingencies permeating both the 'actuality' and the 'History' [*sic*] of their lifeworlds. The two scholars summarize the purpose of their inquiry as follows:

> We have taken seriously the commentaries on current affairs [*actualité*], by regarding them both as the expression of singularities and as attempts to generalize [*montée en généralité*],

> observing the way in which different actors, in their lifeworld[s], seek to adjust to current affairs [*actualité*] – that is, to what they know, at the same time as others, through hearsay [*ouï-dire*]. This possibility of detaching oneself temporarily from one's lifeworld to pay attention to the inaccessible is a central way to co-ordinate oneself with others and, thus, 'to make society'. (p. 16)

IV. Crowds, Masses, and Networks

Boltanski and Esquerre distinguish three key periods, to which they refer as 'moments':

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

These three 'moments' share several key features. First, each of them is shaped by a new agent [*actant*] that – 'through its violent, blind, and harmful action' – 'threatens society and destroys its political regulations' (p. 18). Second, each of them is characterized by 'a logic of gregarious association' (p. 18), which brings people closer together and, in a quasi-collectivist fashion, strips each person of their sense of singularity and uniqueness. Third, in each of them, individual choices and the exercise of a person's autonomy are severely curtailed by the *horizontal* logic of imitation and/or the *vertical* logic of intimidation or manipulation. Typically, this kind of dynamic benefits individuals who succeed in taking on the role of a leader and/or influencer, equipped with the power to impose their wishes and desires upon their (quasi-hypnotized) followers. In brief, all three 'moments' have a pronounced *destructive*, *normative*, and *imitative/manipulative* potential, which manifests itself not only in the radical transformation but also in the gradual synchronization [*Gleichschaltung*] of society.

At stake in these three 'moments' is the close relationship between social order and political order:

1. The *crowd moment* (1870–1914) owes its rise, to a large extent, to revolutionary movements. An illustrative example of this narrative is Hippolyte Taine's *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (published in six volumes between 1875 and 1883), exposing the social and political consequences of 'national decadence' (p. 19). Another example is Gustave Le Bon's (1895) *Psychologie des foules*, grappling with the link between 'the popular mind' and 'criminal crowds' (p. 19). The Paris Commune (1871) as well as the numerous strikes and riots that took place in late-19th-century France are key reference points for this 'crowd' narrative (cf. Borch, 2012).
2. The *mass moment* (1930–1970) is inextricably linked to the rise of fascism (notably in Italy, but also in other countries, such as Spain and Japan), National Socialism (in Germany), and Stalinism (in the USSR). The masses associated with this 'moment' became visible during the spectacular public ceremonies of totalitarian regimes and were amplified via propaganda mechanisms, especially on the radio and television. Having suffered different degrees of despair and

alienation (cf. Arendt, 1967 [1951]), these masses follow a leader, whose authority – which is typically reinforced by a certain degree of charismatic power – they confirm by recognizing him (or her) as their ultimate reference point. Masses are composed of separate individuals, 'who – owing to their absolute similarity and the new techniques of communication and control to which they are subjected – are unified by making up one sole body' (p. 19).

3. In the context of the *network moment* (1990–present), people are no less deindividualized and depersonalized than in the previous two periods. Given the disembodied (and disembodying) experiences generated by digital networks, people appear to be deprived of their bodies. Of course, people continue to exist; but, within the logic of digital networks, they do so primarily by leaving textual and visual traces on the Internet. 'The network logic makes it possible to separate the number of interventions on the Web and the number of people to whom these interventions are attributed' (p. 20) and by whom they are consumed. This logic, however, is far from unproblematic: in principle, network participants can say and write whatever they want, unless their contributions are monitored, and potentially censored, by those who control the digital platforms on which they are published. To a large extent, they enjoy this freedom, because their digital existence (especially if it remains anonymous) escapes the physical (and reputational) risks to which crowds and masses are exposed when engaging in socially 'deviant' behaviour (p. 20) in the 'real' world. This issue is reflected in the large amount of abusive behaviour that is widespread on the Internet. Another extensively discussed problem is the extent to which social and digital media have contributed not only to the rise of echo chambers but also to the rise of populism and authoritarianism across the world (p. 17). Its advantages and disadvantages notwithstanding, digital networks have established themselves as the principal realms of opinion- and will-formation in the 21st century. Having become such a large and dynamic space of communication, the influence of the Internet seems to be limitless. The Internet has become so powerful that it can seriously destabilize not only political structures and practices associated with liberal democracy but also, in a more fundamental sense, society as a whole (p. 18).

V. Democracy: Real or False?

According to Hobbes's pessimistic anthropology (pp. 20–21; cf. Hobbes, 1996 [1651]), politics is an artificial arrangement designed to ensure that people, having left the state of nature, can co-exist in a more or less peaceful manner. This perspective results in several curious oppositions: the social vs. the political, state of nature vs. social contract, barbarism vs. civilization, war vs. peace. One may have doubts about the validity of these oppositions, not least because some political regimes produce forms of life that are closer to the imposition of the state of nature, barbarism, and/or war than to the defence of social contracts, civilization, and/or peace. Indeed, sceptics may conceive of crowd, mass, and/or network societies as out-of-control historical formations that should – but cannot – be mitigated, let alone regulated, by democratic politics.

Boltanski and Esquerre, however, refuse to conceive of *democracy* in terms of binaries, such as the following: real vs. false, authentic vs. fake, direct vs. indirect, deliberative vs. representative, perfect vs. imperfect, empowering vs. disempowering, liberal vs. authoritarian – to mention only a few. To illustrate the importance of this point, they make reference to the position taken by numerous intellectuals in the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s. Both on the right and on the left, many of them were not willing to make the slightest effort to defend the Weimar Republic, because it did not live up to their unrealistic expectations – that is, to their somewhat limited, purist, and ultimately uncompromising view of what a 'proper' democracy should look like (pp. 21–2). In the end, not only Germany, but the entire world paid a heavy price for this dogmatic pursuit of ideological purity. It prevented democratic players from joining forces to defend liberal institutions and to thwart the rise of National Socialism. The lessons learnt from major historical events pose serious questions about the nature of interpretation.

VI. Interpretation: Between Suspicion and Recollection

Boltanski and Esquerre draw attention to Paul Ricœur's distinction between two fundamental types of interpretation: interpretation as a *recollection of meaning* and interpretation as an *exercise of suspicion* (p. 246).

Interpretation as an *exercise of suspicion* is aimed at 'the reduction of illusions, the uncovering of lies, and the exposure of simulacra' (p. 246). In essence, it is driven by the *demand for truth*. This orientation may be expressed in numerous ways – for instance, the radical critique of the media empire (by intellectuals), the illegitimate exercise of state authority (by journalists), or the systemic reproduction of elite power (by marginalized social groups). Members of the public may call the validity of the information with which they are provided into question (and reject it as 'misinformation', 'disinformation', or 'mal-information'). This outlook, however, is not reducible to a form of *objectivist realism*, which presupposes that 'facts' can and should be regarded as 'real' (p. 247) and requires that 'tests' [*épreuves*] be undertaken to establish their veracity. Rather, it may be articulated in different versions of *categorical scepticism* as well as *conspiracy theories*, which tend to assume that narratives are being constructed by powerful groups to cover up their 'true' interests and agendas (cf. Boltanski, 2014 [2012]; Susen, 2021a).

Interpretation as a *recollection of meaning* recognizes that 'the most likely meaning of a text or of an utterance [. . .] can appear mysterious or ambiguous' (p. 247) and may, in this sense, be above and beyond one's immediate reach. A key component of this approach is to seek understanding about texts and utterances not only by contextualizing 'the interpreted' but also by contextualizing 'the interpreter' (pp. 247–8). In the case of *actualité*, the interpretive process can be based on the contextual extension oriented towards the *past* or the contextual extension oriented towards the *future*. The former consists in establishing a link between facts from the present and facts from the past; the latter consists in making judgements about the (real or potential) consequences of current facts for the mid- and long-term future (p. 248).

Either way, the realm of *actualité* presents itself as 'the scene of a process' (p. 249; cf. Boltanski and Claverie, 2007) – that is, as a setting that is in a constant state of flux. If, however, an interpretation is pursued primarily with the aim of getting closer to the facts

of the future, then it cannot be characterized as 'true' or 'false', since the states of affairs to which it makes reference have not yet come about and, hence, do not yet have the status of an established reality (p. 251). In other words, future-oriented interpretations are, by definition, more tentative than their past-oriented counterparts.

The question of the accuracy of judgements based on common sense is inextricably linked to the question of the accuracy [*justesse*] of an interpretation (p. 252). This means that 'the sentiment of rightness [*sentiment de justesse*] that can trigger the interpretation of a piece of news rests on a synthetic judgement oriented towards both the question of truth and the question of justice' (p. 252). Put in Kantian terms, the pursuit of an accurate interpretation hinges on the confluence of theoretical reason and practical reason in the daily search for truth and justice.

The accuracy of an interpretation, however, is a matter not only of (a) the relationship between its representational and its moral functions, but also of (b) the relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted and (c) the relationship between the person articulating an interpretation and the person trying to make sense of it. On this account, an interpretation – 'the violence inherent in every interpretative operation' (p. 252) notwithstanding – can be considered *right* [*juste*] insofar as it obtains a 'degree of acceptability, which is in itself, to an extent, a function of the convergence between the beliefs and prejudices of the person who proposes it and the beliefs and prejudices of her addressees' (p. 252; cf. Gadamer, 1989 [1960/1975]).

VII. Interpretations à la 'Right vs. Left'?

One of the most significant features of *dominant ideologies* is that they have the power to shape how members of a particular society interpret (and, crucially, how they do *not* interpret) key elements of the past, present, and future (p. 253; cf. Boltanski, 2008; Bourdieu and Boltanski, 2008 [1976]; Susen, 2014, 2016). Reflecting on the role of ideologies in modern societies, Boltanski and Esquerre examine the famous right-vs.-left division, which emerged in the French National Assembly more than two centuries ago and, subsequently, spread to other parts of the world. Initially, it captured the division between those who were in favour of establishing a constitutional monarchy, similar to the British model (sitting on the right side of the tribune), and those who were in favour of conceding a limited role to the King (sitting on the left side of the tribune). Different meanings can be attributed to the right-vs.-left division:

1. As a *social* opposition: capitalism vs. socialism, noble vs. non-noble, top vs. bottom, rich vs. poor, elite vs. people, dominant vs. dominated, bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, bosses vs. masses, distinguished tastes vs. vulgar tastes. This opposition is central to the politicization of social hierarchies and inequalities.
2. As a *temporal* opposition: past vs. future, conservative vs. progressive, conservatism vs. progressivism, rear-guard vs. vanguard, tradition vs. invention/renovation, repetition of the same vs. exploration of differences. This opposition is central to the politicization of temporalities.
3. As a *normative* opposition: conformism vs. critique, alienation vs. emancipation, order vs. disorder, authoritarianism vs. democratism, docility vs. revolt/revolution. This opposition is central to the politicization of the question of freedom.

4. As a *transcendental* opposition: spiritualism/idealism vs. materialism, belief vs. reason, labour vs. work. This opposition is central to the politicization of the relationship between the religious and the secular.

Obviously, one could push this semantic exercise further, by classifying different values, principles, and/or characteristics in terms of the classical right-vs.-left taxonomy. Such an exercise would demonstrate, however, that these classification patterns are variable and context-dependent (p. 255): a term that may be situated on the left in one taxonomic field may be situated on the right in another field. To illustrate this point, Boltanski and Esquerre make reference to the 'orientation towards difference' (p. 255): it is situated 'on the right' when associated with the deliberate search for 'social distinction' (p. 255), which manifests itself in social hierarchies and inequalities, and 'on the left' when associated with 'the logic of emancipation, freedom, and creativity' (p. 255).

The key point for Boltanski and Esquerre, then, is to reject any kind of *substantialist* reading of the right-vs.-left taxonomy and to replace it with a *relationalist* one. As part of this ambition, they disagree with Jean-Michel Salanskis's (arguably substantialist) contention that the 'pursuit of equality' lies at the centre of the ideological universe inhabited by 'the left' (p. 255; cf. Salanskis, 2009). Actors on 'the right' may also follow political agendas concerned with 'equality', even if they may interpret this concept very differently (for instance, in terms of 'equality of opportunity', rather than 'equality of outcome'). A similar argument can be made in relation to other key principles and ideals – such as 'freedom', 'autonomy', 'sovereignty', 'solidarity', etc. On this (relationalist) view, it is hard to defend a rigid dichotomy along the lines of 'sensibility of the right' vs. 'sensibility of the left' (p. 256). To a large extent, the terms 'right' and 'left' obtain their meaning from 'the structure of the situation of enunciation [*énonciation*]' (p. 256) within which they are used. In other words, Boltanski and Esquerre's 'pragmatic structuralism' draws on valuable insights from the later Wittgenstein's contextualism and the later Foucault's poststructuralism, rejecting any kind of 'semantic substantialism' (p. 257). Just as, according to the later Wittgenstein (2009 [1953], §43), '[t]he meaning of a word is its use in the language', the value of a principle is its use in a particular context.

VIII. Digitalization and (De)Politicization

One of the most noticeable features of democracy is that, as a political modus operandi, it is meant to provide people with freedom of expression – written or oral, private or public, informal or formal – and to guarantee this privilege within a judicial framework defining the limits of this right (p. 257). Obvious cases in which a red line is crossed are hate speech, denial of major historical facts (such as genocide), and discriminatory discourses based on extreme forms of classism, sexism, racism, ageism, and/or ableism – to mention only a few. In contemporary societies, individual and collective actors may be influenced in numerous ways: no longer exclusively by *dominant ideologies* (p. 258) but also, increasingly, by *nudging strategies* (p. 260; cf. Gane, 2021). These include the use of emotion, framing, or anchoring to sway the decisions that people make, thereby replacing one set of behavioural patterns with another and re-biasing their largely unconscious preferences and inclinations. Especially in the digital age, in which people's ways of engaging with the world are heavily influenced by algorithms, this shift has significant

implications for the systemic regulation of behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning.

Boltanski and Esquerre highlight the *ambivalent* character of politics: on the one hand, it shapes everyone's lifeworld, exerting its power as 'a superior principle of reality' (p. 263), from which nobody can escape; on the other hand, it may be perceived as a special(ist) kind of concern – that is, as something that is imposed upon ordinary people from the outside and that, consequently, may be largely ignored, or at least not taken seriously, by them (p. 263). Paradoxically, then, politics is both an endogenous and an exogenous (and, by implication, both a universal and a contingent) element of everyday life.

During periods of intense politicization, the boundaries between 'the political' and 'the non-political' are increasingly blurred. In periods of this sort, the spontaneous – and often accelerated – development of lifeworlds (p. 263) indicates that *all* (including the seemingly most trivial) aspects of people's existence can be politicized – from their shopping habits and sexual behaviour to their domestic lives and personal identities. Just as politicization processes can be an expression of progress and emancipation, they can be retrograde and, hence, used as an instrument of control and domination (p. 263).

'Within democracies, it is always possible to escape campaigns of politicization by ignoring them' (p. 263). Paradoxically, democracies can be marked by varying degrees of politicization *and* by varying degrees of depoliticization. The balance of power within a particular political regime notwithstanding, democratic societies are shaped by struggles for recognition and by competition between different agendas (p. 263; cf. Chaumont, 1997).

Arguably, the rise of populism and authoritarianism, exacerbated by the echo chambers of social and digital media, is at least partly a result of the profound sense of existential uncertainty, if not insecurity, experienced by more and more people across the world (p. 264). Especially those who regard themselves as 'politically coherent and responsible' (p. 264) may find that they have 'lost the *sense of [global] History*' (p. 264, emphasis in original) as well as 'the sense of their [local] history' (p. 264) and, thus, of their capacity to attribute meaning to their existence in the context of their lifeworlds. It is one of the greatest challenges for human actors, therefore, to attach meaning to both History (as a lifeworld-transcending process) and history (as a lifeworld-emanating process) and to grasp the possible tensions between them (p. 264).

Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Boltanski and Esquerre insist that – in order to avoid falling into the traps of relativism, nihilism, conspiracy theories, and/or mere propaganda – we need to differentiate between *factual truths* and *interpretations* (p. 267). This distinction makes it possible, and indeed necessary, 'to make politics subject to the constant demands for justification, despite the plurality of temporal spaces with which it is confronted' (p. 267). On this view, it is imperative that politics – insofar as it is oriented towards social change and, by extension, towards the construction of a better future – be attentive to *factual truths of the past*, established by historians, and *factual truths of the present*, guaranteed by the guardians of current affairs, from journalists and commentators to academics and researchers. If, however, factual truths are treated as if they were tantamount to 'imaginary creations' (p. 267), then we enter the territory of 'fake actuality' based on 'fake news'.

The 'dialectic of Enlightenment' means for modernity what the 'dialectic of the Internet' means for late modernity: both are indicative of the deep *ambivalence* built into technologically advanced forms of life. On the one hand, the social networks created through the Internet have generated spheres of communication and discussion that are more accessible, inclusive, and global than any of their predecessors. On the other hand, these networks have produced not only echo chambers on an unprecedented scale, but also an accelerated flow of data, the reliability and veracity of which may, in many cases, be questionable – given the velocity and ease with which information (and, by implication, mis- and disinformation) can circulate without undergoing serious editorial processes of 'fact-checking'. Infotainment (see Susen, 2015a: 227) is a relatively benign manifestation of this trend. The spread of hate speech, denial of major historical facts, conspiracy theories, and discriminatory discourses as well as the rise of populism and authoritarianism, intensified by the diffusion of mis- and disinformation, are malign manifestations of this trend (pp. 268–70).

Digital technologies have redefined the relationship between the circulation of news and the articulation of social critique. The Internet has become one of the main tools for the politicization of reality. Given that a growing number of people across the planet obtain their information about (local, national, regional, and global) facts and events from the Internet, their perception of reality is fundamentally mediated by the digitalization of their subjectivity. Through 'the dialectical relationship between facts known by experience and reported elements' (p. 270) relevant to the symbolic construction of reality, the 'principal objects of struggle' (p. 270) are constantly being reconstituted. Actors need to mobilize the cognitive and normative resources of their critical capacity to preserve a sense of agency in increasingly digitalized societies.

IX. Critical Reflections

1

As elucidated above, the two cornerstones of Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry are *processus de mise en actualité* and *processus de politisation*. As the two authors spell out, not everything is political, but everything is politicizable. The famous slogan 'the personal is political', which was central to the student movement and second-wave feminism from the late 1960s onwards, comes to mind. The two sociologists are right to be wary of any kind of 'pan-politicism', according to which 'everything is political', rather than just politicizable. Unsympathetic critics may object, however, that Boltanski and Esquerre are stating the obvious and that the same ('anti-pan-ist') argument applies to other dimensions of social life. For instance, while not everything *is* moral, aesthetic, or commodified, everything *can be* moralized, aestheticized, or commodified. These issues are key concerns in moral, cultural, and economic sociology (and philosophy). In a similar vein, the difference between 'the political' and 'the politicizable' is an object of controversy in political sociology (and philosophy). The challenge, therefore, consists in shedding light on the *confluence* of powerful social processes (such as politicization, moralization, aestheticization, and commodification), notably in terms of their impact on the constitution and development of forms of life (cf. Jaeggi, 2018 [2014]; Susen, 2022a).

2

In *ECC*, Boltanski and Esquerre identify four principal 'forms of valuation' (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020 [2017]: esp. ch. 4; cf. Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017b: 67–70, 72–3), also referred to as a 'distinctive pragmatics of value-setting' (Fraser, 2017: 59; cf. Susen, 2020: 325–30). These forms of valuation, whose 'relationships can be articulated as a set of *transformations*' (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017b: 68, emphasis in original),[2] can be summarized as follows:

a. the '*standard form*', which is vital to *industrial economies* and which allows for the possibility of mass production (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020 [2017]: esp. ch. 5, ch. 6);
b. the '*collection form*', which prevails in *enrichment economies* and which is based on a narrative attached to an object's past (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020 [2017]: esp. ch. 7, ch. 8);
c. the '*trend form*', which is crucial to *fashion economies* and whose principal reference points are contemporary high-profile individuals, such as present-day celebrities (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020 [2017]: esp. ch. 9);
d. the '*asset form*', which is preponderant in *financial economies* and which is driven by the incentive to re-sell objects for a profit at some point in the future (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020 [2017]: esp. ch. 10).

These four forms of valuation, irrespective of the differences emanating from their 'specific arenas of transaction' (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017b: 70), share one significant feature: the prices of the commodities by which they are sustained 'can be *justified* or *criticized* according to a range of *different arguments*' (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017b: 70, emphasis added). Their development is contingent upon the justificatory and critical practices performed by market players, who – notably as buyers and/or sellers – contribute to the reproduction of the logic of interaction and transaction specific to each of these forms of valuation.

Given its concern with the digitalization of society (including the digitalization of politics), Boltanski and Esquerre's most recent book would have benefitted from an *extended* analysis of the aforementioned 'forms of valuation'.

First, one may ask whether or not digital economies deserve to be regarded as a separate 'form of valuation', which is based on the 'virtual form'. Digital economies are embedded in a worldwide network of commercial interactions and transactions, all of which are not only enabled but also accelerated by highly advanced information and communication technologies. Owing to the digitalization of almost everything, it appears that 'base' and 'superstructure' are collapsed into each other (cf. Hall, 1977; Susen, 2015a: 90–92, 97–8, 100–1).

Second, one may ask what the implications of this fifth 'form of valuation' are – not only for economic sociology (the focus of *ECC*), but also for political sociology (the focus of *QAP*). Boltanski and Esquerre rightly emphasize the deeply *ambivalent* character of the digital age. In essence, this ambivalence is due to the tension between the progressive and the retrograde features of technologically advanced forms of life,

including their predominant 'forms of valuation'. The question is where this journey is going to take us, both as a society and as a species (cf. Susen, 2022b).

Third, to capture the specificity of the type of capitalism that takes advantage of *all* (four – or, arguably, five) forms of valuation, Boltanski and Esquerre propose to use the term 'integral capitalism'.[3] The co-articulation of these forms of valuation is central to the rise of a new variant of capitalism. The main reason why this sort of multilayered economic organization is not only remarkably robust but also highly adaptable is that its secret of success consists in 'exploiting new lodes of wealth and interconnecting different ways of valorizing things' (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2017b: 74), ensuring that these are put into circulation for acquiring maximum profit. A key issue that requires the attention of contemporary sociologists, therefore, concerns the numerous ways in which goods can be situated *simultaneously* in (a) industrial economies of 'standard forms', (b) enrichment economies of 'collection forms', (c) fashion economies of 'trend forms', (d) financial economies of 'asset forms', and – as we may add – (e) digital economies of 'virtual forms'. In fact, the values attributed to an item may differ across 'form-specific' economies and across spatiotemporal contexts. Arguably, this multi-level dynamic applies, to use Bourdieusian terminology, to several *social fields*[4] – that is, not only to the *economic field* (and its various subfields) but also, for instance, to the *journalistic field* and the *political field*. A key dimension that needs to be explored further is the extent to which the aforementioned 'forms of valuation' *simultaneously* shape people's immersion in *actualité* and dynamics of *politization*.

3

One may broadly sympathize with Boltanski and Esquerre's use of the term '*lifeworld*' [*monde vécu*]. Acknowledging the influence of prominent philosophers, such as Dilthey and Husserl, Boltanski and Esquerre spell out that they essentially employ this concept in a Habermasian fashion (pp. 297–298*n*7). Similar to Habermas, they regard 'social interaction' in general and 'communicative action' in particular as two constitutive components of the lifeworld. Unlike Habermas, however, they reject the conceptual opposition between 'lifeworld' and 'system' and replace it with the distinction between 'people's relationship to what is *accessible* to them' and 'people's relationship to what is *inaccessible* to them' (298*n*7). The former is based on their direct and 'lived' experience of reality, whereas the latter results from their technologically mediated engagement with reality. This alternative approach, however, is not necessarily less problematic than the one proposed by Habermas.

First, one may object that Habermas's conception of the lifeworld is far more differentiated than Boltanski and Esquerre appear to suggest. (For a detailed and critical account, see Susen, 2007: ch. 3, ch. 4. See also Susen, 2021b: 381–2, 389–92.) Not only is the relationship between 'lifeworld' and 'system' (and, by implication, between hermeneutics/phenomenology and functionalism/systems theory) more complex than Boltanski and Esquerre seem to imply, but so is the relationship between the different components of the lifeworld (that is, culture, society, and personality), including their species-constitutive function (which is to provide sources of interpretation, integration, and identity formation). Granted, for Habermas, communicative action *is* the engine of

the lifeworld. For him, however, *other* forms of action (notably teleological action, normatively regulated action, and dramaturgical action) are also *always already* present in the lifeworld – that is, *before* they are colonized by the steering capacity of the two main realms of the system, namely the state and the market (cf. Habermas, 1987a [1981], 1987b [1981]). This insight illustrates that *some*, albeit not all, of the most problematic dimensions of social life (such as the context-specific preponderance of instrumental action) – far from emanating exclusively from 'the system' (Habermas) and/or from 'people's relationship to what is *inaccessible* to them' (Boltanski and Esquerre) – are *endogenous*, rather than merely exogenous, components of the lifeworld and/or of 'people's relationship to what is *accessible* to them'.

Second, the 'colonization thesis' – notwithstanding its limitations – is more perceptive than Boltanski and Esquerre, who reject the entire lifeworld-system architecture, give Habermas credit for. This thesis is based on the assumption that our lifeworlds are being colonized by the functionalist rationality of the system, notably by the administrative logic of state bureaucratization and the profit-maximizing logic of market competition. Arguably, the 'colonization thesis' may be applied to grasping the influence exerted by technological networks. It is hard to overstate the degree to which, in the 'network moment', people's lifeworlds have been profoundly colonized by digital technologies. This trend poses serious questions about the nature of 'agency', not least because advanced technologies are essentially non-human forms of agency (or extended forms of human agency), confirming Boltanski and Esquerre's proposition that each of their major historical 'moments' is shaped by a new agent [*actant*], thereby transforming society at a fundamental level. In Boltanski and Esquerre's defence, we need to acknowledge that, in many situations, the difference between 'lifeworld' and 'system' may be blurred. For instance, when using a computer and surfing the Internet, we are – presumably – immersed in *both* (an experiential) 'lifeworld' *and* (a digital) 'system'. It is precisely *because of* the extent to which the former may be *colonized* by the latter, however, that Habermas's '*colonization* thesis' carries a lot of explanatory weight.

Third, as a nuanced understanding of the lifeworld makes clear, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a 'direct' or 'immediate' experience of reality. Even when we experience the world 'directly' or 'immediately', we do so *through* – that is, *by means of* – our senses. By definition, even when our experience of the world is not mediated by systemic (including technological) forces, it *is* mediated by our senses. One of the main contributions of Kant's transcendental idealism to modern philosophy is to have drawn attention to the fact that, owing to our senses, all we can access is the 'phenomenal world' (that is, the world that we perceive and experience), rather than the 'noumenal world' (the world in-itself or the world of things as they really are). Whereas the former is knowable, the latter is only inferable. Of course, the point is not to suggest that Boltanski and Esquerre's distinction between 'the accessible' and 'the inaccessible' is equivalent to Kant's distinction between 'the phenomenal' and 'the noumenal' (see Kant, 1995 [1781]; cf. Oberst, 2015; Ward, 2006: Part I). A potentially fruitful challenge arising from the counterintuitive move that consists in combining Boltanski and Esquerre's pragmatic structuralism with Kant's transcendental idealism, however, may be summarized as follows: we need to examine the ontological, epistemological, and sociological implications of the fact that the tension between 'the accessible' and 'the inaccessible' is

always already present in the lifeworld – that is, *prior* to any kind of systemic or technological mediation.

Finally, expanding on the preceding point, 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' (Boltanski, 2014 [2012]: 229; cf. Susen, 2021a: 33), between the seemingly direct access we gain to the world by virtue of our senses and the indirect ways of acquiring knowledge about the world by virtue of reason and logic. The far-reaching significance of this issue is epitomized in the age-old empiricism-vs.-rationalism debate. Empiricists may search for empirical evidence, rationalists for strong arguments backed up by logical reasoning, and Kantians may endeavour to combine the data reported back by our senses with the insights obtained from the triadic interplay between *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilskraft* (cf. Susen, 2022a: 305). An additional (empirical and theoretical) challenge for Boltanski and Esquerre would be to explore the extent to which *both* 'people's relationship to what is *accessible* to them' *and* 'people's relationship to what is *inaccessible* to them' are fundamentally shaped by their relationship to *both* experience *and* reason.

4

Boltanski and Esquerre are right to reject reductive – notably substantialist, essentialist, behaviourist, and determinist – approaches in the social sciences. In sociology, as they stress, it is common to draw a distinction between a *superficial* level, which is composed of observable facts, and a *profound* level, which contains different sets of underlying structures. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this account suffers from several shortcomings.

First, the distinction between 'the superficial level' and 'the profound level' is far more complex than Boltanski and Esquerre appear to suggest. In the history of ideas, this distinction can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy (Grayling, 2020 [2019]), Part I; cf. Susen, 2021a: 44). All main branches of inquiry – that is, the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences – have grappled with the notion that reality is divided into two basic levels: on the one hand, the level of *surfaces* and *appearances*; on the other hand, the level of *essences* and *substances*. In philosophy (especially its Kantian and neo-Kantian variants), this distinction may be captured in the 'phenomenal-vs.-noumenal' opposition. In sociology (especially its structuralist and 'critical' variants), this distinction may be captured in the opposition between the 'apparent', 'illusory', 'deceptive', and 'misleading', on the one hand, and the 'hidden', 'real', 'genuine', and 'authentic', on the other. In one of his previous works, Boltanski (2014 [2012]) has provided a fine-grained examination of these tensions, notably in terms of the 'REALITY vs. *reality*' antinomy (p. xv; cf. ch. 1). Given the importance of this matter for the analysis of the relationship between *actualité* and *politisation*, *QAP* would have benefitted from a more nuanced assessment of this issue.

Second, Boltanski and Esquerre mention *social structuralism* (which tends to focus on social organizations and institutions) and *cognitive structuralism* (which presupposes the existence of invariant structures within the human mind, serving as a fixed point). Their account, however, could have been more refined, by drawing attention to the fact that there

are *numerous* types of structuralism, all of which are based on a basic distinction between 'a *superficial* level' (of observable facts) and 'a *profound* level' (of underlying structures): linguistic structuralism, anthropological structuralism, economic structuralism, biological structuralism, genetic structuralism – to mention only a few. It would have been useful if the authors had identified the main points of (a) convergence, (b) divergence, and (c) cross-fertilization between their own 'pragmatic structuralism' (see Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020 [2017]: 5–6, 338–42, 343) and other forms of structuralism.

Third, Boltanski and Esquerre make the case that, in the contemporary social sciences, the study of the *present* is being *undervalued* and the study of *history* is being *overvalued*. On this view, the former is associated with the *superficial* level of observable facts, and the latter is associated with the *profound* level of underlying structures, notably in terms of their genealogy. Contemporary sociology (at least in Anglophone academia), however, has been marked by the opposite trend – that is, the short-sighted obsession with the present (expressed in a search for 'epochal shifts') and the lack of interest in the past (and, by implication, a lack of understanding of the degree to which its study is indispensable to a comprehensive understanding of the present). The preponderance of the 'presentist lens' manifests itself in the fact that large parts of sociology's disciplinary agenda fail to contribute to a genuinely *historical* understanding of social reality. In the early 21st century, historical sociology tends to be considered a highly specialist sub-field in, rather than a core area of, sociology. This significant conceptual and methodological limitation is reinforced by the widespread use of simplistic periodizing labels (such as 'premodern', 'modern', and 'late-modern'/'postmodern'). Thus, we are confronted with a curious paradox: in mainstream sociological circles, 'the will to periodize' remains strong, just as the analytical focus on the present, rather than the in-depth engagement with the past, remains popular. Both 'stagism' and 'presentism' undermine the critical (and historicist) spirit permeating classical sociology (Susen, 2020: ch. 7). Ironically, this trend converges with Boltanski and Esquerre's interest in people's immersion in and engagement with *actualité* – although, in their defence, it must be said that their serious commitment to conducting empirical and genealogical research runs counter to the kind of headline-grabbing boasting attitude associated with *Zeitgeistsurfing*.

5

Boltanski and Esquerre's account of the right-vs.-left division is insightful for several reasons:

a. It highlights that this division can be conceptualized on different levels – notably in social, temporal, normative, and transcendental terms.
b. It illustrates the multifaceted constitution of this division – both within and across the aforementioned levels of analysis.
c. It demonstrates that the classification patterns attached to this division, far from being fixed and universal, are variable and context-dependent.

Broadly speaking, Boltanski and Esquerre are right to reject any kind of *substantialist* reduction of the right-vs.-left taxonomy and to replace it with a *relationalist*

interpretation. There are, however, some key issues that have not been (but should be) addressed with respect to the right-vs.-left division:

a. Due to its *dichotomous* structure, it fails to account for the highly differentiated political landscapes of pluralistic societies in the 21st century. Most pluralistic societies contain political arenas with a large spectrum of positions and dispositions, whose diversity, complexity, and confluence are irreducible to the narrow logic of a simple right-vs.-left antinomy.
b. Due to its *anachronistic* structure, it fails to account for the role of political hybridization processes that have shaped, and continue to shape, most pluralistic societies in the 21st century. The 'major' political ideologies of modernity (that is, anarchism, communism/socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and fascism), along with their 'sub-major' counterparts (such as nationalism, feminism, and environmentalism) and 'intersectional' elements (such as [anti-]classism, [anti-]sexism, [anti-]racism, [anti-]ageism, and [anti-]ableism), have been increasingly cross-fertilized, leading to projects and alliances that, at least to some degree, transcend the traditional right-vs.-left antinomy (cf. Susen, 2015a: 192–4).
c. Due to its *essentialist* structure, it fails to account for the intersectional constitution of highly differentiated societies in the 21st century. The aforementioned classification patterns need to be revised in terms of the multiple meanings they acquire through the interplay between key sociological variables – such as class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, 'race', age, and (dis)ability.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that we have entered a 'post-ideological' age (Bell, 2000 [1960]; Donskis, 2000; Rubinstein, 2009; Susen, 2014; Susen, 2015a: 32, 192–5; Waxman, 1968). Rather, this is to recognize that – given the pluralization of social fields (and, hence, of positions, dispositions, interests, identities, and discourses) in complex forms of life – classical conceptions of the right-vs.-left division hardly do justice to the multiplicity of factors shaping the diversity of behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning prevalent in polycentric societies.

6

The distinction between the three key periods – that is, the 'crowd moment' (1870–1914), the 'mass moment' (1930–1970), and the 'network moment' (1990–present) – lies at the heart of *QAP*. This tripartite framework, however, is far from unproblematic.

First, the *destructive* potential that, presumably, all three 'moments' have in common may be central to 'crowds' and 'masses', but it is hard to see why it should be regarded as a constitutive feature of 'networks'. Granted, the rise of historical periods is inconceivable without the transformative force of *Aufhebung*: they comprise *and* transcend elements from the past, bringing about the consolidation of a new 'moment'. In this sense, not only Hegel's notion of 'sublation' but also Schumpeter's notion of 'creative destruction' may capture the extent to which every new epochal 'moment' may succeed the previous one by simultaneously incorporating and replacing it. As illustrated in the major wars of the late 19th and early and mid-20th centuries, the destructive potential

of the 'crowd moment' and 'mass moment' far exceeds that of the 'network moment'. This is not to deny that digital networks have *transformative* aspects (above all, the digitalization of almost every facet of our lives) as well as *negative* aspects (such as the spread of hate speech, denial of major historical facts, conspiracy theories, discriminatory discourses, and the diffusion of mis- and disinformation). It is an overstatement, however, to suggest that it therefore effectively contributes to the *destruction* of society in general and political regulations in particular.

Second, the notion that each of these three 'moments' is characterized by 'a logic of gregarious association' (p. 18) – which brings people closer together and, in a quasi-collectivist fashion, strips each person of their sense of singularity and uniqueness – may apply to 'crowds' and 'masses', but it applies only partly to (digital) 'networks'. If anything, the rise of digital networks has contributed to processes of *hyper-individualization* and reinforced an ideology of *hyper-individualism* (Susen, 2015a: 36, 120). This trend has been extensively discussed in terms of 'the transformation of the self' in late-modern, if not postmodern, societies (cf. Susen, 2015a). To the extent that, in a Durkheimian sense, the shift from premodern to modern society led to the *transition from 'mechanical' to 'organic' solidarity*, in a post-Durkheimian sense, the shift from modern to late- or postmodern society is accompanied by the *transition from 'organic' to 'liquid' solidarity* (cf. Gafijczuk, 2005). Put differently, we have moved from the premodern 'cult of God' via the modern 'cult of the unitary subject' to the postmodern 'cult of the fragmented individual'. In late-modern and postmodern societies, actors are expected to be capable of constructing and reconstructing their identities by picking and choosing from a large variety of sociological variables, enabling them to develop a sense of unique subjectivity: class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, 'race', cultural preferences, life-style, religion, age, ability, or political ideology – to mention only a few. If anything, the 'network moment' has exacerbated and accelerated this trend. To be clear, the impact of the 'digital age' on the constitution of personhood has been studied for several decades.[5] The rise of the 'digital self' has led to the emergence of a new, and increasingly widespread, type of 'digital subjectivity'.[6] Boltanski and Esquerre's analysis of the 'network moment' would have benefitted from examining the degree to which the digitalization of subjectivity involves various contradictory processes – such as individualization vs. standardization, personalization vs. homogenization, fragmentation vs. unification, exclusion vs. inclusion, isolation vs. integration, alienation vs. self-realization, and domination vs. emancipation (see Susen, 2015a: 116).

Third, another obvious reservation that is likely to be raised by some critics, notably those arguing from a postcolonial perspective, is that – in terms of its empirical data, historical reference points, and theoretical orientation – Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry is not only largely *Eurocentric* but also, in many respects, *Francocentric*. This limitation is reflected in the empirical, historical, and theoretical underpinnings of their project:

- The sources of data used in *QAP* are essentially French (*Le Monde* and *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* on YouTube – *INA Société* and *INA Politique*).
- The vast majority of examples given are European (mainly French), and the periodization is based on a Eurocentric view of history (which, while relevant to the 'Western' world, may not apply to other parts of the world).

- Their theoretical framework, which may be described as 'pragmatic structuralism', does not incorporate any approaches seeking to challenge Eurocentric agendas in academia, notably those associated with postcolonial studies and decolonial studies (cf. Bhambra, 2007, 2014).

To be clear, this is not to dismiss (a) the impressive amount of data that the authors have gathered and painstakingly dissected for their endeavour, (b) the pertinence of their tripartite periodization scheme, and (c) the valuable contributions of their 'pragmatic structuralism'. Rather, this is to take seriously the charge that the empirical, historical, and theoretical underpinnings of their project remain Eurocentric, if not largely Francocentric. The attempt to address this point is not meant to be a box-ticking exercise of political (or sociological) correctness. If pursued in a constructive fashion, it would broaden the scope of Boltanski and Esquerre's cutting-edge and highly original research even further, contribute to (de)provincializing the social sciences (cf. Burawoy, 2005; Chakrabarty, 2000; Kerner, 2018), and open up new avenues for developing a truly global sociology (cf. Susen, 2020: Part II).

X. Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the question of the relationship between *actualité* and *politization* lies at the core of Boltanski and Esquerre's study. People find themselves constantly exposed to and influenced by the former – especially in the present era, in which their lives are increasingly colonized by digital information technologies. At the same time, people are directly or indirectly affected by the latter – facts and events are being *politicized* and, hence, discursively incorporated into their everyday imaginaries and conversations. As illustrated in the first half of this paper, Boltanski and Esquerre's inquiry into the ontology of contemporary reality contains valuable insights into the relationship between the production, circulation, and consumption of news, on the one hand, and the emergence of processes of politicization, on the other. Perhaps, their most important contribution is to cast light on the sociological (and philosophical) implications of the gap between our *direct* experiences of facts and events in our lifeworlds, on the one hand, and our *indirect* experiences of facts and events via digital media, on the other. Processes of politicization that occur predominantly through the latter are potentially problematic, because they lack the quality and intensity of the first-hand experiences and grassroots involvement provided, and fostered, by the former. Processes of politicization that occur predominantly through the former are potentially problematic, because they lack the global scope and sense of interconnectedness generated, and reinforced, by the latter. As elucidated in the second half of this paper, *QAP* – despite its considerable strengths – has some significant limitations, which may be overcome by sharpening and broadening the empirical, historical, and theoretical dimensions of Boltanski and Esquerre's work.

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Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to Boltanski and Esquerre (2022); all translations (from the French) are mine. I am grateful to Christopher Mikton and Catherine Porter for making several useful suggestions.

1. See Fraser (2017). See also Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b). In addition, see, for instance: Angeletti (2019); Boltanski et al. (2015); Outhwaite (2018); Susen (2018). Cf. Diaz-Bone (2021).
2. Boltanski and Esquerre spell out that they conceive of this 'set of transformations' in Claude Lévi-Strauss's sense of the term. On this point, see Boltanski and Esquerre (2020 [2017]: 4, 110). See, in particular, Lévi-Strauss (1962). See also Maniglier (2002: 55–6). On the relevance of Lévi-Strauss's work to Boltanski and Esquerre's argument, see, for example: Boltanski and Esquerre (2020 [2017]: 4, 79–80, 110–11, 132, 163, 190–191, 336–7, 388*n*1, 410–411*n*3); Boltanski and Esquerre (2017b: 68–9). Cf. Lévi-Strauss (1962); cf. also Lévi-Strauss (1949, 1971).
3. On the concept of 'integral capitalism', see, for instance: Boltanski and Esquerre (2017a: 26, 375, 399–400, 566, 2017b: 68, 73–5).
4. On Bourdieu's 'field theory', see, for example: Bourdieu (1993 [1984]) as well as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). See also, for instance, Susen (2007: esp. 171–80).
5. On the 'digital age', see, for instance: Belk and Llamas (2013); Burda (2011); Junge et al. (2013); Negroponte (1995); Runnel et al. (2013); Westera (2013); Zhao (2005).
6. See, for example, Zhao (2005). See also Belk and Llamas (2013).

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