

Realist and Historicist Modes of Critique in Critical Sociology

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Abstract

There are two distinct modes of critique operative in Bourdieu's 'critical sociology'. Bourdieu sometimes engages in what I call the realist mode of critique. This is premised on the idea that naïve experience of the social world dissimulates real relations of domination, which critique then reveals. At other times, Bourdieu engages in what I call the historicist mode of critique, which denaturalizes the doxic experience of the social order by demonstrating its arbitrary character. Whereas realist critique claims that the social world *really is* other than it appears, historicist critique suggests that it *could be* otherwise. This tension between the two modes of critique is not unique to Bourdieu, but also present in the Polanyian literature and in the Western Marxist tradition. By distinguishing between the two modes of critique, my aim is to clarify an oft-implicit division that cuts across different critical traditions in the social sciences.

Keywords

Bourdieu, Polanyi, Marx, critical sociology, realism, historicism

Introduction

The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu has sometimes been referred to as a 'critical sociology' (Bénatouïl, 1999; Boltanski, 2011; Brohm, 2004; Schinkel, 2003; Swartz, 2003, 2013). But what does this mean? Bourdieu was of course a prominent critic of neoliberalism and social domination more generally, and he owed a significant part of his public notoriety to his more directly political interventions (see Bourdieu, 2008, 2010; Bourdieu et al., 1999). Yet what made his sociology 'critical' was not the political intention behind it, but rather his understanding of the sociological vocation itself.¹

In Bourdieu's oeuvre, 'critical' refers less to the political use to which sociological knowledge is put than to its relationship to *doxa*: sociology, or any other social science, is critical insofar as the knowledge it produces negates the symbolic violence represented by the *doxic* understanding of a social world riven by misrecognized relations of domination. As Schinkel (2003) writes, Bourdieu's analyses are

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unmasking and *demythologizing* . . . Bourdieu wants to show that dominant relations within the social space are maintained by means of a belief in the basis of that dominance as ‘essential’ and ‘naturally real’. This line of thought, which appears in all of Bourdieu’s analyses, is what has always made Bourdieu a critical sociologist. (p. 78, emphases in original)

Boltanski (2008) describes ‘critical sociology’ as a kind of ‘history of the present’ whose task is to ‘describe the present by placing it in a position that is exterior to itself’ (pp. 87–88). Doing so is ‘already to bring up the possibility that the present be other than it is, that reality be other than it is, and, by consequence, relativize or deconstruct the present such as it is’ (Boltanski, 2008: 88).²

The above quotes, however, point to an ambiguity in Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’. Are ‘unmasking’ and ‘demythologizing’ really the same critical operation? Is ‘relativizing’ the present in such a way as to suggest alternative, unrealized presents the same as ‘deconstructing’ the present so as to reveal a hidden reality standing behind appearances? Are these not ultimately different modes of critique? In this paper, I draw a distinction between what I call the *realist* and *historicist* modes of critique that run through Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’, and also other ‘critical’ social scientific traditions, namely Polanyian scholarship and Marxism.

The realist mode is premised on the idea that our naïve experience of the social world not only does not disclose, but also actively dissimulates, the real mechanisms that determine it. What makes social science critical in this mode is that it reveals these hidden mechanisms through theoretical reconstruction. This kind of critique implies a stratified conception of reality in that what it renders scientifically legible stands in relation to surface appearances as their determining principle.³ In this sense, the realist critique has a strong affinity with Bachelard’s (2002) historical epistemology, according to which scientific knowledge entails a break with ‘epistemological obstacles’ rooted in taken for granted ‘pre-notions’. Following Bachelard’s (1949) dictum that ‘There is no science but of the hidden’ (p. 38), we might say that in the realist mode of critique, there is no critique but of the hidden mechanisms of power. Critical social science *unveils* and *unmasks* relations of domination which are never experienced or seen as such.

Whereas the realist mode of critique unmasks the social order, the historicist mode temporally and socially *relativizes* it. The critical operation here consists in demonstrating the arbitrary and contingent character of what is falsely perceived as universal and eternal. If, as Barthes (1972) argues, the principle of myth is not to hide but to transform history into nature, then critique in the historicist mode is *demythologizing*.⁴ To historicize is to *denaturalize* the social world experienced as necessary.

Though both modes of critique seek to neutralize the effects of symbolic domination and provide an epistemic basis for self-conscious political action, they imply different critical postures toward *doxa*. While the realist mode seeks to pierce the doxic experience of the world and apprehend what it conceives as a more fundamental reality that really governs social life, the historicist mode seeks to recover a degree of historical agency by invoking a potential reality that, though unrealized, gestures toward the possibility of another world.⁵ Where the realist mode claims that the social world really *is* other than its doxic representation, the historicist mode suggests that it *could be* otherwise.⁶

The aim of this paper is not to evaluate these two modes of critique, nor to argue that they are necessarily incompatible.⁷ It is simply to clarify an ambiguity in what critique means in different critical traditions, and to point out how the distinction between the realist and historicist modes cuts across these traditions. I show first how both critical modes are present in Bourdieu’s work and emphasized at different times, whether in his empirical studies or in his more programmatic statements on the critical task of sociology. I then consider two cases of critical social scientific

traditions—the Polanyian scholarship and Marxism—within which the distinction I identify between the realist and historicist modes of critique has implicitly structured interpretive debates, focusing specifically on the debates over Polanyi’s concept of ‘embeddedness’ and Marx’s concept of ‘fetishism’. Finally, I return to Bourdieu, arguing that the ambiguous relation between the two modes of critique creates a tension within his work, particularly in his economic sociology, whose critical thrust is inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. Though this tension is not unique to Bourdieu and reflects a deeper ambiguity about what it means to do critical social science, as shown by the comparison with the Polanyian and Marxist literatures, I suggest that Bourdieusian ‘critical sociology’ could be enriched by a more explicit consideration of the different modes of critique identified here.

Bourdieu and ‘critical sociology’

According to Bourdieu, sociology produces ‘instruments of self-defence against symbolic aggression’ (Bourdieu and Chartier, 2015: 28).⁸ Sociological knowledge, insofar as it is scientific, entails a break with the self-evidence of the social world. Sociology is thus by its nature a struggle against symbolic violence and domination, and it is in this sense that it is a critical science. But what is the nature of this symbolic violence, and how does it shape sociology’s critical vocation? A close reading reveals at least two different ways in which Bourdieu characterizes symbolic violence, corresponding to what I have called the realist and historicist modes of critique.

Burawoy (2018, 2019b) has recently noted a ‘profound ambiguity’ in Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, arguing that it variably denotes two distinct ways of conceptualizing how relations of domination are reproduced (p. 69). Symbolic violence sometimes refers to the unconscious internalization of social structures in the habitus. Burawoy identifies this as a form of ‘misrecognition’, in that the harmony between subjective states and the social forms of domination that produce them and to which they are adapted means that domination is never recognized as such. At other times, symbolic violence takes the form of ‘mystification’, which Burawoy describes as a social process that produces a ‘gap between experience and reality *for all who enter a specific set of social relations*’ (Burawoy, 2019b: 153). ‘Mystification’ is thus a feature of social relations themselves instead of the product of individual socialization, and in Bourdieu’s work the locus of symbolic violence as ‘mystification’ is not the habitus but fields, the rules of which lead ‘players’ invested in these ‘social games’ to unwittingly reproduce relations of domination. For Burawoy, these different conceptions of symbolic violence have important implications. Whereas, ‘misrecognition’ implies such a depth of subjection that critical self-reflection can only come from outside the individual habitus, ‘mystification’, because it locates the source of epistemic error in the structure of social relations themselves, independent of the individuals who make them up, leaves open the possibility for ‘good sense’ to emerge out of the ‘common sense’ of subaltern subjects.⁹

Burawoy’s distinction between ‘misrecognition’ and ‘mystification’ is suggestive, but it is not the only way to parse the ambiguity he correctly senses within Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’. For Burawoy, this ambiguity is a problem specific to Bourdieu, and he proposes to resolve it through a Marxist reading. But this ambiguity can also be read as a specific instance of a more fundamental tension between what I call realist and historicist modes of critique.

Burawoy notwithstanding, this ambiguity is typically glossed over in the secondary literature on Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’. Consider some of the more explicit statements on Bourdieu’s conception of the critical vocation of sociology. As noted above, Schinkel (2003) does not differentiate between ‘unmasking’ and ‘demythologizing’, though these have different connotations. Likewise, Boltanski (2011) does not differentiate between ‘deconstructing’ and ‘relativizing’. Swartz also largely passes over these distinctions in his exegesis of Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’. For

example, he states several times that ‘critical sociology’ entails ‘unmasking and debunking hidden, taken-for-granted power relations’ (Swartz, 2013: 193). Yet he also characterizes it as a ‘debunking or disenchanting force’ that ‘desacralizes the sacred’, or as ‘an effort to denaturalize and render less deterministic the social world’ (Swartz, 2013: 156, 185). The differences between these formulations are subtle but meaningful and point to different modes of sociological critique. But if commentators have conflated these, it is partly because Bourdieu himself was less than consistent in how he characterized sociology’s critical vocation.

In his explicit statements on the subject, Bourdieu often renders sociology’s critical vocation in a realist mode. For example, riffing on Bachelard’s dictum that ‘there is no science but of the hidden’, Bourdieu (1998a) states that ‘the function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden’ (p. 17). The ‘science of society’ is thus ‘in itself critical’ because ‘the unveiling of the hidden always has a critical effect’. The social order is ‘founded on the dissimulation of the most effective mechanisms of its reproduction’, the hiding of which serves ‘the interests of those who have an interest in the conservation of this order’. Sociology ‘unmasks, and thereby intervenes in, the relations of force between groups or classes and can even contribute to modifying these relations’. ‘Scientific unmasking can have the effect of transforming the functioning of a mechanism that owes a part of its effectiveness to the fact that its effectiveness is unrecognized by both those who benefit from it and those who are its victims’ (Bourdieu, 1970: 19–20). Sociology is a ‘science that makes trouble’ because it ‘reveals things that are hidden’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 9). In revealing the hidden, sociology ‘can help minimize the symbolic violence within social relations’ (Bourdieu, 1998a: 17).

In this realist mode, Bourdieu’s critical sociology is premised on the idea that the *doxic* appearance of the social world dissimulates an underlying reality—i.e. domination—that is determinant but misrecognized. It is because there exists a disjuncture between real social relations and the way in which these are experienced that sociology has to scientifically construct reality against appearances, and it is because these real relations are often relations of domination that sociology is inherently critical inasmuch as it is scientific. The critical task of sociology is thus to reveal, unmask, or unveil how the social world *really is* beneath or behind the way in which it presents itself to our naïve experience of it.

Many of Bourdieu’s most familiar works are written in this realist critical mode. His early work on social reproduction and education with Jean-Claude Passeron, for example, is about how class inequalities are effectively laundered and legitimated through the educational system. The basic argument is that because the educational system selects for cultural competencies already inculcated in the ‘primary habitus’ of the dominant class, what appears as academic merit is in reality just dissimulated class advantage. The school is thus an instrument of ‘bourgeois sociodicy’ in that it misrecognizes and therefore legitimates arbitrary class differences as differences in merit (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The critical move consists in unmasking the real relations of class domination that stand behind the neutral façade of academic meritocracy.

Distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) follows a similar critical logic. Here, too, Bourdieu argues that class differences are transmuted into symbolic differences and thereby misrecognized. The basic argument is familiar: consumption practices in the symbolic space of lifestyles are not random, but rather homologously related to class position, defined as relative position in a ‘social space’ structured by volume, composition, and trajectory of capital. But class positions do not just correlate with different consumption practices. These differences are apprehended hierarchically so that hierarchies of taste reflect—and hide—class hierarchies. Cultural taste, like academic success, thus serves a function of sociodicy by transmuting objective inequalities into symbolic distinctions that dissimulate and legitimate those original inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984). Again, the critical logic

here is to refer the surface appearance of things to a deeper level of reality, in this case the analytical construct of the ‘social space’ that is its determining principle.

This is also the general logic of Bourdieu’s field concept, the point of which is to analytically reveal hidden relations of power.¹⁰ Field theory seeks to break from the ‘substantialist mode of thought’ that foregrounds visible interactions between individuals by reconstructing the invisible ‘structural relations . . . between social positions’, explaining ‘position-takings’ by reference to field position (Bourdieu, 1983: 311–312). This is also the basic logic of his sociology of culture, the main theme of which is how apparently disinterested arenas of social life—like literature, art, and science—are in reality agonistic fields (Bourdieu, 1996, 2004, 2017) Thus ‘the essential explanation of each work [of art and literature] lies outside each of them, in the objective relations which constitute [the] field’ (Bourdieu, 1983: 312). One also finds this logic in *The Weight of the World*, where Bourdieu laments the ‘site effects’ that mark the study of urban marginality and argues that the ‘essential principle of what is lived and seen *on the ground* . . . is elsewhere’ (Bourdieu et al., 1999: 123). The critical thrust of much of Bourdieu’s work is that the social world is other than it appears, that its principle lies ‘elsewhere’, and that the sociological rupture with *doxa* is accomplished by breaking through the illusion of experience and revealing underlying social realities that can only be accessed through scientific construction.

This realist mode, however, is not the only way Bourdieu characterizes the rupture with *doxa*. In various places, he also renders this in what I have called the historicist mode. In *Pascalian Meditations*, for example, he writes,

Social science, which is obliged to make a critical break with primary self-evidences, has no better weapon for doing so than historicization, which, at least in the order of theory, makes it possible to neutralize the effects of naturalization, and in particular amnesia of the individual and collective genesis of a ‘given’ that gives itself with all the appearance of nature and asks to be taken at face value, taken for granted. (Bourdieu, 2000: 182)

Here Bourdieu (2000) characterizes the epistemological obstacle facing sociology as ‘genesis amnesia’ and ‘the anamnesis of origin’, and argues that ‘only historical critique . . . can free thought from the constraints exerted on it when, surrendering to the routines of the automaton, it treats reified historical constructs as things’ (p. 182).¹¹ The point of sociological critique, he suggests, is to show that what ‘today presents itself as self-evident, established, settled once and for all, beyond discussion, has not always been so and only gradually imposed itself as such’, and to recover the ‘lateral possibles’ forgotten to history (Bourdieu, 2000: 174). Elsewhere, Bourdieu (1994) writes that

there is no more potent tool for rupture than the reconstruction of genesis: by bringing back into view the conflicts and confrontations of the early beginnings and therefore all the discarded possibles, it retrieves the possibility that things could have been (and still could be) otherwise. And, through such a practical utopia, it questions the ‘possible’ which, among all others, was actualized. (p. 4)

Critique here entails denaturalizing the social order by historicizing and relativizing it. *Doxa* in this historicist mode is conceptualized differently than in the realist mode: it is not so much a veil concealing an underlying reality as it is the false eternalization and universalization of this reality. Breaking with *doxa* is thus less an act of deciphering how things really are than an act of remembering that things could have been, and still could be, otherwise: even if the social order really is as it appears, a critical science can at least demonstrate the socially arbitrary and historically contingent character of this order. What critique reveals in this case is not the social world as it really is, but the historical possibility of another world.¹²

When Bourdieu writes about the doxic effect produced by the agreement between the habitus and its conditions of production, he tends to do so in this historicist mode. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977), for example, he writes that it is because of the ‘quasi-perfect fit’ between objective structures and internalized structures that ‘the established cosmological and political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned’ (p. 166). Habitus is thus a critical concept in that, by historicizing the relation between social structures and the mental structures they generate and through which they are perceived, it disrupts the circuit of symbolic violence. The habitus concept has a relativizing effect by drawing analytical attention to the historical and social conditions producing a given habitus. Bourdieu’s (2000) critique of scholastic reason in *Pascalian Meditations*, also, is aimed at showing how dispositions presumed to be universal are in fact specific to particular socio-historical circumstances.

The historicist critical logic of the habitus concept is perhaps most evident in Bourdieu’s critique of masculine domination. Bourdieu (2001) argues that relations of masculine domination become naturalized because the cognitive instruments by which women and men apprehend these relations are themselves embodiments of these relations and therefore adapted to them. Bourdieu (2001) here defines *doxa* as the ‘transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the *natural*’, and he calls for a ‘genetic sociology of the sexual unconscious’ whose task is to ‘reconstruct the history of the historical labor of dehistoricization’, i.e. the ‘history of the continuous (re)creation of the objective and subjective structures of masculine domination’ (pp. 2, 106, 83). Bourdieu defines *doxa* here in the same way Barthes (1972) defines myth—that is, as the naturalization, not hiding, of history. The sociological critique of masculine domination thus primarily entails historicizing the gendered habitus that naturalizes this domination. By reconstructing the historical conditions of their production, Bourdieu seeks to break the reinforcing loop between objective and mental structures that gives masculine domination its self-evident and fatalistic character. Note, however, that the argument is not that this relation of domination is concealed, but that it is naturalized. What scientific critique demonstrates is not the social fact of domination itself, but its historical contingency.¹³

In sum, there is an ambiguity in Bourdieu’s conception of the critical vocation of sociology, and it is related to an ambiguity in his concept of symbolic violence. In some formulations, symbolic violence is essentially a process of concealment, and sociological critique reveals a hidden reality of domination that is not experienced or recognized as such. In others, symbolic violence is mainly a process of naturalization, and sociological critique does not so much expose relations of domination—because they are already more or less experienced and recognized as such—as it does historicize and relativize them. But *pace* Burawoy, if we recast the ambiguity in Bourdieu’s accounts of symbolic violence in terms of the difference between realist and historicist modes of critique, we can see that this ambiguity and the tensions to which it gives rise are not specific to Bourdieu but characteristic of other critical traditions as well. Before discussing these tensions in Bourdieu, I thus turn to an overview of the Polanyian and Marxist literatures, where the ambiguous relation between realist and historicist modes of critique is more clearly recognized than in Bourdieu’s case and has given rise to distinct interpretive camps.

Polanyi and the ambiguities of embeddedness

There has been a resurgence of interest in Karl Polanyi in recent years in both the academic and popular press (e.g. Adelman, 2017; Block and Somers, 2014; Bockman, 2016; Dale, 2010, 2016a, 2016b; Fraser, 2014; Gemici, 2015; Hann, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Iber and Konczal, 2016; Krippner, 2017; Saval, 2016; Watson, 2014). While it is outside the scope of this paper to account for this

resurgence, Polanyi has arguably displaced Marx as the lodestar for critical analyses of the economy.¹⁴ His concept of ‘embeddedness’ in particular has become a central concept in economic sociology, where it is frequently invoked as a critique of the market naturalist assumptions of neo-classical, and now neoliberal, ideology (Barber, 1995; Beckert, 2003; Granovetter, 1985; Krippner and Alvarez, 2007; Lie, 1991).¹⁵ Yet as some have pointed out, Polanyi was far from consistent in his use of the concept, leading to ambiguities in how embeddedness has been interpreted by subsequent scholars (Block and Somers, 2014; Dale, 2011; Gemici, 2008; Krippner, 2001; Luban, 2017).¹⁶ These ambiguities, I argue in this section, parallel those in Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence and map onto the distinction I have drawn between the historicist and realist modes of critique.

Gemici (2008) has identified a ‘central fracture’ in Polanyi’s thought that has given rise to two distinct interpretations of ‘embeddedness’, both of which find warrant in his writing: one according to which it is a ‘historical variable’ and another according to which it is a ‘methodological principle’ (p. 6). In the first interpretation, embeddedness is a ‘gradational concept’ in that the degree to which the economy is embedded is historically variable (Gemici, 2008: 9).¹⁷ In this view, the emergence of market society in 19th-century Europe really did entail a relative disembedding of the economy from society and a reversal in the vector of embeddedness.¹⁸ Polanyi (2001) himself put it thusly in describing the rise of the ‘market pattern’: ‘Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system’ (p. 60).

Interpreted as a historical variable, the embeddedness concept thus points to a real historical process, one in which the economy becomes disembedded and the market comes to ‘dominate “society”, bringing forth a sorcerer’s apprentice world of untrammled market forces that, although human creations, lie beyond conscious human control’ (Dale, 2011: 307).¹⁹ Polanyi’s critique, however, consisted not just in denouncing the destructive consequences of this state of affairs, but also in historicizing it. Indeed, a central focus of *The Great Transformation* and especially Polanyi’s (1968, 1977, 2001) later work on pre-modern economies was to document the variable forms of economic integration—of which the market was only one—that have existed throughout history. The self-regulating market and the economic motives that it fostered were historical artifacts that only became historically possible as the economy was released from its prior societal integuments and the market became instituted as the dominant principal of social organization. The critical value of the embeddedness concept understood as a historical variable thus lies in the way that it denaturalizes and particularizes the naturalist and universalist pretensions of neoclassical economics.

Embeddedness as a historical variable corresponds to what I have called the historicist mode of critique. Gemici notes that the gradational conception of embeddedness—according to which it makes sense to talk about embedded and disembedded economies—has been embraced by the substantivist school of economic anthropology inspired by Polanyi. A central premise of substantivism is that formalist concepts developed to analyze disembedded market economies are not adequate to analyzing embedded pre-modern economies. Implied, however, is that they are adequate to analyzing market economies, and that these really are—or at least can be treated as if they are—disembedded from society. As Krippner (2001) writes in summarizing this interpretation of the embeddedness concept:

Thus, the tendency of economists to reduce economic life to the market was acceptable, at least as an approximation, in describing the West during the ascent of the machine age. Within this specific historical context, the economists had it basically right: their mistake consisted in treating the self-regulating market as a transhistorical category, not in applying it within the limited purview of nineteenth-century British industrialism. (p. 781)

We can see clearly here in what ways embeddedness as a historical variable is—and is not—critical. The concept does not so much reject neoclassical economics as limit its scope.²⁰ The critical move consists not in unmasking the epistemic distortions of neoclassical economics with regard to the workings of market society, but in historically relativizing market society. The political implication of such relativization, as Luban (2017) has put it, is that ‘history will no longer appear as one long quest to achieve laissez-faire’, and will instead be seen as ‘a catalog of other ways that societies have organized themselves, and might still again’. Embeddedness, in this view, is thus a critical concept in that by relativizing market society, it gestures toward the unrealized possibility of an alternative economic reality.

Opposed to this interpretation of embeddedness as a ‘historical variable’ is its interpretation as a ‘methodological principle’. Gemici (2008) himself is partial to the latter, suggesting that where Polanyi adopts a gradational conception of embeddedness, his critique regrettably stops short of applying to the market economy itself (p. 25).²¹ Embeddedness as a ‘methodological principle’ alternatively posits the analytical impossibility of separating economy from society ‘because all economic systems are embedded in social relations and institutions’ (Gemici, 2008: 7).²² From this view, it makes no sense to say that the economy is, or could ever be, actually disembedded from society.

Block and Somers (2014) argue that Polanyi’s core discovery in *The Great Transformation* was the ‘idea of the always-embedded market economy’ (pp. 73–74). In the process of writing *The Great Transformation*, they argue, Polanyi moved away from an allegedly *marxisant* view of the capitalist economy as historically disembedded to what they contend was the more original view that the market economy is, contrary to the pretensions of market ideology, always-already institutionally embedded.²³ The self-regulating market was a ‘stark utopia’ whose attempted realization not only provoked a societal counter-movement due to its calamitous consequences, but also required continuous social intervention to integrate the ‘fictitious commodities’ of land, labor, and money into a functioning market system. As Krippner writes, even in an ideal form, markets ‘are not the expression of primal, timeless instincts; they are rather fully social institutions, reflecting a complex alchemy of politics, culture, and ideology’ (Krippner, 2001: 782). In other words, even the ‘free’ market is constitutively embedded in society.

The methodological interpretation of embeddedness corresponds to what I have called the realist mode of critique. What is critically refuted is the apparent transparency of the market as a world unto itself, free from social coercion. Polanyi ‘definitively lays bare the deception behind the self-serving claim on the part of economic liberals that markets are superior mechanisms of efficiency as well as of morality and freedom because they operate in a space free of power, coercion, and domination’ (Block and Somers, 2017: 385). The embeddedness concept unveils the dissimulated relations of power undergirding the market. While market ideology may represent the market as an autonomous realm subject only to its internal logic, there exists an underlying reality of political and social intervention rendered legible by Polanyi’s concept of embeddedness.

The ambiguity of Polanyi’s embeddedness concept thus mirrors that of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, and like the latter, it has been deployed critically in two distinct ways. Read as a historical variable, the embeddedness concept works in what I have called the historicist mode—it temporally relativizes the market and in doing so suggests that things were and could again be otherwise. Critique in this case is oriented against the fatalistic acceptance of the market, and involves the recovery of alternative economic possibilities. Read as a methodological principle, the embeddedness concept works in what I have called the realist mode—it unmasks the market and in doing so suggests that things are not really as they appear. Critique in this case is oriented against the naïve self-representation of the market, and involves the theoretical reconstruction of a fundamental but concealed reality determining the market. Whereas, one interpretation historicizes the market’s claim to universality, the other deconstructs its claim to self-evidence.

Marxism and fetishism

While the ambiguity within Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence has gone mostly unremarked upon, a parallel ambiguity within Polanyi's concept of embeddedness has given rise to definite interpretive camps. But, it is perhaps within the 'Western Marxist' tradition that this same ambiguity has been most consequential, indeed cleaving the entire tradition into two broad currents. The long history of Marxism has been characterized by intense disagreements over theory and strategy which have been classified in various ways (e.g. Althusser, 1969; Anderson, 1976; Gouldner, 1980; Jay, 1984). Though the details and emphases of these classifications may differ, they tend to converge—descriptively if not evaluatively—and map onto the distinction I have drawn between the realist and historicist modes of critique.

Take Gouldner's (1980) distinction between 'Marxism as science' and 'Marxism as critique', for example. What Gouldner labels the 'critical' tradition, which includes such authors as Lukács, Korsch, Adorno, and Horkheimer,²⁴ is characterized by the following features: a philosophical sensibility suspicious of scientific rationalism, a positive assessment of the Hegelian influence on Marx, an emphasis on the problematic of alienation, and a normative conception of totality. For our purposes, however, what is most notable about the 'critical' tradition is its authors' predominantly historicist interpretation of Marx's critique of capitalism. According to this interpretation, Marx's theoretical breakthrough primarily consisted in historicizing capitalism and the categories of bourgeois thought—i.e. in demonstrating the historical specificity of the social and ideological forms characteristic of capitalism, including its laws of motion. Thus, Lukács (1971) located the 'unscientific nature' of bourgeois economics in its 'failure to see and take account of the *historical character* of the facts on which it was based' (p. 6).²⁵ For Korsch (1970), Marxism was itself a historically specific ideology in that it represented the 'theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat' (p. 45). In this sense, the 'critical' Marxist tradition could be characterized by its commitment to what I have called the historicist mode of critique.

In his broadly sympathetic reinterpretation of this critical tradition, Postone (1993) has characterized it as one in which 'Marx's theory is not considered to be one of material production and class structure alone', but rather a 'theory of the historical constitution of determinate, reified forms of social objectivity and subjectivity', or an attempt to 'analyze critically the cultural forms and social structures of capitalist *civilization*' (p. 16, emphasis mine).²⁶ For Postone (1993), Marx did not so much articulate a theory of history *per se* than locate 'the ground of a particular form of historical logic in the specific social forms of capitalism', a logic which has erroneously been 'projected onto all of human history' (pp. 17–18). Marx 'takes categories of classical political economy and uncovers their unexamined, historically specific social basis', thereby transforming them 'from transhistorical categories of the constitution of wealth into critical categories of the specificity of the forms of wealth and social relations in capitalism' (Postone, 1993: 56). Marx's critique was in this sense 'essentially historical' (Postone, 1993: 81–82).

In Postone's reading, Marx's 'critique of political economy' at its core consists in historicizing bourgeois 'civilization'—the capitalist totality encompassing both its social and ideological forms. Using different terms, we might say that Marx's historicist critique of capitalism emphasizes the temporal 'demythologizing', 'relativizing', or 'denaturalizing' of falsely universalized bourgeois forms over their 'unmasking'. In fact, Postone (1993) explicitly de-emphasizes 'unmasking' as a mode of critique. Marxian critique includes 'unmasking', but only 'as a moment of a more fundamental theory of the social and historical constitution of the ideals *and* reality of capitalist society' (p. 83).²⁷ Marx's critique, as Postone (1993) conceives it,

does not seek merely to peer behind the level of appearances of bourgeois society in order to critically oppose that surface (as 'capitalist') to the underlying social totality constituted by 'labor'. Rather, the

immanent critique Marx unfolds in *Capital* analyzes that underlying totality itself—not merely the surface level of appearances—as characteristic of capitalism. The theory seeks to grasp both surface and underlying reality in a way that points to the possible historical overcoming of the whole—which means, on another level, that it attempts to explain both the reality and the ideals of capitalist society, indicating the historically determinate character of both. Historically specifying the object of the theory in this way implies historically specifying the theory itself. (p. 89)

Postone's critical posture is that of the historicist mode: instead of grounding his critique in a deeper reality which surface appearances conceal, he grounds it in an alternative reality that, though unrealized, exists in potentiality. Indeed, this posture is what differentiated 'critical' from 'traditional' theory for Horkheimer (1975). Or in Gouldner's words, 'To make a critique of something—to criticize it—inevitably premises things might be otherwise'. Critique 'aims at making human potency manifest' (Gouldner, 1980: 71).

In the historicist mode, the main object of Marxist critique is thus not the disjuncture between real social relations and the bourgeois ideological forms through which they are apprehended, but rather the historically determinate capitalist totality, of which social relations and ideological forms are both equally real expressions. Collapsing the real and the ideological in this way as moments of an internally homogeneous totality, the source of epistemic error in the historicist view is located not in the object itself, but instead in its eternalization and universalization. As Therborn (1970) remarks about the Frankfurt School, 'critical theory sees bourgeois economics as ahistorical, but not as incorrect or unscientific' (p. 70). So while the historicist critique relativizes capitalism by placing it within the sweep of history, it denies any fundamental epistemic distinction between the reality and ideology of capitalism in the way that it is lived.

The logic of the historicist mode can be clearly seen in the interpretation of commodity fetishism, which occupies a central place within the 'critical' Marxist tradition. Fetishism in this tradition is typically conceptualized as a real phenomenon that is in a significant sense the essence of capitalism. That is, fetishism is not something incidental to real capitalist relations, but defines the latter. As Geras (1971) remarks, Marx appears to argue in his famous section on the fetishism of commodities that 'where commodity production prevails, relations between persons really do take the form of relations between things' (p. 76).²⁸ Sayer (1991) writes that 'What Marx terms "fetishism", the misapprehension of the social as material, is not just a matter of subjective illusion, but the expression of how things are' (p. 64). Likewise, for Lukács (1971), the process of reification manifested in commodity fetishism is one in which '*Objectively* a world of objects and relations between things springs into being' (p. 87, emphasis in original). Or as Postone (1993) has argued,

the quasi-objective, impersonal social forms expressed by categories such as the commodity and value do not simply disguise the 'real' social relations of capitalism (that is, class relations); rather, the abstract structures expressed by those categories *are* those 'real' social relations. (p. 62, emphasis in original)

Fetishism in this view *is* what capitalist domination is all about.²⁹ Capitalism fundamentally entails the domination of individuals by impersonal forces—abstract and material—like value, the market, the production process, dead labor, and so on, which, though social in origin, take on an independent power like natural forces.³⁰ Capital really does become a 'self-moving substance' and a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense (Postone, 1993: 75). Under capitalism, the individual producer exists only for the self-expansion of value and is thus alienated. Emancipation means reversing this by finally putting the vast social wealth and productive power conjured by capitalism under conscious human direction.

The 'critical' interpretation of fetishism as the essence of capitalist domination is essentially historicist. According to Geras (1971), fetishism implies mystification, except that for him

mystification does not mean ‘something imaginary has been endowed with the quality of reality’, but instead consists in ‘the collapsing of social facts into natural ones’ (p. 78). Demystification, then, is ‘achieved by means of a denaturation’, i.e. by historicization (Geras, 1971: 78). Or as Adorno put it in a letter to Benjamin, ‘every reification is a forgetting’ (quoted in Jay, 1982: 5). De-reification is thus an act of remembrance, or the recovery of historical memory.³¹ But, Geras (1971) insists, demystification is not the same as ‘de-objectification’:

the fact that the material forms of capitalist social relations are not natural ones, does not deprive them of their objectivity, that is to say, of their character of being objects, which become independent vis-à-vis the social agents, dominate them according to their own laws. (pp. 78–79)

Because fetishism is constitutive of the real relations of capitalism and not simply an illusion obscuring those relations, the transcendence of fetishism is not a theoretical precondition for revolutionary transformation but is in fact synonymous with it.³² The critique of fetishism thus cannot in itself neutralize it; it can only illuminate its historically determinate character and point to the possibility of its overcoming.

There is another Marxist interpretation of fetishism according to which the mystification it produces has more to do with ‘those appearances, or forms of manifestation, which are quite simply false, illusions in the full sense, corresponding to no objective reality’ (Geras, 1971: 75). In fact, Geras is not quite right to say that fetishism in this view corresponds to ‘no objective reality’. There is rather a stratified conception of reality. Fetishism in this interpretation is rooted in experience, but this experience is itself ideological and masks the real relations of capitalism. Though not lived as such, these relations are real in a theoretical sense, and as such can only be grasped through a process of scientific construction. Fetishism thus refers to the process by which these real relations are dissimulated by the ideological forms in which they are lived.

This understanding of fetishism is typical of what Gouldner (1980) calls the ‘scientific’ tradition within Marxism, by which he largely means the Althusserian school. Adapting Bachelard’s concept of the ‘epistemological break’—that is, the notion that scientific knowledge is constructed by breaking from unconscious ‘epistemological obstacles’—Althusser famously emphasized the scientific, as opposed to ideological, character of Marx’s mature theory.³³ But in Althusser’s view, Marx’s scientific ‘break’ with bourgeois thought did not consist in historicizing the categories of political economy and the structures which they expressed. Marxism was emphatically ‘not a historicism’. Marx’s ‘immense theoretical revolution’ instead consisted in breaking through the ‘form of appearance’ and ‘apparent motion’ of capitalism by conceptually reconstructing the real relations which determine, but are in turn masked by, those illusory forms (Althusser, 2015). Marx’s mature theory is thus scientific to the extent that it theoretically uncovers real relations concealed by the phenomenal form of capitalism. That is, it is predicated on a disjuncture between the reality of capitalism and the form in which it is lived. It is

because there exists, at the interior of capitalist society a kind of internal rupture between the social relations which obtain and the manner in which they are experienced, that the scientist of that society is confronted with the necessity of constructing reality against appearances. (Geras, 1971: 71)³⁴

Therborn (2008) points out that Gouldner’s counterposing of a ‘critical’ to a ‘scientific’ tradition implies an overly narrow definition of ‘critique’ (p. 71). Indeed, similar to how Bourdieu understood the critical vocation of sociology, for the ‘scientific’ Marxists, it was precisely because Marx’s theory was scientific that it was also critical. But the mode of critique is specifically realist in the way that I have defined it—it scientifically reveals a reality of domination that is not grasped as such at the level of experience or ideology. For example, that profit is only the form of appearance of surplus value, and that the source of the latter is in the extraction of surplus labor, are not

legible at the level of the concrete circulation of capital, where capital appears as self-expanding value.³⁵ Likewise, rent and interest appear as specific returns on land and money, instead of as the mediated forms of surplus value which they really are. The wage form, too, conceals the reality of exploitation by making the value of labor power falsely appear as the value of labor. Indeed, the distinctive feature of capitalism is that the division between necessary labor and surplus labor—i.e. exploitation—is not experienced as such by the direct producers. Marx's (1977) famous 'realm of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham' is thus, in Bourdieu's parlance, a 'well-founded illusion', in that this really is the form in which capitalism appears (p. 280). Capitalism, in other words, by its very nature generates epistemic error. By uncovering the reality of capitalism as a system of exploitation, science and critique coincide.

Fetishism in the realist critical mode does not describe the real relations of capitalism, but refers to those elements of how capitalism is experienced that mask reality. Commodity fetishism is thus essentially a problem of knowledge having to do with the rupture of science from ideology. It

consists in the perception of market exchange simply as an exchange of things with certain values, and not as a manifestation of certain relationships. To reify social relationships is, for example, to treat capital as a natural factor of production with its natural factor income, profit, and not as a specific relation of production, a specific way of exploiting labour. (Therborn, 1976: 367)

According to Rancière (2015) in his Althusserian phase, what is 'constitutive of fetishism' is the movement by which the 'inner determination' of the process of capitalist production is made to disappear as one passes to 'more and more concrete forms' of this process (p. 150). Fetishism, in other words, refers to the fact that 'the relations which determine the capitalist system can only exist in the form of their concealment'. It represents

the specific dislocation according to which the structure of the capitalist mode of production presents itself in the field of *Wirklichkeit*, of *Alltagsleben* (everyday life), and offers itself to the consciousness and action of the agents of production, the bearers of the capitalist relations of production. (Rancière, 2015: 167)

Marx's theory, in this sense, is not only a theory of capitalism, but also the 'theory of its misrecognition' (Rancière, 2015: 168). Fetishism is a 'hieroglyph' which has to be deciphered, and this deciphering 'is the work of science' (Rancière, 2015: 112).

It is clear from the above that the distinction between the historicist and realist modes of critique runs through the Marxist tradition. This is particularly apparent in the interpretation of fetishism. The 'critical' tradition has tended to interpret it as a real phenomenon. Critique intervenes not by dissolving this phenomenon into another reality, but by historicizing it. Fetishism *really does* describe the essence of capitalist relations, but critique points to the historical possibility that it *could be* otherwise. The 'scientific' tradition, on the other hand, has tended to interpret fetishism as an 'epistemological obstacle' in the Bachelardian sense. Critique intervenes by scientifically rendering legible the relations of exploitation dissimulated by the fetishized forms of capitalism. The point is not simply that the world could be otherwise, but that capitalism *really is* other than it appears.

The antinomies of 'critical sociology'

The above discussion suggests that the ambiguous relation between the realist and historicist modes of critique in Bourdieu, Marxism, and the Polanyian literature is not reducible to textual inconsistencies specific to any author or critical tradition, but instead stems from a core ambiguity in what it means to do critical social science more generally. It is outside the scope of this paper to

theoretically adjudicate between the realist and historical modes of critique or to make a case for their logical (in)compatibility, both of which tasks would require a deeper and more wide-ranging philosophical consideration of the question than I can provide. However, the fact that the distinction I have identified between the two modes of critique has been such a significant—if tacit, at least in the terms used here—axis structuring interpretive debates within the Marxist and Polanyian literatures would suggest that, at the very least, there is a tension between them. In this last section, I explore this tension in Bourdieu's 'critical sociology' and conclude that the latter could benefit from a more explicit consideration of this tension which has already marked the Marxist and Polanyian traditions.

I discussed above the ambiguity in how Bourdieu conceptualizes symbolic violence and *doxa*. An instructive comparison can be made here with Therborn's novel elaboration of the Althusserian concept of ideology, which, despite Bourdieu's insistence to the contrary, shares a clear affinity with the concept of symbolic domination (Pallotta, 2015).³⁶ Therborn identifies three 'fundamental modes of ideological interpellation' covered by the concept of ideology. Ideologies 'subject and qualify subjects by telling them, relating them to, and making them recognize' three distinct things: what exists, what is good, and what is possible (Therborn, 1980: 18).

In terms of the reproduction or transformation of the social order, Therborn argues that the three modes of ideological interpellation form a 'logical chain of significance'. In the first instance, a social order stands on its definition of what exists and what does not: for example, 'affluence, equality, and freedom, but not poverty, exploitation, and oppression'. Developing a critical consciousness thus first entails knowing what really exists. Only when a particular state of affairs has to be admitted even by defenders of the social order does the second question arise: whether this state of affairs, imperfect as it may be, is normatively justified.³⁷ Finally, it is when this state of affairs is established and recognized as unjust that the third question—whether any alternative is possible—becomes the stake of ideological struggle (Therborn, 1980: 19).

Our interest here is particularly in the first and third modes of ideological interpellation, which, respectively, pertain to what I have called the realist and historicist critical modes.³⁸ What is interesting in Therborn's account is how the different modes of ideological interpellation—and their corresponding modes of critique—are analytically separable while still implying a hierarchy of significance in the production of critical subjects. For example, though defenders and critics of the status quo might disagree on 'what exists' while agreeing on 'what is possible', just as they might disagree on the latter while agreeing on the former, there is nonetheless an asymmetry between these two cases that suggests that the question of 'what exists' has primacy over the question of 'what is possible'. A critical science that reveals a hitherto obscured state of affairs without making any promises as to the possibility of change is perhaps less *politically* satisfying, but it does not thereby lose its *scientific* value. Moreover, when the state of affairs revealed is defined in morally charged terms (e.g. 'domination'), it is reasonable to assume that the possibility of change is implied, even if the mechanism of change is untheorized.³⁹ Thus, in cases where the dominated recognize their own domination, but see no alternative to it, it is not obvious that a solution to this impasse is necessarily a *scientific* problem. At issue might be a lack of imagination or a sense of resignation,⁴⁰ but the political problem of overcoming these could depend on *ideological* as much as *scientific* inspiration.⁴¹

The reverse case, in which the dominated have a sense of historical possibility but in which the full scope of their domination remains obscured, however, is clearly both a political and a scientific problem for critical science. At stake is the proper construction of the object of critique, and the consequence of a poor or partial construction of this object is the continued illegibility of certain social determinations, including relations of domination. In that sense, an inadequate critique of 'what exists' undermines a critical scientific project from the get-go in a way that an inadequate

critique of ‘what is possible’ does not. Therborn may or may not be right that both are necessary for the development of a critical consciousness oriented toward radical social transformation, but in any case what is clear is that one must know what is to be changed before considering how to change it, and that how one answers the question of ‘what is possible’ will depend on the answer to ‘what exists’.

With this brief excursus on Therborn in mind, let us now turn back to Bourdieu and consider how sociological critique intervenes politically. In both critical modes, science serves to delegitimize the social order. But how legitimation is understood differs. In the realist mode, legitimation is essentially an act of concealment, whereas in the historicist mode it is an act of naturalization. Realist critique’s intervention is fairly straightforward: if the real relations of domination owe their effectiveness to the fact that they are misrecognized, then simply unmasking these relations contributes to their modification. As Bourdieu puts it, because “one of the principles of the effectiveness of the dominant ideology resides in the fact that it does not appear in its objective truth, the fact of unveiling the objective truth of the relations of force that it masks and to which it adds, thereby, its force, can contribute to removing a part of its force” (Bourdieu, 1970: 20).

Things are a little more ambiguous in the historicist mode. On one hand, the point of critique is to recover the ‘lateral’ and ‘discarded possibles’ and retrieve ‘the possibility that things could have been (and still could be) otherwise’ (Bourdieu, 1994: 4). By invoking this possibility, the aim of critique is to inspire a measure of historical agency. And yet, Bourdieu (2002) also recognizes that because symbolic violence is ultimately rooted in the concordance of dispositions and the objective structures of domination of which they are the product, the

relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves. (p. 42)⁴²

So, for example, though gender differences, such as they are constructed in the masculine sociodicy, are arbitrary and contingent, they are also ‘socio-logically necessary’ (Bourdieu, 2001: 2). In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu criticizes Sartre for conferring on the ‘awakening of revolutionary consciousness . . . the power to create the meaning of the present by creating the revolutionary future which negates it’ when he writes in *Being and Nothingness* that ‘It is on the day that we are able to conceive of another state of affairs, that a new light is cast on our trouble and our suffering and we *decide* that they are unbearable’ (Sartre quoted in Bourdieu, 1977: 74). Yet what else is the anticipated critical effect of historicist critique if not precisely such an awakening of historical consciousness?

But the ambiguity and tension in how Bourdieu conceptualizes critique are perhaps most apparent in his economic sociology. Swedberg (2011) argues that we must speak of Bourdieu’s economic sociologies in the plural. This is true not only over the span of his career, but even within a single work like *The Social Structures of the Economy* (Bourdieu, 2005). The book is made up of two main parts: an empirical study of the market for single-family homes and a programmatic chapter, adapted from a previously published article, on the ‘Principles of an Economic Anthropology’. An odd feature of this book, however, is the disjuncture between its programmatic and empirical parts. Although the programmatic Introduction and Part II are clearly intended as, respectively, a theoretical preliminary and capstone to the empirical study which makes up the bulk of the book, the critique of economic *doxa* in these programmatic parts is rendered theoretically in mainly historicist terms, whereas the critical thrust of the empirical study is largely in the realist mode.

The basic argument in the empirical Part I (‘The House Market’) is that the market for single-family homes is not transparent, but overdetermined by the state and other non-economic relations.

That is, standing behind the self-evidence of the market is the ‘twofold social construction’ of supply and demand by housing policy, regulatory practices, cultural norms, advertising, competition, and so on (Bourdieu, 2005: 16). Bourdieu (2005) writes that ‘there is no interaction that so well conceals its structural truth as the relation between buyer and seller in the property transaction’, and that therefore this exchange cannot be taken at face value (p. 148). The ‘truth of interaction’ is ‘not to be found in the interaction itself (a two-way relation that is always in fact a three-way relation, between the two agents and the social space within which they are located)’:

Hardly anything of what defines the economics of housing, from the administrative regulations or legislative measures that orient property loans policy to the competition between builders or banks which underpin these measures and regulations, including, along the way, the objective relations between the regional or municipal authorities and the various administrative authorities responsible for applying the regulations relating to building, is not in play in the exchanges between house sales staff and their clients, but it is invariably expressed (or betrayed) in unrecognizable form. (Bourdieu, 2005: 148-149)

The logic here is a realist one: the market does not disclose, but in fact dissimulates, its own truth, and the real action, so to speak, is elsewhere. Echoing the Polanyian notion of the always-already institutionally embedded economy, Bourdieu suggests that the truth of economic phenomena must be sought in a different analytical space. This is exactly what he so masterfully does in his study of the housing market: he reveals the constitutively ‘political’ character of a market misrecognized as self-evidently and self-sufficiently ‘economic’.

In the programmatic Introduction and Part II (‘Principles of an Economic Anthropology’), however, Bourdieu renders his critical project in mainly historicist terms, with the result that his more explicitly theoretical critique of economic *doxa* does not quite connect with the critical thrust of the empirical study which it is supposed to frame. For example, in the Introduction, Bourdieu (2005) calls for ‘breaking radically with the anti-genetic prejudice’ of economics, which he describes as ‘a profoundly de-historicized and de-historicizing science’ (p. 5). Against the ‘ahistorical vision of economics’, Bourdieu (2005) writes that

we must . . . reconstitute, on the one hand, the genesis of the economic dispositions of economic agents . . . and, on the other hand, the genesis of the economic field itself, that is to say, we must trace the history of the process of differentiation and autonomization which leads to the constitution of this specific game: the economic field as a cosmos obeying its own laws and thereby conferring a (limited) validity on the radical autonomization which pure theory effects by constituting the economic sphere as a separate world. (pp. 5–6)

This passage is notable not only for what it criticizes, but also for what it concedes: the economic field must be historicized, but once constituted its logic is more or less transparent. This willingness to take the economic field at face value, even if only under certain historical conditions, stands in contrast to the critical thrust of his study of the housing market, and more generally to his work on various cultural fields. Indeed, Bourdieu (2005) explicitly makes a distinction between his theorization of the economic field and cultural fields in the programmatic ‘Principles of an Economic Anthropology’:

This kind of instituted cynicism, the very opposite of the denial and sublimation which tend to predominate in the worlds of symbolic production, means that in this case the boundary between the native representation and the scientific description is less marked . . . In a field in which prices are both stakes and weapons, strategies, both for those who produce them and for others, have spontaneously a *transparency* they never achieve in such worlds as the literary, artistic or scientific fields . . . (p. 200—emphasis in original)

These kinds of statement about the economic field can also be found elsewhere in Bourdieu's work. Thus, in *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu (2000) writes that

only at the end of a slow evolution tending to strip away the specifically symbolic aspects of the acts and relations of production was the economy able to constitute itself *as such*, in the objectivity of a separate universe, governed by its own rules, those of self-interested calculation, competition, and exploitation. (p. 19)

In *Practical Reason*, Bourdieu (1998b) argues that the historical emergence of the economic field 'marks the appearance of a universe in which social agents can admit to themselves and admit publicly that they have interests and can tear themselves away from collective misrecognition'. When it comes to the economy, 'Gone is the work of euphemization' (p. 105).

The suggestion in these passages that the economic field is transparent and that its native and scientific representations coincide is at odds with the realist critical mode he employs elsewhere in his work, and even in his empirical study of the housing market. When it comes to theorizing the economic field, Bourdieu puzzlingly ignores the lessons of this work and relies more or less exclusively on a historicist critical mode that limits critique to an operation of temporal relativization. Revealing in this regard is Bourdieu's response to criticisms that he is, after all, an economic reductionist (Caillé, 1981; Favreau, 2001). Instead of emphasizing how the economic field is itself as much a site of misrecognition as cultural fields, he—and his defenders—have tended to rebut the charge of economism by pointing to the historically and field-specific character of economic dispositions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Boyer, 2003; Convert, 2003; Lebaron, 2003). Bourdieu's 'economic anthropology' thus challenges the foundationalist assumptions that underpin economic *doxa* by historicizing them, but it concedes that within modern capitalist societies, the economy is an arena in which everything really is as it appears. In Therborn's terms, we might say that while it questions 'what is possible', it nonetheless takes 'what exists' as self-evident. In that sense, at least in his more theoretical statements on the economy, Bourdieu sells his own critical project short.

Conclusion

In what sense is Bourdieu's 'critical sociology' critical? In considering this question, I identified two different modes of critique: realist and historicist. Critique in the realist mode unveils, unmask, or reveals hidden structures and relations through scientific construction. It is oriented toward demonstrating that social reality is other than it appears. Critique in the historicist mode relativizes and denaturalizes the social order by demonstrating its historical specificity. It is oriented toward combatting the fatalistic acceptance of the social order by recovering a sense of possibility that the social world could be otherwise.

The ambiguous relation between these distinct two modes of critique is not peculiar to Bourdieu, but indeed structures interpretive debates within the Polanyian and Marxist literatures. In the debate over Polanyi's concept of embeddedness, the notion of embeddedness as a 'methodological principle' follows a realist logic, whereas the notion of it as a 'historical variable' follows a historicist logic. In Marxism, the 'scientific' tradition and its interpretation of fetishism as an epistemic illusion concealing the real relations of exploitation follows a realist logic, whereas the 'critical' tradition and its interpretation of fetishism as constitutive of capitalist relations follows a historicist logic.

While the two modes of critique have given rise to distinct interpretive camps within the Polanyian and Marxist literatures, this has not been the case in the Bourdieusian literature. Neither Bourdieu nor the secondary literature on him has recognized the existence of these varying modes

of critique in his work. Even specific treatments of his ‘critical sociology’ have glossed over the subtle differences in how he formulates the critical vocation of sociology and have tended to represent this in a unitary fashion. I have tried to show that Bourdieu not only relies on different modes of critique in different works, but that his explicit statements on the critical vocation of sociology also vacillate between realist and historicist modes.

It has not been my intention here to evaluate the relative merits of these two modes of critique, nor to argue for their (in)compatibility. My aim, rather, has simply been to point out their existence, and to suggest possible tensions between them—tensions that in the Polanyian and Marxist cases have generated lively interpretive debates, and that in Bourdieu’s case have led to inconsistencies in his treatment of certain topics. These tensions are not peculiar to any author or critical tradition, but emerge from a core ambiguity in what it means to do ‘critical’ social science.

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Notes

1. There is doubtless some tension between Bourdieu’s conception of sociology’s ‘critical’ scientific vocation and his public image as a ‘critical intellectual’ (Boltanski, 2011; Fabiani, 2011). While Bourdieu explicitly rejected the Sartrean model of the ‘total intellectual’, preferring instead to devote himself to collective research on clearly delimited objects, by the end of the 1990s, one could be forgiven for thinking that he came to occupy a similar position as Sartre. Swartz (2003) argues that this shift in Bourdieu’s mode of political involvement from ‘critical sociology’ to ‘public intellectual’ was the product of changes in the French intellectual field and its relation to the economic and political fields.
2. These quotes are from a book in which Boltanski revisits and comments upon an old article he co-authored with Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976). Boltanski, of course, broke with Bourdieu subsequent to the publication of this article and became a critic of ‘critical Sociology’ in favor of a ‘sociology of critique’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). For his reconsideration of the relationship between sociology and critique, see Boltanski (2011).
3. I use the term ‘realist’ in the sense used by Reed, who describes the realist logic of inquiry thusly: ‘theory, when used in social explanation, points directly to the underlying structures, mechanisms, or forces of the social world’. That is, a realist logic claims that the ‘theoretical signifiers used by the researcher point to an essential aspect of the social *as such*, and that this world exists underneath the time-space patch of social life to which their evidence refers’. This underlying social world revealed or represented by theoretical discourse is understood to be ‘the underlying causal source of that which requires explanation’ (Reed, 2011: 49). See also the Critical Realist conception of a stratified ontology, according to which the ‘real’ is the domain of theoretical causal mechanisms, the ‘actual’ the domain of concrete events, and the ‘empirical’ the domain of experience (Steinmetz, 2004).
4. According to Barthes (1972), ‘*myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear’ (p. 121). Myth is experienced as innocent speech ‘not because its intentions are hidden—if they were hidden they could not be efficacious—but because they are naturalized’ (p. 131). In the semiological system

of myth, the signifier is evacuated of its meaning (i.e. its history) and its relationship to the signified 'concept' becomes naturalized. The signifier is 'deprived of memory, not of existence' (p. 122). Myth 'has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear natural'. It is 'constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made' (p. 142). Indeed, for Barthes, 'bourgeois ideology' essentially consists of the 'de-nomination'—that is, the universalization and eternalization—of the bourgeoisie: 'The status of the bourgeoisie is particular, historical: man as represented by it is universal, eternal' (p. 141).

5. For Barthes (1972), *political* 'describes the whole of human relations in their . . . power of making the world' (p. 143). If myth, in Barthes' words, is depoliticized speech, then the historicist critique repoliticizes speech.
6. The historicist mode of critique shares the logic of what Reed calls the normative epistemic mode of inquiry. 'Maximal interpretations' in this mode are 'the empirical articulation of utopian possibility, with carefully used theory serving as a bridge from the latter to the former'. Indeed, Reed (2011) notes that research in this mode could be called 'critical sociohistory' (p. 81). According to Reed (2011), in both the realist and normative epistemic modes, theory 'relocates facts in a second conceptual space, a larger world unknown to the facts themselves: a world of the fundamental structures of the social (realism) or a world of the fundamental problems and possibilities of critique (normativism)' (p. 88).
7. The distinction I make between the realist and historicist modes of critique aligns somewhat with that made by Owen (2002) between the Frankfurt School's 'critical theory', which is oriented toward exposing falsehood to reveal truth, and Foucauldian 'genealogy', which is oriented toward relativizing the relationship between truth and falsehood (though our appreciation of the Frankfurt School within our respective schemas differs). In his defense of 'critical sociology' against its detractors (e.g. Latour, 2004), Fassin (2017) argues that despite their apparent philosophical incompatibility, Owen's two forms of critique can in actual research practice 'be combined, if not reconciled' (p. 18). The same could very well be said for the modes of critique I identify in this paper.
8. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the actual capacity of critical social science to in itself neutralize the effects of symbolic violence and modify relations of domination. A full consideration of this question would involve not just a theoretical treatment of the concept of critique, but also a sociology of knowledge and its circulation. Suffice it to say here that among the authors discussed, even those within the same critical camp, attitudes vary as to the power of knowledge to undo symbolic violence. Thus, for example, Althusser (1969), whose conception of science is very much in the realist critical mode, nonetheless rejects the notion that an ideology can be 'dissipated' by knowledge of it, since such knowledge is 'simultaneously the knowledge of its conditions of necessity' (p. 230). Both in his writing and his practical engagements, Bourdieu has considerably more faith in the critical power of knowledge, though at times he also shares Althusser's materialist skepticism on the matter (see footnote 42).
9. Burawoy finds Bourdieu's 'sociology of games' more convincing than his 'psychology of internalization', and he suggests that the former is more compatible with Marxist perspectives on the self-reproducing and self-mystifying dynamics of capitalism (Burawoy, 2018: 82–83). Burawoy (2018) criticizes the 'psychology of internalization' for being 'a general theory of social order without a corresponding particular theory of particular societies', and thus of being 'unverifiable and unfalsifiable' (p. 81). But although Burawoy presents this as a Marxist critique of Bourdieu, one could make a similar objection to Althusser's (1971) famous statement that ideology 'has no history'.
10. The distinction I draw between realist and historicist modes of critique is orthogonal to Burawoy's distinction between 'misrecognition' and 'mystification'. My characterization of Bourdieu's field concept as realist does not necessarily align with 'mystification' in Burawoy's sense.
11. Bourdieu's use of the Platonic term 'anamnesis' to refer to the repression of history recalls Marcuse's writings on the liberating power of remembrance, which Jay (1982) and others have characterized as a theory of anamnesis.
12. One might wonder if the two modes of critique in Bourdieu as they are described here are mutually exclusive. While the question of their logical compatibility is an interesting one, a rigorous theoretical consideration of this question lies outside the scope of this paper. The point here is not discuss whether these modes can in principle be synthesized, but simply to point out that Bourdieu tends not to do so. As

I hope to show, he distinctly lays the emphasis on one mode or the other depending on the text, a fact whose implications I further discuss in the final section of this paper.

13. This is not to suggest that there are no passages in *Masculine Domination* that are in the realist mode.
14. Whether this is simply a matter of post-Cold War intellectual fashion, or if it is because Polanyi gives us a better handle than Marx on newly salient economic phenomena is debatable. See Burawoy (2019a) and Levien (2018).
15. The term's popularity in economic sociology is usually traced back to Granovetter (1985), although he has denied that his use of 'embeddedness' was inspired by Polanyi (Krippner et al., 2004). Krippner (2001) has criticized the way in which the term has been taken up by economic sociology, arguing that it impoverishes Polanyi's original concept by taking the market itself for granted and hypostasizing it as an asocial construct.
16. In fact, Polanyi (2001) himself only used the term sparingly, particularly in *The Great Transformation*.
17. Gemici (2008) summarizes the 'gradational' conception of embeddedness as a 'historical variable' thusly:

The degree of embeddedness changes from one type of society to another, depending on how the economy is integrated. If integrated as a result of operations with non-market ends, it is embedded. If integrated as a result of operations with strictly market ends, it moves towards being disembedded through the commodification of labour, land and money. (p. 9)

18. Dale (2011) notes that even within this interpretation there is some uncertainty as to whether the notion of a disembedded economy is meant to be descriptive of market society or whether it is simply an ideal type (p. 323).
19. Polanyi's rendering of the historical process by which the economy became disembedded from society is broadly reminiscent of the movement from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* described by Ferdinand Tönnies, and indeed the historical or ideal-typical character of Tönnies' conceptual distinction is similarly ambiguous (Dale, 2011, 2016b).
20. Gemici (2015) has written about Polanyi's debt to neoclassical economics in his conceptualization of the market in capitalist societies.
21. Krippner (2001) similarly criticizes what she argues is a thinly theorized notion of the market in Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness. Ironically, Granovetter (1985) himself has criticized Polanyi for drawing a distinction between embedded pre-modern economies and disembedded market economies.
22. Gemici (2008) argues that whereas the interpretation of embeddedness as a historical variable is ultimately grounded in what he calls a 'restrictive institutionalism' that reifies the economy, the interpretation of embeddedness as a methodological principle is grounded in a 'holistic institutionalism' that rejects the analytical demarcation between economy and society.
23. Block and Somers' characterization of Marxism is highly questionable. As Dale (2016b) points out, the 'idea that economic behavior cannot be studied as if it is isolated from society was elementary for Marx, too' (p. 50).
24. The classification of the Frankfurt School within the schema advanced here is debatable. Whereas Gouldner (1980) and Therborn (1970) include it within the 'critical'/historicist tradition, Jay (1984) suggests that Adorno's rejection of a 'longitudinal' or 'expressive' concept of totality ultimately brings him closer to Althusser's anti-historicism. I adopt Gouldner and Therborn's classification of the Frankfurt School here.
25. The historicist interpreters of Marx, as much as their detractors, can find support in Marx's vast oeuvre. For example, Marx (1977) wrote that 'The categories of bourgeois economics . . . are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production' (p. 169).
26. Postone was critical of Lukács and the Frankfurt School and developed his own critical interpretation of Marx. However, he clearly remains within their lineage, and indeed criticizes them for not being historicist enough. For the purposes of this paper, I thus treat Postone primarily as a more contemporary representative of this 'critical' historicist tradition and pass over the aspects of his thought that are unique to him.

27. Marxism-as-unmasking ‘purportedly proves that, despite appearances, “labor” is the source of wealth and the proletariat represents the historical Subject’ (Postone, 1993: 83). Postone (1993) characterizes this kind of critique, which he associates with traditional Marxism, as a ‘critique of exploitation *from the standpoint of labor*’ (p. 8).
28. Geras is specifically commenting on the following passage from Marx (1977):
- [. . .] the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appears *as what they are*, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material . . . relations between persons and social relations between things. (p. 166, emphasis mine)
29. My discussion in this section is informed by Geras’s (1971) excellent account of the different Marxist interpretations of the concept of fetishism. However, whereas Geras initially draws a distinction between fetishism as domination and fetishism as mystification, and then draws a subsequent distinction within the latter between mystification as the naturalization of a reality that is nonetheless objective and mystification as ‘pure appearance’ (a distinction that corresponds to the argument I am making here), I suggest that the idea of fetishism as domination is in fact closely tied to the former understanding of the kind of mystification it entails (i.e. the naturalization of an objective reality to which fetishism corresponds).
30. This can be, and indeed often is, inscribed within a humanist problematic of the loss and recovery of human species-being, but it need not be (c.f. Postone, 1993).
31. The emancipatory potential of remembrance is a central theme running through the work of Marcuse, who can also be classified as a ‘critical’ Marxist (Jay, 1982). As Marcuse (2002) wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*, ‘Remembrance of the past may give rise to dangerous insights, and the established society seems to be apprehensive of the subversive contents of memory’ (p. 101).
32. I owe this formulation to Simeon J. Newman.
33. Indeed, Althusser read Marx as a kind of Bachelardian *avant la lettre*. Compare Bachelard’s (1949) statement that ‘there is no science but of the hidden’ (p. 38) with Marx’s (1981) contention that ‘all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence’ (p. 956).
34. Bidet (2016) refers to this interpretation of Marx’s approach as a ‘constructivist scientific realism’ (p. 67).
35. ‘At the level of the concrete phenomena of the process of capital as a whole, surplus-value does not appear. What does appear is a *form of appearance* of surplus-value—*profit*. Like all forms of appearance, profit is at the same time a form of concealment’ (Rancière, 2015: 129).
36. Bourdieu (1975) was famously contemptuous of Althusser and the Althusserians. Nonetheless, there are many affinities between Althusserian Marxism and Bourdieusian ‘critical sociology’—particularly in its realist critical mode. Indeed, their shared Bachelardian inspiration led them to make similar arguments about science and critique (albeit with very different assessments of particular social sciences). One need only compare *The Craft of Sociology* with Althusser’s *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, both based on lectures given at around the same time in the 1960s, to see this (Althusser, 1990; Bourdieu et al., 1991). On Althusser and Bourdieu, see also Branchu and Robbins (2019).
37. In Bourdieu’s terms, we might say that the first and third questions, because they have to do with what is taken for granted, relate to *doxa*, whereas the second—what is good?—is a matter of normative ‘orthodoxy’.
38. Therborn (1980) points out that the second mode of ideological interpellation tends to be the exclusive focus of liberal approaches to ideology (p. 19).
39. For this reason, I do not believe that the vexed question of whether Bourdieu is simply a ‘reproduction theorist’ or whether he provides a theory of change is an essential one, at least in terms of the critical value of his theory (see Gorski, 2013).
40. Chibber (2022), for example, argues that the reproduction of capitalism relies less on workers’ ideological consent than on a matrix of material incentives that favors individual resignation over collective action.

41. Even in the case of Marxism, we have to distinguish between Marxism as a mobilizing myth and Marxism as a science of history (e.g. Sorel, 1999). Bourdieu (1985) similarly distinguishes between the ‘theory effect’ produced by Marxism and the scientific claims of Marxist theory.
42. Here, Bourdieu sounds much more like Althusser (1965) in his suggestion that symbolic violence cannot be neutralized simply by a critical knowledge of it (p. 230).

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