ENRICHMENT

A Critique of Commodities

Luc Boltanski
Arnaud Esquerre

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For Dominique

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Translated by
Catherine Porter

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Translator’s Note

This translation (excluding the Appendix) was prepared in close collaboration with the authors, whom I thank for their endless patience in responding to my questions. The English-language text includes some updated statistics, some information added for the benefit of anglophone readers, and a small number of corrections to the original. All translations from the French not otherwise credited to a named or unnamed translator are my own.

Foreword

Charles Sabel

Sociology is at its most instructive and broadly useful when it struggles to make sense of the relation between the large structures that constrain our behavior by defining markets and institutions and the way our practical, everyday understandings of justice and fairness can both reproduce and challenge, even transform, those constraints. Sociology is at its most daring and self-sacrificing when, going further, it attempts to understand this relation with both the structures and the practical criteria of judgment in motion – when, in other words, it attempts to combine the macro- and micro-sociology of the present to bring together two terms whose poverty, especially in combination, already hints at the inevitability of partial failure. No one has pursued this audacious and invaluable program more masterfully than Luc Boltanski. Beginning with *Les Cadres* (1982), and passing through *On Justification* (2006), with Laurent Thévenot, *On Critique* (2011) and *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2018), with Eve Chiapello, to *Enrichment* (2020), with Arnaud Esquerre, translated here, he and his co-authors have produced an extraordinary, analytically innovative chronicle of the relentless changes in contemporary capitalism. Reading the present work together with its immediate predecessor may serve to convey the promise yet also some potential limits of this approach as the continuing transformation of capitalism verges on crisis.

The New Spirit of Capitalism looked ahead to the dissolution of the bureaucratic rigidity of Fordist mass production, then well underway. The firm has been replaced as the unit of organization by the project group: a team assembled, ad hoc, under the guidance and inspiration of a managerleader to respond to the needs of a customer. As markets shift, teams are recombined; careers are made by acquiring in each team enough expertise and experience to be recruited to the next. Together the shifting collaborations of teams and the circulation of workers yields a networked economy with open boundaries. Those who don’t qualify for entrance or promotion have no function or place in this reticular capitalism. They are excluded.

But these emergent structures are deeply ambivalent judged from the vantage point of the “projective city,” as Boltanski and Chiapello (adapting the general term developed in Boltanski’s earlier collaboration with Thévenot) call the model of justice particular to the “neo-management” of flexibility. The variant, like all such models, links criteria for judging the fairness of individual transactions that we reflexively invoke in deciding to make an exchange and judgments about compatibility of the actions of the powerful with the foundations of our social and political order. The capitalism of projects disarms the first kind of critique, not least because it responds to familiar objections to wage labor. Thus the spontaneous creativity of the project team and the prospect of a career of ceaseless exploration offer possibilities for self-actualization excluded by the routines of Fordist hierarchies – possibilities previously best embodied in the artist’s flamboyant, disdainful rejection of capitalist regimentation. Questions about the fairness of hourly compensation are moot because project team members manage their own time. If they are exploited it is through self-exploitation. For such reasons, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, parts of the labor movement and the socialist government of François Mitterrand championed the new developments instead of rallying against the precariousness they create. In celebrating talent, energy, and daring as the conditions of success, networked capitalism damps criticism most insidiously in insinuating that the excluded, by their want of endowments and initiative, if not by their vices, have all but marginalized themselves.

But the powerful in the projective city are not only obligated to respect fair terms of trade. They must also use the influence and authority derived from trading to sustain the public goods or commons on which the whole political and social community depends; to use their power selfishly, only to augment it, is a breach of the social contract that constitutes a moral order. From this perspective, the neglect of the excluded is not a regrettable oversight or a resigned acknowledgment of the incorrigible inequities of life but a breach of fundamental obligations. It is here that the critique of structure finds a handhold, but no more and just barely. Boltanski and Chiapello are rightly circumspect about the form and strategy of opposition. They remind us that the work of criticism, like the labor of Sisyphus, no sooner done, must be done again.

The picture, cheerless enough, changes abruptly and for the grimmer in *Enrichment*. The rise of new competitors, beginning with China, has blocked the renewal of industrial capitalism in its historic heartlands. Some countries, above all France, with its primitive accumulation of cultural objects from the time of the Revolution and its continuing association with good taste, respond by abandoning Fordist manufacturing. Instead they turn to production of luxury and artisanal goods, enriched (in one sense of the book’s polysemous title) by narratives establishing their authenticity through connection to a past, or by pointing to some other exceptional feature that distinguishes them from standard specimens of their type. Again progressive reforms help undermine the solidarities they were intended to reinforce. In the period of the projective city, a set of laws designed to buttress traditional collective bargaining (the Lois Auroux), helped legitimate precarious employment by recognizing the (initially) exceptional cases in which it would be allowed. In the same way, the “cultural democracy” of Jack Lang, minister of culture under Mitterrand, was supposed to favor celebration of creativity outside the museums and opera houses. Now, combined, with more expressly self-interested legal changes, such as new protections in intellectual property law for forms of production variously associated with particular places, they help make the nation’s own history for France today what coal once was for Great Britain: fuel for capitalism.

The analytic focus of the book shifts accordingly. In the projective city, value was created in production. The morally inflected language of exchange was therefore shared among different categories of producers – social classes broadly conceived – and embedded in a model of justice including them in a single community. In the capitalism of enrichment, value is created through narratives that link only buyers and sellers. The rich tourists who come to France to consume its cultural and culinary patrimony *in situ* and the foreign elites who buy LVMH products at home (all enriched, in another of the title’s meanings, by the inequalities of financialization and globalization) share a language of evaluation with the maker of artisanal knives or the owner of a gallery offering collectable art. They can scarcely be said to constitute a community even among themselves, and still less with others in their respective home countries, from whom they are more and more distanced by their enrichment. The concept of the city has no place here; and, in its absence, critique loses even the tenuous handhold it had before. It is evoked only fleetingly. The state, having been complicit in the emergence of new forms of production, might be held to account for their consequences; the history of France belongs to all the French. Yet the authors suggest that they themselves find this insufficient. The book closes with a carefully qualified reflection on the potential for great disruptions – “when reality is confronted with major changes that put experience in direct contact with the world” – to call into question the master narratives that link our judgments of exchange and structure.

What has happened?

The first and most conspicuous explanation is simply that the facts have changed, foreclosing even the scant possibilities for critique and protest that remained until now. If Boltanski and Esquerre are silent on these subjects it is because there is nothing to say. This would bring their work into proximity with Wolfgang Streeck’s recent writing on the defeat of the left by a renascent capitalism that, having freed itself of the constraints of the postwar pact with social democracy, is running the table.

But there is despair and despair. However much Streeck may be personally outraged by this outcome, it costs him nothing theoretically to acknowledge it. In his kind of social science the relation among productive groups or social class was always a strategic game, usually resulting in one equilibrium or another. If there is an unexpected, decisive victory, the scientist-observer declares the game over. Sooner or later the players come to the same realization and retire with their payoffs.

Boltanski and his co-authors are not traveling so light. Enmeshed in the structures of their day, social actors play by the prevailing rules of the game and judge whether, in the large and in the small, they are fairly applied; the observer sees the interplay of rule following and revision and the changing motives for it. But the participants can’t simply turn off their faculties of judgment when judgment tells them outcomes are unacceptable. Those faculties are rooted in and expressive of our very humanity. To abandon them would be to sacrifice ourselves utterly, and for an unknown and unintelligible purpose. There is not a word in *Enrichment* to suggest that adversity will, or could, drive us to that. It is never game over with our honor, our dignity, our indignation, and our hope and imagination, even when we know we have lost.

Perhaps then it is the focus on commercial relations – the shared language of buyers and sellers – that explains the continuing commitment to the actors' moral agency and yet the absence of extended discussion of the potential resistance to the new form of capitalism. Attention to the relation between buyers and sellers might thus improve our understanding of novel sources of value and kinds of evaluation while diverting our gaze from the dissatisfaction of the broader population excluded from enriched exchange.

This observation points in turn to the risks of assuming, generally, a close relation between the immediate experience of evaluation and the generation of criticism of capitalist structures and, conversely, assuming that absent such a relation criticism is not possible. Under relatively stable conditions, such as the first postwar decades, there is good reason for these assumptions. For stability brings a shared understanding both of the public goods needed to maintain the productive and social order and of roughly who is owed what in exchange. But as capitalism, under the pressure of competition and protest, changes direction, these relations break down. Public goods are ill-defined and their provision contentious, as are the terms of exchange. It becomes difficult even to discern, as we see in the arc of Boltanski's work, who is participating in the economy and what it means to participate. The terms of exchange are too ambiguous and incomplete to suggest clues about the nature of the emerging structures, and the structures too fluid to point to reliable terms of exchange.

Under these circumstances an analytic response – the one pursued in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* and *Enrichment* – is to identify those terms and structures in each new configuration that are mutually supportive and, on the basis of this accord, to define new types of capitalism. The risk is that understandings based on emerging agreements will ignore, like the agreements themselves, the embryonic disaccord from which indignation and protest spring.

But facing the same ambiguity of terms and fluidity of structure, the actors' practical response is to look to allies outside the sphere of exchange to articulate new understandings that make sense – including moral sense – of the confusion. In a word, the actors turn to politics: the marketplace politics of politicians and parties but also to the backstage politics of institutional and legal reforms, successful and botched, and to the fumbling adjustment of established policies and programs to new conditions. It is a mistake, or, rather, an artifact of many kinds of retrospective analysis, to conclude that this jumble of initiatives and accommodations simply clears the way for and helps support new capitalisms. The same pile of discordant bric-à-brac can be the source of renewed conceptions of markets, public powers, and public goods that make exchange among individuals and groups morally intelligible and therefore legitimate again. Politics is always also a fight about which usage will prevail, and in moments of general breakdown, like the present, these stakes are sensed by all. When moral protest disappears from the sphere of exchange, or seems excluded from it, it is often on the way to such political fights.

Let me put this point generally, as my own reading of the thrust of Boltanski's reading of the last decades of capitalist development and critique of it: in times of crisis and confusion, the only way to understand structures is to see them as mutable and in motion – that is, not as structures at all; and the only way to grasp the potential of these mobile and mutable structures is to see them in the light of possible political alternatives, each associating a distinct group of allies with a bundle of institutional reforms in a constellation prefiguring new terms of exchange. This perspective, venturing further, is at once analytic and practical, or, if you like, cognitive and moral. It is the vantage point from which the observer can best understand what matters and why, and the moral agent can find and help create the rudiments of order amid tumult. In the terms Boltanski develops in *On Critique*, the turn to politics allows the actors to escape the necessarily local limits of their practical judgments without yet requiring they have access to the "overarching" or "totalizing" understanding of structures that some kinds of sociology and social criticism claim to possess.

But while a preface is perhaps a place to formulate such questions and speculations, it is certainly not the place to pretend to conclusions. Besides, you likely have this book before you because you already have these sorts of questions, and many others, in mind, along with provisional answers. You already sense how little the critiques we have speak to the problems we face, and yet how we struggle to fashion even those. So you knew too that criticism is a labor of Sisyphus. As encouragement and consolation, therefore, it may help to recall Camus' observation (from an essay published in 1942, the very darkest of times) that, in the hour of returning down the slope to push the boulder up again, Sisyphus was fully conscious of the task before him, most human in his consciousness, and, yes, happy in his humanity.

Introduction

Social actors, whether they are buying or selling, are constantly immersed in the universe of commodities. Indeed, their experience of what they conceive to be reality depends to a large extent on this universe, often more than they would care to admit. The order of commodities –things in circulation – emerges in a process through which each thing is assigned a price in monetary terms every time it changes hands. At the same time, the things in question remain diverse, so that the universe of commodities is perceived not as an opaque totality – that would make it impenetrable – but as a structured whole. Reference to the structures of this whole makes it possible to identify each of the things exchanged. In addition, because social actors have internalized a tacit competence for dealing with these structures, they are able to orient themselves in the universe of commodities: they can participate in commerce, and, most importantly, they can pass judgment on the relationship between things and their prices.

Nevertheless, these structures, along with the relations they institute between things, their prices, and the value attributed to them, draw on differences anchored in space and in history. They are modified over time in keeping with shifts in the form of capitalism. In most contemporary societies, capitalism imposes its straitjacket on commerce in things; in this regard, Walter Benjamin's analyses offer a striking framework for contrasting the structures of merchandise that subtend trade in much of twenty-first-century Europe, and perhaps in the world, with those of the nineteenth century. In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin nourished his meditation on history and his critique of a commodity-focused representation of civilization with a reflection on merchandise in the era of triumphant capitalism. Commodities are manifested in the immediacy of perceptible presence and indissociably – he says – as "phantasmagoria" to which strollers, *flâneurs*, yield, seeking "refuge in the crowd."[1] Benjamin stressed the forms taken by the world city, radically new forms at the time, in which were concentrated not only finance, luxury, and fashion but also the revolutionary bohemian life emblematized by Auguste Blanqui, along with industry and, above all, the proletariat. Benjamin's primary interest lay in showing how beings in this context – persons and things existing in a common space – embodied a radical break with the past. This break, marked by the creation of industrial and financial capital, was manifested concretely in the destruction brought about in Paris by Baron Haussmann's reforms and the concomitant reorganization of the urban fabric. The age of the "commodity fetish" sought to base its legitimacy on a futuristic staging of the benefits of technology; blind trust in "progress" was the instrument by means of which historians identified with victors. "And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers."[2]

But the figure of the *flâneur*, when transposed to twenty-first-century Paris, is immersed in an entirely different reality. This new reality is no less capitalist than the one faced by Benjamin's *flâneur*. However, "luxury" no longer boasts of being "industrial." On the contrary, it strives to make us forget that its roots lie in a specific framework of production, one all the more easily brushed aside in that it is largely delocalized, confined to the orbits of other, faraway "world cities." Capitalist accumulation is ongoing and even intensifying, but it relies on new economic arrangements and is associated with a diversification of the cosmos of commodities that depends on the modalities according to which value is assigned to them. The present study aims to describe this transformation, which is particularly apparent in the countries that have been the cradles of European industrial power, and above all in France; we shall analyze the way commodities are distributed among several different forms of valuation – that is, according to the way the price attached to a given commodity is justified or critiqued.

Our work will thus be oriented in two directions, whose relations we shall try to characterize. The first is chiefly historical. The object of this aspect of our study is an economic change that, since the last quarter of the twentieth century, has profoundly modified the way wealth is created in the countries of Western Europe. These countries have been marked both by deindustrialization and by an increased exploitation of certain resources that, without being entirely new, have taken on unprecedented importance. In our view, the scope of the change becomes apparent only when domains generally considered separate are brought together – most notably the arts, especially the plastic arts, and other cultural manifestations, trade in ancient objects, the creation of foundations and museums, the luxury industry, heritage creation, and tourism. We shall try to show that the constant interactions among these different domains make it possible to understand the way each one produces profits. Our argument will be based on their common exploitation of an underlying stratum that is purely and simply *the past*.

We shall use the term “enrichment economy” to designate this type of economy, playing on the ambiguity of the word “enrichment.” On the one hand, we use the word in the sense in which one speaks of enriching a metal, enhancing a lifestyle or a cultural asset, showcasing an article of clothing, or bringing together a set of objects in a collection, to emphasize the fact that this economy is based less on the production of new things than on an effort to *enrich* things that already exist, especially by associating them with narratives. On the other hand, the term "enrichment" refers to one of the specific characteristics of this economy, namely, that it draws upon trade in things that are intended above all for the wealthy and that thus also constitute a supplementary source of enrichment for the wealthy people who deal in them. It seems to us that this enrichment economy and its effects have to be taken into account if we are to grasp the transformations of contemporary society and some of the tensions that permeate it.

Our second orientation is more analytical. It seeks to comprehend how very diverse forms of commodities can give rise to transactions that, at least in most instances, will strike the actors who participate in them – either as purveyors or as customers – as normal activities, more or less in keeping with previously constituted expectations. By the term "commodity," we designate everything to which a price is attached when its ownership changes hands. Given its phenomenal diversity, if the cosmos of commodities were not structured by modes of organization that are partly implicit, it would be hard to understand how the actors could orient themselves in it. The commercial dexterity of the various actors is quite uneven, to be sure, and depends on their experience as buyers or sellers. Nevertheless, without a minimal degree of competence, actors would simply be lost and unable to make their way in the world, given the importance that the role and the quantity of commercial transactions have taken on in modern societies. It is in this sense that we shall speak of *commodity structures*.

By relying on these underlying structures, the actors can reflect on the relation between two types of heterogeneous entities – things on the one hand, prices on the other –

whose union constitutes commodities as such, instead of simply receiving this assemblage synthetically and passively submitting to its effects. But to understand the way a rational actor can seek to grasp the relation between things and their prices, we must take into account a third type of entity, which we shall designate by the term actors use – the indigenous term, as it were – namely, the polysemic term of value. It is in fact very generally the substance of a thing that is understood to constitute its "value"; in this sense, the relation between the thing and its price becomes subject to reflection, whether it is a matter of critiquing the price or justifying it. Rather than taking value as a property of things that is at once substantive and mysterious – a way of looking at things that has permeated classical economics and that continues to operate – we shall treat value as an arrangement for justifying or critiquing the price of things. The structures we shall seek to identify divide up the universe of commodities by distributing the entire set of marketable objects among various ways of justifying (or critiquing) their prices – that is, among different ways of assigning value to things. We shall see that the diverse methods for establishing value present differential relations that result from permutations of basic oppositions so that we can describe them as a transformation group in Lévi-Strauss's sense.[3] This makes it possible to reconcile the homogeneity of the cosmos of commodities (which encompasses every entity to which a price is attached when it changes hands) with the diversity of objects that comprise it, on the basis of the way that price is justified.

It is by being attentive to the dynamics of capitalism that we shall seek to connect the two approaches, historical and analytical, that have guided our work. We shall look at capitalism through the lens of commerce rather than focusing on the changes that have affected production and thus also labor – changes that, along with increased unemployment, have been the primary focus of analyses of capitalism. In this project we have benefited greatly from (re)reading Fernand Braudel, whose seminal book on capitalism puts commodities and commerce at the heart of his analyses; these entities are similarly central to studies – especially those of Giovanni Arrighi – that have sought to extend Braudel's perspective into the present day. Commodity structures have to be analyzed in historical terms precisely because they have been inserted into the dynamics of capitalism and into the link between order and disorder that is the driving force behind capitalism. On the one hand, capitalist accumulation has to be able to rely on shared expectations, and thus on commodity structures, in particular so as to limit transaction costs. On the other hand, the very logic of that accumulation means that capitalism must constantly shift its position in order to benefit from the commodification of new objects, thereby subverting its own structures.

Because it depended most notably, in an initial phase, on the development of industry, capitalism had to shift its position so as to draw the greatest possible benefit from the commodification of new objects, as opportunities to profit from the exploitation of industrial labor began to diminish. The formation of the commodity structures we see today can thus be linked to the development of an enrichment economy. The existence of a plurality of forms for making things valuable, forms that are at once isomorphic and differentiated, allows diverse things to change hands with the hope that they will be sold each time at the highest possible price so as to generate the greatest possible profit, or at least to limit losses. If there were only one way to refer to the value of things in order to justify their prices, a great number of objects that are exchanged for high prices today would find themselves