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The more things change, the more they stay the
same: On the epistemology of queer critique

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Abstract

This article takes issue with the criticism against those that I call “sinister accounts”, that is, analyses contesting pieces of legislation, policy measures and judicial decisions that are generally considered as steps towards a more equal and free society. According to some scholars, such a radical, hypercritical attitude, typical of many queer critiques, tends to produce pedantic and dismissive readings of political and legal advancements and thus fails to capitalize on the limited resources of Western liberal democracies. Even more importantly, from a social-theoretical perspective, sinister accounts are charged with draining social agents of any autonomy and self-awareness in that they are described as unconsciously complying with invisible hegemonic forces. With reference to accounts of the detrimental effects of non-conventional relationship recognition and in the light of a particular notion of the work of concepts in social life, I try to rebut this criticism by showing that sinister accounts contribute to opening fissures into the vision of social agents in order for the latter to (re)discover the silenced alternatives that various processes of normalization and naturalization inevitably conceal.

We did our best to worsen the world
(Eugenio Montale)

1. Introduction

The relationship between critical accounts of social change and the way social change is actualized by social agents is complex and multifaceted. Despite any claims to the methodological ideal of neutrality, hardly ever do theorists simply observe and describe the phenomena they study. For not only is the risk of idiosyncratic interpretation, misinterpretation or even projection always present; more importantly, theorists draw out and mobilize conceptual resources that are often un verbalized, or simply

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presupposed by particular practices. One of the claims I set out to make is that this could and should be regarded not as a danger or a flaw, but as a crucial contribution theory can make to transformative politics. Put otherwise, change needs theory insofar as alternatives to the present create breaks that open the door to (imagined) potential futures. Unfortunately, however, most critical thinking today tends to advance hypercritical diagnoses bemoaning the decline of existing democracies in the Global North. Critical scholars lambaste the activity of neo-liberalizing political and legal institutions and dissect seemingly progressive state policies and judicial rulings to illustrate how they, in reality, undercut democracy, rights and popular sovereignty. In the face of it, those who criticize such a hypercritical attitude maintain these kinds of analysis eventually turn out to be unserviceable: theirs is a wholesale rejection of something that might be affected by limits of all sorts, but is the best we can do at present, and anyhow are little steps towards a fairer political community. By dint of this, critics claim that critical thinking eventually falls short of their goal to draw out conceptual resources from existing practices and set their self-proclaimed purity against the dirty-handed job that is needed to bring about gradual change.

This article takes issue with this important criticism against those that here I will call “sinister accounts” (namely, analyses contesting pieces of legislation, policy measures and/or judicial decisions that are generally considered as steps towards a more equal and free society). To commence, the first section will delve into an issue that is coming to the forefront of legal debates, that is to say, the unexpected detrimental consequences of statutes or judicial measures meant to introduce sexual equality and to recognize same-sex sexual relationships. While I deem this to be an enlightening example of seemingly progressive measures that left and radical scholars describe as undemocratic under many respects, this case is particularly appropriate to my analysis here. For, contrary to the various diagnoses of other, more ambiguous political dynamics, radical queer critiques of same-sex equality make particularly clear how and why same-sex people and advocacy groups are engaging in battles that seem beneficial and yet turn out to be utterly detrimental both to themselves and to other minority sexualities. The discussion of this critical framework will allow me, in the second section, to pinpoint (those that are claimed to be) the theoretical flaws of this analytical attitude: social agents are portrayed as blindly embracing political strategies that not only impinge on other people’s lives, but also go to their own disadvantage. This is a conceptual bias that goes under the rubric of “objectivism”, a methodological approach that unduly assigns a pre-eminent role to the theorist, who knows more and better than the agents what the latter do and why.

This issue, which in the field of social theory is better known as the “subjectivism/objectivism” or “agency/structure” debate, will lead me to cut deeper into the role of the theorist vis-à-vis social change and transformative politics. Against this background, in the third section I will introduce a more imaginative and deliberately hopeful approach that is intended to usher in a new critical attitude in the field of left critique; which is to say, Davina Cooper’s investigation of how transformative politics is imagined and actualized in interstitial contexts and how micro-political practices “at the margins” provide resources to reimagine mainstream politics¹. I will go on by saying that, however promising this approach may be, it also implies the theorist playing a decisive role as she self-consciously accepts her role of “intermediary”². Based on this analysis, I will claim that the methodological approach of critical accounts, and especially Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory and his influential conception of the *habitus*, can be viewed as conceptual device meant to open fissures into the vision of social agents as it runs the risk of becoming impermeable to alternative visions of the social world.³

1 D. Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014.

2 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 39.

3 I should like to emphasize that Bourdieu’s and Cooper’s represent particularly suitable prototypes of two approaches that

This, I will argue, undermines the charge of objectivism as it demonstrates that the conceptual resources the theorist draws out get always reinvested into the practices she studies. The article concludes by showing that queer sinister accounts play a crucial part in the mobilization of concepts, whether or not they betray political inclinations and whether or not their picture of phenomena is exhaustive.

2. **One step forward, two steps back?**

Various strands of critical thinking today cast a sinister light on the political trajectories of Western liberal democracies. Various thinkers in a variety of fields claim that despite the heroic efforts of former generations who struggled hard to improve the society they lived in and that their progeny would inherit, the problems these generations set out to overcome are still there and in good shape. Even more worryingly, these problems are augmenting, morphing, and accelerating. In an epoch of increasing depoliticization, where the neoliberal gauge of market efficiency is replacing other standards to assess the quality of a society's organizational dynamics, inequalities of all sorts – from wealth to class, from skin colour to ethnicity, from sexuality to disability – infiltrate liberal regimes even more sneakily than in the past. A deep scrutiny of the far-reaching changes in the legislation of most Western countries meant to dismantle interlocked grounds of inequality shows that they not only failed to attain the change they promised; worse, they changed the face of inequalities in such a way that these might not seem what they are, and yet might continue to produce detrimental effects of domination and exclusion.

One striking example of this is the struggle for sexual equality and marriage equality. In effect, there is no denying that legislations in Western countries are much more tolerant towards sexual minorities. The same goes for forms of unions that depart from the conventional model of the “sexual family”⁴, which have been progressively recognized in the form of marriage or partnership in many jurisdictions, while others are well on the way to recognizing them. Moreover, anti-discrimination law and the legal recognition of same-sex unions had such an impact on the political culture of Western societies that the condition of abjection to which many formerly excluded sexualities were confined is steadily withering away, while homophobic attitudes are perceived as the relics of a faltering heterosexist mindset. Nonetheless, a good deal of left, radical and queer critics paint a different, “paranoid”⁵ picture. Based on both theoretical analyses and empirical research, they claim that such an alleged path towards equality ends up in more inequalities, although less visible than traditional forms of injustice. To summarize a wide range of nuanced critiques, they target three aspects of the path towards equality: outward effects of classification, inward effects of subjectivation and the effects radiated by the legal tools granting equality.

Effects of classification have been lucidly identified by one of the foremost criticisms against gay marriage as a dignity-conferring device, Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*. Here Warner

look *prima facie* irreconcilable but, in reality, share a basic presupposition of to the role of theory vis-à-vis social reality. This will become clear as we go along.

4 M. Fineman, *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family and other Twentieth Century Tragedies*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995.

5 In her text on paranoid and reparative reading, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes issue with the tendency of many progressive and critical academics to engage in paranoid readings: “[Q]ueer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative”, in E.K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 126.

claims that the state seizes upon the rhetoric of the loving couple to turn it into an institution intended to discipline relationships and to cut out those that fail to conform to this model. Consequently, marriage is not so much the legal recognition of two people who love each other and want to make it known to the society at large, as it is a benchmark of dignity and respectability that disqualifies and stigmatizes those who do not fit it, such as “adulterers, prostitutes, divorcees, the promiscuous, single people, unwed parents, those below the age of consent – in short, all those who become, for the purposes of marriage law, queer”⁶. For example, research in the area of bisexual and polyamorous sexuality attests to such a tacit and constant activity of censorship and displacement. Ritchie and Barker (2006: 587) comment that “mononormativity” renders open non-monogamy “invisible or pathological in mainstream representations”. Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli illustrates how the legitimation of conventional gayness and lesbianism establishes “a homonormative hierarchy based on what is constructed as the dominant or central-within-the-marginal homosexual group: usually a white, middle-class, monogamously coupled, exclusively homosexual relationships and families”⁷. In summary, the dividing line state-sponsored marriage draws between fit and unfit sexualities does not vanish with the introduction of same-sex marriage, but shifts to discredit more troubling sexualities that are less amenable to the narrative of the loving couple pursuing a committed, life-long relationship.

The new classification of admissible and inadmissible sexualities does not only affect the “new” excluded, as the “new” included who are granted recognition are also exposed to numerous effects of subjectivation. One instance of such an often-inadvertent dynamic is the narrative surrounding lesbian motherhood. For example, Robert Leckey’s analysis of lesbian motherhood in Quebec showcases the courts’ reliance on the conventional lexicon of motherhood when it comes to the situation of a woman with no genetic tie to the child. A lesbian mother’s endorsing the narrative of conventional motherhood, then, proves strategically advantageous because it “makes it likelier that she will be granted custody, an attribute of parental authority which is itself an effect of filiation”⁸. Also in the most advanced jurisdictions in term of equal rights, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, studies demonstrate that the extension, revision or even innovation of legal kinship terminology builds heavily on the existing forms of relationship⁹. For the better or the worse, new family law categories are modelled on existing ones, which then become the standard, so much so that crucial signifiers such as motherhood¹⁰ and childhood¹¹ serve as tacit vehicles of normalization. This means that the only, or at least the most effective way for people to gain legal recognition is to adapt to those standards and to lay claim to the rights and benefits attached to them. By doing so, however, non-conventional sexualities tend to get rid of challenging and subversive aspects of their sexuality¹² and to appropriate the

6 M. Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 89.

7 M. Pallotta-Chiarolli, *Women in Relationships with Bisexual Men: Bi Men by Women*, Lanham, MD, Lexington, 2016, p. 10. Conventional gayness and lesbianism also flattens the complex scenario of lesbians and gays, whose social conditions varies in accordance with an intersectional set of variables (e.g. class, ethnicity, skin colour, religion, employment, age, and so on) – see e.g. K. Browne, E. Ferreira, *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015.

8 R. Leckey, *Two mothers in law and fact*, in *Feminist legal studies*, 2013, 21, pp. 1-19, at p. 7.

9 F. Swennen, M. Croce, *The Symbolic Power of Legal Kinship Terminology: An Analysis of ‘Co-motherhood’ and ‘Duo-motherhood’ in Belgium and the Netherlands*, in *Social & legal studies*, 2016, 25, pp. 181-203.

10 See e.g. S.M. Park, *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood: Resisting Monomaternalism in Adoptive, Lesbian, Blended, and Polygamous Families*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2013.

11 See e.g. A.M. Duane (ed.), *The Children’s Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities*, Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 2013.

12 See e.g. M. Graham, *Gay marriage: Whither sex? Some thoughts from Europe*, in *Sexuality research and social policy*, 2004, 1, pp.

jargon of citizenship and respectability¹³. This widens the fracture between erstwhile combative generations struggling for sexual liberation and today's more sedate respectable homosexuals who claim the rights they deserve as state citizens¹⁴.

Yet, according to some scholars, especially queer legal scholars, the linchpin of this bundle of normalization processes is the law itself. From an earnestly feminist perspective, Rosemary Auchmuty comments: "I am frequently astonished at how the very feminists who warn of the dangers of increased legal regulation of pornography or prostitution will yet willingly embrace the legal regulation of marriage"¹⁵. In this sense, it is the legal regulation itself that does the normalizing, or at least significantly contributes to it. Indeed, it is one's very recourse to the law that intensifies the conservative and de-politicized nature of (legal) marriage as the new shell of respectable (same-sex) couples. On this wavelength, Katherine Franke has recently made a compelling case about the legal recognition of same-sex marriage as a path to equality¹⁶. Against the common view that landmark judgments such as *Lawrence v. Texas* (which decriminalized sodomy) actualized the "dignity and respect" of all couples through the privileges and immunities granted by the US constitution, she dissects and disproves such a linear argument. By refuting the facile analogy with the full emancipation of black people, Franke foregrounds the many ways in which marriage turned out to be detrimental to African Americans from Reconstruction onward. Legal marriage, she claims, tear to pieces all forms of community and kinship that had been formed within the practices enacted under slavery. In keeping with a general line of reasoning that warns against the perils of rights as a self-evidently emancipatory instrument¹⁷, Franke and other scholars¹⁸ offer a cautionary tale on the emancipatory power of legal tools, which have the power to bring about the effects I discussed above.

As I said above, the detrimental effects of the regulation of sexuality is but a particularly clear instance of several accounts of de-democratizing slopes, such as the recreation of a state of exception as a spreading model of security politics¹⁹, the work on the camp as the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet²⁰, the subjugation of life to the power of death²¹, not to speak of the scarcely visible but strangling yoke of neoliberalism²². When confronted with so ominous a portrayal of contemporary political and legal developments, one of the questions that come up more frequently has to do with its paradoxically *conservative* outcomes: if one step forward to the path of equality implies two steps back even for those who should benefit from it, would it not be better to leave everything unchanged? If

24-31.

- 13 See e.g. M. Valverde, *A new entity in the history of sexuality. The respectable same-sex couple*, in *Feminist studies*, 2006, 32, pp. 155-162.
- 14 See M. Croce, *The Politics of Juridification*. Abingdon, Routledge.
- 15 M. Auchmuty, *Same-sex Marriage Revived: Feminist Critique and Legal Strategy*, in *Feminism & psychology*, 2004, 4, pp. 101-126, 103.
- 16 K. Franke, *Wedlocked: The Perils of Marriage Equality*, New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- 17 See e.g. R. West, *Tragic Rights: The Rights Critique in the Age of Obama*, in *William & Mary law review*, 2011, 53, pp. 713-746.
- 18 See e.g. J. Halley, K. Rittich, *Critical Directions in Comparative Family Law: Genealogies and Contemporary Studies of Family Law Exceptionalism*, in *American journal of comparative law*, 2010, 58 pp. 753-776; T. Ruskola, *Gay rights versus Queer Theory*, in *Social text*, 2005, 23, pp. 235-249.
- 19 K. L. Scheppelle, *Law in a Time of Emergency: States of Exception and the Temptations of 9/11*, in *Journal of constitutional law*, 2004, 6, pp. 1-75.
- 20 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- 21 A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, in *Public culture*, 2003, 15, pp. 11-40.
- 22 See e.g. W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York, Zone Books, 2015.

emancipation, gender equality, marriage equality, the diffusion of rights, and other (seemingly) democratizing strategies turn out to be so unsuccessful, should we come to the conclusion that liberal democracy itself is a failure to get rid of? Is this not a paranoid paroxysm that throws out the baby with the bath water? As I will discuss in the subsequent pages, this type of criticism is usually accompanied by a subtler question concerning the *cognitive* status of social agents vis-à-vis their own conducts. Indeed, if social agents are so narrow-minded and naive to embrace strategies that *prima facie* look advantageous but surreptitiously bring about a host of detrimental effects, this implies that they are thoroughly blind to the upshots of their doings. Social agents (such as more liberal and conservative same-sex individuals and organizations) are driven by short-term goals (e.g. marriage equality) that, measured against the background of broader objectives (e.g. the advance of radical sexual pluralism and the recognition of a variety of kinship practices), prove to be an obstacle to a freer society. How can social agents be so unaware of what they do and of the way they are involuntarily worsening their society?

3. Agents' social incompetence vs. theorists' hubris

The view that social agents are "socially incompetent", in the sense that they are not capable of verbalizing what they do and, if they happen to be, their verbalizations are deprived of any socio-scientific value, is an old and much-criticized one in the field of social theory. It is generally known as "objectivism" in that it postulates the existence of objective social structures, or more generally social constraints, that frame and shape the agents' activity within the social world. Bruno Latour goes so far as to say it has been the hallmark of sociology since its very onset. He chides those whom he calls "sociologists of the social" because they drain the agent of autonomy and self-awareness. He claims that traditional sociology – which he defines "of the social" because it reifies and hypostasizes a taken-for-granted entity (the social) which is nothing but the projection of sociology itself – conceives of social agents as "hapless bearers of symbolic projection"²³. They are depicted as pawns on a chessboard that move in compliance with forces they can neither grasp nor verbalize. As if this were not enough, agents' discursive performances, when they revolve around their doings, are claimed to be theoretically defective, in that the (real) rules, reasons and motives that lie behind actions are not transparent to them. The conceit of sociologists of the social, and particularly critical sociologists (to wit, those who believe their duty is to rescue agents from their ignorance), is exemplified by their conviction that the any potential disagreements between the agents' verbalization and the theorist's explanations "offer the best proof that those explanations are right". In this way, the agents' "own elaborate and fully reflexive meta-language"²⁴ is silenced and replaced with the theorist's overintricate repertoire of socio-conceptual tools.

This offensive against objectivism is not recent. Such prominent a school as ethnomethodology – initiated by Harold Garfinkel in the 1960s – was born as a response to the dominance of macrostructural analysis neglecting the agent's point of view. Ethnomethodologists submit that social agents "are not only knowledgeable, but their knowledge of macrostructural phenomena is not treated as impoverished or naïve"²⁵. There is no divide between a hidden, sociologically relevant reality (only visible to the theorist), that agents are supposed to be unaware of, and a sociologically irrelevant reali-

23 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, cit., p. 10.

24 Ivi, p. 30.

25 T.J. Berard, *Rethinking Practices and Structures*, in *Philosophy of the social sciences*, 2005, 35, pp. 196-230.

ty that agents experience but cannot competently articulate. Accordingly, for ethnomethodologists, the object of study is not the structures that constrain and shape social agents' actions and worldview, but the way they account for their actions and worldview. Social agents are treated as cognizant and conscious producers and reproducers of meanings, who should be investigated in their interactional performances as well as in the way they put these interactions into words. On this account, as also Latour claims, postulating the existence of structures invisible to the agents, which constrain and guide their actions, is but a makeshift of the sociologist of the social who aims not so much to understand reality as to prove her own theory of the social – one that she projects on social agents and claims to be the uncovered truth enshrined in their actions. Quite the reverse, non-objectivist investigations should refrain from forging unneeded social entities and to explain how social meanings and categories are accountable for social agents.

According to many critics, the most nuanced kind of objectivism is Pierre Bourdieu's. It is a particularly refined version precisely because Bourdieu himself considered objectivism as serious a mistake as subjectivism. While subjectivism envisions a free, utterly self-conscious subject and provides accounts based on a causal relation between one's motives or intentions and the consequence of one's actions, objectivism hollows out the relation between the agent and her actions. In this latter case, the action is taken to be the application of supra-subjective normative schemes that the agents unconsciously apply when they interact in the social world. Objectivism is the apotheosis of the theorist's hubris, as she believes she has identified the schemes that guide social agent's conduct, ones that make sense of the mystery of social regularities. The theorist's reliance on such schemes, however, "introduces a radical discontinuity between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge"²⁶, to the extent that the former is claimed to pin down and establish the particular conditions in which the latter is possible and intelligible. This chasm cannot be filled by the agents' practical experience, because they lack the theoretical knowledge that is necessary to gain a bird's eye view on the possibility conditions of their interactions. While Bourdieu intended to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, he is said to have failed. For example, Alex Van den Berg argues that this was an original sin of Bourdieu's theory as he never dispensed with the aim of "explaining" actions, while "the various 'subjectivistic' approaches simply do not possess any conceptual tools for explaining social behavior"²⁷.

In effect, one might say that Bourdieu's theory did not live up to the expectations he himself had fed. His valorization of practical knowledge (one that is inscribed in one's own bodily postures, gestures, manners, gait, linguistic competence, accent, and so on), as the deposit of a particular position within the social world, clashes with his insistence on social agents' naïve reliance on a normative lexicon that conceals the reality of social mechanisms. In the end, for Bourdieu (1990: 102), social agents master a kind of knowledge that cannot account for itself:

They thus conceal, even from themselves, the true nature of their practical mastery as learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*), that is, a mode of practical knowledge that does not contain knowledge of its own principles. Native theories are in fact dangerous not so much because they lead research towards illusory explanations, but rather because they bring quite superfluous reinforcement to the theory of practice that is inherent in the objectivist approach to practices, which, having extracted from the *opus operatum* the supposed principles of its production, sets them up as norms governing practices.

²⁶ P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 26.

²⁷ A. Van den Berg, *Is Sociological Theory too Grand for Social Mechanisms?*, in P. Hedström, R. Swedberg (eds.), *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 204-237, at 220.

Therefore, something more is needed for the agents to get to grips with the mechanics of their actions, something that only the theorist is able to offer. This brings to the surface what seems to be an inner flaw of Bourdieu's social theory. Indeed, as Anthony King (2000) avers, Bourdieu is thoroughly aware that the theorist's devising a scheme for interpreting people's conduct is devoid of explanatory force, as it is the theorist's own view projected on the phenomena she is studying. Bourdieu reckons, says King, that the theorist's talk of objective structures reifies "the complex and negotiated exchanges over time between individuals into a static, timeless system which exists before any individuals"²⁸. Yet, he continues to envision a gulf between the order of practice and the order of knowledge, one that cannot be filled by the agents' limited conceptual resources and then calls for the expertise of a learned observer providing conceptually enriched lenses to make sense of what makes people act in such and such a way. This is evidence that Bourdieu did not settle the score with objectivism, but simply perfected it. He recognized the agents' contribution to the production of the social world but eventually put the theorist on a pedestal, as only she can penetrate the opaque relation between practical knowledge and social action.

4. Reorienting critical attitudes

Bourdieu's (alleged) failure to undo objectivism might be regarded as the epitome of the failure of sinister accounts to warn against the inadvertent shortcoming of liberal politics. Against objectivist perspectives demoting the agent's practical knowledge to unserviceable native experience, Bourdieu placed emphasis on how social agents structure their actions and give life to stable interactional contexts (what he called "fields"). Despite this, he eventually reinstated the theoretical primacy of an omniscient theorist who is called upon to detect the principles lying behind people's "learned ignorance". Analogously, queer and radical critics do not intend to demote same-sex individuals and civil society organizations to unaware puppets amenable to the dynamics of neo-liberal politics.²⁹ Critical readings of recent legal and political developments by no means discredit the broad range of benefits, protections and rights that marriage grants (such as, social security, pension benefits, child custody, conjugal visits and others).³⁰ However, sinister accounts, whether explicitly or not, suggest that agents are adopting strategies that prove, or will in the long run prove, not only impoverishing – because they scotomize elements of sexuality that should be included in a radically pluralist society – but also detrimental to themselves – because the conventional model that marriage furthers imprisons them in a formula that evolved in a particular socio-historical context to meet particular requirements, needs and interests.

What are the main defects of such a theoretical pitfall? In her inspirational discussion of the po-

28 A. King, A., *Thinking with Bourdieu against Bourdieu: A "Practical" Critique of the Habitus*, in *Sociological theory*, 2000, 18, pp. 417-433.

29 For example, Volker Woltersdorff claims there is a special relationship between neo-liberalism and the recognition of formerly excluded sexualities "Institutional recognition is bestowed, therefore, when it is of economic advantage to the state"; yet, this relationship is more ambivalent than it might appear, in V. Woltersdorff, *Paradoxes of precarious sexualities: Sexual sub-cultures under neo-liberalism*, in *Cultural Studies*, 2011, 25, pp. 164-182, at p. 177. The same type of ambivalent, even equivocal relationship in the struggle for same-sex equality is nicely pinned down in D. Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, cit., pp. 91-117.

30 For a perceptive analysis of the trade-off between beneficial and detrimental outcomes, see R. Leckey (ed.), *After Legal Equality: Family, Sex, Kinship*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015. This collective book also reflects the multiple scholarly divisions that characterize such an expanding subject area.

tentials of transformative politics in interstitial contexts (what she calls “everyday utopias”), Davina Cooper laments the attitude of contemporary critical works to frame a dystopian scenario where scholars seem at pains to thwart a menacing future. She notes that today’s orientation to the future tends to be “expressed in terms of what needs to be avoided.” Accordingly, critical works set themselves up to stall a dreadful “vision of the world seen, unhappily, as taking shape”³¹. In doing so, Cooper does not dismiss the critical edge of ‘sinister accounts’; rather, she underlines the risk of self-erosion that besets them, whereby the emphasis placed on the dark side of contemporary political dynamics ends up proving the futility of political engagement as such: “[I]f everything is wrong, if yesterday and tomorrow are just like today, corrupted by politics’ relentless (if far from original) sin, investing energy in action to pursue a transformative politics seems pointless”³².

Cooper’s invitation to reorient critical attitudes is sensible and well-placed: critical work should dispense with the conceptual Manichaeism which leads scholars to see large-scale politics as irretrievably decaying and small-scale contexts – where concrete alternatives are imagined and enacted – as too peripheral, idealistic, or even delusional, and thus fundamentally incapable of uncovering the biases of conventional politics. This negative attitude ends up in a deadlock: on the one hand, everything mainstream is corrupt and enchained in spheres of domination; on the other hand, the good that is practiced in minorstream contexts does not rub off on the broader political society. To shed light on an alternative, more optimistic methodological attitude, Cooper engages in colourful and vibrating accounts of particular sites (e.g. a sexual bathhouse for women and transgendered people in Toronto, Summerhill School in Leiston, Speakers’ Corner in London, the Local Exchange Trading Schemes), in which transformative politics is practiced in such a way that these sites’ conceptual potential might fruitfully speak to mainstream politics. But it is precisely in this context that Cooper centres theorists’ and scholars’ crucial task. For example, while discussing the contribution of nudist politics to transformative politics, she claims that equality as a presupposition of the former might not be explicitly verbalized or even consciously deployed as a presupposition. Nudists might well frame their claims in terms of individual rights or group rights, but equality is presupposed nonetheless:

Presupposition concerns the norms required to be in place for a particular practice to be intelligible, appropriate, or possible. Such norms may become apparent only as new practices take shape; they may also be invented or asserted by those claiming legitimacy, as past conditions get imagined as already there in order to drive their future reality. As a presupposition, equality is particularly evident in the conditions animating nudist activism. The contemporary focus of nudist politics may largely revolve around rights and freedom, but these are authorized and gain meaning through notions of a moral equality between nudists and others³³.

Cooper’s theoretical hypothesis behind this is that concepts are not static entities, intellectual constructs reflecting states of things, but an *oscillation between how things are imagined and how they are actualized*. This means that concepts cannot be detected in any simple way by observing how principles are put into words by the agents, or the way they materialize, whether or not these are adequately verbalized and whether or not materialization proves successful. For recognizing concepts is not a job of elicitation based on ostension and observation, as “recognition doesn’t depend on ‘real’

31 D. Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, cit., p. 30.

32 Ivi, p. 217.

33 Ivi, p. 76.

things fitting linguistic terms or terms fitting, and thus elucidating, particular social practices”³⁴. Rather, drawing out concepts requires taking seriously Latour’s distinction between *intermediaries* and *mediators*. While an intermediary “is what transports meaning or force without transformation”, mediators “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry”³⁵. In this light, theorists and scholars should be aware of, even exploit their intermediary role and should endeavour to identify “more oblique” lines “that emerge when actualization and imagining don’t do what is expected, producing complex relationships of nonresemblance [...] when community imaginings of particular concepts acquire, in their operational pursuit, an undesired or unsought practical shape; or when concepts are manifested in ways that differ significantly from the expressed imaginings of participants”³⁶.

This conception sets the stage for a methodological approach that prompts the theorist to contribute to the transformative potential of the phenomena she observes. The theorist makes something appear, something that she does not project on phenomena but at the same time that is not manifest in them. The theorist teases out a conceptual potential that underpins the agents’ activity as a linguistically unarticulated and most often intuitive presupposition, and puts it in counterpoint with a future that is imagined but might never be actualized. Importantly, failures open fissures that allow understanding the work of concepts at the moment in which imagining and actualization do not match. However, while agents are not reduced to socially incompetent pawns, they still need someone who observes and interprets what they do. In this respect, also Cooper’s compelling plea for a different approach to interstitial, unconventionally normative contexts betrays objectivist nuances. In my view, though, this is by no means a flaw, as it highlights the key importance of the theorist’s activity. Based on this analysis, in the successive section I want to make the claim that the flaw with which both sinister accounts and Bourdieu’s social theory are charged is not an objectivist flaw, and in the end is not a flaw at all. If we look at it through the prism of the theorist’s work on oscillation between imagining and actualization, we can interpret it as *politics in the making*, a political proclivity for the intermediary role that theorists inevitably play, whether willingly or not.

5. Following oscillations

In the previous pages I said that Bourdieu set out to debunk objectivism but critics believe his attempt fell through. In particular, they point the finger at the *habitus*, his signature concept³⁷. Bourdieu defines it as a set of “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations”³⁸. Some critics regard the *habitus* as the quintessential form of the theorist’s self-assigned superiority. For it is a tacit knowledge, partly hereditary and partly acquired over time, that the agents deploy unconsciously as they move within the various social fields and that only the theorist can reconstruct. Precisely because of its being tacit and unconscious, the *habitus* gets caught in a riddle: “[A]ctors never know why they are doing things, only the interpreter

34 Ivi, p. 43.

35 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, cit., p. 39

36 D. Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, cit., p. 13.

37 M. Emirbayer, *Tilly and Bourdieu*, in *American sociologist*, 2010, 41, pp. 400-422, at p. 41.

38 P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, cit., p. 53.

knows. Yet there is no means of verifying the interpreter's hypothesis other than by pointing to the presence of the regularity it interprets and saying it is consistent with the interpretation"³⁹.

Elsewhere I advanced an alternative reading of the *habitus* that interestingly echoes Cooper's notion of concepts as oscillations between imagining and actualization⁴⁰. Based on a closer inspection into the multiple accounts Bourdieu provided of the *habitus* (accounts that, admittedly, are not always in agreement), I argued that it is not a concrete set of inculcated dispositions constraining the agents' behaviour; rather it is a set of schemes of perception through which people understand and determine what is appropriate and inappropriate in a given context. In a way that resonates with the late Wittgenstein – one of Bourdieu's constant points of reference – the *habitus* makes sense of peoples' inclination to provide accounts of state of things by subsuming them under normative frameworks. While the same behaviour, as Wittgenstein's rule-following argument persuasively demonstrates, can be adequately accounted for with reference to alternative (even conflicting) normative frameworks, the *habitus* is not meant to explain what the most adequate normative framework is. Instead, the *habitus* aims to make sense of why people in a given context draw out and rely on a given normative framework and, by doing so, discard others (most often inadvertently). In other words, the *habitus* as a conceptual device utilized by the theorist draws attention to the fact that the production of certain accounts of practices implies the concealment or even the erasure of alternative ones. As Loïc Wacquant points out, the *habitus* foregrounds "the genetic mode of thinking as it directs us to excavate the implicit cognitive, conative and emotive constructs through which persons navigate social space and animate their lived world"⁴¹. In my interpretation, this suggests that Bourdieu is not concerned with these constructs as such, or how they develop, or the way they *determine* (if they ever do) people's activity in the social world. Rather, he is concerned with how these constructs lead people to produce particular accounts of their own actions as well as the actions of the others and to neglect alternative accounts anchored to different normative frameworks. To put it another way, the *habitus* sheds light on the way widespread habits, convictions and principles lose their character of social constructedness and get normalized, naturalized and dehistoricized. It is a conceptual and methodological approach to the social world in the attempt to identify "the processes responsible for this transformation of history into nature, of cultural arbitrariness into the natural"⁴².

If this is the case, the *habitus* opens up to a critique of the present as it serves to trace the silent activity of the social taxonomies that are perceived as differences and distinctions inborn in the nature of the social world. Yet, this critical approach can hardly do away with the perspective of the agents. On this point Bourdieu is crystal-clear. On the one hand, the theorist can never be either a neutral outsider (in the sense of an observer who in no way affects the phenomena she observes) or a participant (in the sense of an observer who merges with the object of inquiry in the hope of penetrating its inner dynamics as though she were an insider). On the other hand, however, the theorist's self-awareness of her inevitable contribution to what she studies by no means justifies the tendency to put into the agents' "heads, as it were, the problematic that I construct about them and the theory that I elaborate to answer it"⁴³. If no objectivist biases are allowed in this critical approach, then theorists have first and foremost to criticize their own position vis-à-vis the object of inquiry. This means that they must

39 P. Gerrans, *Tacit Knowledge, Rule Following and Pierre Bourdieu's Philosophy of Social Science*, in *Anthropological theory*, 2005, 5, pp. 53-74, at p. 68.

40 M. Croce, *The Habitus and the Critique of the Present. A Wittgensteinian Reading of Bourdieu's Social Theory*, in *Sociological theory*, 2015, 33, pp. 327-346.

41 L. Wacquant, *A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus*, in *The sociological review*, 2016, 64, pp. 64-72, at p. 70.

42 P. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 2.

43 P. Bourdieu, *Participant Objectivation*, in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2003, 9, pp. 281-294, at p. 288.

bear in mind that they are intermediaries, that they affect the object, that they introduce things that are presupposed in the practice they investigate much as this presupposition might never be verbalized by the agents. At the same time, however, this work can never be an end in itself. The creative and imaginative job carried out by the theorists must be reinvested in the practice for the practice's sake.

Cooper's methodology is illustrative also in this regard. For example, in her analysis of the normative framework organizers, volunteers and participants work with at Toronto Women's Bathhouse (a sexual bathhouse for women and transgendered people), she short-circuits feminist care ethics and the (cognitive and practical) understanding of care at the bathhouse. While care ethics is not a theoretical framework that people consciously deploy to account for their practice, Cooper identifies several key references to care and care ethics in the accounts of those she interviewed. Yet, she does not use feminist care ethics to make sense of people's practices at the bathhouse. Rather, she takes care ethics as a rich normative framework that cast light on the unstated principles lying behind people's care practices and concentrates on the multiple frictions it creates with people's activity at the bathhouse. She illustrates how care ethics is actually present as a presupposition and at the same time how care ethics fails to adequately account for concrete practices that (most often intuitively) draw on it as agents put their doings into words. In doing so, Cooper does flex the order of practice to fit the order of knowledge. She spotlights the limits of care ethics as a theoretical paradigm that "repeatedly refers to the situated body and to situated embodied care, but [shows] a notable absence of real descriptions of embodied encounters – with their odors, textures, and discharges – and the dilemmas that uncontained bodies can pose for ethical care in the contemporary era" as illustrated in the practice of bathhouse volunteers⁴⁴.

I am not saying that Bourdieu's and Cooper's approaches map onto each other in any simple manner. What I am saying is that the theorist's methodological attitude they recommend is basically the same: the theorist first reckons with her own situatedness (her history, background, political inclination, theoretical attitudes, and so on); then she positions herself to the observed phenomena in such a way that such a situatedness might productively interact with the investigated phenomena; by doing so, she unearths frictions between normative available frameworks: those tacitly inscribed in the practices she studies, those that are consciously brought up by members, those that the theorist thinks are more appropriate to the context. This activity mobilizes concepts as movements between present and future in such a way that a variety of not-yet-realized futures (which manifest themselves under the guise of competing normative frameworks) might affect the present, whether or not these futures are likely to materialize into actual presents. Certainly, Bourdieu was naturally inclined to focus on the mechanisms of concealment that cut out some normative frameworks and halt the imaginative movement between present and future. Cooper is more attentive to the promising resources that the oscillatory movement can contribute to transformative politics. Yet, they share the methodological premise that the present, as naturalized, normalized history (what I believe can be effectively described as people's *habitus*), contains presuppositions that naturalization and normalization tend to suppress and expunge. These presuppositions, whether verbalized or not by the agents, are invaluable resources for "neutralizing the mechanisms of the neutralization of history"⁴⁵ with a view to make alternatives appear in the here and the now.

44 D. Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, cit., p. 119.

45 P. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. viii.

6. Unexpectedly hopeful

If, as I said, the recognition of the concepts that underpin practices is conducive to the discovery of hidden or un verbalized transformative potentials, then we can interpret sinister accounts as light shed on the perpetual conflict among alternative normative frameworks that make particular social practices differently intelligible. On this reading, critics do not put them forward to hold back the movement of history and to hinder governmental equality programmes that are claimed to benefit various strands of the population. More importantly, sinister accounts cannot be charged with lapsing back into conservative positions, or with projecting paranoid suspicions on equality policy measures. Rather they are intended to inhibit (or, more modestly, to denounce) the risks of naturalization and normalization that all political and legal (and more generally societal) developments imply. This is why Bourdieu claims “there is always room for a cognitive struggle over the meaning of the things of the world [...] The partial indeterminacy of certain objects authorizes antagonistic interpretations, offering the dominated a possibility of resistance to the effect of symbolic imposition”⁴⁶.

Thus, sinister accounts are at one and the same time *hopeful* accounts, because they trigger an imaginative movement that favours a clash of normative frameworks. Certainly, some accounts are more accurate and nuanced than others; some are politically more engaged and perhaps potentially more biased than others; some are less attentive to the empirical variety one can always expect to find in our complex societies; despite this, they bring out presuppositions that inevitably conflict with people’s self-perception and self-account. As I contended, this does not depend on the fact that the agents’ reflexive meta-language gets muted; rather, the theorist’s account deliberately brings about fractures between imagining and actualization and produces a cognitive “break with preconceptions and presuppositions – that is, with all theses that are never stated as such because they are inscribed in the obviousness of ordinary experience, with the entire substratum of the unthinkable that underlies the most vigilant thinking”⁴⁷. Bourdieu’s effective lexicon gestures towards a conceptual process that makes the unthinkable intelligible insofar as it gives the unthinkable back its status of potential alternative – a status that tends to be effaced by naturalization and normalization.

In this light, sinister (hopeful) accounts are to be seen as alternative routes to an *elaborate language* that lack *reflexive meta-language*, as Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker’s text on the silenced language of non-monogamies nicely shows. The article’s evocative title (“There Aren’t Words for What We Do or How We Feel So We Have to Make Them Up”) illustrates how the discovery of muted alternatives is a way of complicating the limited “discursive possibilities” that “construct but also constrain meaning”⁴⁸. Analogously, the refusal to recognize marriage equality as a straightforward path to sexual equality permits realizing that the hegemonic form we live in “contains the history of its own undoing by other possibilities that the law refuses to realize”⁴⁹. For example, Franke’s analysis confronts us with the diversity of kinship formations that African Americans created under slavery – ones that were not the compelled response to a state of abjection, but exalted “interdependence and communal cooperation, rather than individualization and immediacy (in the sense of ‘immediate family’ versus ‘others’)”⁵⁰. In much the same way, Park’s investigation does not simply refute mono-

46 Ivi, p. 13.

47 P. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 36.

48 A. Ritchie, M. Barker, ‘There aren’t words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up’: *Constructing poly-amorous languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy*, in *Sexualities*, 2006, 9, pp. 584-601, at p. 586.

49 E. Freeman, *Still after*, in *South Atlantic quarterly*, 2007, 106, pp. 495-500, at p. 497.

50 K. Franke, *Wedlocked*, cit., p. 30.

maternalism; she does not simply examine how practices of mother-child interaction have been “queered” by several non-biological and poly-maternal families who have moved away from normative family configurations and mainstream domestic arrangements⁵¹. For she also reframes maternal love – in part against queer portrayals of childhood innocence as an inherently conservative ideal⁵² – as a broader attempt “to move beyond the dichotomy of home/not home and safety/risk” towards an understanding of home as “a space of mutuality and conflict, of love and its risks and struggles, of caring and conflictual connections to others”⁵³.

This does not mean that the theorist is called upon (or even has any right or possibility) to give practices and their language a reflexive meta-language of her own – an approach that, as Latour incessantly remarks, distorts practice for the theory’s sake. Rather, the theorist navigates the multiple imbrications of alternative (conflicting) normative frameworks that social agents develop, and emphasizes how they themselves ignite these conflicts – as Cooper’s inquiry beautifully shows – when they move among the plurality of practical contexts they are simultaneously member of. In doing so, critical views of the social world accentuate unsettling contradictions that show how the way in which we imagined our future is most of the time destined to fail and, because of this, we can reimagine our present.

51 S.M. Park, *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*, cit.

52 See e.g. L. Edelman, *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2004.

53 S.M. Park, *Mothering Queerly, Queering Motherhood*, cit., p. 251.