

REVIEW ESSAY

“WHAT IS TO BE DONE?”

Insights and Blind-spots from Cultural Political Economy(s)

BY

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Paul Du Gay and Glenn Morgan (eds), *New Spirits of Capitalism? Crises, Justifications, and Dynamics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xi + 328 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-959534-1 hardback, [£...]

Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Putting Culture in its Place in Political Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton (MA): Edward Elgar, 2013. Xviii + 569 pp. ISBN 978-1-84542-036-9, [£...]

1. Where are we? The need for and contributions of cultural political economy

As 2015 begins, the sense of a world in the midst of multiple overlapping systemic crises remains palpable and more intense and foreboding than ever. In critical realist parlance, underlying tendencies have erupted into the actual and it seems once again that we are entering a ‘new world’. The assassination attacks in Paris, the gruesome beheadings and burnings by ISIS, the election of Syriza in Greece with no accommodation still from Germany and the ECB, flagrant political executions in Russia and Argentina, tightening clampdowns on free speech in China, another round of egregious wrongdoing brought to light in British banks...² These events feel more than familiar, alive somehow with a deeper shifting of social tectonics not present through the period from the eruption of the Great Financial Crisis of 2008 onwards, that speaks almost of entering a new ‘phase’ in the global crises.

What is clear, certainly, is that the present is a moment that is crying out for a new paradigm of understanding of political economy, which lies at the source of so many (if not all) of these crises. We need a new political economy that is more insightful in its analysis of the present and the aetiologies of these various crises, that can incorporate the growing range of issues that (it is increasingly clear) are inseparable from issues of political economy (and *vice versa*) and so that can offer more productive ways forward out of the present mess. In short, global crises are calling for new knowledge, and a new political economy is a key element of this broader paradigm shift.

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² The untimely death of my colleague and friend Ulrich Beck on New Year’s Day – and so soon after that of Roy Bhaskar too – has given these events a further, if more personal, hue regarding a new stage in the emergence of a ‘new world’ to which both were so insightfully and whole-heartedly dedicated, to the very end, but which it has proven they were unable to witness. This essay is dedicated to their memory, with enormous gratitude.

Step forward the broad field of ‘cultural political economy’, therefore, which in various incarnations has begun amongst the most important of theoretical syntheses underlying such a project; namely between a (largely critical and Marx-inspired) political economy and a ‘cultural’ realm of hermeneutics, meaning, language, communication etc... Inspired by a variety of specific problematics – including the immanent criticism of evident gaps in explanatory power, phenomenologically compelling description or political correctness of existing approaches – and starting from at least the late 1990s, cultural political economy has developed just in time to be ready-to-hand for precisely this moment of crisis understanding and crisis-induced-demands for new knowledge. If in every crisis there is opportunity, is this the moment for cultural political economy?

This review makes no claim to be surveying the whole field, but we do consider two leading candidates within the field: the pragmatist ‘sociology of criticism’ of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, most influentially developed (notably *before* the emergence of the global crises) in their best-selling work ‘New Spirit of Capitalism’;³ and the ‘cultural political economy’ (CPE - henceforth this acronym refers specifically to this work) of Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop. Specifically, we consider the post-crisis reflections and responses to the former in Paul Du Gay and Glenn Morgan’s edited volume ‘New Spirits of Capitalism?’ (*NScC?*); and the substantial 500+ page second volume of the CPE project, in which, having gone ‘Beyond the Regulation Approach’ in a previous volume,⁴ its positive formulation is most strongly developed to date, ‘Towards a Cultural Political Economy’.⁵

2. *Sociology of criticism and critique of cultural political economy*

Both volumes, and both projects (not the same thing, as the former volume includes much critical commentary) in turn, cover vast intellectual terrain that cannot possibly be faithfully reviewed, no matter the length of the essay. We focus here, therefore, only on key strengths and weaknesses in both, specifically brought out by reading them together and in the broader context of the current conjuncture.

We must start, nevertheless, with a brief description of both projects. For Boltanski & Chiapello the cultural political economy project (not a terminology they use incidentally) hails from a dissatisfaction with the canons of critical French sociology in which they were schooled, notably Bourdieu, specifically regarding the tendency of this work to render the every-day social actor a dupe of ‘bigger’ social forces. Turning instead, therefore, to the pragmatics of everyday reasoning, they examined how reasoning and argument, and specifically diverse forms of justification, are brought to bear in the inescapably inchoate arena of everyday decision-making, marked by an irreducible uncertainty. Determined not to lose sight of the broader context of powerful social structures, and of ‘capitalism’, however, this shift of perspective is used to explore, in particular, the performance of substantive logics of criticism. This is thus a shift from a ‘critical sociology’ to a pragmatist ‘sociology of criticism’.

Yet there is also a secondary motivation of this work encountered at this point: namely to explore how politically powerful forms of critique of capitalism can be (and have ended up being) absorbed by capitalist social forces, or rather utilised as forces of the rejuvenation and re-legitimation (always only ever temporary) of continued capitalist accumulation. Specifically, these forms of critique are said to transform the ‘spirit of capitalism’, drawing on allusions to Weber. Written at the very

³ Boltanski & Chiapello 2007, henceforth *NEC*.

⁴ Jessop & Sum 2006.

⁵ Sum & Jessop 2013, henceforth *TCPE*.

height of a neoliberal social dominance, but before the current crises, *NEC* describes how the countercultural critiques of the 1960s and '70s came to inform what emerged subsequently as the dominant management discourses of the 1980s and '90s, in a classic example of an anti-capitalist-critique-turned-capitalist-manifesto. Though translated into English only much later, the book received enormous adulation from the Left-leaning social sciences. As regards the present, then, Du Gay and Morgan's edited volume brings together work inspired and/or critical of *NEC*, including from both original authors (itself both inspired by and critical of *NEC*), with the invitation to think through how this perspective illuminates the present crises of neoliberalism.

For Sum & Jessop, by contrast, CPE is understood as a project firmly within a 'critical social science' - and explicitly critical realist - frame, but seeking to grapple with the significant opening of the theoretical imagination that decades of post-structuralist but not-Marx-incompatible criticism of political economy have wrought. Here, then, the explanatory starting point concerns the predicament of the enquiring intellect as it confronts a reality that is always too complicated, complex and variegated to capture faithfully in understanding. The result is the imperative of simplification, always done from the specifically situated perspective of a given agent, and where the resulting construal is as much a reflection of that agent's strategic goals, positioning and resources as of their knowledge.

'Some construals are more equal than others',⁶ however, in that, depending on one's strategically enabled or constrained positioning, *construals* can be more or less successfully (but never completely) transformed into social *constructions* by way of an evolutionary process involving social variegation, selection and retention. This thus sets up a social ontological overview from which it follows that all apparently 'material' processes are mediated and selected by way of these irreducible semiotic processes, while conversely, the latter are always mediated and constrained by the former. In short, therefore, this is a strategic and relational perspective in which moments of 'hard' political economy and 'soft' semiosis/ economic sociology must be analytically separated and never collapsed on each other, but equally must be explored in their conjunction. In other words, the challenge of CPE (thus defined) is to chart a course 'between Scylla and Charybdis',⁷ thereby illuminating the mutual ontological interplay of political economy and semiosis in the active and strategic emergence of cultural political economic settlements.

Jumping from this most abstract to a more concrete 'meso' level, then, the project takes shape in terms of exploring specifically how forms of semiosis and particular conjunctions of political economic (capitalist) relations have intercalated in the construction and crises of these hegemonic forms, drawing on methodologies of critical discourse analysis for the former and critical/Marxist post-regulation approach political economy for the latter; or in other terminology a synthesis of 'Foucault' and 'Gramsci', that privileges the emancipatory and critical social science thrust of the latter over the former.

Reading the two books together, it is indeed striking how complementary they are in many ways, even as their points of common reference, let alone direct and explicit cross-referencing of each other, are slight. Both approaches yield considerable insights, engender highly sophisticated, meticulous and politically- or morally-earnest (a compliment!) bodies of work that speak of intense care for their subjects and for the potential contribution of their work to broader social and political projects of human 'betterment'.

They are also strikingly similar in many concrete respects. Most obviously, both are explicit attempts at synthesis between approaches that take seriously, and on their own terms, the concerns

⁶ *TCPE*, 163.

⁷ *TCPE*, Ch.4.

of (broadly defined) critical political economy and (broadly defined) ‘culture’, albeit each with opposite polarities. Hence for Boltanski & Chiapello the priority is a pragmatist sociology of forms of critical reasoning that nevertheless does not lose touch with the contexts of capitalism, albeit read in post-Marxist terms; while for Sum & Jessop the priority is a revived critical social science based in Marxist (critique of) political economy, where this revitalisation happens precisely by taking seriously the diversity of concrete forms capitalism can take by incorporating semiosis into the heart of its analytical form. For both, therefore, a stand-out point of contact is French Regulation theory, and the key point that (ever-expanding) capitalist relations necessarily stand in permanent need of ever-renewed discourses of legitimation or else face system-wide rejection and consequent systemic crisis.

As such, however, both projects are also similar at the more abstract level of philosophical projects; and, indeed, it is also noticeable how strongly both projects explicitly deal with issues across both the substantive level of their empirical research and primary social concern and this more abstract level. In particular, both are clearly projects attempting the broader synthesis of a critical realism and a post-structuralist pragmatism, and thus, crucially, motivated by a felt *need* for this synthesis and a broad awareness of their being significant explanatory and/or ‘emancipatory’ loss in choosing only one such approach at the cost of total neglect of the other. For this reviewer, such an acknowledgement of the value of the ‘other’ approach, whichever one is ‘starting’ from, seems utterly appropriate - indeed, a pre-requisite today of any intellectual project in this field worth seriously entertaining. For if we are interested in how contemporary political economies, of “*knowledge societies*” especially, work we must attend to both their dominant framing by (structures of) relations of capitalist accumulation AND to the construction of new (techno-scientific) knowledges through which this process is mediated.⁸ The former calls for a critical realist approach, while a post-structuralist and constructivist approach has proven undeniably productive in deepening our understanding of the latter; concerns at the meso-level conditioning demands at the philosophical one.

This is clear in both projects and manifest from *their* own starting points. Hence, for Boltanski & Chiapello, a pragmatist approach is what offers insightful illumination into the actual processes and negotiations that people actually (have) go(ne) through in the fundamentally open, and always only ever temporary, construction of edifices of logics of justification - not getting the ‘right answer’ but constructing ways and means through which life can ‘go on’ ‘acceptably’. But today this is also and irreducibly life conditioned by the imperative of capitalist accumulation; and taking this into account demands at least some concession that this compulsive force is ‘real’ in some way - and, moreover, problematic. At the very least, therefore, a critical realism must have some presence in the Boltanski & Chiapello framework, however tacit and/or attenuated.

Conversely, for Sum & Jessop, their primary critical realist orientation manifests in their prioritisation of renewing the critique of political economy - but where the *raison d’être* of their specific project comes from the acknowledgement that the concrete twists and turns, and always temporary geo-historical settlements and fixes of capitalist accumulation, can only be understood by attending also to the issue of semiosis.

The two projects/volumes also are both crammed with insights, from the ‘grand theoretical’ (a term explicitly and very productively developed by Sum & Jessop) to the detailed. For this reviewer, however, three stood out especially: from Sum & Jessop, the broader conception of complex strategic relational systems in which political economy and semiosis, ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, are situated and indissolubly connected; from the Du Gay & Morgan volume, and particularly in the

⁸ Tyfield 2012.

chapters from Du Gay himself, the (for this reviewer) surprising significance of a reappraisal of Weber, rather than Marx or Polanyi, as the ‘canonical’ social theorist offering the most relevant insights into our current predicament; and, from Boltanski & Chiapello and reappraisals thereof, regarding the crucial work that anti-capitalist critique, and hence critical social science itself, does for the rejuvenation of capitalism (a matter of some heated controversy, as we shall see).

Indeed, across all three of these major points there appears to be something of a common thread, namely in the recognised imperative for particular attention to the inescapable limits of knowledge, its incompleteness and imperfectibility, what it can achieve, the extent to which it can possibly be ‘objective’ and per se ‘truthful’, etc... In short regarding the epistemological challenges posed by the immanent scientific study of science itself, by way of science & technology studies and/or the curiously (but tellingly) absent (or at least under-represented) figure of Foucault. Thus, Sum & Jessop’s work is, it seems, primarily motivated by the *political* implications and insights from this work for critical social science and its social ontology, viz. ‘how is the (social) world *really* structured?’, presenting the results of this attempted theoretical integration. Du Gay’s work in his jointly edited volume, meanwhile, draws on Weber to present a compelling critique of the dominant social epistemology of neoliberalism and its hugely destructive market-individualist Promethean optimism regarding the supposed capacity of the entrepreneurial self to remake the world as it wishes, with a specific focus on the costs for states and their bureaucracies. Here, then, a small-c conservative valuing of norms of ‘public service’ is presented as the corollary of a eupeptic scepticism regarding the capacity of individual knowers acting through untrammelled entrepreneurial self-interest to be able to manage issues of government effectively, and indeed, not disastrously, corruptly and/or destructively. Finally, Boltanski & Chiapello (and some, but not all, of the pieces in the Du Gay & Morgan volume) take up the challenges for the conception of critical social science itself, and its emancipatory thrust and self-definition, from the growing weight of evidence, in the literature and in historical experience, that knowledge does not, and more to the point *cannot*, play the role assigned to it by this epistemic-political project. For the inseparability and co-production of strategic power and new forms of knowledge effectively means that the task of perfecting critical social knowledge does not in fact offer what it claims – as a necessary if not sufficient step – regarding either its emancipatory ‘essence’ nor actual socio-political effect.

Read together, therefore, it emerges that the volumes are presenting different perspectives and aspects of a broader ontological-epistemological programme (if not actually ‘achieved’ synthesis). This reviewer understands this aggregation of insights in terms of a complex systems perspective, where the ‘stuff of the world’ not only is constituted as such complex (in the sense of non-linear and emergent, not merely ‘complicated’) and dynamic relational systems (and systems of systems) *but also and specifically as* intrinsically strategic, a-rational and normatively ambivalent power/knowledge relations and technologies that in turn condition further agency and emergence; and this includes the practices and institutions of knowledge production, ‘politics’ and government (in the broad Foucauldian sense). This seems to me to be a conception that is both epistemically compelling (affording significant critical explanatory power and insights of genealogical criticism) and strategically enabling, and the most promising outlines of an emerging reshaping of political economy and the social sciences more generally for the challenges of the 21st century. Moreover, in both cases, their evident ethical seriousness shines through not just in terms of the profundity and rigorousness of their respective analyses but also in what is evidently the primary motivation for both projects – namely to contribute not just to the accumulation of knowledge and ‘cleverness’ but to more just and equitable worlds. In short, both projects warrant considerable support and development. The rest of this essay will consider one argument as to how best to do this.

3. Differences, but Indicating Common Problems

As is clear from these different ways in which the irreducibly strategic and power relational nature of knowledge is incorporated in these various projects, however, the projects are also strikingly different in key respects - and, indeed, even opposing or complementary (depending on one's perspective). Moreover, these differences serve to highlight shortcomings in each, weaknesses and gaps addressed in the other, at least to a greater extent. And more importantly still, this comparison brings out problems shared across the projects, whereby the complementary insight of the 'other' remains less than a full and comprehensive response.

In particular, what emerges clearly from reading the two against each other is how their respective engagements with the insights of the limits of knowledge and its *strategic* nature are less than whole-hearted, but rather attempts to domesticate it in some ways according to the existing strictures and demands of the position already adopted. In particular, neither project sufficiently engages with the significance of power/knowledge *for their own projects* as opposed to as another, albeit key, insight that needs to be incorporated into the picture they paint of the world they are studying. Yet, precisely *as* self-consciously self-defined epistemic-political projects, where power/knowledge is genuinely acknowledged, both projects simply cannot go on as before.

This is true of self-consciously 'critical' (realist) and 'pragmatist' projects alike, the two registers of epistemic critical analysis, as the two perfectly exemplify. Whether the goal is to construct critical and realist explanations that enable emancipatory insight into the exploitative nature of capitalism, as contingent natural necessities, or to present deconstructive and deflating rich descriptions of the always-imperfectly negotiated challenges of everyday meaning-making in the context of political economic systems dependent upon constantly performed and renewed logics of justification; in both cases, acknowledging power/knowledge robs the analyst (and their readers) of any consolation that the epistemic work in itself will have the desired 'emancipatory' or 'disillusioning' effect. As such, power/knowledge demands that all epistemic projects, actively and in *practice*, seek their value and purpose outside and beyond themselves, and specifically by explicitly addressing and returning to the key *strategic* question - situated as we *all* are amidst complex, dynamic structures of power/knowledge relations - of 'what do I do now?'

When tested against this key question, however, it unfortunately appears that neither Boltanski & Chiapello's pragmatism (nor Boltanski's, again highly insightful, self-critical developments of his approach) nor Sum & Jessop's critical realism actually present much in the way of compelling answers to this question. In the former case, as several critical pieces in the *NSsC?* volume argue persuasively,⁹ the attempt to synthesise a pragmatist sociology of criticism with the specific issues of the logics of justification of capitalism has, if anything, almost the opposite to the desired effect. The stand-out lesson of *NEC* seems to be that effectively all forms of anti-capitalist critical argument end up merely being absorbed by and reviving capitalism. This is thus a counsel of despair, as well as an unwarranted presentation of capitalism as monolithic, infinitely flexible and, of course, unbeatable. In seeking to take capitalism seriously in its revival of a *critical* pragmatist sociology, therefore, this synthesis of (philosophical and meso-level) perspectives ends up actually achieving the opposite. "What do I do now?" thus can elicit only the thin gruel of 'formulate new critiques, but in full awareness they will serve capitalism better than the critical movement itself'.

Conversely, for Sum & Jessop, one would expect to look specifically in the more substantive and meso- level analyses both of crises' aetiologies and learning in, by and from crises *per se* (fascinating work, to be sure) and the illustrative CDA analyses of specific discursive-material conjunctures of the present for some advice regarding 'what next?' Yet the analytical gaze remains

⁹ E.g. Willmott 2013 and Parker 2013

firmly post hoc and explanatory in both cases, and indeed, sometimes denunciatory in tone rather than strictly critical in ways that – all statements to contrary notwithstanding – give the strong impression that *this* form of critique of capitalism – as opposed to a Marxian critique of political economy *without* the specific focus on semiosis and critical discourse analysis – sometimes takes a circular form of showing that a discourse or phenomenon presumed from the outset as bad is indeed bad. Again, therefore, the attempt to synthesize critical insights from the ‘other’ perspective end up paradoxically weakening, not strengthening, the critical thrust of the original position. To be sure, these chapters almost all end with valid and important comments regarding the intrinsically unclose-able nature of capitalist settlements, the capillary nature of power and the omnipresent possibility of resistance and counter-hegemony. But these abstract consolations are surely not enough, even notwithstanding the enormity of the volume and what it *does* meticulously, effortfully achieve. What is thus lacking, therefore, is attention to the inevitably messy and even sometimes morally ambiguous challenges and decisions of generating new knowledge of the world presented ‘here’ and ‘now’ to us – us *all*, both critical social scientists and everyday agents, including the explicitly pro-capitalist agents under investigation – as a *primarily strategic and not epistemic* challenge, in which power/knowledge is not a matter of concealing a truth but rather an inescapable predicament of trying to construct the emerging socio-political (and -natural) future in specific ways.

In both cases, therefore, these projects remain, in their own practice and implicit in their explicit goals of ‘getting the answer right’ about their chosen subject matter – substantively and/or theoretically, with all the sophistication on display in both cases –, wedded to a dualistic conception of knowledge vs. action-in-the-world that their *discussion* of power/knowledge goes beyond. The result, however, is that their laudable commitment to scholarship that aims to contribute to political programmes of social betterment can only be manifest in terms of what their knowledge contributes to the illumination of such a larger movement, i.e. as assessed on strictly epistemic criteria. Conceived on such terms, though, the most such epistemic projects can offer is to change the distal goal for which one is aiming to ‘get the answer right’, vis-à-vis from a positivist ‘for itself’ to a much broader critical gaze ‘for human emancipation’. What cannot be changed – and is not changed in these cases –, however, is the (self-) conception of epistemic projects *per se* as the progressive perfecting of knowledge and understanding; albeit perhaps self-consciously as fallible, iterative, never-ending and/or asymptotic approaches on ‘truth’, and as merely one step, but a necessary one, toward realization of their distal goal. In short, understanding the truth – or perhaps merely determinate negation of the socially-efficacious demi-real untruth – is conceived as a necessary, discrete and first step in an emancipatory project, for it *then* to be put into action and realized in various ways. And this separation is presupposed by all ‘critical’ projects, or else one is forced to abandon the possibility of realizing – at least, in cognitive understanding and in the first instance, *then* to be realized in practice and/or actuality – (a) truth that is *per se* emancipatory, which is the very mark of ‘critical’ social science.

Moreover, the specific problems both encounter arise directly from their continued attempt to base their synthesis of critical realist and pragmatist insights on primarily epistemic projects. For such a synthesis *cannot work* when thus framed. This could be explained in terms of the *ontological* natures of the epistemic resources that are, thus, their primary materials (a critical realist point, dependent upon being able to make such ‘realist’ statements). For, as alluded above, forms of political and substantive insight condition acceptable and appropriate forms of presupposed epistemological approach and these requirements mean that, insofar as they remain conducted at a purely epistemic level as *de facto* epistemic enterprises, ‘synthesis’ is an attempt to merge two *essentially* different perspectives. The result, thus, can only be the subsumption of one by the other, to the likely effect of violence on and distortion of *both*. Hence the *more* successful and sophisticated the *epistemic-level* synthesis of pragmatist (NB ≠ pragmatic) and critical realist

analyses, the *bigger* (and not as we may suppose when embarking on such a synthesis, the *lesser*) the problems, as we have seen.

In the case of Boltanski & Chiapello, this manifests in the combination of a pragmatist flat-ontology analysis of the actual logics of justification of capitalism, but one which, thereby identifying primarily with its epistemic position, *self-consciously* takes capitalism as given and unquestionable. The result is a critical project, seeking to rethink and re-energize emancipation, that ends in defeatism. Conversely, for Sum & Jessop the determination to incorporate all the insights regarding the strategic nature and limits of knowledge *back into* a grand theoretical overview with primarily critical explanatory aims necessarily leads only to a framework of increasing - daunting, even - sophistication and nuance, while focusing studiously on critical insights regarding the extent of the iniquity of and power asymmetries underlying contemporary social change rather than on strategic insights regarding what can be done about it.

What is key here, though, is that these criticisms arise precisely from the *insights* the two projects (and their reading together) provide. In short, the very complex strategic relational and productive power perspective that both are seeking to grapple with presents a challenge that is not only akin to an immanent critique of both positions, but is also one that is specifically challenging – indeed intensifying – at present. As regards the former, where the whole (socio-natural) world is a dynamic and complex systemic process in which strategic power/knowledge relations (and the power/knowledge technologies mediating and mediated by them) are primary loci and mediations of socio-technical and political change, it follows immediately that:

- (i) this is an irreducible predicament of *all* enterprises and agents;
- (ii) that the nature of this positioning is that, positively, strategic world-producing action and practice is an unshakeable imperative on everyone, while, negatively, the irreducible non-closure of the complex system realities, their relentless and unstoppable dynamism and the priority of the '*realrationalität*' of relational power over the '*rationalität*' of the (critical) intellect¹⁰ mean that the project of seeking to improve (social) reality, moving it in the 'right direction' by way of the 'necessary' first step of critical understanding and elucidation of cognizable truths that are *per se* emancipatory, must be abandoned;
- (iii) that this includes the ontological reality of knowledge (practices) too, which emerge and *make sense* (attain intelligibility and purchase) only when thus positioned as strategic power/knowledge enterprises of greater or lesser truth-*constructing* success. Hence these too are (radically) imperfectible, but intelligible in both their opening and their 'closing' only in the context of strategic projects and to be evaluated primarily in terms of their strategic world-building effects, *not* in their own terms of rational coherence etc...(what may be called a 'strategic realism');
- (iv) that therefore, against projects even *aspiring* to self-substantiality and totalized closure as some distant ideal, there is *no possibility* of ever getting (social) reality 'right' – to align it with 'truth' –, even asymptotically or approximately, through the relentless effort and untiring vigilance of the critical intellect.

In short, and to repeat, precisely the ontological insights that have been yielded to date by the imaginative synthesis of the critical insights of pragmatist and critical realist work lead to an ontology and associated epistemology that *cannot but* significantly and conclusively deflate the pretensions of the critical intellect and its ambitions for (conclusively informing) world-righting socio-political action. For it becomes painfully (or perhaps liberatingly) clear from this ontological perspective that the critical intellect – of both stripes, pragmatist and critical realist – is, on its own terms, at best deluded (and so misleading) as to its own importance in projects of the human quest

¹⁰ Flyvbjerg 1998.

for freedom from suffering. Conversely, situated within a power/knowledge perspective, it may become a useful strategic instrument in never-ending projects of world-building. But here, the priority of the question ‘what do I *do* now?’, or more specifically, ‘what *strategic action* does this analysis illuminate?’, can be seen anew and as even more pressing, being the primary question *for* knowledge, including critical knowledge. This thus initiates a shift in approach to one of *phronesis* or situated power/knowledge-aware practical wisdom, in which both the power/knowledge attentiveness and associated dynamic relationality *and* the prioritization of strategic, practical intervention warrant emphasis.¹¹

To be sure, both critical pragmatist deconstruction or disillusionment and critical realist explanatory insight can significantly contribute to any such project, i.e. can serve precisely as key sources of strategic insight and strategic advantage. But this *strategic* contribution is not a secondary matter, as each would tend to see it vis-à-vis their epistemic-political illumination of socio-political ‘truths’, but their *primary* value. And they will be of much greater strategic value the more they are explicitly framed as such; while, vice versa, failing to be thus reframed may serve significantly to *reduce* their strategic, and indeed thereby even their epistemic, value. In short, putting the *critical intellect* ‘in its place’, to misquote Sum & Jessop, seems a much more appropriate and far-reaching conclusion than simply doing so with ‘culture’.

4. What do I do NOW?

So much, then, for the ‘immanent’ criticism. But what makes this point even more crucial and pressing, if not frankly undodgeable – and note, on *strategic* grounds, i.e. now, in this specific socio-historical juncture, in terms of what cultural political economy needs strategically to be doing etc... – is that strategic insight is specifically crucial in moments of systemic crisis and transition. In other words, in moments when the very constitution of entire social systems are in the process of profound qualitative change, it is savvy (and preferably ethical or ‘virtuous’!) strategic action that will succeed in dominating the shaping of the emerging system. Of course, this is precisely such a moment. But in such moments, the critical, *post hoc* intellect (whether explanatory or deconstructive) and its firmly backward-facing and rational-critical gaze is not just looking elsewhere; far worse than this, it is claiming for itself the moniker of politically engaged epistemic project while systematically refusing to engage in any strategic (including strategic-epistemic) action that has any hope of capitalizing upon this moment of intense opportunity and profound opening, or even of strategically girding and guiding ethical forces through the destructive whirlwinds of the crises.

As such, to the extent it engages with issues of present political direction, the break between *post hoc* explanatory sophistication and an untheorized future-oriented strategic action conditions – or rather, lets off the hook – the propagation of ‘arbitrary, rationalistic and willed’ (a great phrase from Gramsci, cited by Sum & Jessop) visions of ‘alternatives’ (see e.g., disappointingly, much of the ‘degrowth’ literature). Moreover and much worse, as such it also wilfully concedes the strategic battlefield. For other social forces will have significantly less qualms about rational or normative coherence, and will be *enabled* as such. And in contexts in which ‘common-sense’ remains utterly conditioned by logics of capitalist individualism, these other social forces will be likewise systematically conditioned by understandings of the world that are far indeed from the insights of a

¹¹ Flyvbjerg et al. 2013. I note (with thanks to Mervyn Hartwig) that Bhaskar (2008) thematises ‘phronesis’ in *Dialectic*. This is not the place to compare these discussions. But the development of the term by Flyvbjerg and colleagues remains significantly different to Bhaskar’s use of the term – and in ways that again resonate with the difference between projects prioritizing building edifices of understanding as against projects focused primarily on strategic intervention, as discussed here.

critical analysis of capitalism. In these circumstances, then, self-consciously limiting themselves to critical illumination of the (recent) past is not merely rationally self-defeating but *normatively and politically wrong*, systematically offering no strategic guidance for such mobilization at the very moment of its greatest need and most profound opportunity. While certainly not the case for the books under review, it also too easy when focused on a (difficult, laborious, protracted) project of critical explanatory knowledge – as I know myself with discomfort – to become fascinated by the promises of the critical intellect as an enterprise that in itself supposedly fulfils one’s political responsibilities, as if illumination in itself will ‘emancipate’.

To emphasise this point, let us briefly consider how (an emphasis on) critical and ‘complex’ explanation can be a positive impediment, a problem, and is not always what (critical, political-) epistemic projects should be primarily dedicated to developing. A vivid example of this for me arose at the beginning of this year, in the wake of the Paris murder rampage. This was, understandably, immediately followed in the mainstream press-cum-social media by the charge and counter-charge of the extent to which the assault was indicative of a broader incompatibility between Islam *per se* and Western liberal democratic freedom of speech, and the extent to which all Muslims should or should not be held in some way responsible for the killings. Of course, this in turn elicited statements from Muslim voices condemning the killings and denouncing any connection between them and Islam, affirming the latter as a religion of peace. Others, perhaps carefully making the distinction between explanation and justification, pointed also to the continuing killings, on much greater scale, of (perhaps fellow) Muslims across west and central Asia by Western governments. Cutting through all this discussion, then, the *Guardian*’s Gary Younge wrote a strong piece about the need for a more complex explanation to get to grips with the source and meaning of the killings.¹² He unimpeachably pointed out the utter failure of all explanations presented in clear black-and-white terms properly to come to grips with what, in effectively critical realist terms, is the underlying reality that the events reveal and to which we now must respond. More importantly, he argued that only such a complex explanation can avoid pouring further fuel onto the fires of hatred, extremist fundamentalism and mistrust in cycles of recrimination and counter-blame.

So far, so good. But what the Paris killings and the popular response also show is that critical explanation of events, no matter how complex, also misses a great deal – both epistemically, as a matter of referential fidelity, and politically – and in ways that are now of such consequence that they must be addressed. In particular, the underlying premise of calls for ‘more complex explanation’ is generally an appeal to calm reason and a return to our senses, even if this means confronting uncomfortable truths on all sides. This is a sensible move. In 2001, for instance, after 9/11 it was clear that the voices ramping up the analysis of the attacks into a ‘clash of civilizations’ and an ‘axis of evil’ were precisely engaged in self-serving and self-legitimizing rhetorical projects that could only serve to exacerbate the situation: precisely the goal for war-mongering neo-conservatives, for instance, but also, to a great many others, manifestly self-defeating in terms of accepting the terms of the engagement with (what we then called) Al Qaeda that *they* presented. Far better all round to have a ‘complex explanation’ of the situation and then engage with a group who have styled themselves ‘our’ enemy on ‘*our*’ terms, while preserving the rights of Muslims in our countries and harmonious inter-cultural relations.

In 2015, however, now half a generation into a ‘global war on terror’ seemingly without end and, to the contrary, one that is mutating and radicalizing, such calls for calm reason seem not only increasingly hollow, themselves ringing fraught and desperate, but also actively fail to engage with the extent to which the (real!) strategic landscape of public mood has changed in the interim and

¹² Younge 2015.

now is no longer prepped and ready for ‘calm reasoning’ but rather for fearful and/or defiant confrontation. Moreover, in these circumstances, calls for ‘complex explanation’ – *insofar as it is per se presented as the acme of the reasonable political way forward* – will not only fall on increasingly deaf ears (like calling for calm in a stampede), but, given this changed real context, *legitimately and rationally* so (again like *ignoring* the call for calm in a stampede and running for your life). For the very preconditions of critical explanation *as* the necessary and primary contribution of ‘thought’ to progressive political praxis no longer hold: notably a relative stability in socio-political and every-day life and the roles and forms of knowledge, reasoning and cultural meaning in that system; a diminution of the role played by strong popular emotion, bullet-headed defiance etc.. in the (again, real) trajectory of social change, precisely because new forms of reasoning have emerged that are (perhaps increasingly) capable of ‘normal’ government and crisis management; and hence a basis for how knowledge reflecting critically on itself can both make genuine political contributions and, mistakenly but persuasively, increasingly see itself *as* politics.

Conversely, in moments *not* of relative systemic (meta-)stability but of active, ongoing and profound change, it is clear that the primary political question is not ‘*why* has this happened?’ so we can hold the political system to account and seek to change it, but the much more challenging, productive and Dionysian question of ‘what system can be forged from this conjuncture and *how*?’ In short, in such moments the systemic dependence of the legitimacy of given forms of epistemic criteria for rational thought on ontologically prior, but generally tacitly presupposed, *strategic and world-productive-power-relational* concerns becomes inescapable because the socio-political stability on which the pretences of (critical) reason *as* politics are collapsing.

To be sure, where explicitly reframed as a necessary moment in a broader *strategic* project (of ‘what do I do now, given this predicament?’), critical explanation remains essential; one must certainly still not lose one’s head even as you run with that proverbial stampede, as much remains at stake and possible in terms of better or worse concrete outcomes. But note how its legitimacy, both epistemic and political, hinges on *its* strategic contribution and *not* primarily (let alone entirely) on its *own* criteria of evaluation (*viz.* explanatory power etc...). This is so even as the opposite continues to hold, *viz.* its strategic contribution is in part a matter of its explanatory power; but ‘here’ and ‘now’ to ‘these’ people facing ‘this’ predicament, not objectively and in itself. In short, without this radical reframing, the contribution(s) of the critical intellect are actually *wrong*.

Moreover, were this not enough, the current system crisis – or more properly overlapping crises of systems and system of systems and of their *crisis management*¹³ – means that, quite literally, the whole world is at stake as never before. Whether expressed in discourses of planetary boundaries, Anthropocene, cosmopolitization and global risk society, imminent post-human singularity etc... it is manifestly clear that the challenge that we (and cultural political economies) are faced with – now, here – is not just one of political economic, or even political economic-cum-cultural political, crisis (on many different scales, global, regional, national, local...); but one also of ‘nature’ and of planetary extent, or more accurately of the prevailing socio-natural relations, including especially the *forms of power/knowledge technologies* through which they are mediated and their *innovation*. Acknowledging this – and again in *practice*, in a way that incorporates this into the core of the problematic to be worked with – however, again demands that the critical intellect simply holds up its hands in defeat, at least insofar as it continues to demand for itself the pre-eminent epistemic contribution to progressive political projects. For whether it is the complexity of socio-natural relations, and their global-local diversity, or the complexity of the geographical specificity and cosmopolitized hybridity of socio-economies and their distinctive forms of knowledge and innovation, it is clear that the ‘world’ the critical intellect is now trying to encompass massively

¹³ TCPE, 398.

exceeds its capacities. Moreover, it is clear that the predicament we are faced with is one in which we must take responsibility for the ‘world’ even as we have no chance of coming anywhere *close* to ‘fully’ understanding it – not beforehand, not now, not ever. Knowledge, in short, cannot and will not deliver emancipation, and this includes *critical* knowledge that is explicitly oriented beyond itself to projects of praxis that are in turn oriented to concrete ends apparently illuminated by critical knowledge.

How, then, can the critical intellect respond to this predicament? The most productive route is for it to concede defeat of a kind and allow other conceptions to emerge that resituate and depose it from its self-appointed throne. For this can yet re-dignify the critical intellect with a diminished but crucial role in a broader project of ‘meliorist’ social and personal practice. In short, the ‘problem field’ that contemporary progressive politics is confronted with is one in which the very discourse of emancipation by way of a necessary step of critical knowledge (whether critical realist or pragmatist) must not only be abandoned as not fit for purpose, but is a *positive impediment* that must be shed.

5. So... what DO I do now?

Of course, to avoid being hoist by my own petard, it is incumbent upon me now to present some response to precisely the key question I have outlined. What is to be done, then? What strategically in this moment is a ‘way forward’? And whence these alternative conceptions?

In this (not so!) brief review, it is not possible for me to summarize clearly my own response, though this is a project I am in the process of completing elsewhere. What follows is thus a potted summary of the fuller argument to come.¹⁴ But a few key points can certainly be made here.

First, regarding the new role of science, including critical social science, I can do no better than Büscher’s succinct summary of this point, thus:

“A deeper understanding and conceptualisation of complex dynamic systems is not enough. Indeed, it is problematic to assume that ‘real’ understanding and ‘diagnosis’ is a possible and necessary precondition for acting in and on such systems in ways that can help people ‘design’ them better. Science, technology, natural, material, economic processes, human practice are distributed, mobile, entangled, emergent phenomena. Rather than assume that thorough ‘diagnosis’ is a precondition for intelligent action in and on such systems it is more useful to consider how diagnostic work can be done through and as part of action.... 21st Century scientists need to be able to mobilise knowledge for intelligent, circumspect, prudent action on shifting ground. The role of 21st Century scholars should be to help societies to expose those who need to understand the system to as far and wide as possible perceptual access to the systems’ operation and reverberations whilst being embedded in and acting on the system.”¹⁵

Secondly, in terms of substantive focus of the social sciences, and indeed ‘techno-science’ more generally, the broad ontological vision outlined above of dynamic complex power/knowledge systems suggests two key points: first, that processes of ‘knowledge production’, research and innovation are key windows into the ongoing process of world-making and, crucially, for insights regarding what world is currently being – and *could* be – strategically constituted amidst the ‘world crises’.¹⁶ Moreover, with its gaze firmly oriented on this explicitly strategic landscape AND seeing itself as inescapably *within* this landscape, this analysis of current and currently-changing

¹⁴ Tyfield Forthcoming.

¹⁵ Büscher (n.d.)

¹⁶ Tyfield 2014

knowledge/power technologies must reconceptualize *its* purpose too as one of working with and generating new knowledge/power technologies that serve broader, ‘public’ and ‘knowledge democracy’ purposes.¹⁷ A particularly productive line of development in this respect, and for critical realist work more generally, is to align with the ‘real social science’ movement and its call for a revitalization of *phronesis*, or situated practical and power-aware strategic wisdom, as the primary epistemic virtue, as against both the more familiar forms of *episteme* and *techne*.¹⁸ In this way, therefore, sciences, including critical social science, actively take advantage of the limited but not insignificant strategic privileges they have for genuine intervention in politics – a (global and local) politics, moreover, in which issues of ‘knowledge’ are increasingly central – rather than cleaving to a model of critical thinking and ‘praxis’ that offers little in this moment of potentially exceptional world-making opportunities and world-risking dangers.

Thirdly, ongoing work in which this reviewer is engaged substantively attending to current processes of innovation, and particularly innovation attempting to respond to – and implicated in – the ‘world crises’, reveals a key strategic dynamic that is increasingly dominating the construction of a ‘new world’ in and through the crisis and demise of the ‘old’. This dynamic is one described previously by Foucault regarding prior system transitions in (and initiating) the Modern era; namely of the positive feedbacks amongst newly enabled forms of (particularly individual) liberty and autonomy on the one hand, and intense collective fears and ontological anxieties about system existential ‘security threats’ on the other. The interplay of these dynamics is complex and multifaceted – and too complex to explain in detail here. But the key point is that both ‘liberty’ and ‘security’ must be understood *not* as abstract principles engaged in some sort of Platonic philosophical wrestle towards equilibrium of the legitimate concerns of each; but rather as shorthand for powerful and profoundly dynamic world-productive forces that feed off each other. Indeed these forces are ‘powerful’ precisely in their efficacy at mediating, and being mediated by, self-reinforcing practices of ‘innovating’ new power/knowledge technologies, social relations, institutions, subjectivities and moral economies; i.e. in their dynamics of strategic relational world-producing and system-shaping.

Looked at through this lens, the world crisis reveals a completely different picture of ‘where we are’ and ‘what is happening’... and thus of ‘what should we do now?’ The daily headlines tell of deepening system crisis and increasing paralysis. The incumbent (ecologically-dominant conditions within) systems continue to attempt to deploy their familiar forms of crisis management – programmes that simply exacerbate the problems – AND the emergence of a normatively desirable alternative remains despairingly slow. But studying the ongoing construction of ‘future worlds’ through this lens reveals indeed the embryonic form of a new and dramatically qualitatively altered system (of systems). This emerging system, however, is profoundly normatively ambivalent and barely resembles the more utopian and Left-wing hopes that are currently proliferating. In particular, this ‘liberalism 2.0’ or ‘complexity liberalism’ manifests serious and significant efforts to tackle the most threatening aspects of the current crises. This would include low-carbon transitions, regulated global finance and new forms and institutions of ‘cosmopolitan’ geopolitics as well as, more profoundly, the emergence of new forms of government (in the Foucauldian sense) of techno-science and innovation that are responsive to the fundamental challenges of dynamic complex systems. Yet these undeniably essential ‘advances’ also go hand-in-hand with new and newly legitimated forms of inequality that are all the more egregious for the self-righteousness of their complex ‘scientific’ defence, new systemic and collectively policed paranoias and self-reinforcing social exclusions, and possibly worsening environmental risks for the global majority. In short, they are irreducibly still within *and driven by* – hence ontologically inseparable from – a renewal and re-settlement of global capitalism; albeit, of course, itself only a temporary one. This is the case not

¹⁷ Cf Leach et al. 2010; Stirling 2010.

¹⁸ Flyvbjerg et al. 2013.

least because of the utter domination of the key world-producing forces of *innovation* by capital vs. labour and their effectively *total* neglect by self-styled radical Left-wing ‘alternatives’.¹⁹

Understood in strategic relational and complex systemic terms, however, this currently emerging future is also far from monolithic and, to the contrary, presents enormous strategic opportunities for a more ‘progressive’ system. But this is so *only insofar* as the Left is prepared to engage with the profound rethinking of its epistemic-political self-conception described above; ironically in ways that parallel the rethinking of the epistemological presuppositions of classical liberalism 80+ years ago as neoliberalism was beginning to be formulated in the moment of its political nadir.²⁰ For so long as it remains wedded to the familiar consolations of ‘emancipatory critique’, the Left will continue to concede the strategic initiative precisely to the far-from-dead – indeed, just emerging, really, across the majority world with their burgeoning ‘middle classes’ – forces of capitalist individualism. This epistemic reorientation is the *immanent* step of the critical and realist spirit that is now emerging in this moment of global crisis of globalizing power/knowledge systems.

6. *What do I do now?*

This leads, however, to one final point – that could possibly be understood as resonating with meta-reality, but in ways not examined here. The priority for ‘critical’ forces in its reorientation to strategic, rather than explanatory/deconstructive, engagement with the present is a shift in primary focus of its moral gaze and purpose from the ‘objects’ of society or knowledge to the *self* (albeit *in* the world). For insofar as the latter remains, at best, secondary and thus unchallenged, the entire project of critical thought remains wedded – in practice, whatever its explicit pronounced position – to a conception of the ‘problem’ lying in the ‘object’ (whether this is the ‘world’, knowledge of it, or both), which is therefore *necessarily* to be ‘corrected’ by effortful, critical work and always ‘in due course’, *after* the thinking. Yet this is precisely to reaffirm the nature of the whole enterprise in ways that *cannot* reorient to a phronetic engagement of (critical) knowledge production with and *within* the dynamic strategic landscape of the rolling present; instead sending the critical scholar and activist back to the library and the committee room for literally endless and fissiparous abstract positioning and planning of the never-arriving future.

Conversely, attending to the central question of ‘what do *I* do now?’ demands finally that one incorporates the crucial but (through Modernity) systemically overlooked dimension – and thereby systematically *built up*, hence the given predicament of (late) modern selves, including critical scholars like me – of the ‘I’ thus situated; the ‘I’ presented with this strategic, practical and ethical predicament and *doing* the thinking/doing. And this is a move that cannot be done *in* thought by the critical intellect, but only by the real mind/body (and indeed selves *really and irreducibly* technosocio-naturally situated and mediated). For the latter certainly incorporates the former, but the former systematically aims to its own self-subsistence and completion in thought, denying its manifest dependence on the latter. It also thereby claims it *is* the self, rendering the self without particularity or substance, and so directing the gaze consistently away from itself back onto the ‘object’, even as it remains in practice the most important locus producing contemporary socio-natural worlds. As this entire confection – this problematic situatedness – is the product of the thinking (suffering, socio-technical, strategic) *being*, however, it is by reorienting our gaze to this broader self – and explicitly as *not* one’s (irreducible) critical cognition – that one can then allow the incremental but spontaneous emergence of realizations that may, in turn, afford a synthesis *in practice* of critical insights and perspectives, such as critical realism and deconstructive pragmatism, that are intrinsically incompatible *in thought* but equally compelling. But here, then, the synthesis of critical insights is not *achieved in thought* nor even first and foremost *pursued in*

¹⁹ See e.g. Lanchester 2015 and Lanier 2013, and Kallis 2015 respectively.

²⁰ Mirowski & Plehwe 2011

that particular realm of human action. Or, to put it differently, the unity of theory and practice is not achieved in practice *after first* being achieved (even provisionally) in theory; it happens *only ever* in practice (of a concrete sociotechnical person), and hence according to *criteria* of practical, strategic, perpetually changing and lived coherence, not a durable and conclusive cognitive coherence that is somehow subsequently realized in practice.

Moreover, turning the (critical) gaze on one's own experience – and as a daily practice and ongoing process in the world through the cultivation of virtues, as in practices of mindfulness not just (endless cycles of) epistemic 'reflexivity' – thus: inevitably brings attention to what is the primary and most vivid and affective manifestation of the lived domain of *being*, which is what the critical scholar *really* wants to change; thereby inescapably, if slowly, reorients and resituates (undeniably crucial) *practices* of (critical) knowledge generation within their broader and primary goals in terms of what the scholar is actually *doing*; cultivates awareness and concern²¹ for the changing complex systemic and strategic reality in which the critical scholar *actually lives*, as opposed to that which s/he conjures for themselves in their comfort of their writings; and, crucially, manifests broader virtues, built upon a deepening appreciation of interdependence and care,²² imperfectability and constant change, that colour one's reorientation from epistemic to strategic enterprise, so that this is not merely a shift to an ethically desiccated and self-serving opportunism.

Finally, but by no means least, in the age of the Anthropocene and the global imperative of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitical sensitivity, when human knowledges (techno-sciences and socio-technical interventions) have propelled themselves to a predicament in which it appears increasingly 'common sense', if still an insupportable and misconceived burden, that they are literally responsible for the world, this becomes an urgent ethical imperative.²³ For only by taking such responsibility for the self – the absent and morally and ontologically unchallengeable puppet-master of the Modern era, but also the primary locus of our default ontological commitments (of substantial and perfectible things) that are both profoundly held and lived, not merely thought, *and* fallacious – does humanity ultimately have any hope of not only achieving 'living together well' (with each other and with 'nature') but also of challenging the primary driver of the world crises to which the insatiable self – including and bolstered by its critical intellect – has led us.

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²¹ Sayer 2011

²² Groves 2012

²³ Grinbaum and Groves 2014

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