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Biographical Statement

Reiner KELLER, born in 1962 near Saarbrücken (Germany), studied sociology at the Universities of Saarbrücken, Rennes (France) and Bamberg and was awarded his *Diplom* in 1988. He received a PhD in sociology in 1997 on "*Müll. Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion des Wertvollen. Die öffentliche Diskussion über Abfall in Deutschland und Frankreich*" [Garbage. The Social Construction of Value. Public Discourses on Household Waste in Germany and France] (Munich, Technical University), and completed his habilitation in 2004 on "*Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse. Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogramms*" [The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse. A Research Program] (Augsburg University). From 2006 to 2011 he was full professor of sociology at Koblenz-Landau University. Since 2011, he has been professor of sociology at Augsburg University. Currently, he is chair of the Sociology of Knowledge section and member of the executive board of the German Sociological Association. His research centers on the sociology of knowledge and culture, discourse studies, sociological theory, qualitative methods, risk and environment, and French sociology.

Abstract

Is there still a role for discourse research today? A decade ago French actor-network theorist Bruno Latour famously declared the end of critique as ethos and practice in the social sciences. Empirical work therefore should be replaced by a politics of 'matters of concern'. French sociologist Luc Boltanski added to this critique of critical perspectives by suggesting that an investigation into social modes of critique should replace critical sociology. Against this background, and with a focus on discourse research, the present contribution stresses the ongoing need for precise empirical work as a condition for the social unfolding of critical perspectives.

Has Critique Run out of Steam?

On Discourse Research as Critical Inquiry[1]

1. Introduction

More than a decade ago French actor-network theory pioneer Bruno Latour declared the end of critique in social constructivism and discourse research. According to Latour, critique had lost its power and did not reveal anything anymore to anyone and therefore should be replaced by an engagement with transforming matters of fact into matters of concern. In parallel, French sociologist Luc Boltanski argued for a sociology of critical capacities and critique instead of critical sociology. He thereby tried to establish a route from the analysis of social critique toward critical sociological interventions. The following paper begins by introducing the current field of discourse research as one of the areas under attack by Latour and Boltanski (2). It then discusses Latour's (3) and Boltanski's (4) arguments, pointing out a number of problems inherent in their positions. In contrast to their move away from constructivist empirical research it argues for the ongoing value of precise empirical discourse research and social constructivism in establishing matters of concern, therefore drawing on different ways of performing research into the social relationships of knowledge and the politics of knowledge (5).

2. The multiplicity of current discourse research

It is not easy to talk in general about discourse research and discourse analysis for the reason that these terms refer to a broad range of approaches with rather different interests and concepts. Discourse research today is a well-established,

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heterogeneous and interdisciplinary field of inquiry investigating social language use and discursive constructions of reality (Keller, 2013). It extends from perspectives embedded in linguistics to cultural studies and the social sciences, including education, political science and sociology. Linguistic discourse research is interested in language, its rules, transformations and social functions. Other discourse research in the humanities and the social sciences tends towards questions of power and world-making. Some approaches, situated between linguistics and the social sciences, explicitly claim to be 'critical' – especially Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2001) and the Essex School of Hegemonics (Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis, 2000). The principal aim of CDA is to unmask the ideological or discriminatory use of language in the mass media, in everyday conversation, office talk or political arenas. For example, a politician speaking 'in the name of the people' might be 'revealed' as 'speaking in the name of the ruling capitalist class' or 'the hidden agenda of neoliberalism'. Using a specific word in a debate or mass media contribution might be labeled and problematized as 'racist' or 'fascist'. Office talk might be shown as structured by informal powers and therefore 'asymmetric'. 'Unmasking' hidden agendas behind surface discourse is a version of the *hermeneutics of suspicion,* a term coined by Paul Ricœur (1970). Classical examples are Marxist hermeneutics (where the given is the effect of capital power) or Freudian hermeneutics (in which current behavior and talk is understood as the effect of 'unresolved' early childhood constellations).[2]

The project of the Essex School of Hegemonics (ESH) is also close to such a hermeneutics. It builds on Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Saussurian linguistics, as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis. Rooted in the study of populist social movements and labor

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[2] For a comprehensive critique of CDA see Widdowson (2004).

relations, it conceives of discourses "as relational and differential configurations of elements" (Howarth & Griggs, 2012, p. 308), which are the result of ongoing articulatory practice. In assuming the fundamental incompleteness of discursive structures, the Hegemonics school emphasizes the role of subjects in producing novel articulations. The notions of "hegemony" and "empty signifier" are introduced to account for the partial fixing of meanings in an otherwise contingent flow of articulations. Empty signifiers are conceptualized as discursive elements which can serve as a kind of umbrella term for coalitions composed of divergent actors and thus can provide some sort of unity to the discourse. ESH scholars study established "organic or inorganic hegemonies" and emerging "counter-hegemonies" in order to "critically explain why and how one particular policy has been formulated, accepted, and implemented, rather than others" (Howarth & Griggs, 2012, p. 309). It mobilizes psychoanalytic categories to explain affective dimensions of policy change: How and why – or why not – are subjects drawn into a discourse? What role is played by subjective desire and attachment? Here, according to Howarth and Griggs (who draw upon Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek), a "logic of fantasy" is at work, which explains the "enjoyment subjects procure from their identifications with certain signifiers and figures" (Howard & Griggs, 2012, p. 322). The Essex School indeed re-introduces, via Lacanian psychoanalysis, a narrow ontology of the subject and its emotional economy shaped by the lack of idealized completeness and the desire to remedy this lack as core explanatory factors.[3]

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[3] The origin of this conception of the subject lies in Laclau's research on reactionary right wing populism and provides a rationale for the identification with such nationalist positions. There is a long tradition dating back to the 1930s in Critical Theory of using psychoanalytical theories to explain the vote for the extreme right. However, I doubt that it can be transferred to emancipatory social movements and discourse in general: What is the element of lack when arguing for climate action? And given the conditions of this absence, why does it choose identification with right wing populism, and not with dream escape literature? This is not to deny that desire and passion are important elements in political and societal engagements.

Other streams of discourse analysis, found mostly in corpus-linguistics, but also in some versions of frame analysis as used in social movement research,[4] prefer a more positivist approach, statistically describing such features as co-occurrences of words and semantic patterns of language use in big data. They thereby attempt to account for changes in word/concept/frame usage in public discourse across decades and between arenas and actors.[5]

Yet other streams, such as Foucauldian-based work, including the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD), which is explored in more detail below (see Keller, 2011a, b), do not explicitly refer to critique, but make use of the Foucauldian philosophical concept of 'critique' discussed in some of his famous writings (Foucault, 1984; 2007). Here, critique in a loosely Kantian tradition is conceived as an implicit strategy involving the reconstruction of conditions of possibility for the presence of phenomena and, I would add, thereby also *conditions of impossibility*. These might include the contingent realities of the modern subject being responsible, sane, healthy, rule following, with correct sexual practices (Foucault, 2000a, 2000b).

However, neither the explicit labeling of an approach – in discourse research and beyond – as 'critical', nor the most honest critical intentions of a researcher, is a guarantee of the *critical functions or effects* of a specific concrete analysis. Such labeling might even do the opposite by providing knowledge for established powers and domination.[6] On the other hand, research which is not labeled 'critical' might have far reaching critical effects. There is considerable evidence for this. Take, for

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[4] For a critique of the latter see Ulrich & Keller (2014).
[5] See Benford & Snow (2000) on frame analysis; for a content analysis of abortion discourse as frame analysis see Gamson et. al. (2002). For corpus-linguistics see Conrad (2002).
[6] E.g., when Judith Butler (1997) tries to identify the subject's core elements of resistance inside of its psychostructure (drawing on psychoanalysis) she runs the risk, if she succeeded, of providing new tools for manipulation.

example, Michel Foucault's work on *The History of Madness* (Foucault, 2009), Erving Goffman's study on the inner life of psychiatry in *Asylums* (Goffman, 1961), or Howard S. Becker's famous writings on *Outsiders* (Becker, 1997). 'Critique' in general, and in discourse research too, therefore seems to be a very complex notion.

3. From matters of fact to matters of concern: Bruno Latour and critique

3.1. Beyond critique?

According to a prominent statement deriving from a conference at Stanford University in 2003 and published by French anthropologist Bruno Latour some years ago, "critique has run out of steam" (Latour, 2004a). In that paper, Latour starts by observing climate skepticism. He quotes an editorial in the *New York Times*:

> Most scientists believe that [global] warming is caused largely by man-made pollutants that require strict regulation. Mr. Luntz [a Republican strategist] seems to acknowledge as much when he says that 'the scientific debate is closing against us.' His advice, however, is to emphasize that the evidence is not complete. 'Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,' he writes, 'their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make *the lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue'.[7]

Latour's argument is as follows: In a world in which the experience of and arguments for contingency have become basic features of everyday life, social scientific 'unmasking' of 'essentialism' and 'hidden agendas' – such as via social constructivist

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[7] "Environmental Word Games," New York Times, 15. Mar. 2003, p. A16, quoted in Latour, 2004a, p. 226. The NYT article is available at http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/15/opinion/environmental-word-games.html [accessed January 29, 2016].

and historical analysis or social theory – has ceased to be a viable course of action. Why? Because today everybody knows about contingency, and the work of 'unmasking' is very popular throughout society. Thus, since everybody does it, the special impact of the social sciences' critical work no longer generates worthwhile effects:

> What has become of critique when DARPA uses for its Total Information Awareness project the Baconian slogan *Scientia est potentia*? Didn't I read that somewhere in Michel Foucault? Has knowledge-slash-power been co-opted of late by the National Security Agency? Has *Discipline and Punish* become the bedtime reading of Mr. Ridge [...]? (Latour, 2004a, p. 228)[8]

In academia, science and technology studies established the fact of the social shaping of scientific knowledge, and a large range of constructivist research (e.g., Hacking, 2000) accounted for the historical contingencies of social phenomena. According to Latour, such approaches today fail simply because of their past success – everyone, everywhere now knows about contingency.

In order to 'save the critical spirit', he suggests throughout his essay that as social scientists we should *instead* try our hand at turning "matters of fact" into "matters of concern" (Latour, 2004a). This position, taken up by one of the world's most prominent scholars in the social sciences no less, tears deeply into the heart of discourse research and into many other realms of social research and theory as well. Regardless of the different stances in this field, Latour directly challenges them all. He suggests first that there is no further need for sociological and discourse approaches labeled as 'critical', since everyone already knows the facts of power and domination. Thus, there is nothing more to unmask. No one will listen to such things

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[8] DARPA: Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, US Department of Defense.

anymore. Second, by including as targets the genealogical and reconstructive approaches of Foucauldian work and social constructivism in discourse research, Latour expresses not only a deep contempt towards time consuming but precise empirical work linked to an urge for political action, but also devalues the role such work plays in generating public awareness of contingency and possibility. Latour's two main arguments will be considered more closely in the following.

3.2. Everyone knows? Latour against 'social constructionism'

Latour begins by making an argument against the kind of genealogical work established by Michel Foucault in his studies on the history of madness, the medical gaze, discipline and punishment, and sexualities. *Genealogy* in Foucault, an idea closely linked and influenced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (e.g., *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 1887), traces historical contingencies, discontinuities and transformations of power/knowledge-constellations which can be identified as regimes of power-knowledge through time. The analysis is about "games of power" and "games of truth", about conflict, struggle, domination, historical ontology and historical becoming, without assuring pathways to brighter futures and the ultimate progress of knowledge making or even Enlightenment (Aufklärung). Genealogy, according to Foucault, is a never-ending story throughout the social history of power/knowledge-regimes.

But according to Latour, analyzing the complex historical becoming of such constellations of power, *dispositifs*[9] and orders of discourse and knowledge no longer seems valuable. He argues that 'social construction', which, beyond Foucault and to

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[9] I prefer the French term to the established English translation 'apparatuses,' which gives a different connotation.

a lesser historical degree, is the core argument of some branches of social constructionism (e.g. Hacking 2000 and in a different sense, Berger & Luckmann, 1966), is outdated. Why? Because knowing about the historical contingency of everything – our political system, scientific facts, norms and values in everyday life, life forms, etc. – has become, at least according to Latour, part of common sense, used in everyday affairs to generate critique of all kind of issues, including the facts of climate change. Everyone already knows that our innovations are naturalized and hence devalued. The role model for such critique is conspiracy theory (i.e., 'the twin towers were destroyed by the CIA'; 'the moon landing was a fake'), which works just as effectively in popular culture as in critical social science (Latour, 2004a, p. 229).

This polemic leads Latour directly to his attack on the second version of critique, that inspired by pre-established social theory. Latour refers here to the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu or, to be more precise, to an effect of a "too quick reading" (Latour, 2004a, p. 229) of Bourdieu's work, as he argues with caution. Shorthand Bourdieusianism also implies strong affinities with 'conspiracy theory' as practiced in everyday life. But this time it is performed in social theory:

> […] you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism – while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intent, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first

movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique? (Latour, 2004a, pp. 229-230)

One might ask whether Latour's referring to 'theory' in both conspiracy theory and social theory here is not a strange case of blurring genres and words. Next, in the following, Latour (2004a, pp. 237-239) accounts for two main explanatory, or perhaps clearer, revelatory strategies of such 'critiques by theory'. First, the so-called "fairy position" states that the world as perceived is nothing but a projection. If you think elites and gods are powerful, indeed it is you yourselves, the people who via projection create and allow the power of elites and gods! The second argument – the "fact position" – can be summed up as follows: You, the everyday woman or man in the street, think you know the world as it is. But you are wrong, because you are a prisoner of *illusio*, of the secret structural forces which are working under the surface of reality, called habitus and field, called discourse, class, intersectionality or neoliberalism, or whatever other concepts have been invented in social theory.

Both of these stances allow – please remember, according to Bruno Latour – for the critical social scientist to occupy a superior and extremely comfortable position, perhaps not quite godlike, as Donna Haraway (1988) would have put it, but somewhere 'above' the others. Further, we must remember here that Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 2007) conceived his sociological diagnostics as "socio-analysis", explicitly referencing psychoanalysis and thereby claiming a grasp of the process of revealing, via his sociology, the secret forces which drive our collective life.[10] Socio-analysis, by

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[10] The argumentative strategy of philosophical and normative critique as established in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory tradition is somehow different. Regardless of the internal differences, it tries

the way, is superior to every other position taken in academic research because it not only breaks, via its epistemology with everyday *doxa* and native-naive sociology, but with naive social science too! Only Bourdieusian theory is able to objectify social scientific objectivization and place itself in a third order observer position above the fracas (Bourdieu, 1990 [1980]).

To sociologists who reserve the term 'social constructionism' for particular approaches, such as that of Berger and Luckmann (1966), the line Latour draws between social constructivism and critical sociology is striking. Moreover, in a related paper on the "promises of constructivism", Latour (2003) explains, that "everything is wrong with constructivism", although it seemed – even to him! – a very good idea at the beginning.[11] First, it is wrong because it explains too much solidity by the effects of the "social". Here again, Bourdieu's sociology in particular and critical sociology in general are cases in point for attack (and theories of de-construction too). Second, it is wrong because it suggests a master (plan) of construction. Third, it is wrong because it lacks a concept of materiality. And furthermore it is wrong because of its ubiquitous use throughout the humanities (see Hacking, 2000).

3.3. Matters of concern – Towards a renewed ethics of discourse?

Against the simply 'good feeling of being a critical mind' (Latour, 2004a, p. 238)[12] and the "euphoric drug of critique" (Latour, 2004a, p. 239), and against the general misery of critique he feels, Latour then claims a strong realism.

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to reach the external eye's position via philosophical reflection and philosophically established indisputable normative grounds, not via social theory, empirical research and 'proof'.
[11] In 2014 he states that „social construction" is nothing but an "ersatz of mind", a concept we should not "stick to" (Latour, 2014, Lecture 2, p. 28).
[12] "Do you see now why it feels so good to be a critical mind?" (Latour, 2004a, p. 238)

What I am going to argue is that the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist attitude* – to speak like William James – but a realism dealing with what I will call *matters of concern*, not *matters of fact*. (Latour, 2004a, p. 231)

But, you may well ask, how does Latour intend to save critique? Referring to the linguistic and philosophical etymology of the word 'thing', Latour proposes to conceive of things – like facts, objects, and we may add: institutions, organizations, discourses – as 'associations' or 'assemblages' of different elements, that is as fora or agendas, as compositions to involve all kind of concerned actants:

[…] Give me one matter of concern and I will show you the whole earth and heavens that have to be gathered to hold it firmly in place […] The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. I am aware that to get at the heart of this argument one would have to renew also what it means to be a constructivist, but I have said enough to indicate the direction of critique, not away but toward the gathering, the Thing. The practical problem we face, if we try to go that new route, is to associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts. (Latour, 2004a, p. 246)

It seems that Latour's sketch for new democratic institutions as presented in the very same year to the English speaking public in *Politics of Nature* (Latour, 2004b),

delivers a kind of role model for a new political sphere in which such matters of concern can be dealt with. In this book, Latour presents a general template for a "new constitution", introducing the "parliament of things", an institutional device that is used to represent, discuss, evaluate and judge such matters of concern.

Ten years later, in 2014, he writes about "situations" he has arranged, in which differing claims of reality descriptions meet, demonstrating that there is a pluriverse rather than a universe (Latour, 2014, Lecture One, pp. 17-19). But we might well ask: Doesn't this somehow end up as a recycled ethics of discourse similar to that established in the early 1980s by German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987, 1991a, 1991b, 1996)? A reminder: Discourse ethics was presented as a contra-factual idea, as an organizing device and setting for conflict resolution, to clarify distinctions between 'factual truth' and normative rules, especially in the context of public deliberations and environmental concerns. Based on a universal pragmatics of language use, Habermas distinguished between factual, normative and expressive statements. Factual statements refer to the 'objective world' and its materiality out there. Normative statements are about the value and justification of social norms. Expressive statements are about inner-personal states of mind (like feelings). According to Habermas, a practical discourse is a concrete, situated, institutional device and setting focused around an issue of concern – e.g., a planned waste treatment infrastructure, a new technology with far reaching consequences like GMO or nanotechnologies – in which all the concerned parties assemble, having the same rights to speak and argue their case along the three dimensions of language use.[13]

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[13] Such institutional devices have been established since the early 1990s as 'round tables', 'consensus conferences' or 'conflict mediation on environmental and technological issues' in Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and other countries. Habermas' work has been a major background to this

Is this what Latour is reincarnating? Social actors, representing divergent interests and facts, assembled around a table, arguing about the evaluation of factual claims? Deciding, in a setting 'free of domination', upon 'hierarchies of concerns'? And the better argument wins? To me, it appears close to this, despite the long detour Latour traveled through the science studies. But wasn't Habermas even more concrete, providing a rationale for discussion, whereas Latour stops at the very idea of bringing different people and interests together, simply bypassing the question of *how to decide*, for example, on *red tuna vs. the Japanese* (Latour, 2010)? And if not, what would a mix of Habermas and Latour look like today?

3.4 The need for evaluating matters of concern

Certainly there are advantages in such settings. Nevertheless, as Keller & Poferl (2000) argued, the basic problem is the contra-factuality of the setting itself. In order to function, it implies an equal access to knowledge, its resources and production, the capacity to 'make' evidence and so forth. SKAD argues that social sciences discourse research is about the discursive construction of reality, that is, *social relationships of knowledge* and *politics of knowledge* (Keller 2011a, b). The former refers to the idea that societies establish hierarchies of truth, moral order and institutional claims to reality. The latter refers to competing actors engaged in discursive struggles on the "definition of the situation" (William I. Thomas & Dorothy Thomas). *Social relationships of knowledge* are asymmetric relationships of power. Material and symbolic resources for *politics of knowledge* are anything but equally distributed throughout society. So the idealized setting proposed by Habermas, viewed from a Foucauldian angle, simply ignores the complex hierarchies existing in

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phenomenon. The balance sheets so far indicate a gap between such deliberate discourse and institutional or political consequences (Feindt & Saretzki 2010).

all power/knowledge-regimes. Nor does Latour tell us how to deal with competing claims or concerns in such a parliament or situation. So is his suggestion only about introducing more issues and actors into established playgrounds of political powers?

Recently, Puig de la Bellacasa has pointed out as well the lack of criteria in Latour's position concerning how to proceed in such settings. Picking up on one of his cases in point, a conflict between a 'hardcore' ecologist and SUV drivers, she resumes his argument against the 'fundamentalist ecologist' who is advised to respect and attend to the interests of the SUV owners. Puig de la Bellacasa therefore asks: "[...] do we not still need critical approaches to play a role in the assembling of concern?" (2011, p. 89) She further states:

> My problem here is with how the problem is presented, and how the argument for care is mobilized to protect the SUV issue from its objectification by a critical participant – an angry and fairly disrespectful environmentalist. Respect for concerns and the call for care become arguments to moderate a critical standpoint. (2011, p. 91)

Drawing on Donna Haraway's and other feminist work, Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 2012) argues for an "ethos of engaging with care", for a "speculative commitment to neglected things" and "matters of care" as additional principles necessary to address such situations.[14] Such an ethos introduces a critical rationale for evaluation into the realm of "matters of concern" and fully acknowledges that not all stakeholder positions can be considered equal in the way conceived by Bruno Latour.

My own argument, presented next, raises yet another objection which in principle goes along with Puig de la Bellacasa. I explicitly refer to the ongoing importance of

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[14] For an extended discussion of the role of care in knowledge politics and social studies of science and technology, see Martin, Myers & Visieu (2015).

empirical analysis and of *genealogical and reconstructive discourse research* in order to make visible the asymmetric relationships of knowledge and the work of knowledge politics implied in such 'arguing cases'. Mere claims of critique are not enough.

4. Sociology of critique instead of critical sociology?

4.1. Moral orders and critique

Before we return to Latour, another (and also French) approach to revitalizing critique will be addressed which seeks to replace critical theories (e.g., the Frankfurt School) and critical sociologies (e.g., Bourdieu's) with a *sociology of critical capacities*. This refers to the work of French sociologist Luc Boltanski and French economist Laurent Thévenot (see Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006) on the moral orders of judgment/"economies of worth" and their analysis of critique in social life. As will be argued, Boltanski and Thévenot point to very interesting issues for contemporary discourse research but without exploring their full potential. And unfortunately, Boltanski (2011) also fails to transform the analysis of critical capacities into a new haven for critical sociology.

For Luc Boltanski too, Pierre Bourdieu is the main enemy – French academia is a small world. After his theoretical and personal split with Bourdieu in the 1980s, Boltanski advanced arguments for sociological inquiry into the processes and procedures of critique in everyday life, into how common people as well as organizations make, establish, defend and evaluate critical arguments and

interventions. Let me sum up the basic arguments.[15] Boltanski and Thévenot argue that throughout its history, French society has established several economies of worth, that is hierarchies of evaluation to decide upon the 'worth' of a person, organization, practice or object. For example, the economy of inspiration in the field of the arts places very high value on the creative individual, and much less on one who merely copies what others have done. The economy of the home, the domestic world, creates hierarchy in processes of belonging. One should note that the identified orders (or 'worlds') here are not causally linked to a special field of practice.

4.2. The critical work common people do

In the everyday lives of people and organizations, such orders of worth are used in situations everywhere, much like a grammatical system, to evaluate and judge situations, objects, phenomena, and people. They are also used to present critique, such as addressing the question whether some order has been correctly applied, or whether the present order of evaluation should be replaced by another. For example, in universities, grades given in oral exams or for reports are indicators of concrete work done by some person. They evaluate the contribution to science. But there are (and always have been) disputes regarding the form and quality of evaluation. Do grades evaluate what they should evaluate (intellectual contributions)? Or do they evaluate in relation to social attributes and identities (such as ethnicity, race, class, gender), which should not matter? Could evaluation processes be improved? Should they be replaced? What procedures of evaluation would then be the best to account for the capacity (such as 'intellectual contribution') one is seeking in a particular situation?

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[15] I cannot account for their whole theory of six (as in the original book) or seven or eight (if newer work is included) moral orders established in French history and culture (please see the cited works of Boltanski & Thevenot).

Significantly, this is not presented as some kind of self-sufficient endeavor. Rather, by insisting on the critical capacities of everyday people, Boltanski (2011) argues that they understand their own situations quite well.[16] There is no need for critical social theorists, placed in privileged observer positions 'outside the game', to explain to them their alienation due to structures of power and dominance. Viewed from this angle too, critical sociology and critical thinking in general have run out of steam.

4.3. Problems of the sociology of critical capacities

Several arguments have been made against Boltanski's and Thévenot's framework. Leading German critical theorist Axel Honneth (2008) wondered why so many classical French philosophers were dominant in the presentation of economies of worth. He was also surprised at their small number – why should there be only six such economies? Further, given that Boltanski and Thevenot basically argue with French philosophy and empirical research, is their theoretical elaboration and empirical account valuable for other societies beyond France? French sociologist Francis Chateauraynaud (2003) further objected to the rather proof-oriented empirical research ethos present in Boltanski and Thévenot. According to him they were, at least for large parts of their empirical work, not interested in empirical analysis and new results, but only in demonstration of the value of established concepts – theory testing rather than empirical research.[17]

Nevertheless, Boltanski (2011) wants to explore, via his sociological analysis, the path which leads from everyday critique to an immanent critique of societies. Can a

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[16] Please note that Latour and Boltanski, despite working in different fields and paradigms, share (or have shared) a longtime friendship and common discussion. Thus the affinities between their arguments may well not be by chance. Important differences regarding basic features of their sociologies exist too (see Latour 2004c).

[17] In fairness, one should add that at least Boltanski and Chiapello (2007 [1999]) show, via discourse analysis of management literature, the emergence of a new economy of worth.

new critical sociology be established on those solid grounds of immanent critique? Can it be grounded in the auto-critical capacity of societies or social collectivities? This is how Boltanski aims both to avoid an external god / observer position (which Bourdieu held) as well as the classical critical theory position which grounds its observations in philosophical reflections (or imaginations) of un-alienated life.

However, a closer examination of Boltanski's texts reveals that, despite arguing convincingly about the conditions of the emergence of critique in social worlds themselves, such as the eternal gap between collective institutions and human self-interested role players, he fails to relate the sociological analysis of critique to sociological assistance to 'the people' to achieve their emancipation. As a true French thinker, he is not interested in 'voice' or 'action research'. Rather, he seeks to assist the more or less ignorant everyday people in their fight for a new world by attacking in a rather simple manner the greedy deeds of powerful men governing the world. Moreover, he does not hesitate to point ultimately towards "revolution" as the goal. Thus, in his later days, despite rhetorical distanciation, Boltanski (2011), in fact and in words, re-joins his former colleague Pierre Bourdieu in mounting polemics against 'the ruling classes' and 'the system' – a position particularly difficult to ground in the theoretical diagnostics of economies of worth.

5. Back to genealogy and interpretative analytics of power/knowledge as (possible) catalysts for critique

5.1. Interpretative analytics and critical effects

By now you may consider the author of this paper a rather old-fashioned European sociologist struggling with conceptual ghosts from yesteryear. But please allow me in my conclusion to sum up my arguments against the positions presented.

First, I wish to emphasize the *possibility* and *capability* of emerging critical effects of all kinds of solid sociological research and arguments which help to expand the "action repertoire of societies", as German sociologist Hans-Georg Soeffner put it in an interview (see Reichertz, 2004). 'Solid' here does not refer to some positivist ideal of science, but, as the endless ideological and rhetorical work of simplification abounds in the public domain, to carefully executed theoretical and empirical work which engages with the complexities of today's social agendas (see Clarke & Keller, 2014) for "telling about society" (Becker, 2008).

Significantly, this is not the exclusive jurisdiction of explicitly 'critical' approaches. And it holds not only for empirical analysis, but also for theory and diagnostics of a different kind, as the work of German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2008) has impressively demonstrated. For example, his ground-breaking arguments on risk society and individualization, based not on his own empirical research, but on informed sociological reading and 'sociological imagination' (Mills 2000 [1959]) pointed to inequalities of risk definition and risk exposures and very much changed public awareness and possibilities for (and even perhaps: realities of) action in contemporary societies.

Second, to return to discourse research, I insist on the ongoing usefulness of genealogical inquiry and interpretative analytics regarding power/knowledge regimes. Such genealogical inquiry, according to Foucault, implies carefully conducted empirical research. Herein social phenomena are conceived as crystallized effects of complex constellations and historical becoming which cannot be explained using a

one-theory-fits-all rationale. They exist, in the words of Max Weber, as "historical individuals". Therefore, they cannot be accounted for via simple cause-and-effect assumptions, but demand careful research into their always and ever particular features. The term "interpretative analytics" was coined by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) to describe Foucault's work and methodology. 'Interpretation' therein refers to the far reaching societal diagnostics proposed by Michel Foucault, as in concepts such as "disciplinary society". 'Analytics' points to Foucault's distancing from pre-established theoretical explanations such as those of Karl Marx or Pierre Bourdieu (and perhaps we should add Bruno Latour and Luc Boltanski) which deductively account for social phenomena by the same assumptions regarding the always already-known 'most important' elements and relations. While SKAD uses this idea of analytics, it prefers a different connotation of 'interpretation', one anchored in the interpretive tradition of sociology (Keller, 2011, 2012).

5.2. A never ending story: de-objectifying against simplification

Societies are made up of competing worlds, hierarchies, structures of domination, hate and violence, but also of pleasure, community action, human care, and friendship. And the conflicts, issues, commitments and resources available for the definition of collective situations – including things, actors, animals, objects, values, ways of doing, justifications, etc. – never cease. Pretending that reality *is* the way it is and *must be* the way it is, surely is an ongoing business in which lots of sciences are active partners. Therefore discourse analytical reconstruction and genealogical analysis remain useful and timely tools with which to establish contingency. Latour's 'solution' of transforming "matters of fact" into "matters of concern" is like the white rabbit springing out of the magician's hat – if it is not grounded in discourse, analytical reconstruction of implicated constellations, contingencies and silenced

actants, in the carefully done analysis of social relationships of knowledge and politics of knowledge – the realms of discursive construction of realities. How else could you, as a scientific worker, seriously be able to establish a "thing" as a matter of concern?[18]

In working against processes of "objectification" and "reification" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 106-107), sociological and discourse analytical work helps 'de-objectify' reality. Therefore, Latour's core argument for saving critique is not an alternative to discourse research and social constructionism, but the direct *outcome* of such research. The effects of Foucauldian work are the most obvious arguments for such an evaluation. The *ethos of enlightenment*, according to Foucault (1984), implies never-ending effort.

5.3. Discourse research as sociology of knowledge

In order to do such research, sociology and the social sciences in general must reexamine the concept of discourse: Discourse is not language or language use. It is not only a framing of phenomena but, following Foucault, a heuristic device for exploring the making and unmaking of knowledge/power constellations. The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) therefore articulates Foucauldian work with Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge and pragmatist interpretive sociology. As Adele Clarke (2005) has argued, we are awash in seas of discourses, and discourses are inherent parts of all situations. Accounting for this does not reduce discourse to linguistic features, but implies a different conceptual and analytic move. The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) therefore addresses these challenges by inquiring into social relationships of knowledge and politics of knowledge. It is not interested in discourse as a linguistic

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[18] Of course this is different when you simply act as political activist.

phenomenon or language game, but in discourse as process and structuration of knowledge production, circulation and transformation, including establishing 'facts' and 'norms'. Such processes operate not only in the fields of science and technology studies, but everywhere in society, in religion as well as in politics, for example, and most of all transversally across such fields.

SKAD (Keller 2011a, b., 2012b, 2013; Keller & Ulrich, 2014)[19] is interested, to use the old words, in the social and the here and now: discursive constructions of reality. Close to Foucault, but integrating Berger and Luckmann (1966) and interpretive sociology as established by the pragmatist tradition, it takes up Ulrich Beck's notion of "relationships of definition" (Beck, 2008, pp. 24-46). Beck proposed these in close affinity to Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's concept of "relationship of production" or "relationship of domination". Thus, *relationships of knowledge* refers to how our societies establish hierarchies of knowledge, belief, ideologies, technical norms, social values, etc. in their attempts at ordering and organizing the world. *Politics of knowledge* refers to the processes of establishing, objectifying, evaluating and transforming realities, e.g. via religions, political ideology and the sciences.

5.4. The seriousness of (discourse) research as experimentation

In interpretative analytics, reconstruction is not a simple representation of how things went on. Reconstruction is a process of theoretically informed empirical inquiry in the pragmatist sense. It is not a *theorism* which applies pre-established categories on empirical data, a procedure classifying data as proof of theory. Instead it takes seriously the capacity of empirical work and data to challenge thinking and to allow or even make us create new concepts to tell new stories. For example, much work in

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[19] For more extended presentation of SKAD's theoretical background, concepts and analytical procedures please refer to the references given.

governmentality studies ends up by simply identifying 'neoliberal governmentality' and 'biopolitics' or 'biopower'. This is neither analysis nor explanation, but classification into established categories, which does not cause any surprise. In a recent critique of some work referring to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg made the very same argument:

> Such efforts to *diagnose* contemporary power appear to be driven by the theoretical concepts. The concepts are not treated as tools and are no longer open to the challenge of a revitalized empiricism. Instead, the world is reduced to the concepts themselves, without the necessary complexities that define the concreteness of any context. Empirical realities do make their appearance, but their promise is almost always guaranteed in advance. The demands of theory overpower the demands on theory. (...) As a result, one inevitably finds what one looks for. (Grossberg, 2014 p.13)

Foucault worked in a rather different way in order to create new concepts via empirical work. As he said in an interview (Foucault 2000b), he lives through research as experimentation where you don't always already know what you will see and get – the interest lies in changing one's own thinking about the ways things are. To me, this is today's challenge to the sociological imagination C. Wright Mills (2000 [1959]) argued for so intensely.

Therefore, discourse research needs tools (concepts, methodology), but not a pre-established theory of discourse. And it needs good questions, questions that matter.[20]

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[20] Remember Foucault's interest in modern subjectivity and its historical production.

6. In guise of conclusion: questions that matter

As this article has argued, the arguments and solutions presented by Latour and Boltanski against critique and for replacing critique have their particular shortcomings and limits. But replying to them by simply returning to a 'critical stance' and completely ignoring what they point to does not seem to respond to the challenges for a new critical inquiry today. Rather I would state that contemporary analysis in discourse research has to engage with the complexities of constellations inherent in discursive constructions of reality, in order to work against ever ongoing simplification (see Clarke & Keller 2014). This needs an ethos of experimentation in the sense of Foucault, of being attentive to different kinds of data, abductive reasoning and the creation of new views on social phenomena and "matters of fact". It implies interpretative analytics, concepts and tools for analyzing social relationships and politics of power/knowledge, and carefully done reconstructive research – in order to prepare grounds for the possibility of emerging critique, which in its real unfolding is beyond the control of the social sciences. Such a sociological discourse research, as 'critical inquiry without the label', could respond to what Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis (2013), following Max Weber, called the "demands of the day".

So what are the good questions and issues today? Where is the complex analytical work of de-objectifying against simplification needed most? It is surely not this paper's task to give that kind of advice. But in the guise of concluding at least two paths for such an inquiry into the discursive construction of reality and its politics of knowledge should be suggested.

First, discourse research conceived of as sociology of knowledge in the very broad sense of combining Berger & Luckmann and Foucault (that is beyond science & technology studies or Karl Mannheim's standpoint theory), provides a powerful

26

heuristic for analyzing social relationships of knowledge and politics of knowledge across the different fields of society. Processes of simplification and reification of realities abound and are shaped by a hybrid mix of heterogeneous elements for establishing evidence (including scientific knowledge, everyday sayings, religious worldviews, political ideologies, cultural frames). Therefore a comprehensive work of de-objectifying such 'evidences' via precise empirical analysis of its discursive construction, its genealogy, contingency and effects is needed today as much as it ever was.

Second, – and here Boltanski's and Thevenot's idea of economies of worth and situations or instances of 'doing critique' in social arenas reappears on stage – corresponding questions for a sociological and discourse-orientated inquiry into such instances of knowledge, fact and norm making and remaking could include: Where and how, on which topics, issues, and phenomena, by which actors and means is factual, moral or aesthetic critique performed, evaluated, denied, or enhanced? Under what conditions? With what kinds of material and symbolic resources? And effects?

Paul Rabinow & Anthony Stavrianakis' (2014), in their book on *Designs on the Contemporary,* argue for a research agenda complementary to genealogical Foucauldian work, which is interested in the current arenas and struggles of innovation, transformation and traditions of all kinds. One case in point they present is that of Salman Rushdie and the conflict around his fictional book the *Satanic Verses* from 1988, where publication bans, threats of death, condemnation and critique by postcolonial thinkers all worked together against the author. You may remember the recent New York PEN club discussion on *Charlie Hebdo* and the

conflict amongst writers in the summer of 2015.[21] One might also identify such issues as cases in point in current conflicts on the right to speak and its restrictions. Such discursive events and practices can be considered points of entry into important realms of contemporary relationships of knowledge and politics of knowledge. Knowledge, considered in the broad definition given to it by Berger & Luckmann or Foucault: not that which is true in a positivist or foundational sense, but that which claims to refer to some existence. I am convinced there is no way that leads from discourse research into such conflicts and processes of critique to the critical standpoint Boltanski so desperately seeks and Latour so vehemently opposes. But telling good and new stories about such conflicts could be one contribution of discourse research to the widening of social repertoires of action – understood as another path toward critical inquiry, despite the missing word 'critical'. Therefore choosing issues and questions that matter, and doing solid empirical work, might be a promising perspective for discourse research as sociology of knowledge with the possibility to enable social transformation.

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[21] See The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/27/nyregion/six-pen-members-decline-gala-after-award-for-charlie-hebdo.html?_r=0; accessed January 29, 2016.

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