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The Precarity of Critique:
Cultures of Mistrust and the Refusal of Justification

> "Nothing guarantees, after all, that we should be right all the time. There is no sure ground even for criticism. Isn't this what criticism intended to say: that there is no sure ground anywhere? But what does it mean when this lack of sure ground is taken away from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish?"
>
> *(Bruno Latour)*

Abstract The paper reflects on recent developments towards authoritarianism and right-wing populism that have become apparent in a number of Western societies and aims at pinpointing possible cultural foundations for this trend. Using the example of the German PEGIDA movement and the wider milieu in which it is embedded, it identifies and describes a rapidly spreading culture of mistrust and discusses some of its political and epistemological implications. In a second step, the paper draws on Luc Boltanski's theory of justification in order to attain a better understanding of this political movement's specificities. It is argued that it is a quasi-violent *refusal* of justification which is constitutive for the movement in question, thereby transcending the reach of Boltanski's framework to some extent. In a third step, a closer look is taken at the epistemological paradox that results from the fact that a number of the PEGIDA movement's crucial points of criticism are effectively shared by a larger part of the overall population, raising severe problems for the question of sociological critique. The paper utilizes ideas by Bruno Latour in order to illuminate this paradox further and examine its consequences. It closes with remarks on the possibility to "reassemble" trust and critique as crucial but contested – and, hence, *precarious* – foundations of modern society.

Keywords: mistrust, distrust, trust, paranoia, right-wing populism, PEGIDA, justification, critique, Luc Boltanski, Bruno Latour

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1. Introduction

Since a few years, things are seemingly changing considerably in a number of Western societies.[1] Political discourse, at least according to some observers, is becoming rougher; right-wing populism and authoritarianism seems to be on the rise in several countries; and the overall climate is characterized

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more and more by an enormous extent of mistrust towards political institutions, democracy and the state. Old certainties seem to be under threat – and a feeling of instability that has been largely unknown for the past decades is starting to spread. Paralleling these primarily political developments, previously unquestioned historical "truths" and scientific "facts" are becoming increasingly contested as well. Conspiracy theories are flourishing, fueled by the dynamics of social networks, while traditional media is viewed suspiciously more than ever before. Peculiar neologisms, such as "hate speech", "fake news" or "alternative facts", speak volumes about these different developments and can be treated as alarming indicators for a cultural change that may be happening right in front of our eyes; but it appears that we still lack a proper account of these processes – how they fit together, where they stem from and where they might lead us.

The following paper presents some tentative ideas regarding the nature of one problem at the core of this unsettling state of affairs, namely a rapidly spreading culture of mistrust and its political and epistemological implications. To this end, it will first give a descriptive account of the German case which serves as a paradigmatic example: the right-wing PEGIDA movement, the wider social milieu in which it is embedded and the worldview shared by a large part of its supporters (2). In a second step, and in order to attain a better understanding of this political movement's specificities, the paper will draw on one of the most influential contributions to contemporary social theory, Luc Boltanski's theory of justification, an approach that puts societal conflicts and the ways in which actors justify their own actions and criticize those of others center stage. As will be argued, it is precisely the quasi-violent *refusal* of justification which is constitutive for the movement in question, thereby transcending the reach of Boltanski's framework to some extent (3). In a third step, a closer look will be taken at the epistemological paradox that results from the fact that a number of crucial points of criticism are far from exclusive to the PEGIDA movement but rather shared by a larger part of the overall population (not limited to Germany), which raises severe problems for the question of sociological critique. At this point, the paper will refer to a number of ideas by Bruno Latour in order to allow for a better understanding of this paradox and its consequences (4). The paper closes with a few remarks on the possibility to "reassemble" trust and critique as crucial but contested – and, hence, *precarious* – foundations of modern society (5).

2. Cultures of Mistrust: Into the Heart of PEGIDA

The far-right PEGIDA movement, which first emerged in Eastern Germany and has since spread over Europe with offshoots in virtually all European countries, has left a mark on current German political culture and discourse

that cannot be overlooked. PEGIDA, the *Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident*, started by organizing large-scale weekly "Monday demonstrations" from October 2014 on, drawing up to 25,000 participants in Dresden alone (in January 2015, after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris). Similar movements quickly formed in many German cities, and the recent success of the right-wing party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*, engl.: "Alternative for Germany") can be seen as a direct effect of that movement and as its institutional, party-political branch. The present paper is not so much interested in the timeline of historical events, however, or in the political power struggles both inside the actual movement and the German political system as a whole, but in the epistemic and discursive order at the heart of this movement.

PEGIDA and its followers have become infamous for their openly provocative symbolism, for example by picturing Chancellor Angela Merkel as a Muslim with a headscarf, or as a Stasi or, alternatively, NSA agent. Also, the pejorative term "Lügenpresse" ("lying press"), which was voted the "ugliest word of the year" in 2014, is probably well-known already. What is striking, beyond this use of symbols and intended provocation, is the kind of overarching worldview that seems to be at the core of PEGIDA, the AfD and their supporters, which can be observed in interviews and especially in social media. PEGIDA reached the mark of 200,000 Facebook likes on February 6, 2016.[2] In comparison, the two largest German parties, the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats (SPD), had around 100,000 likes each on the same day. This, of course, not only gives insight into the socio-demographic structure and media preferences of PEGIDA followers and Facebook users, but also opens a large space for empirical observation, since actors are rather outspoken even in publicly accessible social media and do not mince their words. Once one delves into this rather unpleasant discourse bubble, one quickly finds oneself bewildered by a widespread mixture of misanthropy, hate speech, skewed ideas of politics, conspiracy theories and revolutionary fantasies. In effect, what one can observe in this discourse is what we may call a *relatively closed worldview* that is shared to a large degree in the groups of concern here. Of course, not every single individual member of PEGIDA will subscribe to every single statement referred to in the following sketch, but as a general pattern, it might sum up well how the world works for PEGIDA, the AfD and their members, voters and supporters.

First and foremost, and giving the movement its founding name, Islam in general (as opposed to any more differentiated accounts, such as "radical Islamism", "Salafism", etc., and usually conceived of in a "monolithic" way) is considered a threat to culture and society and, hence, allegedly has no place

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2   The page was permanently banned from Facebook in July 2016.

in Germany or Europe at all. As chance would have it, the emergence, con-
solidation and proliferation of PEGIDA just happened to fall into times not
only of terrorist acts in the middle of Europe, further enforcing stereotypes
and hatred against Muslims and foreigners, but also of what became known
as the "refugee crisis", leading to a generalization of xenophobic attitudes
with a particular focus on refugees seen as "invaders" and "social parasites"
conquering Europe. According to many followers of PEGIDA, however, this
"invasion", and here it is getting substantially bizarre already, is conceived as
being *intended* and *controlled* by the German government whose aim is the
"replacement" of the autochthonous German population, a policy which again
is considered to be guided by a secret UN policy of "replacement migration".
More generally, there is a broad agreement on the idea that the German gov-
ernment, indeed, purposefully serves the interests of foreign countries and
that this government continuously breaks the prevailing law, climaxing in the
very commonly accepted idea that Angela Merkel (and other leading politi-
cians) are to be charged and sentenced for high treason and treason against the
people ("Volksverräter"). In this worldview, political leaders are perceived as
enemies of the people (which by all accounts is not just semantics but meant
literally), Merkel is not only "Europe's most dangerous woman" but effec-
tively a dictator ruling against the will of "the people", and so on and so forth.

But the irritating ideas of PEGIDA and its political milieu are not limited to
politics and politicians alone. According to its supporters, all "mainstream"
media is politically coordinated, cooptative (using the term "gleichgeschaltet",
deliberately referring to Nazi Germany) and, hence, simply permanently ly-
ing ("Lügenpresse"), which also leads to the strong and prominent convic-
tion that Germany's TV and media license is an illegitimate type of forced
taxation that has to be abolished immediately.[3] Freedom of speech, one is
convinced, does not exist at all, since political discourse is dominated by gag
orders, political correctness and taboos on speaking, allowing right-wingers
to stage themselves as *parrhesiastae* (in the Foucauldian sense), as the ones
taking personal risks to speak "the truth to power" (cf. Foucault 2011; Dyr-
berg 2014). Furthermore, it is no wonder that similar accusations are aimed
at opinion polls and scientific research in general, which is allegedly far from
objective and only serves the "anti-popular" interests of the government.
Lastly, the same thus applies to any state or state-affiliated institution: the
education system and its "perverted" curricula, courts and the legal system
in total, bureaucracy and public administration. Those not participating in

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3   In Germany, monthly licence fees for state-funded media (radio and TV) are collect-
ed from every household by the fee collection center of public-law broadcasting institutions
in the Federal Republic of Germany (GEZ). The fees have to be paid by every household
with a TV set, radio or internet access, irrespective of the number of devices and of
whether or not they are used to receive and consume public broadcasting content.

the movement or even voicing their differing opinions are pejoratively labeled "do-gooders" ("Gutmenschen", i.e. starry-eyed, naive idealists), while anti-PEGIDA protesters are believed to be unemployed "parasites" (again), secretly paid by the government and brought to demonstrations by organized bus transfers.

While all of this already sounds like an abstruse conspiracy, it is indeed worrying that there is no irony involved in this worldview at all. However, it gets even worse at the point where the PEGIDA milieu coalesces with parts of the so-called "Reichsbürger" (Reich Citizens' Movement) as well as ideological patterns stemming from the nationalist-conservative revolutionary movement of the Weimar Republic, thereby adding downright revolutionary aspirations to the picture. In this part of right-wing discourse, it is not an uncommon idea that the "Federal Republic of Germany" factually does not exist because it is not a "state" but actually a "firm", owned by the U.S. (or the "major banks", alternatively, that is "the Jews", and so forth). More often than not, this conviction goes hand-in-hand with a strong sympathy for Russia and Vladimir Putin, who is frequently stylized both as a hero and as the victim of Western media politics, censorship and propaganda. Consequently, the more radical parts of the movement claim that the German government (that is the Merkel regime, in particular) and also "the system" overall must be boycotted or, even better, toppled entirely – and interviews with PEGIDA protesters have repeatedly shown that there is a fairly common belief that both will indeed be overthrown soon. At this point, specific Eastern German traditions come into play, giving room for the idea that after 1989 a "second" revolution originating in Dresden is now almost around the corner because the governmental system of lies is already close to collapsing – "We did it once. We will do it again." It is, of course, never fully clear what kind of alternative system should be established after "it", but what is frequently made clear by the movement's supporters, not shy of openly threatening their political opponents in interviews or social media communication, is that names and faces "will be remembered". In fact, "remember the names" temporarily became a popular hashtag whenever politicians were attacked or criticized, and once one delves into the depths of Facebook and the like, it is not unusual at all to read that the representatives of the government and the "lying media" will be "first to be put up against the wall".

Of course, the picture drawn up unto this point is broad-brush and intentionally generalizing, yet hardly exaggerating. We might consider this milieu, its worldview and its bizarre ideas mesmerizing from a solely sociological or discourse analytical point of view, but in a political sense, it is truly frightening and indeed alarming. It is alarming not least because the recent success of the AfD, which achieved double-digit results in several recent elections and

received up to 25 percent of the votes in Saxony-Anhalt, has to be seen in this discursive context; it is alarming as well because even the intellectual debate has dramatically changed under the pressure of PEGIDA and its institutional offshoots. By now, it is no longer exclusively right-wing authors, such as the recently deceased Udo Ulfkotte, who enjoy great success with book titles such as *Corrupt journalists: How politicians, intelligence services and high finance control Germany's mass media* (Ulfkotte 2014). It is also not only the revival of extreme right-wing intellectuals, such as Götz Kubitschek, a central figure of the "New German Right" (Müller 2016) and one of Germany's leading right-wing publishers, who, alluding to Nietzsche, recently talked about a "political dawning" and a rediscovered "passion to be furious" that is spreading over the country.[4] Instead, established bourgeois philosophers alike, including Peter Sloterdijk and Rüdiger Safranski, as well as recognized conservative authors such as Botho Strauß, have also entered this discursive sphere and fantasize about governmental "decisions to flood Germany with refugees" or a policy of "self-destruction" and join PEGIDA in its radical critique of the media as an "ether of lies" (cf. Matussek 2015; Strauß 2015; Cicero 2016).

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Leaving exaggerations and semantic excesses aside and looking at all of this with the sober gaze of a social scientist, what has been called "closed world-views" are of course only *relatively* closed. The radicalness of opinions differs greatly, and what we are able to observe is rather a discursive field that ranges from ultra-conservative skepticism to plain pathological paranoia. Yet, there is one common denominator running through all of these positions, namely a firmly established *culture of mistrust* that affects a considerable part of society. It is based on a deeply rooted mistrust not only towards the state, the government, democracy and "the system" overall, but also towards the media, the law, the educational system and sciences – or, to put it more plainly and technically, an enormous mistrust towards *institutions* in general. The actual problem with this culture of mistrust, however, is that it has become, by its very mistrustful nature, hermetically sealed and hence established highly disintegrated social milieus. The social and political problem here arises from the fact that if mistrust is directed towards institutions in such a general sense – political institutions, law, media, science, education –, it becomes an increasingly impossible task to reach these milieus by way of rational arguments. Of course, this is precisely how strong ideologies and, even worse, conspiracy theories work, as a wealth of research literature demonstrates: Opposing ideas, arguments or viewpoints and their respective advocates almost automatically *have to be* considered part of the very false system that is

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4   Orig.: "Denn es ist am Horizont eine neue Möglichkeit aufgegangen, eine politische Morgenröte, und es ist eine Lust, zornig zu sein und der Politik die Zähne zu zeigen" (Kubitschek 2015).

refused and has to be overcome. As long as this mechanism operates in rather obscure segments of societal discourse, it may be treated more or less lightly and constitutes an interesting subject for epistemology and the sociology of knowledge. In the present case, however, it reaches a point in which the very foundations of civil democratic societies become friable.

3. Boltanski and the Refusal of Justification: A Theory and Its Significant Other

What does sociological theory have to offer for understanding this situation, and how can it possibly make sense of it? From a formal point of view, the discourse described here can obviously be understood as a radical type of criticism. In current social theory, it is Luc Boltanski who not only worked extensively on the dynamics of societal conflicts and their inner logics, but also formulated the most significant single contribution to the modern debate on critique. His theory of justification, comprehensively published in a work with Laurent Thévenot, tries to describe and explain how agents critically deal with situations they consider problematic, how they refer to different "worlds" or "orders of justification" when they perceive social injustice and suggest solutions that are considered more just, and how they eventually solve conflicts by making reasonable compromises between these different orders (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot 2006). At first, the PEGIDA discourse and its patterns of argumentation, if one cares to call it that, do bear certain similarities to what Boltanski and Thévenot call the "domestic world", which is essentially constructed along the lines of the family and puts emphasis on tradition and one's place in a hierarchy of personal dependencies (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 164 et seqq., 241 et seqq.). Indeed, the political vision of PEGIDA and the AfD as well as their agenda, rationale and logic strongly resemble certain elements that are characteristic for the domestic order, namely a strong affinity to authority and hierarchical thinking, a stressing of ancestry and tradition, and an emphasis on trust that is paradoxically at the bottom of mistrust. In addition, there are some elements which could well be drawn from what the authors call the "inspired world" (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 159 et seqq., 237 et seqq.), in particular the charismatic aspirations of right-wing leaders and their tendency to produce themselves as enlightened saviors of the country, enabled to look behind the curtains of the political stage: *"It Is Written, but I Say unto You"* (cf. also Weber 1978: 243). However, the underlying "logic of the house" ends beyond its very doorstep in the current case, radically excluding "the other" from the idea of generality and common good. Thereby, the PEGIDA model, as one that is based on primordial exclusion and the *negation* of fundamental principles, such as solidarity and equity, already violates a crucial assumption vital to Boltanski's entire polity model. As he argues on the case of eugenics

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and national-socialism, "[a]n order supported by an *illegitimate value* is […] not established in full generality, insofar as its compatibility with the principle of common humanity has not been established", with "hierarchies relying on racial inequalities, and on biological inequalities in general" being the example given for illustration purposes (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 80). In Boltanski's model, which draws on political philosophies that have stood the test of time, the vision represented by PEGIDA and comparable movements should therefore not fall into a valid *cité* of justification that anyone may convincingly and acceptably refer to. In this orthodox reading, it *cannot* rely on any of the established orders of value because it challenges the very sense of justice of anyone referring to it.

It would, of course, be the easy way out to reify theory instead of taking empirical evidence seriously, only to then give up the theoretical model in its entirety for the current case. One other way to deal with the empirical observations at hand would be to introduce a new regime of justification into the framework, an "order of chauvinism" for instance, that renders racist and excluding claims of superiority legitimate. The problem here is the axiom that the idea of common [sic!] humanity [sic!] is the cornerstone of *every* valid regime of justification (which has been pointed out as a problem by a number of commentators before, Bruno Latour (1998; 2004a: 255) among many others, sometimes referring to Michael Walzer (1983) and his "spheres of justice", which actually allow the distribution of goods to be tied to particular groups of actors). There is another element in Boltanski's and Thévenot's theory, however, that appears interesting for the present case: the anomalies in orders of justification which the authors describe only very broadly on the last pages of their seminal book. While their entire theory is fundamentally based on the assumption of what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 34, 346) call the "imperative of justification" in modern, democratic societies, they are smart enough to also take notice of the crosscurrents of this imperative, if only very briefly.

On these last pages of the book, Boltanski and Thévenot discuss a number of strategies (so to speak) that actors may adopt when resolving conflict by way of justification seems too costly, pointless or otherwise impossible. Among those alternative strategies, we find *firstly* private arrangements, namely a deal between two parties that allows mediation between their particular interests but is not oriented towards a *common* good (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 336 et seqq.). At the same time, this allows one to question a societal compromise by reducing it to a "solely" private arrangement. Interestingly, the authors mention racist ideologies in this context (cf. ibid.: 338) as a case of agreements that are essentially particularistic and not based on the idea of common humanity. *Secondly*, Boltanski and Thévenot mention the exposure of implicit allusions that are inherent to a justificational discourse, which is

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then uncovered as being untruthful (for example, when somebody uses legitimate political arguments to conceal his or her actual, illegitimate interests) (cf. ibid.: 338 –339). *Thirdly*, the authors introduce the "flight from justification" (ibid.: 339–340.) as a special type of conflict solution, but it is noteworthy that this technique is narrowed down to cases in which actors *mutually agree* on the idea that the matter of debate did not really matter at all to begin with, an "active complicity among persons" which may then lead to a "relativization" of the conflict, understood as being based on a "tacit agreement to interest themselves in contingency and bring it into the foreground" (ibid.: 340). *Fourthly*, and as a more stable version of relativization, Boltanski addresses "relativism" as a general approach to life in which all orders of justification and the underlying common good are considered equally meaningless, but *without* referring to an alternative order of things (cf. ibid.: 340 et seqq.).

For the present case of relatively closed right-wing ideologies, it could be argued that elements or motifs of at least the first three strategies mentioned may be observed, while the full phenomenon cannot be captured by it. PEGIDA supporters, indeed, accuse established politics of being involved in specific types of private arrangements that ignore the alleged interests of the German people, while paradoxically their own conceptions, in fact, match the very same type of particularistic design. Furthermore, we also find an element in their rhetoric that claims to uncover the secret, scandalous plans of politicians behind the detested "humanitarian talk". What Boltanski and Thévenot call "flight from justification", however, falls remarkably short in this special case. PEGIDA is far from fleeing into contingency or from retreating into privatism. Its protagonists and supporters do have a political vision – and the AfD now also has a full-fledged party program to bring it about – but the more interesting point is that they largely *refuse* to enter into a serious discourse about this vision at all. At this point, it may be possible to introduce precisely this as another strategy to the model, namely the *refusal of justification*.

If we look at the structure of argumentation more closely, a difference may be stated between the logic at play when PEGIDA actors refer to their vision internally and externally. Among their own peers, their logic is indeed to a large degree inspirational (in Boltanski's terms), mixed with elements borrowed from the domestic order, focused on an idealized "community of blood" and on a neo-romantic glorification of what is considered the good old times of a traditional, homogeneous society. When defended against opposing views represented by outsiders, however, it is remarkable that these motifs move to the background – not to be substituted by other patterns of justification, but by a strong, emphatic will to refuse any kind of justification at all. What can be observed then is not a different type of reasoning,

justification or critique, but the general denial of argumentative discourse in principle, based on the total denial of the other's arguments, combined with an almost totalitarian claim to truth.

But where do such phenomena fit into Boltanski's framework? After having briefly discussed the aforementioned special cases, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 343–346) *lastly* mention the tension between violence and justification in a rather cryptic final paragraph that evokes more questions than it is able to answer. It becomes apparent only in the 1991 afterword to *De la justification* (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 347–358) as well as in Boltanski's parallel volume on *Love and Justice as Competences* that "justice", as the crucial point of reference in the theory of justification, solely constitutes one of four possible "modes of action" (Boltanski 2012: 68 et seqq.), with "the idea of a universe operating wholly according to justice" being considered "utopian". On several levels, the empiric case discussed here falls into the realm of violence – symbolically, ideologically and sometimes even practically –, and Boltanski makes a relevant point when he describes the "regime of dispute in violence" as one in which "[t]hings […] – and the category includes people, too, when they are in violence – are no longer human things, stabilized by their association with persons, but […] forces of nature", showing "themselves as foreign and unknown" (ibid.: 72). The notion of "refusal" fits into this scheme of dispute in violence rather well – and into the idea that "the impossibility of converging towards a principle of equivalence is what differentiates a dispute in violence from a dispute in justice" (ibid.: 68). However, these trenchant distinctions are already made on the periphery of Boltanski's model before he quickly turns towards "love" as an alternative regime, leaving "violence" behind as a desiderate of his framework, as the residuum which lurks in the dark for those analytical cases in which other "regimes" of dispute resolution have failed.

With this ultimately asymmetrical conceptual decision, the reader, looking for proper tools to deal with violent phenomena, is gracefully ushered out of the theoretical framework. While the ideological patterns and practical manifestations found in the PEGIDA movement may be far from a singularity, Boltanski's theory of conflict and justification remains strangely quiet here, and thereby to some extent shows a certain bias towards rationalist and idealist conceptions of social action, discourse and conflict. If we agree on this observation, we may raise much more general questions in this context, questions that might be addressed to large parts of our entire theoretical arsenal and our general ideas of justification, deliberation and rational democratic discourse. Without being able to further pursue this lead at this point, we should indeed ask ourselves what other theoretical means we actually do have available to address this type of a radical refusal of justification.

4. Latour and the Precarity of Critique: Epistemopolitical Problems

That being said, the problem we face with the described culture of mistrust goes even further. This is where the key notion of *critique* comes into play – in all its contested complexity and, hence, its *precarity*. To pinpoint the problem, the central *political* question arising from the aforementioned may be repeated here: How can voter milieus be reached by means of political communication and democratic discourse *at all* if any attempts at doing so are *a priori* considered untruthful and already part of a "larger" conspiracy against the people? Unfortunately, the problem is even more complex and far-reaching: Faced with the immense amount of mistrust towards the "lying press" and other parts of "the system", which has been observed in PEGIDA and its wider social context, major surveys were conducted in Germany in 2014 and 2015 in order to draw a more concise image of this spreading mistrust. The findings of these surveys were as consistent as they were alarming: Around 60% of all German respondents admitted to having *little* to *no trust* in the verisimilitude or "truth" of major media reports – 60% of the German population who basically does not believe what they read in the newspapers or see on TV (ZEIT Online 2015). Looking at the survey data in more detail, it is likewise remarkable and surprising that actors with above-average education and income, in particular, perceive media coverage as being "politically controlled".

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In what was labeled the largest Europe-wide youth survey ever, these findings have recently been validated even further: The *Generation What?* Study, which surveyed almost one million 18 to 34 year olds from 35 European countries, found that 66% of the German respondents have "rather no" or "no trust at all" in political institutions (with educational effects opposing the aforementioned findings). Relative and/or absolute distrust in other institutions ranges from 33% (police) to 42% (legal system/judiciary) to 61% (media) and 81% (religious institutions) (Calmbach 2017). However, the situation is even worse in a comparative perspective: The number of young Europeans who more or less distrust politics averages at 82% (with the highest figures in France, Italy and Greece, ranging from 92 to 94%), and 79% of the respondents reported a mistrust of media (again over 90% in countries like the UK or Italy).[5]

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5   Cf. the survey website at http://www.generation-what.eu/en/; some comparative results can be found at https://www.ebu.ch/news/2017/04/ebus-landmark-generation-what-project-reveals-picture-of-modern-european-youth; and at https://www.ebu.ch/events/2017/04/ebu-media-lunchtime-talk--generation-what-how-do-18-34-year-olds-feel-about-europe-and-many-other-things (last viewed: 15 May, 2017).

Faced with these disturbing figures, we need to acknowledge that the above-mentioned kind of mistrustful criticism is not at all a phenomenon particularly special to PEGIDA and its supporters. On the contrary, in 2014, even the official German broadcasting council blamed both the wider German media and the official "consortium of public-service broadcasters in Germany" (ARD), in particular, for their coverage of the Ukraine crisis, calling it "fragmentary", "tendentious", "flawed" and "one-sided" (Telepolis 2014). Effectively, not only protesters in Dresden, but also critical sociologists of the media, the media's very own broadcasting council, and, finally, a majority of the population seem to meet in a similar critique which happens to peak with the term "lying press" at some points and turns out more nuanced and sophisticated at other times, but ultimately is highly congruent substantially. In effect, while the described "cultures of mistrust" may form the foundation and background for the emergence of movements such as PEGIDA, they are far from reducible to it. But does that mean that the critique expressed by PEGIDA is, in fact, justified and reasonable after all? How do we draw the boundaries then, and how may we remain capable of differentiating between extremist conspiracy theories, cultures of institutional mistrust and objective, well-founded criticism?

To illustrate another facet of this problem, we may cite a simple, example: The German weekly intellectual newspaper *Die ZEIT* recently confronted Alexander Gauland, a founding member, vice speaker and by now one of the two frontrunners of the AfD, with selected statements by Sahra Wagenknecht, who in turn is the deputy chairperson of the German socialist party "Die Linke" ("The Left"). *Die ZEIT* asked Gauland: "Wagenknecht [the leader of the left] has, let us put it carefully, commented critically on questions of migration and immigration. She is less critical towards Russia. She is highly critical towards the USA. She is highly critical towards the 'economic imperative', and she hates the 'system parties' ("Systemparteien"). So, we ask ourselves, what is the difference between you and Wagenknecht?" To which Alexander Gauland answered, laconically: "That she's in the wrong party" (Ulrich/Geis 2016).

If there is only a pinch of truth to this assessment, does it mean that the differentiation between critical positions which are part of "paranoid" worldviews and those which constitute a "rational" critique towards certain politics and media practices cannot be drawn on the basis of *substantial* criteria anymore but only by attributing them to specific *speakers* – that is in the *social* dimension? Of course, this would be a dangerous path to follow, but it does, indeed, lead to the crucial question of how we can determine the borders between criticism and contempt or even condemnation of the media, between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" forms of mistrust in institutions. It is again Boltanski who, in his latest masterpiece on *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, makes

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a fascinating point by proposing that the paranoid and the sociologist share one crucial trait, namely the firm conviction that there is always a concealed truth hiding behind things and how they seem to be (Boltanski 2014: esp. 170–267).[6] Paranoia, as a clinical disorder, and sociology, as a discipline with its generalized "hermeneutics of suspicion", historically developed around the same time, and thus are like unequal twins according to Boltanski. But then, how can they be distinguished? How, in other words, may we determine the "conditions that must be met for […] narratives […] to be judged *acceptable* or *unacceptable*" (Boltanski 2014: 213, emph. in the orig.)?

As far as looking to speaker positions is considered a reasonable starting point, the next step would be to generalize trust in public institutions or experts that "supply the official explanation", thereby falling into a "cult of *trust*" (Boltanski 2014: 207, emph. in the orig.; cf. ibid.: 209–212) which seems equally as dangerous as the cult of mistrust that is to be overcome. Another classical answer from the social sciences would be: by looking at the referred sources, the methods applied for determining truth as well as the inner logics of reasoning and argumentation. In Boltanski's words, we may try "to specify the formal properties a narrative has to manifest, in a given situation of utterance, in order to be judged acceptable or at least open to discussion, even by persons who do not accredit the way in which certain events are recounted in the story", that is to "orient us towards the analysis of the narrative grammars on which the character – acceptable or not – of the story of an event depends" (Boltanski 2014: 214). Boltanski calls these formal narrative structures the "grammar of normality" (ibid.: 215) and the "grammar of plausibility" (ibid.: 217). However, a number of problems arise at this point: Boltanski's issue (very much in line with Dewey) is not the identification of "objective" truth conditions but rather the *pragmatic* logic behind the "truth" of conspiracy theories and their "denunciation", the practical establishment of "acceptable" utterances or ideas, and the social logics behind it. His inquiry into the elective affinities of conspiracy theories, paranoia and allegedly "rational" sociological analyses is enlightening in that it shakes false certainties and illuminates the ambiguities of *both* everyday life and scientific accounts, yet it remains rather iconoclastic in the end and leaves a lot of burden on the actors and their capability to negotiate social realities. It may appear doubtful whether his otherwise lucid analysis helps to actually understand (let alone "solve") the *aporiae* that the "age of suspicion" (Boltanski 2014: 164, 226) has produced.[7] A substantial problem persists where even the very standards of scientific thinking are not *criticized* but entirely *rejected*, where what we call

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6   The general motif is, of course, already prominent in, e.g., Popper (2002 [1945]: 306–308), with whom Boltanski (2014: esp. 234 et seqq.) deals extensively.
7   Boltanski borrows this term from Nathalie Sarraute (1963 [1956]).

a "reliable source" is already considered part of the false and corrupted system, and particularly where this rejection is based on criticisms and sceptical ideas very similar to those voiced by a large number of otherwise unsuspicious observers, including critical thinkers, sociologists and so forth. It is exactly this similarity (or potentially: indistinguishability) which makes it a delicate endeavor to tell the difference between justified ("acceptable") and unjustified ("inacceptable") critique or even call the spreading rejection of reason and justification into question. Surely not on the level of differing accounts and opinions, but on this meta-level of discourse is where any kind of rational and responsible discussion becomes truly difficult.

It is another leading French theorist, Bruno Latour – who in turn obviously studied *On Justification* more than just superficially before writing his own *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Latour 2013) – who identified this very paradox much earlier. In his much-cited essay on the question *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?*, Latour (2004b: 228–229) asks: "What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let's say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu […]? In both cases", Latour answers his own question, in words almost identical to those of Boltanski, "you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete illusion of their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes […], but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation" (ibid.). "Of course," Latour (2004b: 230) states further, "conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: *Made in Criticalland*" (emph. in the orig.).

But there is even more to this strange relationship of paranoia, mistrust and critique: The actual and equally unsettling point is, in fact, not that conspiracy theories may be treated as "deformed" twins of "our own arguments", but the fact that in the process of their emergence and rise to popularity, "our own arguments" as well are "deformed" in a mirror-inverted manner. We should be aware that the appropriation of critical discourse *changes* the very character of critical arguments itself since the paranoid nature of conspiracy theories unleashes feedback effects unto the discursive sources upon which it draws. "What has become of critique", we have indeed to ask ourselves, "when there is a whole industry denying that the Apollo program landed on the moon?" (Latour 2004b: 228). By poisoning certain sources of critique

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and contaminating them with the odor of paranoia, consolidated cultures of irrational and ideological mistrust endanger the possibility conditions of rational scientific critique as well. It is therefore not at all a random episode when Latour starts his narrative on the *Modes of Existence* with a business meeting in which an entrepreneur challenges the scientific account of climate change since he does not "believe" in it, which gives a first hint at what Latour will later describe as differing "modes" of being in the world, "modes" that may be translated into each other by means of "diplomacy", yet entail and uphold their very own, irreducible "veridictions" (in plural) (Latour 2013: 366). Needless to say that it is precisely at this point where sociological critique *itself* ultimately becomes precarious.

Under these premises, what Latour aims at, first and foremost, is nothing less than a renewal of sociology based on a critique of critique[8] – on "bring[ing] the sword of criticism to criticism itself" (Latour 2004b: 227). For Latour, the classical critical posture "was predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances" (Latour 2010: 474–475) and, hence, absorbed by a (too) sharp, binary distinction between "*fact* and *fairy*" (Latour 2004b: 237, emph. in the orig.). Because of this, the genuinely "modern" critic, according to Latour, was practically forced to "alternate[…] haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya" (Latour 2004b: 246), the precise state of affairs that constitutes the focal point of Latour's critique. As far as a positive concept is included in this project, it consists in "suspending the critical gesture" (Latour 2010: 476) by way of a largely descriptive (cf. Savage 2009), ethnographically-oriented style of research which he calls "composition" or "compositionist" in that it *brings together* elements in order to make them "speak" in all their potentially conflictual heterogeneity. Culminating in the *Inquiry* and the accompanying *AIME* project for the time being,[9] this "relativist relativism" (Latour 1993: 111–114) (or maybe better: *epistemological relationalism* and *ontological pluralism*) is conceived as a more "realistic" foundation for the social sciences that allows one to overcome the pitfalls of "critical" thinking and, if the allusion to Husserl is permitted, to go back "to the things themselves": "My argument is that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on

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8   Even though Latour (2010: 474) claims that his project of "compositionism could stand as an alternative to critique (I don't mean a critique of critique but a reuse of critique; not an even more critical critique but rather critique acquired secondhand—so to speak—and put to a different use)."

9   Cf. www.modesofexistence.org.

the contrary, renewing empiricism" (Latour 2004b: 231, emph. in the orig.). For the question of critique, this can only lead Latour to the same conclusion that Boltanski drew in the debate on critical sociology vs. the sociology of critique: namely to "follow the actors themselves" (Latour 2005: 12, 121, 227; Boltanski & Thévenot 2006: 10–12; cf. Boltanski 2011: 23–29) in their specific ways to "adopt a [critical] position with respect to the world, and lend it *meaning*" (Weber 2004: 381, emph. in the orig.).

5. Reassembling Trust and Critique: An Outlook

Again, the reader may find a number of interesting ideas in Latour's dealing with critique, but whether or not these turn out as useful tools for tackling recent political developments still remains an open question. So what is it that we may learn from Boltanski's and Latour's writings, and what is it that these two might add to the discussion on mistrust, right-wing populism, conspiracy theories and "fake news", as well as matters of critique and critical reason that run through these issues like a common thread? The case discussed here is, in fact, a special one: Politically, it is based on an extreme particularism and thus not exceptional in any regard. Epistemologically, however, it draws on conspicuous and conspiratorial, hermetically sealed patterns of reasoning. In this respect, it marks the exact opposite of what Boltanski (and in a certain regard also Latour) asks of critical sociology in order become a more reasonable, *pragmatic* sociology of critique, namely making its measures, reference points and standards of critique explicit and taking into account the very logics of justification of the other. For a start, we might acknowledge this ambiguity and come to understand the problems outlined here as epistemopolitical hybrids, for we are forced into dangerous dilemmas when focusing on only one side of this hybridity. The questions at stake are genuinely political ones at first glance, yet they quickly come to involve complex epistemological issues that have to be dealt with in order to reach a better understanding of the former. At the same time, the current debates on truth, knowledge, reason and (mis-)trust turn out to be deeply political, both in their inner structure and with regard to their actual and potential consequences. It is this very hybridity of conflictual issues that Latour has stressed for several decades, and we surely are well-advised not to "purify" them by blanking out one side or the other if a better understanding of these issues is what we are looking for (cf. only Latour 1993: 10–12). Our political problems with trust and critique *are,* in fact, epistemological problems – and *vice versa*.

On another note, we might take the pragmatistic impulses of both Boltanski and Latour seriously on an empirical level even if we are not buying into their epistemologies and ontologies in their entirety. If there is one thing

we might actually learn from these two authors, it is to observe more attentively again, to look more closely and to listen more carefully to what is happening in these dark places of society, places which precisely will *not* disappear, but will potentially even be bolstered by exorcistic critique and forceful refutation. Instead of falling either into naivety and excessive trust on the one hand or into mutual excessive distrust on the other (the "fact" and the "fairy" position, respectively) (Latour 2004b: 227), it might, indeed, be a good idea to follow Latour's understanding of critique and critical discourse as a practice of *composing* – of *assembling* heterogeneous elements that might otherwise soon end up as parted, separated ontological zones. "The critic", in this understanding, "is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles"; he is "not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather" (ibid.: 246). Rather than countering cultures of mistrust with even more mistrust, thereby constituting *our very own culture of mistrust* to sink into, we might thus look for better ways "to protect and to care" with "caution" (ibid.: 232, 246) for those critical arenas and the elements which they entail. In the end, and on a practical level, these suggestions might lead into rather well-known (and in effect: rather Habermasian) models of discourse, yet (and in contrast to classical models of deliberation) there is reason "to visit successively and to document the different truth production sites that make up our civilisation" (Crease et al. 2003: 18) in order to bring them into a truly critical dialogue with each other.

In fact, there surely *are* means to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate trust and mistrust, and between appropriate and inappropriate critique, but elaborating on reliable criteria to make these distinctions (and what does "relieable" mean under late-modern conditions?) *still* constitutes a pressing task for the sociology of mistrust and critique. Boltanski's original suggestion to overcome this problem was to take the respective critiques of the very actors in question more seriously, and we might add with Latour that the elements involved in these critiques first need to be "*re*assembled". Paradoxically, we might still end up with the fundamental problem of determining and justifying the respective epistemic *place* from which these distinctions can be drawn at all and how to take up a truly "metacritical position" (Boltanski 2011: 4–8) – the classical problem of ideological criticism and critical sociology. But we have good reasons to continue reflecting on the vital question of how criticism and well-founded, justifiable mistrust in institutions can remain thinkable and communicable, especially in times when hermetic arguments and paranoid thinking seem to be becoming more and more socially acceptable – thereby threatening to appropriate critical discourse and at the same time demonstrating how *precarious* this critical discourse is.

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Daniel Witte

Prekarnost kritike: kulture nepoverenja i odbijanje opravdanja

Apstrakt

Tekst se bavi skorašnjim razvojem u pravcu autoritarizma i desničarskog populizma koji je postao vidljiv u velikom broju zapadnih društava i pokušava da označi moguće kulturalno zasnivanje ovog trenda. Koristeći primer nemačkog pokreta PEGIDA i šireg miljea u koji je ugrađen, u tekstu se identifikuje i opisuje brzo širenje kulture nepoverenja i diskutuju neke od njenih političkih i epistemoloških implikacija. U drugom koraku, tekst se okreće teoriji opravdanja Lika Boltanskog, kako bi se postiglo bolje razumevanje ovog političkog pokreta. Argumentuje se da je kvazi-nasilno *odbijanje* opravdanja konstitutivno za ovaj pokret, te se stoga u izvesnoj meri transcendira okvir koji je postavio Boltanski. U trećem koraku, više pažnje je posvećeno epistemološkom paradoksu koji nastaje iz činjenice da su brojne glavne kritike koje iznosi pokret PEGIDA zajedničke za veći deo ukupne populacije, što dovodi do ozbiljnih problema za pitanje sociološke kritike. Tekst se koristi idejama Bruna Latura da bi bolje rasvetlio ovaj paradoks i ispitao njegove posledice. Zaključuje se sa primedbama o mogućnosti da se „ponovo združe" poverenje i kritika kao ključni, ali osporavani – i prema tome *prekarni* – temelji modernog društva.

Ključne reči: nepoverenje, sumnja, poverenje, paranoja, desničarski populizam, PEGIDA, opravdanje, kritika, Lik Boltanski, Bruno Latur