

- I Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil.
av.werneck@ifcs.ufrj.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7529-7633>
- II Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil.
vittorio.talone@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4939-201X>
- III Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil.
ailtongualandejr@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0024-8431>

Alexandre Werneck^I
Vittorio Talone^{II}
Ailton Gualande Junior^{III}

THE IMPERATIVE OF OPINION: A PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE IN 'ACTUALITÉ POLITIQUE'

[The scandal is] the most shameful, the most indelible of stains [...], the ultimate blow to all truth and justice. And now France has this stain on her cheek, history will record that it was under your presidency that such a crime could be committed. Since they dared, I too shall dare. [...] My duty is to speak: I have no wish to be an accomplice. My nights would be haunted by the spectre of the innocent man who is atoning there, in the most terrible torture, for a crime he did not commit. And it is to you, Mr President, that I shall yell out this truth with all the strength of my revolt as an honest man. To your honour, I am convinced that you do not know. But to whom should I denounce this evil mob of true culprits if not to you, the first magistrate of the country? [...] I have but one passion, that of light. [...] My fiery protest is simply the cry of my soul.
Émile Zola, *L'Aurore*

When Émile Zola published his celebrated article "J'accuse!" (from which the aforementioned excerpts are taken) in the newspaper *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898, inaugurating the figure of the modern intellectual, he was, among other things, making explicit the rules of an economy already established in his time but which were rapidly becoming consolidated during this early phase of modernity: his open letter to the President of France, Félix Faure, whom he names as the 'first magistrate of the country' (a metonymy for the body of national society as a whole, the actual intended recipient of his letter), acquired a voice by being published in a newspaper with an ample readership. This was not something available to just anyone, however. The divulgation of an opinion depended on a series of details capable of making the legitimacy of its publication explicit (Tarde, 2005 [1901]; Habermas, 2014 [1962]; Champagne, 1998 [1990]), its rise in *generality* (Boltanski, 2012a [1990]). Zola can speak mostly

because he is Zola, but more specifically, because the newspaper *conceded* space for his polemical manifestation. Almost a century and a half later, after numerous political, social, and technological developments, the author of *Germinal* (presuming that he occupied the same prominent position enjoyed during his lifetime) would now probably make his views known on social media — maybe by writing a lengthy social media post or making a live stream. Today, without needing to speak to anyone beforehand, his digital text or video would likely reach millions of followers in an instant.

In the excerpts cited from his letter, he offers the motives for his critique: what unfolded in the notorious Dreyfus Affair¹ was a ‘blow’ to truth and justice, a ‘social crime.’ Zola had no wish ‘to be an accomplice’ to the actions of an ‘evil mob.’ This explained his ‘revolt’ as an ‘honest man,’ the cry of his ‘soul’ for ‘light’ to be shed. The writer *denounced* a scandal of judicial injustice with the intention of involving as many members of the population as possible — and seeking their support, convoking their collective strength. As Luc Boltanski (2012a [1990]: 169-170) shows:

[The] denunciation of an injustice presupposes the designation of a guilty or responsible party [that] can be represented by a synecdoche of abstraction (for example, ‘capitalism,’ in a union pronouncement [...]), or it can be identified and designated by name. The denouncer has to persuade other persons, associate them with the protest, mobilize them; in the process, the denouncer must not only convince the others that he or she is speaking the truth, but also that it is right to speak out, and that the accusation designating a being (individual or collective) for public retribution is equal to the injustice denounced. Vengeance pursued by means of direct violence, whether physical (blows) or verbal (insults), can always be achieved, even if the results are not always predictable. In contrast, denunciation may not reach its aim — it may fail — if a denouncer who has rejected the possibility of personally administering the desired punishment does not encounter people who are inclined to offer support. The author of a public denunciation is asking, in effect, to be followed by an indefinite — but necessarily large — number of persons (‘all,’ ‘all those who count,’ ‘all men of good will’). The cause the author is defending entails a claim to universality.

The aim of our essay is to outline an analytic framework on the economy of opinion and critique in contemporary societies based on the idea of *actualité politique* [political actuality] proposed by Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2022). Setting out from a reflection on the contributions made by the pragmatic sociology of critique (Boltanski, 2016 [1990]; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020 [1991]), especially in the lineage founded by and based on Luc Boltanski (2009; 2013; 2015b; McEvoy, 1995; Chiapello, 1998; Boltanski & Claverie, 2007; Blic, 2007; Lemieux, 2000; 2007; Susen, 2014; Mossi, 2018; Werneck & Loretti, 2018) and on various individual and/or collective research projects (Werneck, 2015a; 2015b; 2017; 2019; 2021a; Werneck & Loretti, 2018; Talone, 2015; 2017; 2022; Gualande Junior, 2019; 2022; Werneck & Talone, 2022), to comprehend its mechanisms, we respond to a question habitually avoided as ambitious

but which we believe to be fundamental: what are the determinant factors of the ‘passage to the act’ of a critique, the conversion of internal indignation into a manifestation external to individual social actors; in other words, its *effectuation* (Werneck, 2012; 2023a; 2023b)? Our argument is subdivided into three parts: one formal and two historical-conjunctural.

The first part maps the elements of a matrix of effectuation of this passage. Further developing the design of a *critique-form* matrix proposed by one of us along with another colleague (Werneck & Loretto, 2018), we explore the determinant variables involved in effectuating ‘critical capacity’ (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). The second part argues that historical transformations in the scarcity-versus-abundance economy of the elements of this matrix have made opinion and critique more widely available and, as this shift has continued to evolve, a hegemonic mode of sociability in our contemporary era.² Finally, the third part of this study discusses some of the effects of this conjuncture, specifically the ideas of a *banalization* of critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2009 [1999]) due to the recurrence of ‘major problems’ (Gualande Junior; 2019; 2022), the *conflictuality* implied by ‘ostentatious moralism’ (Werneck, 2021a; Werneck & Talone, 2022), and the *problematization of reality* in a supposed ‘post-truth’ context.

In the social sciences and related disciplines, as we shall see, the theme of the relationship between public opinion, on the one hand, and social and political life, on the other, has encompassed a vast range of approaches from early pioneering works to contemporary treatments. Attempts to delimit and define the notion of public opinion emerged in parallel with the advent of modern liberal societies in Europe (Champagne, 1998 [1990]). Thus, Tarde’s classic work *L’Opinion et la Foule* (1901) is fundamental, and the resumption of the discussion by Boltanski and Esquerre in their recent book *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique* (2022) plays a leading role in our argument. Both will be discussed in their specific points over the course of our text. For now, we shed light to the many attempts to provide a synthesis: all of which confirm the central role over recent centuries of institutions possessing what we could call a *legitimate monopoly of access to public speech*, notably the press. On one side, this is manifested in more *consensualist* descriptions ranging from Matteucci (1998 [1983]), for whom public opinion “does not coincide with the truth, precisely because it is an opinion — *doxa* not *episteme* — but, insofar as it becomes formed and strengthened in debate, expresses a rational, critical and well-informed attitude,” to Habermas (2014 [1962]), who argued that public opinion is connected to rationality and the politicization of public discussions, a way of the crowd seeing, circulating in the *public sphere*, a congregation of state entities and the press, representing a form of mediation between the State and civil society in the context of a liberal bourgeois society. The other side has more *conflictualist* versions spanning from Walter Lippmann (2008 [1922]), with his thesis that the press produces and transmits

biased information that is not necessarily true to the facts³ to Bourdieu (1973) and his assertion that “public opinion does not exist” but is a false consensus produced in social surveys.

In the context of pragmatist/pragmatic sociologies, the set of approaches which bases our argumentation, the processes of *publicization* and the emergence of a *public* are strongly intertwined with the *repertoires* produced by the involved actors, as per Dewey (2016 [1927]). The formulation of critiques and performative positionings before an audience regarding a problem identified to be of interest to a collectivity is connected to the opinions about this process. As Cefaï (2013: 7) states in a clear reference to Bourdieu, “public opinion exists” and is “one of its active catalysts is the experience of public problems.” By experiencing situations of disturbance and uncertainty that generate disputes capable of imposing positions and issuing judgments, the actors construct a scenario in which critiques circulate concerning the issue in which they are immersed.

Along these lines, the combined agencies of collective actors are capable of *making public*, in *arenas* (Cefaï, 1996; 2017a; 2017b), the problems in which they become involved, fixing them within public arenas that are *formal* or *informal* in the terms proposed by Nina Eliasoph. In her discussion of the avoidance of contexts for political conversation, the author (1998: 12) argues that we may also include “the free-form, sociable, playful, esthetic public life that happens in cafés, informal gatherings, bars, coffeehouses, theaters, salons...” as informal modalities of publicizing public and collective action. Based on this logic, nowadays we can likewise include the world of social media as spaces in which questions relating to a large number of people are problematized, evading official discursive structures.⁴ The *public agenda* — a notion characterized by topics raised and discussed within the scope of *public opinion*, capable of shaping what Eliasoph (ibid) calls *public speech* — becomes populated by critical and opinionated positionings about a particular event or problematic issue.

A FORMAL MATRIX FOR THE EFFECTUATION OF CRITIQUE

As mentioned before, in an earlier text, one of us, along with another colleague (Werneck & Loretta, 2018), outlined a matrix of the formal dimensions of critique, mapping the determinant factors involved in shaping any discursive criticism. That study showed that every critique, to affirm itself as such, needs to respond to a series of 15 formal interpellations. The latter are distributed in three dimensions — metamoral, aesthetic, and logical — in which different combinations of responses to interpellations characterize different critical types and protocols. This matrix enabled the development of a research agenda on different experiences of the practical implementation of the critique-form (Werneck, 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2022; Corôa, 2021; Wer-

neck & Talone, 2022; Gualande Junior, 2022; Oliveira, 2022; Sales, 2022; Lemos, 2023). Here, we take a step back in the analysis of the construction and operation of the matrix to ask what happens earlier, during the moment when actors need to effectuate the passage from the wish to critique (something fundamentally emotional and interior) to actual critique — i.e., how a ‘critical moment’ (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999: 359) is implemented in the world, the moment when people can no longer restrain themselves and need to manifest their criticism: “People, involved in ordinary relationships, who are doing things together — let us say, in politics, work, unionism — and who have to coordinate their actions, realize that something is going wrong; that they cannot get along anymore; that something has to change.”

An important analytic foundation of the *economies of worth* (EW) approach (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1987; 2020) is the investment in the elective affinities between social life and economy. Moving beyond the anthropology of the latter to stress a *capacity-based* theory of the human, this approach recognizes the characteristics of economic life as foundational to social relations, but instead of giving preference to a *homo economicus* (turning social life into a setting founded on competitive individualism), it constructs a character centered on a matrix of capacities (Werneck, 2017) from which the *moral* and *critical* capacities are foregrounded (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). Influenced in this regard by both the economics of conventions (Orleans, 1989; Thévenot, 1989; 2016) and the work of Albert O. Hirschman (1958; Hirschman & Lindblom, 1962), the EW approach highlights two main elements of the simile between the economic and sociological dimensions: (a) the treatment of a central element of social life, agency, as a *scarce resource* and (b) the management of this resource as negotiated *valoratively* and justified through its relation with *investments* (Thévenot, 1986) — i.e., in the sacrifice of resources toward achieving future states of worth.

Among the central elements of this economy of worth is a fundamentally scarce resource, *critical agency*. In another text, one of us (Werneck, 2015a) suggested the existence of ‘slack’ as a factor operating on the critical capacities of social actors in modern societies. Expanding Hirschman’s contribution to economic theory, in which, diverging from the neoclassical school, he maintains that competing organizations do not tend toward full employment (Hirschman, 1958), our argument shares the idea that people — as well as organizations — ‘economize’ resources for crisis situations by maintaining a certain level of ‘indolence’ (slack) and curbing the productive impetus. In these situations, these energies can be called upon as something that is effectively observable:

[At] any one point of time, an economy’s resources are not to be considered as rigidly fixed in amount, and that more resources or factors of production will actually come into play if development is marked by sectoral imbalances that galvanize private entrepreneurs or public authorities into action. [...] The crucial,

but plausible, assumption here is that there is some “slack” in the economy; and that additional investment, hours of work, productivity, and decision making can be squeezed out of it by the pressure mechanisms set up by imbalances (Hirschman & Lindblom, 1962: 211-212).

Werneck (2015a) thus claims that actors generally adopt the same stance in moral terms: rather than manifesting a critique and seeking to change the world each time their own evaluations are contradicted, they ponder (albeit not always consciously or reflexively) the best moment to do so, very often ‘forgetting about’ — sometimes even ‘closing their eyes to’ (Boltanski, 2004) — much of what bothers them. The explanation for this resides in the *economization* (the parsimonious use) of scant resources: the various elements needed to effectuate all the indignations that occur to us in the form of critiques do not seem to be available in sufficient quantity. Hence, this ‘critical slack’ can act directly on these moments: “Critique [...] may be a resource saved for moments of greater necessity, more opportune or simply more effective [or, *we could add, simply more possible*], always constructed according to situated disputes” (Werneck, 2015a: 209).

Our argument sets out from the fact that critique is a specific form of *opinion*, the pure and simple manifestation of a way of thinking about something, or, as Gabriel Tarde (2005 [1901]: 59-60) defines it, “the set of judgments” about things at a determined moment. For Tarde, the economy of opinion is a discursive mechanics underlying modern life. A central element of this economy, he argues, is precisely the opinion, which “is to the public as the soul is to the body” (Tarde, 2005 [1901]: 59). It amounts, therefore, to the abstract framework — part of the ‘social spirit,’ to use his terms — that animates its actions. Opinion is coordinated with two other abstractions: tradition — “a condensed and accumulated opinion of the dead, a legacy of necessary and salutary preconceptions, frequently onerous for the living” (Tarde, 2005 [1901]) — and reason — a “thinking elite that isolates itself and withdraws from the popular mainstream to express or direct it.” The modern political-discursive dynamic is driven by this coordinated operation in which established traditional common-sense judgments and highly tangible rationalized judgments pressure and are pressured by a conjunctural judgment: opinion, which is indeed responsible for broad social decision-making.

His starting point is a classic theory of the passage from pre-modern to modern societies: from the *crowd* (conceptual aggregates founded in proximity) to *publics* (conceptual aggregates detached from spatiotemporal proximity).⁵ With the public, “the influence of spirits on each other becomes a long-distance action” (Tarde, 2005 [1901]: 2). This *contagion* of opinions (formative of the modern public) is also an effect of the equally modern potency of *actualities*. For the author (Tarde, 2005 [1901]: 8), an actuality is that which generates “a general interest, even if it concerns an old fact [...]. Actu-

ality is everything that is in fashion.” This actuality and (contagious) opinion are distinctive properties of modern sociability.

Thus, a *public* (the core of social formation under modernity) is also formed by a partial (*actual*) agreement on central issues for society. *Opinion* is also the momentaneous set of judgments that respond to these problems of actuality. In turn, this opinion is based on two foundations: the pulverized *conversation* — according to Tarde (2005 [1901]: 76) “every dialogue without direct and immediate utility, in which one speaks mainly for the sake of speaking, for pleasure, for distraction, for politeness” — and the press — for him, the main source of conversations, actualities, and technologies that provided the ‘power of number’ (following the logic of *contagion*).

Conversation is, for the author, the ‘main factor of opinion.’ Tarde (2005 [1901]: 64) attributes the logic of public life to disputes between opinions and the consolidation of social truths to the contagious effect achieved by one of them: “[*There are*] always two conflicting opinions on every issue. Yet one of them will always manage to rapidly eclipse the other by radiating more quickly and brightly or, though less widely diffused, by being the noisiest.”

Tarde’s notion of the public is linked, therefore, to the creation of the press. Newspapers are a filter of the collective mentality capable of providing the social grouping inaugurated by the modern world. The press (represented by professionals who perform jobs recognized as legitimate in their function as ‘sounding boards’ of significant current conversations) and its format as newspapers are a modern force that can diffuse certain conversation contents. They unify and give form to what people routinely discuss — in other words, it provides a semiotic connection between actors dispersed around central elements for the social order.

This irradiation thus faces an obstacle imposed on those wishing to have a voice in conversations: as we saw in the example of the Dreyfus Affair, it is (was) not open to everyone. Not by chance, the press assumes this place as the principal locus and motor of conversation. It performs a central role in this economy due to its capacity to become, by metonymy, the public space. But, as we know, this happens due to the monopoly of the means of public expression, the public arena itself.

However, this is not the only limiting factor. Observation of both the accumulated knowledge on the history of public expressions and the argumentative framework of the pragmatic sociology of critique (notably in the proposal developed by/from Boltanski as well as our own work), allowed for a better understanding of the logic of critical slack. There seems to be a set of determinant variables that, following this logic of scarcity, favors this indolence.

Here we can turn to Boltanski and Chiapello (2009 [1999]: 72):

The formulation of a critique presupposes a bad experience prompting protest, whether it is personally endured by critics, or they are roused by the fate of others. This is what we call the source of indignation. Without this prior emo-

tional — almost sentimental — reaction, no critique can take off. On the other hand, it is a long way from the spectacle of suffering to articulated critique; critique requires a theoretical fulcrum and an argumentative rhetoric to give voice to individual suffering and translate it into terms that refer to the common good. This is why there are actually two levels in the expression of any critique: a primary level — the domain of the emotions — which can never be silenced, which is always ready to become inflamed whenever new situations provoking indignation emerge; and a secondary level — reflexive, theoretical and argumentative — that makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle, but assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticize with values that can be universalized.

In this excerpt, we can note a list of insinuated elements: at the primary level, a *source of indignation*; at the secondary level, a *widely sharable moral abstraction* ('theoretical fulcrum') that may enable a *rise in generality* and competence in the mobilization of elements, proving this public character ('argumentative rhetoric,' 'concepts and schemas').

Similarly, Boltanski and Esquerre (2022: 28) write:

In modern industrial societies in which the forms of information are multiple and readily accessible (press, television, smartphones, internet, etc.), actuality is omnipresent. It is, therefore, less the possibility of access than the attention given to news — the base units of actuality — that distinguishes those who dedicate a more or less substantial portion of their time and energy to learning about and trying to understand current events, especially at a political level, from those who attribute less importance to them. The latter may voluntarily try to avoid the news or follow just the most popular or commented topics, such as sports or *fait divers*. Nonetheless, even for the most reticent, the level of remaining completely apart from current affairs is practically infeasible.

We can see that the investments of *existential and cognitive resources* — 'energy' and, the scarcest of all resources, 'time' — are just as, or even more, determinant than the *channel* ('forms of information') for engaging in a critique in the world. Social actors have access to limited offer of these resources to engage any critical enterprise. Stop what you are doing to complain? Deploy emotional energy and 'work yourself up' to point out what is wrong? 'Chase after' a space in which you can be heard, and your voice amplified?

Expositions of elements such as these can be found scattered across the vast production of the pragmatic sociology of critique — we included. Reviewing this literature and our own works on critique, whether private or public, we formulated these elements in the form of a matrix whose composition in different intensities represents a specific situation: the effectuation of the passage from indignation to critique. Hence, the composition of the *actancies* of these elements in this matrix is the determinant factor of this passage. Thus, we arrive at the following framework of determinant elements for this effectuation, historically treated as scarce resources:

- 1) Time: Actors understand this self-explanatory element as the set of trade-offs of temporal investment in favor of the critical moment (stop doing other things and dedicate yourself to indignation), recognizably scarcer than the continuity of life (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999: 359-360).
- 2) Energy: this meta-element translates the *effort* (cognitive, physical, emotional, financial, etc.) actors spend to carry out a critique.
- 3) Information: access to information on the world gives access to the situations and contexts to be criticized and elements that enable the critique to be made.
- 4) Attention: according to William James (2021 [1890]: 403-404), this involves “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.” It is thus a question of selecting something in the world to which you dedicate cognition and that can determine experience, defined precisely as “what I agree to attend to,” determined by a simple and peremptory trade-off: “without selective interest, experience is utter chaos.” Attention performs the role of an inversely proportional variable in this framework. While all the others are interpreted as scarce in the consolidation of modernity, attention is found in abundance: a critique depends on a high level of attention — i.e., concentration — to be effectuated as such.
- 5) Shareable morality: as we have seen, actors must identify the moral grammar into which their indignation — initially perceived as emotion (anger, pity, and so on) — translates itself valueatively and encounters its potential universality in a given context.
- 6) Structural conditions: a series of structural conditions must be present for a critique to be permissible — from being able to criticize at all (living in a democracy rather than a dictatorship, for example) to being able to envisage a future to the critical gesture (such as facing a problem that can be solved rather than one impossible to solve due to a lack of resources).⁶
- 7) Disentanglement from the constraints of sociability: in the game of *accountability* (Scott & Lyman, 2008 [1968]), actors can (and very often do) avoid making a critique out of politeness, fear, direct coercion, or another of the wide range of forms of constraint produced by their co-presence with others.
- 8) Channels: actors need the means to amplify the range — classically by newspapers and public spaces; more recently, as we shall see, via social media — or the potency of their voices.
- 9) Competences: actors must show resourcefulness in a series of competences, especially regarding justice and piety, as well as in formal ones such as ‘knowing how to speak,’ ‘not being shy,’ ‘arguing,’ and so on.

- 10) Actantial translatability: the imperative to translate the situation regarding the elements of the actantial system of critique (Werneck & Loretto, 2018: 977), a framework inspired by the actantial system of denunciation formulated by Boltanski (2012a [1990]). Actors, therefore, must recognize the model actants of a critique in the practical world:⁷

[The] one who criticizes [...], the critic [...]; the one in whose favour it is made, the victim; the one against whom it is exercised, the criticized [...]; and the one before whom it is performed [and who will judge it], the judge. Each is understood to be qualified to assume a position and perform their role, and the system will function better the more 'worth' each one demonstrates in their actantial performance (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020 [1991]).

- 11) Identified triggers: without identifying the ultimate causes of indignation (such as the socioeconomic suffering of a specific community or category), it is impossible to advance to a speech claiming to show its connection with primary causes (such as 'social injustice,' 'inequalities,' or 'government omission').
- 12) Presumed addresses: it is essential to have a definite addressee (a 'judge,' as we have seen), however vague (the critique may even be scattered 'to the four winds,' for instance, or addressed 'to whom it may concern'), for the speech to be suitably adapted to this recipient — for example, by adjusting its moral grammar, the appropriate vocabulary or the types of needed proof.
- 13) Reality devices (proofs): critique is impossible without samples of reality that can show the harm caused and the public interest in the fact.

The delineation of this matrix thus provides a clearer understanding of the critical slack that performed a historically determinant role in the modern political actuality until just a few years ago: if it is necessary to stop everything, invest time, energy, and thought (in a clear and universal moral agenda, in its figures, and in the elements of the world capable of showing it), organize, write a 'manifesto,' post it to a newspaper, go to a public square with a megaphone or organize a demonstration, be ready to confront 'the powerful' or 'a major problem that is never solved,' and so on, then it becomes clear that criticizing 'is hard work' — hard enough not to be an automatic activity and demand a management of resources responsible for making it scarce.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL ACTUALITY IN A CONTEXT OF ABUNDANCE AND THE IMPERATIVE OF OPINION

Our argument, therefore, is that the digitalization of public arenas and their potentialization as a market over recent decades seem to have consistently transformed the economy described thus far: in a very short time, especially following the advent of what is known as *social media*, access to material

channels for critique has become more available at a vertiginous pace. Simultaneously — and consequently — the energetic and temporal costs of critique have been hugely reduced. This has implied and was implied by a new interactional condition: opinion seems to have become the fundamental mode of sociability in our world. Moreover, this intensification in the manifestation of opinion seems to have intensified critique.

Returning to Tarde, the author suggests that the generalization (or better said, ‘contagion’) of an opinion is the core of modernity. This translates into the tendency of a topic to become an issue on which everyone expresses an opinion.⁸ In modern Western societies, we tend to express opinions in the same way: we address the things of contemporary life and elaborate opinions about them regardless of the matter in question. As we have seen, this is actuality. Regarding social transformations, changes thus start to spread ever faster and more widely than in earlier moments since they are marked by a collective disposition to substitute one dominant idea with another.

A little over a century later, as scientific and technological development and diffusion stimulated the proliferation and rapid circulation of information and diverse topics (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Castels, 2013 [1996]; 2003; Lupton, 2015; Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022), we can ask: what happens with ‘current events?’ What are the consequences for ‘actuality’ when conversations and their effects on the shaping of opinion become widely diffused at the same speed in which they are formed? How does this affect the economy of the resources that determines critique?

Boltanski and Esquerre (2022) argue that the contemporary public space tends to become a proliferation of news about what is happening now. Participation in actuality (and the consumption and production of actuality) have become an important factor in the socialization of the interconnection between the ‘[intimate] world of life’ (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022: 30-31), lives in the collective and what can be apprehended as the ‘inaccessible’ (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022: 16). The expression of singularities, the attempts at generalization and the form in which different actors seek to adjust synchronically to current events are all central in the contemporary world. The possibility of concentrating on the inaccessible and reflecting on its ‘tangibility’ (Chateauraynaud, 2011) is a collective coordinated undertaking that belongs to the engaged action that ‘makes society’ (Thévenot, 2006). As França and Oliveira (2012: 7) write:

In the multimedia setting in which we live, everyone — not just specialized agents — occupies a legitimate position to propagate information, comment on events, construct narratives on different aspects of our reality. Reporting or creating events has become part of the daily agenda of ordinary citizens, or at least those who engage in digital networks. In the world of blogs, microblogs, virtual relational networks, personal webpages or discussion sites, individuals from any part of the world are not only able to give their opinions about events, but also, in many cases, create or replicate them⁹ (França & Oliveira, 2012: 7).

As Web 2.0¹⁰ potentializes the circulation of interpretations and understandings of events, the sources/triggers for critique also proliferated. We argue, therefore, is that this composes a context we can call *hypercritical*: with the internet in its current format, we are faced with an information system shattered at its core (Esquerre & Meyran, 2018) that enables anyone to express an opinion and take an active role in the ‘interpretation of an event’ while criticizing how others — including traditional media — do so. The press is now merely a source of information with ‘proofs of tangibility’ (Werneck & Loretii, 2018: 995) that can appear more or less effective.¹¹ Hence, it is now possible to speak about actuality in a more *intense* form than in Tarde’s times.¹²

For Boltanski and Esquerre (2022), through actuality, experienced in the world of life of people endowed with multiple memories — or ‘baggage of experience’ (Talone, 2022) as we put it —, actors become affected by generalized opinions and critiques, as well as by (another fundamental characteristic of the contemporary world) the *politicization* of diverse phenomena. People thus draw equivalences between the context of reported facts and that in which their own existences unfold, especially when these facts affect those dependent on the same ‘political power’ (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022). Politicization and actuality, manifested in conversations as opinions/critiques, are devices central to connection (even if conflictual) in the social world.

The authors (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022) also argue that processes of politicization — the form in which politics is expressed today in public spaces — constantly require new facts, particularly those whose divergent interpretations fuel online exchanges. The competent agent, endowed with critical capacity, is now also a potential newsmaker in the sense that they recurrently carry and transmit their worldview.

In short, the internet potentializes different theories, opinions about the world, and critiques between them (Fassin, 2022). This makes forms of apprehending the world present and potent — in and for actuality — characterized by the search for an explanation that is not content with ‘official interpretations’ (Fassin, 2022). The digitalization of public arenas has played an intensive role in the ‘contagion’ of opinion. As can be observed in various descriptions of the ‘network society’ (Castels, 2013 [1996]; Hari, 2022; Fischer, 2023), in *actuality*, time occupies a key place among the variables that have most changed regarding the resources needed for critique. Time constitutes the *now*, what is on the agenda, a durable and rapidly ‘contagious’ now. Moreover, this is not just because of speed but also because of the contemporaneity — the fact that someone can offer an opinion as they simultaneously perform other activities.

It is not, though, just a question of time. We can perceive transformations in all the variables of our matrix from a mode of scarcity to one of abundance — and the reverse relation in the case of attention. This is fairly striking

in the case of available channels given, as we have seen, the absence of a legitimate monopoly of publicization, as people do not depend solely on the ‘official’ media to expound their ideas on events in the discourse concerning their constitution — the traditional media has become a reputable media, a media based on the world of *fame* (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020 [1991]). The same applies to energy, competences, and actantial translatability: the digital context has enabled a reduction in the effort and training needed for actors to read the world critically, perceiving things as problematic together with the people involved — albeit sometimes in an accusatorily skewed way.

However, attention seems to occupy a prominent place: It behaved as an abundant outcome in the past (although, in practice, it was determined by the general framework of scarcity, such that the passage from indignation to critique required an increase in the state of attention paid to something for its problems to be seen and enunciated), but nowadays it has become a scarce resource arising precisely from the context of abundance: as several authors have shown — especially Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2019)¹³ —, the level of *collective attention* has undergone globally monumental reductions over recent decades in a shift in which attention is given to increasingly distinct information, quickly jumping from content to content without close attention, thanks especially to an increase in the volume of circulating information:

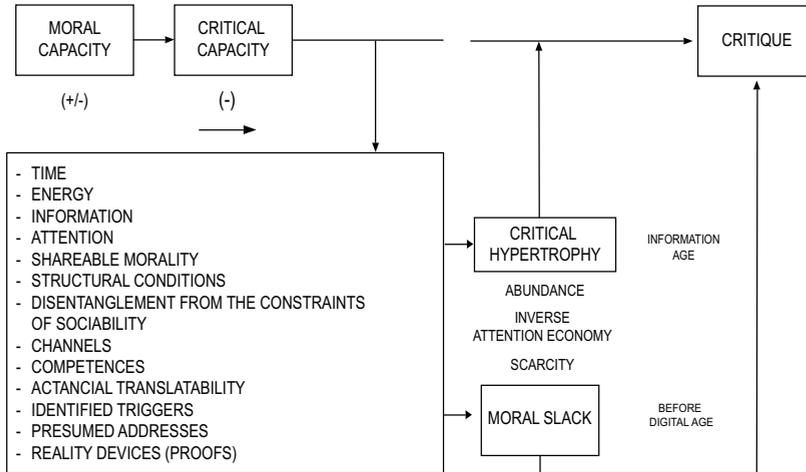
[The] increasing rates of content production and consumption are the most important driving force for the accelerating dynamics of collective attention. The resulting picture is an attention economy, where the increasing abundance of information combined with the cognitive limitations and time constraints of users, leads to a redistribution of the available resources across time towards quicker changes and higher frequencies. (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019: 2).

This redefines the very speed of political actuality since this change makes the politicization of topics the outcome of an ever more frenetic actuality in terms of its actualization now: we jump from issue to issue in an increasingly intense frequency without an intensive immersion in the processes of proof that would make the examination of the problem exhaustive.

Moreover, there seems to be a social configuration that produces a perennial invitation to express opinion both technical (with ‘like’ buttons, the development of ‘threads,’ campaigns, ‘click baits,’ and so on) and moral: there is a proliferation of interlocutors (since it is the ‘entire internet,’ a huge ‘to whom it may concern’) and possible sources (or triggers) of indignation given that everything becomes an object of scrutiny (Fischer, 2023). All of these factors result in an *imperative of opinion* and its hegemonization, as well as by intensification, its format as critique, as a central form of contemporary sociability — with *politicization* the principal format for their effectuation.

The schema below summarizes this historical passage from scarcity to abundance:

Chart 1 – From scarcity to abundance of opinion’s elements



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As the diagram shows, we once lived in a moment — located over the last two centuries — of “more [...] so there is less” (Foucault, 1999 [1970]: 31), a hypertrophy of the mechanisms of rarefaction of critical resources and thus of critical discourses, which made them scarce and produced moral slack: being indignant was not easily converted into a voice, which required considerable work. As a consequence, political actuality was permeated by critical moments dependent on considerable logical-moral undertakings. However, as we have explored, another moment took shape — over recent decades, we could say — in which this picture was replaced by another, marked by less intermediated or fundamentally less filtered kind of discourse: resources that were once scarce became abundant, leading to the formation of a *critical hypertrophy* deriving from an imperative of opinion, bypassing what previously produced slack, and altering the status of attention.

FROM THE MORAL IMPERATIVE TO CRITICAL HYPERTROPHY: BANALIZATION, CONFLICT, AND THE PROBLEM OF REALITY

This passage from scarcity to an abundance of resources to disseminate opinions/critiques has been significantly affected by the practical fusion between the virtual world and the material world experienced in our time (Fischer, 2023; Hari, 2022). An example of this is the *viralization*¹⁴ of topics, originating from speech, actions, memes,¹⁵ or images associated with known

or unknown people that generate thousands (in some cases, millions) of comments on social media. The public discussion of particular events or the politicization of current facts (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022) shapes a dynamic of intense exchange of opinions on a theme that has become of interest to a collectivity. There are then three consequences for the imperative of opinion that we aim to explore due to its close connection to the politicization of actualities (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022), located in an equilateral triangle in terms of coordination: at one vertex, a *banalization of critique*, implying a loss of its potency; at another, its intensification (and its conversion into its accusatorial modality), directing itself to generally open conflict by what we have called *ostentatious moralism*; and, at a third vertex, a fundamental redirection of critique, from problems expressed in terms of values to problems expressed in terms of reality, summarized under the label of ‘post-truth.’

BANALIZATION: CRITIQUE OF THE ‘MAJOR PROBLEM’

The means used to propagate critical opinion impose modulations to how they are elaborated and proffered. In other texts, one of us (Gualande Junior, 2019; 2022) has analyzed how the profusion of means to enunciate complaints and opinions on a public problem evinces the presence of critique as a constitutive part of the analyzed reality — and not only as a disruption of everyday life;¹⁶ the same dissatisfactions are often and recurrently presented over many years, referring to the same problematic issues, which themselves repeat. Moreover, while the presence and circulation of critique are clearly evident, their capacity to alter the problematic order is less so. Thus, we argue is that, in specific cases (Gualande Junior, 2020; 2022), a draining of critique takes place precisely because of the intensity of its recurrence, implying that contestations of the problematic world become dispersed. Therefore, it can be asserted that the banality of critique is central to its loss of force precisely because of its repetitiveness and generality in attacking a *major problem apparently without resolution*. The analyses of Boltanski and Chiapello (2009 [1999]) of the shifts brought about by capitalism over its history corroborate this interpretation of the role of critique in the process: the appropriation of the indignation of opponents to encounter points of moral support becomes fundamental to how changes in the operation of wide domination systems play out. This approach has the capacity to incorporate absent devices of justice, contributing to disarming the force of any counter critique. This exhaustion of critique leads to a loss of its virulence — i.e., its capacity to become generalized to the point in which the criticized side can no longer respond. Nonetheless, the *effectuation* (Werneck, 2012; 2019; 2023a; 2023b) of critique continues, with this type of discourse manifesting in the world to be understood as such, even if failing to garner the force needed to alter the reality considered negative.

Public critiques thus pass by a kind of dilution: their repetitive manifestation is intensive merely in a quantitative sense, functioning as a kind of solvent that reduces the concentration of the potential for mobilization, weakening its force and its capacity to transform the world. Thus, the argument of Boltanski (2013:442) is persuasive: “It seems that today the increase in critique is not accompanied by an increase to the same degree in the *power* of critique”.

Pursuing this argument and thinking about the profusion of critical opinions in social media concerning any and every subject enable us to problematize them as something dispersed in the virtual world and — to a huge extent — expected, naturalized, and routinized by those navigating it. As we have observed, time, energy, information, and channels of communication are especially accessible in the ‘digital age.’ A message, video, or photo can be posted on social media in just a few minutes, sometimes even seconds. The need to invest a large amount of effort to do so has also dissipated given the lower level of complexity involved in virtually adopting a position without the need to write to a newspaper, for example. Likewise, social media enable the direct exposure of critiques/opinions without heavy prior filtering by the platform responsible for publishing them.¹⁷ The passivity of the past, in which journalists and the press in general dominated the production and dissemination of information, has given way to an active positioning in the production of content by well-known digital influencers (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Fischer, 2023; Watkins 2022; Han, 2022). Anyone can quickly become recognized on social media, depending on their opinions and their capacity to generate interactions with other users. Thus, the public that follows these ‘influencers’ expects them to be ready to adopt a stance on diverse issues.¹⁸

Consequently, the aspect of repetition and banality in critiques represents the expected and routinized, which, as a habit, can dampen indignations by the adoption of a blasé attitude.¹⁹ This fact contrasts with the definition of a critical moment (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020 [1991]; 1999), a moment constituted by its rarity and surprise, in which certain actions are deemed inappropriate as they define the situation in question.

MORALISM AND OSTENTATION: CONFLICT AND PERFORMANCE

The other consequence of critical hypertrophy to be highlighted is a type of moral behavior we have called *ostentatious moralism* (Werneck, 2021a; Werneck & Talone, 2022), defined by one of us (Werneck, 2021a: 1) along two axes:

- a) a simplification of the moral complexity of the world in favor of a single morality and in detriment to a plural moral universe of multiple worlds [*moralism*];
- b) a performance of this option as unique and non-negotiable within the frameworks of an ostentatious display of the intransigence of this position [*ostentation*].

Regarding the offer of opinions, this entails an operation in which critique seeks to disqualify the moral bases of the other, disallowing the criticized subject any chance to account for his behavior (Scott & Lyman, 2008 [1968]) or, more specifically — considering the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the economies of worth — from *justifying themselves*. It also implies a shift from situations to the performance of intransigence as a value in itself. As we saw earlier, EW explores model disagreements from an imperative of convergence toward agreement between parties precisely by being accountable toward justice (justifications) and the presentation of *proofs* of this competence in the actions being called into question. As we have also shown, a moralist appropriation of morality focuses, in certain situations, on individuals basing their evaluations on a single morality, represented as the most correct and coherent, and taking this position as non-negotiable, placing the criticized subject in a morally reproachable condition, hindering them from having any stability in the situation. In this scenario, an accountable critique gives way to an accusatorial critique (Misse & Werneck, 2012; Werneck & Loretto, 2018), which is widespread in the structure of public denunciation (Boltanski, 2012a [1990]). In this modality, the *accusation-guilt-punishment* framework is established, and *accountability* is annulled (Scott & Lyman, 2008 [1968]) — i.e., the very possibility of someone making sense of their acts and thus obtaining acceptance of their actions from the initially dissatisfied side. Once again, this dimension of critique suggests a transformation in the temporality of *critical moments vis-à-vis* the original context: they become far more recurrent and intensive (and thus difficult to resolve).

Our argument, therefore, is that many contemporary interactions, especially in social media, which already take up a larger portion of actors' time (Fischer, 2023; Hari, 2022), focus on an accusatorial model of evaluative interpellation. To this we can add the *ostentatious* modality, as described above, as it shifts the evaluation from the situation of justice concerning the central moral value of the *content* of subjects' actions to one of three competences of *form* (Werneck, 2021a): *aggressiveness* — in which the attempt is made to *diminish* the other by *verbal force* (Werneck et al., 2021); *humor* — in which the objective is to *ridicule* the other; and *embarrassment* — in which the aim is to instill *guilt* in the other. Whoever shows a greater capacity for performative intransigence 'wins' the dispute. The most familiar aspect of this scenario is known in Brazilian Portuguese as *lacrção* — something like 'slaying' — in which a discourse of effectuation is so strikingly successful due to its forcefulness that it 'puts an end to the matter,' leaving all other interlocutors without argument.²⁰ The virtual world offers an ideal platform for this type of behavior since it adopts opinion, especially its critical modality, as a privileged form — one indeed stimulated commercially (Fischer, 2023). This makes ostentatious accusatorial critique an extremely present and everyday phenomenon: conflicts attract new critical interactions, which attract

new critical interactions, and so forth, generating a feedback loop of virtual criticality that merges with political actuality.²¹

'REALITY' AND FORMS OF DISINFORMATION

One of the most widely debated questions regarding social media is the issue placed under the umbrella term of 'post-truth' (McIntyre, 2018; D'Ancona, 2018; Maddalena & Gilli, 2020; Fischer, 2023) — a label that initially served to designate how specific (right-wing)²² political groups represented reality, a worldview in which 'alternative facts' have converted previously immutable truths into mere versions/descriptions (*narratives*) and thus into fragile truths. However, for most analysts (including those identified before), the term came to designate the very phenomenon of promoting this representation, which, in turn, became conceived as a social/public problem. Along these same lines, a series of correlate phenomena has amassed and joined conversations/opinion among the main issues of contemporary political actuality.

To problematize this dimension, we need to return to a founding precept of the theoretical approach on which our argument is based. Critique, when inscribed in a modality of *public* circulation referring to *public* topics (Tarde, 2005 [1901]; Dewey, 2016 [1927]; Cefaï et al., 2011) and aimed at the *common good* (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020 [1991]) or the *good of all* (Werneck, 2012; 2021b) should be rooted in stable tests: i.e., in examinations *vis-à-vis* evidences derived from *reality*. This means that these critiques have been subject to procedures or rules involving a certain institutionalization, "giving them an objectivity that makes it possible to share indignation. This contrasts with barely formalized tests that [...] can easily be discredited as purely 'subjective'" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2009 [1999]: 489). According to this understanding, the substantiation of general claims in their content and form should be based on information submitted to prior scrutiny and institutionally and collectively validated as true. At the same time, critiques can be qualified according to their degree of demand for tangible proofs (Chateauraynaud, 2011; Werneck & Loretto, 2018), which situates a region of public social situations as more typical in an area, in which proof is demanded in scientific and juridical terms, and another region which is more informal and less concerned with methodological rigor. In the state of affairs in 2010/2020, *proofs* once considered in common culture to be consolidated by time came to be contested without engaging in the established process of *testing* (*épreuve*), which had served as a protocol since the consolidation of formal empiricism — implying, rather than a post-truth, something we could call a *post-proofing*, i.e., the promotion, by certain groups, of an idea that testing reality involves a purely rhetorical operation dependent only on the will of the involved actors and unrelated to any objective investigative process that would provide proof. In essence, proof consists of an operation of testing the *effectiveness* — i.e., the capacity to produce effects,

showing its anchoring in reality (Peirce, 1992 [1878]; Werneck, 2023a, 2023b) — of a *definition of the situation* (Thomas, 1969 [1923]) by an *inquiry process* (Dewey, 1938) that implies a *collation* of utterances defining/describing the situation against *frames of reference*, accepted (i.e., previously tested) circumscriptions of the universe as ‘the reality’ about certain things (Werneck, 2021d). Our argument is that in this ‘post-truth’ world (as constructed by certain actors), various protocols of testing founded on objectivity is eclipsed in favor of an evaluation of effectiveness in terms of the *trustworthiness* of its enunciators.

One of the most debated contemporary examples of this theme is the propagation of *fake news* (Mello, 2020). Although by no means a recent invention, the new information and communication technologies have enabled this kind of news, adapted to what is generally a conspiratorial interpretation, to spread rapidly and in ever greater volume.²³ In this type of action, diverse situations are manipulated by certain groups to generate positive opinions about allies or critiques of specific opponents and their actions.

Esquerre and Meyran (2018) argue that what is new in this package composed of fake news, disinformation, conspiracy, and rumors in the contemporary world is the change in the public space itself in Western countries, now formed at its core by disputes between ‘alternative facts.’ In other words, this space has become an environment of disputes between happenings, facts, rumors, and conspiracy theories that challenge the ‘truths’ established by legitimized authorities or indeed challenge these authorities and institutions themselves, with micro- and macro-actants opposing each other in their ‘worldviews.’ The doubt over truth is itself an issue (*actuality*) in digital media space and thus in the public space. The accusatorial critique that something is ‘fake news’ or that someone is a ‘post-truth’ acolyte has itself become a device for testing in this setting, a frequent element in processes of politicization.

Nonetheless, fake news and disinformation are founded on *critique* as a form of sociability: people accuse each other of propagating lies and lie to accuse each other. This dynamic is constant on social media, involving different sources and the manipulation of images, videos, and events, always with the aim of discrediting someone or generating speculations, doubts, or factoids. As Boltanski and Esquerre (2022) claim, what we have — to understand the ‘vertiginous growth’ in the propagation of fake news — in the contemporary world is a growth in the engagement in online social media associated with the decline in trust in traditional information outlets. The understanding of phenomena becomes more complex with the proliferation of the sources (legitimate or not) providing information, which also multiplies the devices available for verifying the tangibility of opinions and critiques. If a proof of reality and tangibility consists of taking a stance and successfully persisting in the face of critique, in the current digital world, we have a proliferation of the modes of testing and questioning precisely these traditional ‘semiotic anchors.’

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this text, we have sought to define the factors at work in the passage from potential (including especially its format as critique) to manifested opinion, precisely by thinking about the effects of the intimate contemporary relationship between the public sphere, politicization, and ‘current affairs’ (*actualité*), following the ideas formulated by Boltanski and Esquerre (2022). Digitalization potentializes the continuous circulation of information, opinions, and proofs, acting on people’s perceptions and interpretations of reality and on how they manifest their critiques and worldviews, marked especially by the dynamic of politicization — the way in which politics is manifested (and is made manifest) in the public sphere nowadays (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022; Susen, 2023).

As Susen (2023) proposes in a critical review of Boltanski and Esquerre’s book which guided our reflections here, two points have become central to shaping the debate on the status of contemporaneity itself: on one hand, the framing of ‘events’ selected as current and newsworthy, enabling a huge number of people to obtain knowledge about facts and events that are mostly experienced indirectly; and, on the other, the processes of politicization that, by problematization (a specific framing) and the critique of facts and events, translate into a multitude of opinions, interpretations, and debates circulated by social networks and digital media as commentaries, discussions, and polemics. These contemporary phenomena show considerable actancy in the formation of the *public arena* in which people act collectively (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022: 9). For the authors, these elements form a historically and socially situated ontology.

As we have seen over the course of the text, the effects — at least in the Western world — of social media and the internet on how the large majority of citizens engage with politics (through the lens of these media) involve the transitory definition of what counts and does not count as ‘politics’ — since ‘everything is politicizable’ (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2022: 13) — and a modification of the influence of politics on our lifeworlds. It is in this sense that Boltanski and Esquerre speak of a new ontology of reality. Our interest resided in mapping how an imperative of opinion is expressed in this scenario (complexifying the ‘traditional economy’ of the latter), especially in its format as critique, intimately connected to the topics of ‘actuality’ generated in a dynamic agenda of ‘politicizations’ produced by multiple actants. We briefly highlighted some of the consequences in this text but these should become the focus of future efforts of research — for example, analyzing the ‘politicization’ processes, the clashing of moral and moralist contents, the circulation of diverse contents that characterize ‘actuality,’ the ‘real reality’ (Boltanski, 2014), and its forms of proof and contestation.

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Alexandre Werneck is Professor of the Department of Sociology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and its Graduate Programme in Sociology and Anthropology (PPGSA) and coordinator of the Citizenship, Conflict, and Violence Studies Laboratory (Necvu) at UFRJ. He is a PQ2 productivity grant holder from CNPq and a Faperj Jovem Cientista do Nosso Estado researcher. He has a PhD in Sociology from PPGSA-UFRJ and a master's degree from the Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture at the same institution.

Vittorio da Gamma Talone is a Nota 10 Faperj postdoctoral researcher for the Citizenship, Conflict, and Violence Studies Laboratory (Necvu) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). He has a PhD from the Graduate Programme in Sociology at the Social and Political Studies Institute (Iesp) of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (Uerj) and a master's degree from PPGSA-UFRJ.

Ailton Gualande Junior is a doctoral student on the Graduate Programme in Sociology and Anthropology (PPGSA) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and a researcher for the Citizenship, Conflict, and Violence Studies Laboratory (Necvu) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). He has a master's degree from PPGSA-UFRJ.

NOTES

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- 1 The *Affaire Dreyfus* is well-known and will not be explored further here: what matters for our purposes are the possibility conditions of Zola’s public critique. It will suffice to recall that the scandal involved a false accusation of treason levelled against a young French officer in the Third Republic, spanning from 1894 to 1906. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew, was used as a scapegoat in a case of espionage for Germany, sentenced to life imprisonment until his story came to light and the denunciation of judicial anti-Semitism enabled his release. The manifesto published by Zola played a pivotal role in this process by creating a wave of public pressure for the case to be reopened. For more on the affair, see Loué (2007) and Pagès (2021).
 - 2 As various authors have shown — for syntheses, see Fischer (2023) and Hari (2022) —, it may even be said that the offer of opinion, especially critique, has become *the* central form of sociability in our era when we consider the en masse temporal permanence of the global population on social media and the deliberate encouragement by corporations for actors to express their opinions all the time — notably those capable of producing conflict (founded on a ‘negativity bias’ in human psychology). This increases engagement in these media and enhances potential profits. However, we avoid ‘overstressing’ this peremptory argument, even though it is widely corroborated in the neurosciences. Essentially, the genealogy of this process and even its elements would exceed the limits of this text.
 - 3 The discussion between Lippmann and John Dewey concerning the problem of the relationship between the pub-

lic sphere and democracy is notorious. For Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems* (1927: 208), among other points of disagreement, diverging from what the other American author proposed as a solution for the control of the masses by stereotypes, “[n]o government of experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few.” Dewey’s democratic theory would provide the grounds for a comprehensive treatment of public problems, as we shall see. For more on this quarrel, see the excellent introduction by Melvin Rogers to the 2016 edition of the cited book.

- 4 For a more recent example of how social media can serve as a space for critical outpourings, see Oliveira (2022).
- 5 To provide an example, Tarde argues that there was no public in the Middle Age but rather tumultuous crowds dominated by extreme emotions without a ‘vehicle for thought’ such as the press.
- 6 For a recent and local example, see Azevedo et al., (2021); for more general and comprehensive overviews, see Chateauraynaud (2011) and Chateauraynaud and Debaz (2019).
- 7 The scarcity of this axis is made explicit in the very economy of politics, as conceived under modernity, based on a framework of *uncovering* the hidden mechanisms of social life (Boltanski, 2012a [1990]). In this sense, both the social sciences and social movements are devices for showing this configuration to actors (ibid).
- 8 For Tarde, an effect of the *principle of imitation*, something inherent to social groupings. Thus, what gives shape to society is people’s reproduction of each other’s behavior and ways of thinking (Reynié, 2005). It is worth noting that a certain ambiguity in Tarde’s proposal concerning the ‘contagion of opinion,’ which sometimes appears as a theme and sometimes as a resource: while he proposes contagion as a thematic imposition (people enter the exchange of opinions on something of actuality), he also suggests that one opinion is always in opposition to another (as devices to swap positions on matters), such that it would be difficult for everyone to have the same opinion on something.
- 9 To some extent, this phenomenon has already been discussed since the 1980s — for example, by the category of

the *prosumer* (Horst & Miller, 2012: 23; Castels, 2003), a profile of the user of virtual communities who acts in active and creative ways toward communication technologies (compared to the usual ways of using virtual spaces in earlier periods), mobilizing and giving them new forms not only as consumers but also as producers. According to Fonseca et al. (2008: 5) “[p]rosumers are consumers engaged in the coproduction of products, meanings and identities. They are proactive consumers who dynamically share their points of view.”

- 10 This term refers to the World Wide Web (WWW) and its transformation into a dynamic and interactive platform in which users collaborate to create and build content. Web 2.0 is typically used to describe the change of the internet with the emergence of social media and applications designed to disseminate content. It thus encompasses blogs, wiki pages (freely collaborative), social media (including video-sharing sites such as YouTube), and other user-driven platforms. Along with this phenomenon, a new phase of involvement of business and companies on the internet also emerged (Almeida & Dias, 2022) with diverse forms of content commodification and advertising based on exploiting the *digital footprints* (Bruno, 2012) left by users.
- 11 The time between the fact and its enunciation is extremely short (Quééré, 2018). For historians, the time of the fact is stabilized, although the time of its enunciation and the enunciation itself may vary from one professional to another. Even so, there are points taken as established and to which they can return and debate within well-defined limits. In the contemporary world of actualities, diverse facts occur at the same time as they are being published and analyzed. The newspaper page and its timescale of publication, along with our capacity for paying close attention, are limited, which means that we select certain ‘events’ and express opinions/critiques on the basis of multiple ‘proofs of tangibility’ and ‘vocabularies of motives’ (Mills, 1940) and distinct moral competences.
- 12 Tarde, however, observed elements still present today.
- 13 For a review of the discussion on attention in the contemporary world, see Hari (2022). On the emergence of an “economy of attention”, see the various contributions edited by Citton (2014).

- 14 A phenomenon in which a publication is rapidly disseminated (like a virus) by being shared and reproduced many times, generating an impact by capturing the public's attention.
- 15 As one of us defines the phenomenon in another text (Werneck, 2019: 614), "[a] meme is a sign that spreads massively via the internet, originally in peer-to-peer systems, but more recently in a model we can call peer-to-all, more typical of social networks, through repetitions and/or alterations."
- 16 The research describes how users dissatisfied with the public transport service publicize their criticisms concerning the provided service. The specific section of a newspaper with wide local circulation in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro was analyzed along with Facebook pages dedicated to the topic and updated by internet users with the publication of videos showing overcrowded, rundown buses and other precarious situations, as well as the Municipal Transport Secretariat (SMTR) ombudsman's office, supervisory bodies such as the Public Prosecutor's Office, especially its consumers defence branch, the Procuradoria de Proteção e Defesa do Consumidor (Procon), and the television and digital media themselves.
- 17 A powerful example of this past filtering can be found in Boltanski's work on public denunciation (2012a [1990]: 167-271). On the other hand, the issue of online moderation has been increasingly discussed. Social movements and state entities around the world have been putting pressure on social networks to apply filtering and moderation criteria to the content posted by users. Their core argument is that freedom of expression cannot be used to justify the spread of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech. The topic is even the subject of a law bill currently being evaluated by Brazil's National Congress (PL 2630). Nevertheless, users are still able to disseminate their positions directly, even if they are later removed or their profiles blocked by the social media themselves.
- 18 As in the 2018 and 2022 Brazilian presidential elections, for example, when some celebrities were asked by their fans to publicly declare which side they supported. Alzamora and Andrade (2019) propose that we understand the dissemination of 'authoritative' opinions made and/or shared by celebrities on the basis of their iconic status, which potentializes the actions of sharing.

- 19 The COVID-19 pandemic itself is an example of this situation, in which not only experts expressed their opinions in public arenas but also people of all ideological shades without any kind of in-depth knowledge of public health and infectiology based on *proofs* that were flimsy but possessed a strong capacity for popular uptake. The circulation of opinions in the critical modality has become a constant among the involved actors, enhanced by the mass dissemination of fake news on social media. On this topic, see Miskolci (2021) and several of the contributions by Werneck and Araujo (2023).
- 20 On the other hand, the term is also used to designate a critique, one according to which the author of another critique is only looking for *lacrção*, i.e., performing a critique merely to obtain the celebrity status derived from expressing the critical opinion on social media.
- 21 One of our efforts of research consisted of analyzing readers' comments on reports about 'urban violence' in Rio de Janeiro (Werneck et al., 2021; Werneck & Talone, 2022) and on joking headlines on the same topic on a popular newspaper (Werneck, 2022b). The comments were collected from 2019, after the end of the federal public security intervention in the state of Rio de Janeiro (Morellato & Santos, 2020), to 2022, and cover diverse police operations, especially in favelas in Rio de Janeiro. The headlines were collected from 2011 — when the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) policy was introduced — until 2017, when the intervention began. In both papers, we analyze ostentatious moralistic critiques of figures from both sides of the spectrum concerning this 'urban violence' (Werneck et al., 2021; Werneck, 2022b): on one hand, the grammar of crime (Rocha, 2020), especially the so-called *bandidos* ('bandits', criminals) — interpreted as actors making use of a disproportional degree of force (Werneck & Talone, 2019) and 'adrenaline' (Prado, 2020), especially in the form of *traficantes* ('drug traffickers': Werneck et al., 2021), *ladrões* ('thieves': Grillo & Martins, 2020; Caminhas & Beato, 2020) and *milicianos* ('militia members': Werneck, 2015b) — and, on the other, the grammar of the military police officers (Talone, 2020;2023; Cubas, Alves & Oliveira, 2020; Luneke et. al., 2022). When discussing *bandidos*, it is important to emphasize the specific processes of *criminal subjection* (Misse, 2022 [1999])

and labelling (Werneck, 2014) involved in the Brazilian context or even in the 'Global South' (García et al., 2022). This last point also makes explicit dynamics according to which are relativized more general ontological frameworks — such as the very humanity of agents (Freire & Teixeira, 2016) or the borderline character of young people as privileged characters involved in crime (Gonçalves, 2020); and specific points of public debate — such as the statute of torture (Jesus & Gomes, 2021), the value of life (Beraldo, 2021) or “criminal governances” (Muniz & Nunes, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2022; Briceño-León et al., 2022).

- 22 For studies of this phenomenon among conservative or far-right groups and politicians, see Hodge and Hallgrímsson (2019), Cesarino (2022), and Massuchin et al. (2022); on how these groups have historically mobilized the internet in Brazil, see Rocha (2021).
- 23 As striking examples, the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential elections in various countries over recent years have been moments in which the operationalization of this phenomenon became more clearly evident — on this topic, see the various texts compiled by Werneck and Araujo (2023).

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THE IMPERATIVE OF OPINION: A PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE IN “ACTUALITÉ POLITIQUE”

Abstract

Based on the concept of *actualité politique*, this essay aims to analyze the economy of opinion and critique in contemporary societies. Based on various research projects arising from our works and on a reflection concerning the pragmatic sociology of critique, we respond to a fundamental question: what are the determinants of the ‘passage’ of a critique into action; i.e., the conversion of internal indignation into an external manifestation of the social actors? The argument has three parts, one structural and two conjectural. In the first, we map the main variables determining the passage from indignation to criticism. In the second, we show how a series of historical transformations in the scarcity/abundance interplay of the elements in this matrix have made opinion and criticism more available and, in the continued evolution of their presence in contemporary life, a core mode of sociability. In the third part, we analyze three consequences of this movement: the trivialization of criticism, conflict, and the devaluation of objective truth.

Keywords

Actualité politique;
Critique;
Indignation;
Social media;
Imperative of opinion.

O IMPERATIVO DA OPINIÃO: UMA SOCIOLOGIA PRAGMÁTICA DA CRÍTICA NA ‘ATUALIDADE POLÍTICA’

Resumo

O objetivo deste ensaio é analisar, com base na ideia de *atualidade política*, a economia da opinião e da crítica nas sociedades contemporâneas. Com base em várias pesquisas oriundas de nossos trabalhos e em uma reflexão sobre a sociologia pragmática da crítica, enfrentamos uma pergunta fundamental: quais os determinantes da “passagem ao ato” de uma crítica, isto é, da conversão da indignação interna em manifestação externa aos atores sociais? O argumento é subdividido em três partes, uma estrutural e duas conjunturais. Na primeira, mapeamos as principais variáveis determinantes da passagem da indignação à crítica. Na segunda, mostramos que uma série de transformações históricas no jogo escassez/abundância dos elementos daquela matriz tornou a opinião e a crítica mais disponíveis e, na continuidade de sua presença na vida contemporânea, um modo privilegiado de sociabilidade. Na terceira parte, analisamos três consequências desse movimento: a banalização da crítica, o conflito e a desvalorização da verdade objetiva.

Palavras-chave

Atualidade política;
Crítica;
Indignação;
Redes sociais;
Imperativo da opinião.