Anti-Equivalence:

Pragmatics of post-liberal dispute

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Abstract

In the early 21st century, liberal democracies have witnessed their foundational norms of critique and deliberation being disrupted by a combination of populist and technological forces. A distinctive style of dispute has appeared, in which a speaker denounces the unfairness of all liberal and institutional systems of equivalence, including the measures of law, economics and the various other 'tests' which convention scholars have deemed core to organisations. The article reviews how sociologists of critique have tended to treat critical capacities as oriented towards consensus, but then considers how technologies of real-time 'control' circumvent liberal critique altogether. In response, a different type of dispute emerges in the digital public sphere, which abandons equivalences in general, instead adopting a non-representational template of warfare. This style of post-liberal dispute is manifest in the rhetoric of populists, but does not originate there.

Keywords

Disputes, liberalism, public sphere, control, populism

In the first three years of his Presidency, Donald Trump's twitter account featured the word "unfair" eighty times, typically in relation to how he was being treated by the media or the Democratic Party in Congress. The persecution complex of the most powerful man on the planet, framed in the ostensibly normative language of 'fairness', prompts wide-ranging questions about how the language and affects of injustice are mobilised in contemporary societies. Trump's most ardent supporters are those who are objectively privileged, in racial and economic terms, but who feel that this privilege is not as great as it should be or used to be (Brown, 2017, 2020). International evidence on those most likely to support right-wing populist parties and leaders shows that they tend to express feelings of "relative deprivation", enjoying above-average incomes and wealth, but experiencing a sense of unfairness regarding the improvements experience by others (Pettigrew, 2017; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

Elsewhere, the digital public sphere has witnessed ruptures which themselves contributed to Trump's political rise. On the one hand, a type of reactionary libertarian discourse has taken hold, in which freedom is only authentic if it means the freedom to communicate anything to anyone, regardless of its epistemic, moral or aesthetic value. On the other, there is a mode of radicalised suspicion, identifying originally with the Left, which doubts the possibility of *any* institution serving a common good, as opposed to the contingent cultural and personal agendas of its spokespersons. These opposing sides in a 'culture war' share certain formal characteristics, in being aimed primarily at the obstruction of normative and epistemic consensus, deploying the classic 'trolling' techniques of humour, memes, outrage and ad hominem attack to do so (Phillips, 2015). Contrary to initial hopes, social media platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter have turned out to be dissensus-making machines, helping to generate a more paranoid mindset about public life in general.

Sociologists have long been interested in critique as an everyday or 'lay' phenomenon, that takes place beyond the limits of professional criticism, critical theory or expert disciplines. These studies have often sought to understand how and where 'critique' as understood by scholars morphs into something else altogether. Boltanski's work in developing a 'sociology of critique' used the empirical case of letters to a newspaper expressing 'denunciations' of various kinds, which he studied to understand when a complaint appeared to reflect an injustice in the world, and when it appeared to reflect on the mental state of the complainant (Boltanski, 1984). Latour's suggestion that critique

had "run out of steam" derived from a sense that the doubts of critical theory had become a new common sense, that sought to unmask too much (Latour, 2004). Boland has written of a new "cacophony of critique", which seeks to turn the unmasking of power into a type of "spectacle" (Boland, 2018).

This paper shares these sociological concerns, in tracing a genre of contemporary controversies which abandon critical foundations, and take on some of the properties associated with war. A key feature of many rhetorical conflicts today is that they contain no immanent grounds of their own resolution, thereby debarring the possibility of a resulting consensus. Absent any implicit normative premise, reflexivity or standard of judgement, it becomes inappropriate to describe such situations as ones of 'critique'. Nevertheless, we may still retain Boltanski's wider concepts of 'dispute' and 'denunciation', to refer to these situated rhetorical conflicts. In the post-liberal disputes I am referring to, denunciations take on a spectacular quality, which tips into a type of eye-catching rage. This has the tactical advantage of cutting through the vast flood of voices, all competing for attention in the digital public sphere, and becoming difficult to ignore. Alternatively, comedians (such as Beppe Grillo) and comical political figures (such as Trump and Boris Johnson) deploy an entertaining persona for political effect, managing to draw eyeballs towards them amidst an otherwise overwhelming glut of information (Milburn, 2019). Body language has become imbued with fresh significance in the context of over-abundant data, seeming to bi-pass a semiotic glut to reveal 'authentic' thoughts and feelings (Andrejevic, 2013).

To explore this escalation of discursive hostilities, I build on the pragmatist sociology of critique as developed by Boltanski and his various co-authors since the 1980s (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1999, 2006; Boltanski, 2011, 2012; Blokker, 2011; Wagner, 1994). Boltanski and his colleagues argued that everyday social situations periodically erupt into disputes regarding the worth of a material object, artefact, action or person (for instance, a disagreement over a hiring decision). When these situations arise, parties to the dispute may draw on metaphysical claims about justice in order to denounce one course of action, and to affirm another, and deploy them in the form of 'tests' which seek to prove differences of value (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). These tests serve as 'equivalence principles' or 'commensuration' devices, that allow judgement to be exercised fairly over diverse people and things, and inequalities to be measured (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). Critique is thus deployed with an unspoken aspiration to consensus regarding judgements of value. Disputes are characterised by uncertainty, which critical tests (resting on diverse moral accounts of worth) seek to resolve, such that a shared sense of reality is restored.

What happens, however, when parties to a dispute abandon the liberal aspiration to justice-as-consensus? How should we understand judgements which draw on no external measure or principle, and aim primarily to attack and discredit the judgements of others? How do disputes proceed once measurement in general is targeted? Such controversies involve no quest for resolution or 'settling up', but merely highlights the endless, irresolvable imbalances and injustices that are waged by one party against the other. This is the lingua franca of both social media 'wars' and much populist discourse. As Boltanski and Thevenot also note, "the act of bypassing justice and behaving only as one pleases, without being burdened by the requirement to explain, is the defining act of justice" (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1991: 37-38).

To understand such post-liberal disputes , I seek to identify some of their political and institutional conditions. If the ideal liberal critique is located in the liberal public sphere (Habermas, 2015), what are the formal preconditions of post-liberal denunciations in their present manifestations? My argument here is that, as the impositions of neoliberalism have become more far-reaching and inescapable, under the auspices of the 'control society', resistance and complaint have become increasingly outrageous, embodied and violent in nature. In the following section, I contrast the types of 'disputes' studied by convention scholars, which seek agreement, with situations governed by surveillance and constant real-time reaction. I then consider how the critical public sphere is reconfigured, once principles of equivalence are discarded. This then feeds into a consideration of 'populist' rhetoric, rooted in Schmittian notions of politics as war and ideals of direct democracy (Mouffe, 1999, 2018).

Equivalence and its limits

Whether considered as a political philosophy or (in a Foucauldian sense) as a political rationality, liberalism begins from a principle of the formal equality of persons. The political, institutional and epistemological challenges that liberalism confronts are of how to establish this formal equality in practice, and what forms of redress should be available when it fails. Within the liberal imaginary, the separation of the 'state' from the 'market', or 'politics' from 'economics', is a crucial principle (Polanyi, 1957). But across both domains we can see the same problem of how to establish instruments which establish equivalence between separate persons, actions and objects, and to do so in ways that appear 'fair'. Judicial authority, rooted in liberal ideals of procedural fairness and

judicial independence, is where the recognition of formal equality is most explicit, and where the search for equivalence – between crime and punishment, harm and compensation – is most publicly visible. Benthamite utilitarianism recasts justice in economic terms, but still on the formally egalitarian principle that each person's pain and pleasure is of equal value. The liberal defence of markets is also anchored in a perceived formal equality that is created between parties to an exchange, and the equivalence that is generated between monetary price and use value (Foucault, 2007; Watson, 2018). What justice and markets have in common, within the liberal imagination, is the promise that scores will be settled, and parties can therefore move on without lingering grievances. Ideally, this permits moral harms to be recognised and compensated, so as to allow individuals to leave them behind.

The image of the 'bourgeois public sphere' and 'civil society', as they developed over the eighteenth century, was of a space between the state and the market, where the same formal equality of persons was respected, though on the basis of critical autonomy and opinion rather than on the basis of law or economics (Foucault, 2007; Habermas, 2015). While always compromised by material considerations (specifically the fact that only property-owners were included), this public sphere allowed arguments and artefacts to be evaluated on the basis of their merits, rather than on the status of the person, aided by the development of magazines and newspapers (Habermas, 2015: 36; Honneth, 2018). This normative and institutional context gave birth to the notion of 'public opinion' and criticism as disembodied, autonomous judges in the realms of politics and aesthetics, and which Kant viewed as the engine of collective enlightenment (Kant, 1970). Judgement itself became the measure of value and the grounds of a hypothetical consensus (Kant, 2007).

One of the central insights of the pragmatist sociology developed by Boltanski, Thevenot, Desrosieres and others is that the establishment of a shared reality is also dependent on the creation of generally acceptable equivalences, and the resolution of critique. The reverse is also true: the establishment (or proof) of a shared reality occurs precisely in order to achieve agreement amongst people, and escape constant critical uncertainty. The birth of scientific societies depended on the principle that the select community of witnesses to a scientific experiment were epistemic equals (Shapin, 1994). Standardised methods of accounting represent one of the foundational uses of quantitative records as the hallmark of modern facts (Carruthers & Espeland, 1991; Poovey, 1998). By introducing politically acceptable categories and 'classes', statistics offer a picture of economy and society that 'holds together' in the eyes of both state and public sphere (Desrosieres,

1998). Countless 'commensuration' devices (indicators, league tables, performance measures etc) allow for differences to be represented in objective terms (Espeland & Stevens, 1998).

Everyday social and economic life is stabilised thanks to the existence of shared 'equivalence principles' (norms which establish the basis of comparison and judgement) and 'tests' which allow uncertainty to be resolved (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1999, 2006). Where a test becomes a generally accepted standard, it alleviates uncertainty and the likelihood of moral disputes arising as to which actions should be taken. Political metaphysics (concerning the nature of justice) is replaced by political physics (concerning testable empirical properties), and there is little need for discussion or moral reflection. The 'worth' of a job candidate, public policy, investment strategy or material object can be assessed with reference to a test, with the result being generally accepted, so long as the test (and the principle on which it depends) has won consent within the public concerned with the situation. Critique is kept at bay, so long as the facts of the situation are clear, and the methods which produce them are recognised as independent and fair. Tests are therefore like small-scale judicial situations, which establish certain findings before an audience, and have a quasi-liberal quality.

An intended consequence of this perspective is to highlight the degree of critical agency that all parties have in the reproduction of social and economic reality, and consequently to expose the moral and empirical fragility of the status quo. This is the central way in which the 'sociology of critique' departs from the 'critical sociology' of Bourdieu (Boltanski, 2011; Basaure, 2011a). As Boltanski and Thevenot stress, power does not typically work through brute domination, but by offering justifications in the form of evidence of its normative rectitude. Moreover, these can be usually challenged in a number of ways. Firstly, it is possible to argue that a 'test' has not been administered correctly, and that unfairness has crept in. The independence of the judge or the relevance of the empirical evidence can be challenged. Resolving the unfairness would involve removing prejudice or external influence from how the test is administered.

Secondly, there are multiple 'orders of worth' available to actors when offering and seeking justification, and it is possible to challenge the justification given within one 'order' with reference to a different one (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006; Stark, 2009). An argument that a course of action maximises customer satisfaction might be challenged on the basis that it weakens productive capacity or social solidarity, with proofs of the former justification countered with equally robust proofs of the latter ones. "Envisaged thus, the social world does not appear to be the site of

domination endured passively and unconsciously, but instead as a space shot through by a multiplicity of disputes, critiques, disagreements and attempts to re-establish locally agreements that are always fragile" (Boltanski, 2011: 27). Tests establish a shared and stable 'reality' that is recognisable to the actors concerned, but this exists against a backdrop of an uncertain 'world' of experiences that can be drawn on to challenge and disrupt that reality, when it loses credibility (Boltanski, 2011: 60-62).

The pragmatist sociology of critique therefore harnesses the formal equality of liberalism as a methodological basis on which to enquire into moral agreements and disputes. Inequality is not a structural effect of, say, capitalism, but a performative outcome of principles and tests which exist to establish generally agreeable equivalences and differences. In line with Honneth's philosophy of recognition, everyday moral experience becomes the starting point from which to understand the force of critique in society (Basaure, 2011b). This sociological approach is hermeneutically illuminating, but assumes a sometimes implausible degree of critical autonomy, as if formal liberal equality – as witnessed in the ideal court-room, market or deliberative public sphere – is typically a feature of everyday socio-economic situations. As Fraser has argued against Honneth, such a stance downplays the autonomous power of markets in capitalist societies to weaken political status (Fraser, 2000; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Boltanski himself has sought to rebuild bridges between the 'sociology of critique' and 'critical sociology', by mapping the various ways in which 'tests' can be deployed to impose a particular account of reality, in a way that becomes a form of dominance or even violence, and critique is debarred (Boltanski, 2011; 2012).

From measurement to control

The default assumption of pragmatist sociologists of critique is that (potentially acceptable) justifications are the central means by which institutions and society cohere. Yet we can also identify a set of technologies and rationalities which enable coordination of behaviour, without the requirement for public principles of equivalence or 'tests' in Boltanksi and Thevenot's sense. Technologies of real-time *control* operate without recourse to periodic judgement and evaluation, and instead work via ubiquitous surveillance and constant feedback loops, that serve to steer behaviour towards a goal (Deleuze, 1992; Franklin, 2015). Uncertainty becomes unceasing, and a resource for those in a position to exploit and learn from it (Esposito, 2011; Konings, 2018). Shared understanding or agreement amongst the coordinated parties becomes unnecessary, if they can be

organised into a type of behavioural equilibrium based around stimulus and response. The task for the would-be coordinator is not a rhetorical or normative one, of convincing people to accept a given principle or measure, but a wholly computational one of aggregating and analysing incoming data in real-time, such that instructions can be constantly updated to steer behaviour.

Technologies of real-time control have a long history that is entangled with the problem of military strategy and decision-making (Edwards, 1997; Mirowski, 2002; Kline, 2015; Rid, 2016). The problem of achieving social coordination in the absence of a general principle or test of equivalence is one that is foundational in the domain of warfare, but which subsequently arises in economic spheres under the guise of management (Beniger, 1986), then in civil society and the public sphere thanks to the affordances of platforms. The rise of 'platform capitalism' or 'surveillance capitalism' in the early twenty-first century has vastly extended the reach of data capture, well beyond the terrain of traditional market research or performance management, into new social, affective, physiological and intimate domains of life (Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019).

If the liberal ideal of consensus is premised on the technology of the printing press, this post-liberal ideal of control depends on *interfaces* of various kinds: control rooms, dashboards and screens that allow the controller to receive and respond to a constant influx of information (Galloway, 2013; Hookway, 2014). In the absence of principles of equivalence, decision-making is neither 'fair' nor 'unfair', but operates in a zone of 'exception' and uncertainty where the question of fairness or legality ceases to apply. Where power renounces the resort to general equivalences, or where those equivalences are deemed to be mere masks for power, so it acquires characteristics of military combat. Social and economic situations which are governed according to this cybernetic logic are different from those which depend on justifications and tests in three crucial ways, that drastically constrain possibilities for the type of liberal critique that seeks justice.

Firstly, controlled situations lack the temporal punctuation which allows disputes to occur, and are instead constantly unfolding. Rather than periods of stability and certainty being interrupted by eruptions of uncertainty and critique (which are then resolved in some way), 'societies of control' exist in a state of constant uncertainty and precarity (Deleuze, 1992: 5). Nothing is ever resolved or finished, and no conclusive judgement is ever provided. Whereas reports may offer judgements based on facts, control panels and dashboards only offer updates, which remain in flux. In the neoliberal tradition of Hayek, the price system of the market is one such technology of control, in that it never provides a resolution, and is never conclusively correct in its valuations, but in constant

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motion, internalising new information and exposing error in an unfolding process of discovery (Hayek, 1945). Price, from this perspective, is not a normative measure (in the sense that it is for liberals) but a real-time stimulus to which every agent must react (Mirowski, 2002, 2013). Uncertainty is a constant, rather than a periodic break-down of reality.

Secondly, liberal critique necessarily exists within separate differentiated spheres of social action, or 'orders of worth'; the evaluations issued within a school operate on the basis of different equivalence principles from those in a workplace, or those in the artistic public sphere. But the promise of ubiquitous surveillance is to take everything into account, all the time, not in order to perform judgement, but as a constant learning exercise. The differentiation of parallel and incommensurable 'orders of worth' is collapsed into a single domain of data capture, in which the principles of measurement and equivalence emerge *after* mass quantification has occurred (Davies, 2019a). The ubiquitous surveillance of platform capitalism facilitates a type of extra-juridical power that is not bound by formally stated process or *a priori* method, but instead grants a type of sovereign decision to the technologies and consultants who have the opportunities to exploit the data available (Amoore, 2013; McQuillan, 2015). Data is not presented to settle an existing dispute, but accumulated by default for unknown future purposes (Hansen, 2015).

Thirdly, control technologies do not treat people as liberal subjects or persons, but as "dividuals" or cybernetic "black boxes" which respond to stimuli (Delezue, 1992; Lazzarato, 2014). Cybernetics traces its origins back to the distinctive problems of aerial warfare, in which the challenge of coordinating allies in the air, and of anticipating the movement of enemies, becomes one of extracting a 'signal' from the 'noise', where communication is either absent or very stressful (Rid, 2016). The solution is a behaviorist one, to treat the problem as a complex system of machines interacting in space, each responding to incoming stimuli. Viewed this way, patterns can be discerned in behavioural systems, even in the absence of communication, rules or mutual understanding. From this perspective, subjective interiority becomes irrelevant, and agents become conceived as targets of and respondents to information, which (if it is to succeed in altering behaviour) must be tailored to their physiology – eyes, ears and other sensory inputs (Pickering, 2010; Kline, 2015). A critical moment in enabling this behaviorist-cybernetic project was when experimental psychology began to use eye movement as a proxy for consciousness (Crary, 2001).

In the context of the high-surveillance workplace or the digital platform, actors are not granted the recognition as reflexive moral agents (as the pragmatist sociology of critique assumes), but become

cyborgs, who react to information in traceable and ultimately predictable ways. Just as interfaces are designed to mediate autonomic reactions (especially of eyes), the algorithmic analysis of behavioural data seeks to circumvent conscious understanding of intentions, and extract patterns and correlations that are otherwise unavailable to human cognition. As Hansen argues, contemporary media technologies have diverged from the space of human *perception* (the grounds of experience) and become trained on technological *sensing* of pre-cognitive data (Hansen, 2015).. The circumvention of the Cartesian self is equally the circumvention of critical liberal subjectivity, which (in situations of judgement) allows the individual to stand outside of their contingent situation and to see it as if from a disembodied generalised perspective. The appeal to principles of equivalence is necessarily made on the basis that individuals can attain perspectival distance from the dispute at hand. But such distance is rendered impossible where consciousness is collapsed into 'attention' (a property of eyeballs), and thinking collapsed into autonomic response.

These post-liberal technologies and rationalities come together most acutely in the sociological phenomenon of the 'rated' and 'indebted' specimen of human capital, which has become a dominant logic of existence under advanced neoliberalism (Lazzarato, 2012; Feher, 2018). Foucault's prescient identification of 'human capital' as the definitive conceptualisation of neoliberal personhood is born out with the rise of debt as the means of leveraging one's education, free time or training for future returns, following the dramatic expansion of credit after the 1980s (Foucault, 2008; Feher, 2009; Cooper, 2017). The financialisation of housing, the household, education and social reproduction was further enabled by the spread of surveillance technologies capable of rating individuals, in terms of their behaviour (Poon, 2007). The platform economy offers the perfect technologies with which to build up rich, multi-dimensional pictures of behaviour, which grow more detailed all the time and which transcend institutional or normative divisions such as 'public' and 'private', 'personal' and 'professional'.

Under these conditions of control, 'users' are not evaluated according to a particular test (such as an exam or an audit), but subjected to constant experimentation, without end – what Lazzarato, drawing on Deleuze, terms "machinic enslavement" (Lazzarato, 2014). The rating of indebted human capital is an ongoing exercise, which replaces episodic 'crises' and 'critiques' with a constant temporal flow between an archive of past behaviour, a present of stimuli, and a future of predicted behaviour. If the purpose of the liberal judgement – whether by law, markets or everyday 'tests' – is to allow people to 'move on' and go their separate ways, the purpose of contemporary behavioural surveillance architectures is to prevent them from doing any such thing. The users of platforms are

entrenched ever more firmly in archives of their own past and networks of socio-technical interaction. In Deleuze's terms, there is no "starting again" in societies of control (Deleuze, 1992: 5). It is with the dawn of such infrastructures that principles of equivalence are jettisoned, with implications for how denunciation is performed.

The delirious public sphere

Sociologists of critique have shown family resemblances between the rhetoric of established powers and that of their opponents and critics. The defence of the status quo also deploys registers and rhetorics of critique, which are provided partly so as to satisfy the denunciations of critics. Thus, for example, there is moral and discursive traffic back and forth between capitalism and anti-capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). The liberal state and its critics both deploy the conventions of statistics as tools of justification and denunciation (Desrosieres, 1998). By the same token, we might expect that systems and technologies of power that operate without public principles of equivalence will be met with a mode of resistance that is equally divorced from the quest for justice.

Elements of counter-liberal resistance have been mapped by a number of theorists, in overlapping ways. Foucault identifies a long history of such discourses, replete with claims (as per Clausewitz and Schmitt) that war is the essence of the state, and not law (Foucault, 2004). The conservative and ethno-nationalist discourses that Foucault traces back to the seventeenth century subsume everything – including truth – within partisan conflict, treating all forms of social peace and consensus with deep suspicion, to the point of representing sovereign law as a necessarily foreign and imperial force. Where history is understood purely as perpetual war (concealed for long periods by the fictions of law), there is no resolution to conflict, but only periods of delay before revenge is extracted. All politics becomes an "unending movement - what has no historical end - of the shifting relations that make some dominant over others" (Foucault, 2004: 109). The past builds up as a store of resentments and (often mythical) humiliations that need to be repaid at some future opportunity.

Sloterdijk is alert to a similar view of history that sees everything as an "endless pendulum of hit and retaliation" (Sloterdijk, 2012: 49). Rather than justice bringing disputes to a close, the trial itself becomes just another punishment (as in Kafka's *Trial*, which Deleuze sees as anticipating societies of control), breeding resentment for future retribution. The injured person offers their own painful experiences as the only measure of justice, and paints all public mechanisms for resolution as

corrupted and violent. As Sloterdijk argues, "when the public order is accused of malfunctioning or of being a part of the problem (we might think of preferential treatment in court proceedings), individuals can take themselves to be appointed to represent justice as wild judges (Sloterdijk, 2012: 65). Trump's perpetual sense of 'unfairness' serves as an example of the 'wild judge', for whom their own emotional experience is the only measure that counts.

Boltanski identifies a similar strain of denunciation, that distrusts the very possibility of a peaceful, normative resolution to differences and imbalances. Rather than counter the justifications of power with contradictory evidence, or by appealing to a separate 'order of worth' (as conventional critique does), there are cases such as the 'pamphleteer' who:

> *does not seek to reach a compromise with a sociological description that can lay claim to*
> *objectivity. On the contrary, he legitimates himself exclusively with the rights of subjectivity*
> *to insult, ridicule and deploy a verbal violence that make him an imprecator.*
> (Boltanski, 2011: 101).

Boltanski's typology of critical forms includes those which introduce "existential tests", which rely wholly on subjective feelings of humiliation, pain and shame, and are "difficult to formulate or thematize because there exists no pre-established format to frame them, or even because, considered from the standpoint of the existing order, they have an aberrant character" (Boltanski, 2011: 107-8). This overlaps with a form of denunciation that is pure "suspicion", which – like the anti-liberals traced by Foucault – sees all 'official' accounts of reality as dubious per se: "it suffices for a truth to be accredited for it to be suspect" (Boltanski, 2011: 114).

These theoretical insights provide clues as to how we can understand disputes which renounce the very possibility of equivalence and resolution, as functions of public institutions. The rise of neoliberal financialisation from the 1980s onwards, supplemented by the platform technologies (or 'surveillance capital') of the twenty-first century, has squeezed out the conditions in which liberal critique can occur. The epistemological turn from modern 'facts' (established via methodological standards) to banks of 'data' claims to circumvent conventional representations of reality, and grasp reality itself, eliminating the space in which procedures of proof, justification and critique take place (Savage & Burrows, 2007; Boltanski, 2011: 131; Andrejevic, 2013). Where financial and managerial power operates in this extra-juridical fashion, as facilitated by technologies of control, it is necessarily mirrored in forms of opposition which – like the radical sceptics described by Foucault

and Boltanski – abandon the quest for consensus, or the commitment to resolving moral injuries in mutually recognisable ways. Instead, the absurdity and violence of power must simply be indicated and obstructed in whatever way is possible.

Opposition to all equivalence principles results in a public sphere characterised by delirium, in which complaints are no longer offered as the grounds of possible consensus or resolution (that is, as measure) but instead become performances within an unending game of attack and counterattack. The contemporary digital public sphere has become reconfigured around the logic of the platform, exemplified by the space of social media, with all of the post-liberal characteristics of control technologies that have already been identified. This has at least two important implications for the character of the public sphere.

Firstly, public disputes become warlike in their configuration, giving vent to past resentments and laying the seeds of future ones. This is a significant departure from the norms of the liberal public. Participants in the bourgeois public sphere, as described by Habermas, encountered one another without regard to status, that is as strangers and equals, much as traders were imagined to encounter one another in a liberal 'spot market'. This somewhat utopian idea "had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realized, it was at least consequential" (Habermas, 2015: 36). By contrast, the digital public sphere is a space of clear and quantified inequalities of status, as represented in the form of reputation. Parties to a dispute encounter one another not as traders (and hence equals) but as capitals (and hence unequals). Any user of social media carries around their past behaviour and their ratings (in the form of followers, likes, retweets and so on), as a mark of their value and credibility. Status is fundamentally internal to how disputes play out, such that someone with a very high rank can overpower someone with a low one, regardless of the merits of their argument, artefacts or evidence. There is little sense of justice involved in how such conflicts play out, but a great deal of strategy and tactics.

A consequence of this premise is that it becomes worthwhile to strategically inflate one's own reputation (like a brand), and strategically sabotage another's. Trolling is the practice that brings these two together, offering a form of heroism (in the eyes of other trolls) to the internet user who is able to wreak the most harm upon others, especially those who are highly reputed (Phillips, 2015). But other forms of 'reputation warfare' can be witnessed online in which reputation can be earned by demolishing the reputation of another user, where the more famous the target, the more reputation can be earned from a successful attack (Rosamond, 2019). As the case of Trump again

suggests, no level of reputation is sufficient to exempt oneself from this "endless pendulum of hit and retaliation", and the person who has behaved most aggressively in the past will have the greatest grounds for paranoia of retaliation in the future. The archive that accumulates inexorably in the digital age provides an unfathomable resource for those wishing to recall the "history of fidelities and betrayals", which Foucault sees as the heart of the conservative use of history, and becomes the basis of sustained resentments (Foucault, 2004: 135). These memories are deposited in what Sloterdijk terms "rage banks", which can accumulate over time, until they are unleashed as furious outbursts (Sloterdijk, 2012).

The reconfiguring of the public sphere around the template of 'war' represents a radical departure from the modern bourgeois ideal of criticism, which emerged in the eighteenth century. The provision of a judgement, regarding an artwork or a political decision, can no longer stand independently of the relation that it forges (or already exists) between the judge and the judged. Digitisation and archiving of all discourse means that every statement is merely a new strategic move, which rearranges relations and contingent advantages of the parties concerned. The result is to reconfigure critique around the Schmittian logic of friend and enemy. To denounce a book, say, as 'bad' is to declare oneself an enemy of the author; to praise it as 'good' is to act as a friend of its the author. Criticism becomes a branch of strategy or PR, in which each 'move' is valued to the extent that it bolsters the reputation of one side, and reduces the reputation of a rival (Smith, 2018). As corporate strategy sanctions the 'sabotage' of useful assets where it benefits the strategist (Veblen, 2003), so criticism may seek to de-value worthy actions so as to benefit the critic. What is lost is the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgement which offers itself as a possible universal measure, and the basis of a whole community of taste.

Secondly, evaluative rhetoric shifts from an aspiration to representation to one of presentation. In Foucault's account of counter-liberal discourses, there is no possibility of a neutral or external perspective on history, only of contributions to its perpetual conflicts. In the absence of any epistemic exteriority or a priori, "knowledge is never anything more than a weapon in a war", and abandons the quest to offer objective representation of any kind (Foucault, 2004: 173). One thing that can be made present is one's own suffering and pain, performing what Boltanski terms an "existentialist test" of a situation, which offers the mere fact of injury as the authentic proof of injustice. The struggle is in how to present this injury in the most authentic and immediate way, which involves a constant battle against the necessarily mediated nature of public discourse. The same is true when seeking to demonstrate a positive reaction or affirmation, which indicates value

through positive affect. Emojis, memes and graphical reactions of various kinds become the currency through which to demonstrate affect, with minimal semiotic mediation – features of the 'crisis of semiotic efficiency' that Andrejvic views as a defining problem of the digital public sphere (Andrejevic, 2013). The immediacy of the affective presentation is what gives it value, and body language is treated as more authentic than verbal language.

One of the most decisive forms of non-representational valuation in the digital public sphere is laughter, which conforms to the cybernetic logic of real-time, embodied feedback. Laughter may denote a positive valuation of charisma, or a negative one in the form of ridicule, but in either case it signals the direction of attention towards a particular figure in the public sphere. Comedians have the necessary skills to succeed politically in the conditions of the control society, possessing the ability to manage and anticipate audience reactions in real-time, and perform a type of persona that is both entertaining and 'authentic' at the same time (Milburn, 2019; Davies, 2019b). The relation of stand-up comedy to 'reality' is epistemically ambiguous, seeing as the performance rests on the telling of stories presented as true, but without any of the constraints of fact. This is the template within which many successful populists and social media celebrities work, presenting their authentic selves for the enjoyment of followers, but prioritising laughter and attention over empirical validity.

The agent who does the most damage to their foes in this warlike, presentational public sphere is not a critic, but a *curator* who extracts small pieces of 'content' from the vast behavioural archive that is accumulating all the time. The age of ubiquitous data capture and over-abundant content makes the job of curation all the more important, that is, of providing the cognitive aids and guides for directing attention (Andrejevic, 2013). Anticipated by 'reality television', this has also yielded a sudden take-off of 'true crime' and other 'real-life' drama series, based wholly on archives of video data capture. Authenticity involves seeing the original footage, and not a representation of it, but this places all the opportunities for narration in the hands of the curator who decides what content to include, and in what order.

This same presentational and curatorial politics is in play in the conflicts that break out amongst social media users. Where a critical representation seeks to represent its object, accompanied by approval or denunciation, the reputational attacks that go on in the digital public sphere simply involve presenting an isolated specimen of the enemies' words or behaviour. A single sentence from an interview or a brief facial expression from a video can be shared, either as an investment or a divestment in the reputational capital of another person. The hostile reputational tactic of 'nut-

picking' involves finding the most extreme, marginal or implausible manifestation of one's opponents political position from a vast glut of voices, then presenting it as the norm. Efforts to inflate a political reputation can work in a similar way, using memes and gifs to build an online mythology around a leader, especially one such as Trump or Jeremy Corbyn who is viewed as unfairly maligned by the 'mainstream media' (Dean, 2019; Rosamond, 2019). Whether these techniques are used against an 'enemy' or in defence of a 'friend', they have no aspiration to represent fairly, but only to misrepresent advantageously. The consequences of this for the contemporary public sphere are witnessed in the delirium of hostility, victimhood and mutual misunderstanding that has become a commonplace in the age of the digital platform, and which has contributed to the broader political crisis of liberalism.

Denouncing liberalism

The rise of 'populism' during the 2010s has been the topic of voluminous scholarly analysis and media commentary. The term is typically understood as describing political parties and leaders, often emerging from outside the political mainstream, who draw sharp moralised distinctions between 'the people' (who are presented as morally innocent) and the 'elites' (who are presented as self-serving and corrupt) (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mueller, 2017). As a rhetorical style, populism can be attached to diverse political agendas, including those of the democratic Left (Judis, 2016; Mouffe, 2018) but in its agonistic view of 'the political' it is typically disruptive of liberal norms and the teleology of consensus. Consensus is less something to be achieved institutionally (via the parliamentary and critical institutions of the bourgeois public sphere), and more something to be divined as a kind of 'general will' already embedded in a 'people'. In this respect, populists reject representational democracy in favour of either direct democracy (such as plebiscites) or a type of strong charismatic leadership via which a kind of popular unity is expressed.

If we consider populism via the pragmatist sociology used in this paper, its rhetorical ploys come to appear as less exotic, and more exemplary of a broader mutation whereby equivalences are discarded by parties to a dispute. As a result, disputes become perpetual and potentially irresolvable. As I have argued here, this mutation is a symptom of how capitalism and the public sphere have been technologically reconfigured, to undermine the conditions on which liberal critique and justification depend. It is not so much that the norms of liberal consensus-formation

have been specifically targeted by populists, as that they were already sufficiently weak as to provide fertile grounds for populist politics. Where principles of equivalence (and the normative tests or commensuration devices that concretise them) are gradually crowded out by technologies of real-time control, critique itself becomes increasingly devoid of any appeal to equivalence. The language classified as 'populist' is a case of this, but it is a language that is already pervasive in everyday political and cultural disputes. What is specific about 'populism' is that it channels and scales up this spirit of post-liberal anti-equivalence towards the central political institutions of liberalism.

Populist rhetoric displays the two characteristics of post-liberal denunciation outlined in the previous section. Firstly, it reconfigures political argument around the template of war, in which there are victors and vanquished, but no space for compromise or balance. This can be viewed as a fearsome example of divisive nationalism or 'culture war', but it has also been celebrated by Mouffe as an element of 'agonistic pluralism', in which conflict between fundamentally irreconcilable views is an essential feature of democratic politics (Mouffe, 1999). Either way, it realises the Schmittian vision of politics as rooted in a distinction between 'friends' and 'enemies'. In keeping with a view of history as perpetual war, populism draws on reserves of past resentments that have built up over time, as Sloterdijk describes. Violence and rage are repayments for previous harms. This becomes particularly manifest in the field of punishment, where – in place of the Benthamite ideal of scientifically calibrating crime with punishment, to achieve a balance – justice becomes re-imagined as an *excess* of pain to be visited upon the wrong-doer (Pratt, 2007; Pratt & Miao, 2017). The promise of authoritarian populism is to abandon liberal norms of measured rehabilitation and to rediscover ritualised, passionate forms of retribution (Norris & Ingelhart, 2019).

Secondly, the semiotic logic of populism is presentational not representational. It is the very idea of liberal representation that is denounced, whether that be in the form of statistics which represent populations, parliaments which represent the demos, professional media which represent news, or parties which represent interests (Davies, 2018). In its place, an ideal of direct and unmediated relation between 'the people' and 'the leader' comes to the fore, accompanied by a new type of digital political party, in which social media is a key instrument for connecting up a mass movement without the need for mediation by analogue liberal institutions (Gerbaudo, 2018). As Schmitt argued:

Only the present, truly assembled people are the people and produce the public…. They cannot be represented, because they must be present, and only something absent, not something present, may be represented.

(Quoted in Agamben, 2011: 254)

In place of parliaments, parties and professional politicians, there are rallies, protests and celebrities (or what Gerbaudo terms 'hyper-leaders'), often demanding greater use of direct democracy. These swarm-like political entities are extremely effective at attacking the status quo but far less effective at converting a generalised sentiment of outrage into a set of policy proposals to be delivered by legislative and governmental institutions.

The rhetoric of populists is replete with what Boltanski defines as 'suspicion', which assumes that the exercise of power is typically illegitimate. In many cases, populists seize on well-grounded frustrations that the political system has become corrupted by money and lobbying (e.g. Stanley, 2018). For Boltanski, critique of this form "can be called alienated in the sense that it is not determined by anything other than the forces that appear to resist it" (Boltanski, 2011: 114). The main targets of such denunciations are all institutions which claim to make judgements according to the liberal premise of formal equality of persons, on the basis of equivalence principles. Thus, where the 'mainstream media', judiciary, civil service, central bank or parliament appears to be prioritising procedure and facts, this is evidence of infidelity to the nation or 'the people'. Like the conservative historical discourse mapped by Foucault, populist hostility to the 'liberal elite' seeks to expose the underlying betrayals and violence that granted power to official institutions in the first place. Such declamations do not seek to challenge one norm with another, or one fact with another, but to unmask the personal loyalties and contingencies on which the valorisation of 'norms' and 'facts' stands.

According to one study, individuals who support 'populist' political parties tend to exhibit a combination of two psychological characteristics: they have high levels of political 'anger' with low feelings of political 'efficacy' (Magni, 2017). Seeing as anger is commonly viewed as a 'power emotion' or a 'political action' emotion, its combination with low feelings of political 'efficacy' produces a slow build up of resentment which produces the 'rage bank' that Sloterdijk identifies (Lorde, 1981; Demertzsis, 2019). Under conditions where critique (involving the quest for consensus via representation) appears to be unheard or ineffective, the individual is left only with their own injuries and feelings of injustice. Liberal claims that the social order is based upon notions of merit

and balance add insult to these injuries. The political appeal of the 'wild judge' or 'hyper-leader' who renounces equivalence principles altogether, by force of their own rage, rises accordingly.

In the context of advanced neoliberalism, in which technologies of 'control' have usurped those of 'discipline' (or what Boltanski terms 'reality tests'), there is potential truth value in populist attacks on the liberal order. In contexts such as Eurozone austerity, liberal ideals – that policy is determined on the basis of economic facts, that sovereignty lies with the nation state, that individuals possess formal equality – become divorced from existential realities. It becomes apparent that the state's sovereignty is not absolute, but shared with financial markets which respect no national boundaries or normative constraints (Vogl, 2017). The primacy of real-time price fluctuations over tests and principles of equivalence becomes plain. In such circumstances, populist critique acquires authority simply by exposing liberalism as a sham. The language and instruments of justice, efficiency and fairness no longer possess the representational power that liberals attribute to them. Thus denunciation turns upon the very institutions which once purported to host disputes over matters of worth.

Yet populist leaders and movements do not possess a monopoly over this style of complaint. The denunciation of 'mainstream' equivalences and institutions is one of the central affordances and apparent purposes of social media. For example, prior to the birth of giant platforms in the early twenty-first century, the ability to denounce the biases, occlusions, corruption and partisanship of broadcast and print media was very restricted. But now this denunciation is an ubiquitous feature of the public sphere (Boland, 2018). The 'pamphleteer' is everywhere. Institutions, Boltanski argues, are 'bodiless' actors that require 'embodied' actors (or spokespersons) to represent them (Boltanski, 2011). In order for institutional judgements to be legitimate, any contradictions between the 'bodiless' and the 'embodied' actors must be ignored. But social media provides a limitless capacity for this contradiction to be studied and emphasised, such that institutions (parliaments, markets, laws, firms etc) become increasingly seen as fictions presented for the contingent advantages of the 'embodied' actors (journalists, politicians, officials) who seek to represent them. The very idea of justice and equivalence becomes implausible, and discontent with the 'embodied' actor (or 'liberal elite') accumulates.

Conclusion: post-critical denunciations

Fears of illiberalism and authoritarianism have become widespread in many democracies since the global financial crisis, with the rise of nationalism, populism and demagoguery. It is commonly assumed, with much justification, that the political threat is posed by forces from the Right and the Far Right. But, as this article has sought to argue, these are symptoms of a broader crisis of critique that has seen a mentality of deep suspicion become normalised across the political spectrum, taking aim at all 'official' mechanisms and principles on which justice might be established. The Trumpian declaration that things are "unfair", but without any principle on which "fairness" might be based, speaks of a sensibility that is not limited to authoritarians or populists.

To be sure, there is something liberating and thrilling about the capacity to name and denounce the injustices of what passes as 'justice': the falsehoods of what passes for 'news', the unrepresentative nature of 'representatives', the exploitation that is concealed by 'market forces', the costs and contributions that go uncounted in 'official' statistics. But as Boltanski stresses, critical theory and everyday critique must – or should – also seek to disclose some aspect of reality, and not simply to attack established facts and judgements (Boltanski, 2011). This in turn involves the provision of proofs, methodological equivalences and justifications, on which an alternative account of reality can be based. In Horkheimer's landmark dialectical account, the critical theorist employs dominant standards of socio-economic fact, but simultaneously condemns the political-economic system which up-holds them (Horkheimer, 1976: 218-9) The danger with denunciation that resorts to 'existential tests' (drawing only on the suffering of the denouncer) and 'suspicion' (that treats all official accounts as lies) is that it offers nothing by way of shared reality to accompany the condemnation. This might be epistemologically and morally illuminating in its own way, but the risk is of a Schmittian culture war in which agreement is possible only between 'friends', whose shared identity is forged out of suffering at the hands of 'enemies'.

Another effect of this mode of complaint is that it is incapable of ever resolving a dispute, in such a way as to consign it to the past. This may involve lingering suspicion regarding facts and reports, of the sort that fuel conspiracy theories, and which can never be fully resolved with additional facts or reports. With the help of myths, the past comes to appear like a series of injuries and defeats that were never adequately repaid at the time. As Sloterdijk argues, "just as a festering wound can become both a chronic and general malady, psychic and moral wounds also may not heal, which creates its own corrupt temporality, the infinity of an unanswered complaint" (Sloterdijk, 2012: 49). The digital public sphere, with social media at its heart, has its own equivalent of myths, in the archive of past behaviour and 'content' that can be presented as evidence of disrespect, untruth and

disloyalty. It is a social function of justice to draw a line under disputes, and to insert measure in place of anger (Nussbaum, 2016), but that also requires suffering to be relinquished.

Populist leaders and parties fan the flames of such resentment, but they are not responsible for the breakdown of juridical and critical logic. The question is why did critique become toothless and pointless in everyday situations in the first place, such that 'tests' and 'equivalence principles' ceased to resolve disputes on the basis of liberal equality. The normative pluralism and ambiguity that Boltanski and Thevenot view as an ordinary feature of socio-economic life is suppressed by the neoliberal logic that 'there is no alternative', and that there is no rival principle of valuation beyond that of market price; this reality is the only reality, so doesn't even require justifying (Boltanski, 2011: 131-2). The suppression of rival orders of worth by a managerial logic of what simply must be done means that critique is reduced to mere complaint that simply presents suffering, without any capacity to represent alternatively or alternatives.

But as I have argued, it is not just the prospect of alternative equivalences (tests, measures, realities) that is debarred under neoliberalism. In the context of 'control' technologies and controlled situations, equivalences disappear altogether, in favour of unrelenting data capture or feedback. Just as the interior consciousness of the agent is ignored by the behavioural observer, so the epistemic and procedural methods of power become wholly opaque to the agent. With the rise of platform capitalism in the twenty-first century, the very principles through which social life 'holds together' (in Desrosiere's phrase) are no longer apparent to those who participate in it, meaning that 'suspicion' is an entirely understandable critical stance (Davies, 2020). Faced with data gatherers who disclose nothing, individuals can only guess at the justifications and equivalences that are at work – the sensibility of conspiracy theory (Andrejevic, 2013). The choice is whether to play the game – to accumulate reputation in the eyes of creditors of various kinds, through strategic behaviours – or whether to declare the entire game crooked. The ultimate political sweet-spot, within the society of control, is to do both at the same time.

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