Recovering Morality: Pragmatic Sociology and Literary Studies

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Abstract

The disciplines of sociology and literary studies have seen a renewed interest in morality and in ethics in recent decades, but there has been little dialogue between the two. Recognizing that literary works, both classical and popular, can serve as moral critiques and that readers, of all types and classes, can and often do serve as moral critics, this paper seeks to apply some insights of pragmatic sociology to the field of literature by exploring the ways in which moral claims are expressed, evaluated, and negotiated by texts and through texts by readers. Drawing on the new French pragmatic sociology, represented by sociologists such as Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, this paper claims that fiction has a twofold role in civil society. Firstly, novels serve as critiques in their ability to formalize and dramatize generalizable logics of evaluation and to elicit debates by pointing to the inadequacies of, and clashes between, such evaluative logics in the lives of their characters. Secondly, the reading public is often moved to form its own critiques of a novel, in praise or in denunciation of its content, its form, or its perceived intent, and in doing so exercises its moral capacity in the public sphere.

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Recovering Morality: Pragmatic Sociology and Literary Studies

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Recent decades have witnessed the rediscovery of the moral and ethical dimensions of literary texts. Under the impetus of the growing interest in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and the criticism promoted by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty—who conceive of literature as a site for the formulation of ethical dilemmas[1]—literary scholarship has turned towards ethics. This movement, which first gained prominence in the mid-1980s, was undoubtedly a response to the formalism of structuralism and post-structuralism. Questions of otherness, of singularity, of the relation of ethics and aesthetics, of universalism and responsibility became increasingly pertinent for literary scholars as different as Wayne C. Booth and J. Hillis Miller, leading the discipline towards a new concern with the moral dimensions of texts and of reading.[2]

A turn towards morality has also been evident in various branches of contemporary sociology. Departing from the dominant paradigms of rational choice theory on the one hand and critical theory on the other, sociologists have elaborated new and insightful ways of accounting for the moral dimension of social life. Through his interpretation and revitalization of Émile Durkheim, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has unraveled the fundamental role of social "goods" and "evils" in modern societies, demonstrating the centrality of morality in the eruption and management of public scandals, in practices of inclusion and exclusion, and in the very underpinnings of democratic life.[3] A different perspective on morality is developed by Michèle

Lamont, who demonstrates the ways in which social groups construct moral boundaries between themselves and others and view their morality as a valuable resource with which they preserve their uniqueness and self-worth.[4] Further endeavors in the sociology of morality include examples from fields as diverse as urban sociology and economic sociology.[5] These sociologists, of course, do not share a single, uniform understanding of morality, yet what is common to all these approaches is a recognition that the moral dimension of social life is irreducible to other categories.

Despite their parallel concerns, there has been very little dialogue between the two disciplines of sociology and literary studies on the role of texts in articulating moral points of view. This is apparent in the different uses of the terms "morality" and "ethics," conventionally contrasted in standard philosophical accounts, the first referring to universal imperatives, while the second addresses more culture-specific questions of the formation of the good character and the good life. Despite the obvious affinity of sociology with culture, sociologists, who belong to the discipline christened by Durkheim as "la science de la morale," have tended to use the terms "moral" or "morality" to designate the normative constraints on behavior. But the question of terminology and the debate between universalists and ethics-oriented philosophers should not obscure the fact that both share an attempt to move away from standard theories of power and oppression and from totalizing concepts such as "ideology," "habitus," or "discourse," while retaining an exemplary concern with the moral dimensions of texts, what texts say about what we owe to each other. While the various offshoots of Marxian, Gramscian, and feminist approaches to texts and culture have been immensely useful in highlighting the social underpinnings of literature and its role in relaying formations of power, these perspectives now threaten to paralyze cultural inquiry by relying on mechanistic distinctions between the powerful and the

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oppressed.

The purpose of this article is to offer tools for studying the ways in which literature as a social practice enacts and performs moral evaluation. A novel which exposes the reader to a sense of injustice or to a dilemma and which imbues these dilemmas and injustices with emotional value is not only a work of fiction but what we may call a <u>critique</u>, a discourse denouncing the violation of common norms. Similarly, responses to a novel voiced by scholars, reviewers, and "lay" readers are often imbued with a concern for morality and should not be "deconstructed" but rather studied at face value as moral claims about social arrangements. When debating the inclusion of a controversial novel in high-school curricula, when championing or deploring the proliferation of works of one popular genre or another, when denouncing a book for its gender politics, actors make claims and justify them using generalizable logics which pertain to the common good. Recognizing that literary works (both classical and popular) can serve as critiques and that readers (of all types and classes) can and often do serve as critics, this paper seeks to develop a new direction for the sociology of literature, one which explores the ways in which moral claims are expressed, evaluated, and negotiated by texts and through texts by readers.

In making this argument, we turn to the new French pragmatic sociology, represented in a large part by Luc Boltanski and his collaborators, Laurent Thévenot and Ève Chiapello, who address questions of how agreement is achieved among parties whose claims draw upon conflicting logics, the conditions under which a particular argument carries weight, and when this argument will be refuted or disregarded. From this sociological perspective, morality is a set of repertoires of justification, not iron-clad rules about "oughts." We view fictional characters, writers, readers, and critics as social actors endowed with moral competence, who are able to

articulate and respond to controversies using different arguments and to formalize critiques of existing social arrangements. Actors switch between different logics of justification, thus making the field of moral justification multivocal and conflictual, and not a set of ethical and normative injunctions, as is often supposed in Aristotelian and Kantian intellectual legacies.

After briefly reviewing the main points of pragmatic sociology and its relation to the sociology of morality, we examine its relevance to the sociology of literature by exploring the place of fiction as critique in the moral discourse of civil society. We claim that the role of fiction in civil society is twofold. Firstly, novels serve as critiques in their ability to formalize and dramatize generalizable logics of evaluation and to elicit debate by pointing to the inadequacies of, and clashes between, such evaluative logics in the everyday life of their characters. The novel, therefore, may be viewed as part and parcel of the formation of civil society in that it requires the simultaneous exercise of compassion for the suffering of imaginary characters and the consideration of the moral implications of that suffering. Secondly, the reading public— common readers, popular reviewers, and high-brow critics—form their own critiques of a novel, in praise or in denunciation of its content, its form, or its perceived intent. Critiques then, whether voiced by authors through the mouths of the characters they create or by readers and reviewers, constitute the exercise of morality in the public sphere in that they express the concern of the speaker with what he or she perceives to be the greater good of society.

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Since the sociology of popular culture is a well-trodden field, what is the value of introducing this new paradigm? Our contribution to this field should be understood against the general tendency of sociologists of culture to analyze culture as forever entangled in webs of power and discourse, being—so to speak—the dependent variable to be unpacked and analyzed

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by the critic over the heads of largely unaware and uncritical "lay" readers. In contrast to pragmatic sociology, with its emphasis on the critical capacity of the social actor, critical theory—in the form of postcolonial, feminist, or neo-Marxist studies—has often proved impermeable to the moral claims of lay actors and texts, either ignoring them or subsuming them under the broad category of "ideology" (and its various intellectual offshoots).[6]

This reluctance to address moral claims has a number of reasons. One is epistemological and has to do with the fact that cultural studies have been plagued by the "hermeneutics of suspicion." As Rita Felski cogently put it: "Drawing its energies from the political commitments of professors and students, it [the hermeneutics of suspicion] seeks to read against the grain and between the lines, to subject seemingly self-evident truths to merciless questioning and vigorous critique. Its strategy is one of relentless deciphering, of pressing below surface distractions to lay bare meanings. A spirit of disenchantment hovers over the practice of suspicious reading, a desire to slay false gods by exposing art's complicity with oppressive social arrangements."[7] An epistemology of suspicion, by its very nature, cannot take seriously the explicit moral claims of texts. A second reason has to do with the widespread conflation of morality with coercive ideological structures, shared by gender, Marxist, and postcolonial theorists. By and large, throughout the twentieth century, both sociology and psychoanalysis have viewed morality as a form of false consciousness, repressing the working class or disciplining the ego. These theoretical frameworks have thereby dissociated themselves from one of the most consistent concerns of lay actors in daily life: namely, who is right and who is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, and how different moral claims can be reconciled. The scholastic distinction between texts and life, aesthetics and the everyday, is oblivious to the fact that critique is a universal capacity shared by actors in various ways. While several notable exceptions to this tendency

exist, such as Elaine Showalter and Elizabeth Lunbeck's studies of psychiatry and of the ways in which it redefined symptoms of social upheavals as individual neurosis and hysteria, morality in these studies remains coupled with power. [8] This is due to the fact that once the sociologist creates an analytic dichotomy between oppressed and oppressors, the claims and deeds of the latter group (in this case, psychiatrists) become inherently false and deceitful whereas the protests and complaints of the former group (in this case, patients) are correspondingly considered to be genuine. The result is an asymmetrical explanation, one which evaluates evidence offered by various parties and institutions according to differential sets of criteria.

Pragmatic sociology, by shifting our attention from underlying structures to a close reading of how social actors (as readers, authors, or critics) understand such structures in their own terms, criticize them, and effectively communicate the meanings of their critiques via moral claims, allows us to recover the critical capacity of these actors. In referring to moral claims, we mean neither a claim of the Aristotelian variety about the nature of the good life, nor a Kantian claim about the universality of moral maxims. Rather, we argue that social actors (real or fictional) voice critiques in the name of values, ideals, and repertoires of justification that are presumed to be universally shared. Where critical sociology sees positions in fields of power being defended through distinctions, or hegemonic ideologies being fiercely guarded, pragmatic sociology reveals a critical competence shared by actors located in different institutions. The methodological implication of this symmetry is that the researcher cannot and should not create distinctions between genuine and false claims, but rather follow closely the ways in which actors create such distinctions and challenge one another's claims. This understanding allows for the radically divergent moral stances voiced by authors, readers, or critics to be regarded symmetrically; the pragmatic sociologist gives all sides of a controversy equal weight and thus

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reveals the aesthetic and narrative mechanisms which actors use in order to make moral claims and to render their critiques powerful and effective.

The Pragmatic Sociology of Justification

The new French pragmatic sociology, in its various forms, was developed in the 1980s by theorists such as Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Bruno Latour, Cyril Lemieux, Philippe Corcuff, Claudette Lefaye, and others.[9] A shared assumption of pragmatic sociologists— emphasized especially by Boltanski and Thévenot—is that actors have a universal capacity to argue about just and unjust arrangements, a capacity to criticize and to move between different ways of arguing about these arrangements, and a capacity to defend their position using evidence or "tests." Because ordinary actors care a great deal about justice, they will frequently engage in confrontations with others when their sense of justice is disturbed. Rather than being strategic, calculating, and wholly self-interested, as sociology has often portrayed them, actors tend to use arguments which aim at having general validity, make use of an array of cognitive operations to evaluate situations, and assess the size (grandeur) of other actors. They do so by using principles of equivalence, that is, instruments to evaluate, compare, hierarchize, and arbitrate between conflicting situations and principles.

In their seminal work On Justification, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot arrange these principles of equivalence into what they call cités, or "worlds of evaluation."[10] These worlds are systems of logics which are used to establish what is to be considered worthy in a repertoire of evaluation, allowing actors to evaluate the merit of a person, an object, or an abstract value. Moreover, each logic excludes and disqualifies all other methods of evaluation, allowing a person to be deemed worthy in one cité and unworthy in another. Each cité specifies the relevant

categories for evaluation, the adequate methods for establishing worth, and the expected investment of a person in achieving a high measure of status. For example, a critique formed according to the criteria of what the authors describe as the <u>civic cité</u> evaluates its object according to its conduciveness to good citizenry, to universalism, and to the common good. Conversely a critique based on the <u>domestic cité</u> will consider its object in relation to familial values, fraternity, and tradition. Equipped with these tools, individuals bring into public their deliberations over questions of worth: Did someone receive a promotion because of their creativity and originality? Because of their industriousness, or their charity?

Pragmatic sociology is therefore first and foremost a sociology of controversies, of moments of dispute, that are openly visible to actors. The focus on controversy, rather than consensus, stems from the fact that while members of a society share certain norms, values, narratives, and scripts, their joint social life is strewn with uncertainties about the basic characteristics of their interaction. Uncertainties, as Latour identifies them, may exist at all levels of social engagement. Actors may disagree about the nature and boundaries of the group they belong to, about the goals of their actions, about the types of objects relevant to their interactions, about what constitutes a fact and what constitutes an empirical science. Thus, within a wide array of different frames of reference, controversy is a key focal point for the sociologist, allowing actors to offer accounts of their own frames of reference. As Latour puts it, "Instead of taking a reasonable position and imposing some order beforehand, [this approach] claims to be able to find order much better <u>after</u> having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed . . . The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst. This is why, to regain some sense of order, the

best solution is to trace connections <u>between</u> the controversies themselves rather than try to decide how to settle any given controversy."[11]

At the same time, controversies and their resolutions are often stabilized by texts. In the work of Boltanski and Thévenot each <u>cité</u> is formalized in a range of texts, both canonical and current, and is exemplified and studied in managerial texts as well as in works of political philosophy. Thus, the logic of the <u>market cité</u> is demonstrated by Adam Smith's <u>The Wealth of Nations</u>, the <u>charismatic cité</u> by Thomas Hobbes's <u>Leviathan</u>, the <u>civic cité</u> by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and so on. This, of course, does not imply that all able discussants must have read this somewhat difficult series of works. While the rules and characteristics of particular <u>cités</u> are demonstrated clearly and lucidly in philosophical texts, they are also voiced in some form or another by speakers of various class and educational backgrounds on a daily basis.[12] Thus, while Boltanski and Thévenot do not make explicit methodological formulations, we can generalize their methodology to suggest that texts can serve as platforms which formulate <u>cités</u> and moral critiques, and at the same time to suggest that readers of various class backgrounds can appropriate and utilize such texts as exemplars of a specific critique.

In relation to the sociology of literature, then, we would like to consider how critique operates in literature, first in the text itself and second in its readers. The first level of analysis is interested in the ways fictional characters address issues of real-life injustice and invoke the moral emotions of readers. Many forms of critique tend to devalue moral readings of texts, viewing them as "less sophisticated" than purely aesthetic responses or, worse, as eliciting ideological structures that literary scholars would like to dismantle. However, by giving us accounts of characters wrongfully evaluated or valued in radically different ways in different contexts, a text can communicate the unfairness of equivalent situations beyond the text. Thus,

by appealing to the "less sophisticated" moral responses of its readers, a fictional text articulates an explicit moral claim. Pragmatic sociology, by refusing to differentiate between the moral competence of authors and their readers, enables us to view them as belonging to the same world of moral assumptions and repertoires, with the possibility that some novels will stand out because they are better able to formulate the assumptions of an emergent cité.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin can serve as an outstanding example of how a controversy can be brought to life through the words of fictional characters, as a novel published at the time of one of the fiercest controversies in the history of the United States. Abolitionists promoted their cause in the antebellum North by presenting slavery as a threat to democracy[13]—a moral concern in itself—and, in the case of Stowe, to Christianity. Countering the claims that the Southern economy was reliant on slavery, Stowe juxtaposes the relatively benign personal relations of some slave owners with their slaves and the universalistic Christian promise of salvation against a market logic that allowed human beings to be bought and sold. Uncle Tom, as a loved and respected slave in a southern household who is sold to pay the rising debts of his masters, can be read as Stowe's critique of antebellum conceptions of African-American personhood, having a quasi-familial relationship with his owners on the one hand, while being subject to the market cité and thus treated as a commodity on the other.

Similarly, in Little Eva's famous dying words, the promise of Christian salvation is extended toward slaves, subjecting them and their masters to the same universalistic logic of evaluation:. "You must be Christians. You must remember that each one of you can become angels, and be angels forever."[14] (p. 103). Salvation is here equally available to members of all races. As Stowe herself claimed in a subsequent publication, "The last and bitterest indignity which had been heaped on the head of the unhappy slaves has been the denial to them of those

holy affections which God gives alike to all."[15] By relocating the slave from the context of the domestic or the market cité to the civic cité, the fictional character of Eva directly gives this tension literary form. The controversy regarding the worth of slaves—as familiar and sometimes loved members of a household, as potential candidates for salvation, as commodities to be bought and sold at will, or as equal members of society—and the struggle of the characters with these competing definitions calls attention to the larger injustice of the social order. Of great importance here is the fact that, rather than reflecting a Christian ideology of the righteous white man, or—as Ian Watt's classic claim would lead us to believe—an ethic of individualism and authenticity, Stowe's novel explicitly calls for solidarity and social responsibility, and as such may serve as one of the most powerful moral claims against slavery in American literature.

It remains to be seen how far such moral confrontations overlap with, or even constitute, what narratologists call a complication in the plot. A plot complication, for example, is frequently a result of an object being dislocated from one cité to the other: what might have been previously thought of as belonging to the domestic or to the market cité is now addressed through another world, such as the civic cité, or vice versa. A controversy, then, is any such differential understanding of the worth of an object, value, or person, voiced by different parties in the text but responding to similar tensions and disagreements about value in the context in which the text was written. As Alexander notes in his discussion of the role of fictional media in communicating the values and ideals of the civil sphere, "If fictional writers were indeed deeply affected by the deprivations of economic, racial, and familial life, they were responding not only to actual situations outside of themselves but to their own inner desires, as members of the civil sphere, to speak on behalf of oppressed groups to society at large. Through their fictional work, in other words, they gave voice to the idealized aspirations of civil society itself."[16]

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Our second level of analysis refers to the ways in which readers of various classes—from common readers to academic critics—evaluate, criticize, or justify the moral value of a text or a genre. The value of literary works is often perceived by readers as intricately connected to morality. A novel may be intellectually or aesthetically challenging and thus seen as honing the mental capacities of the reading public; it may be seen as profane and harmful to that same public; it may question widely held assumptions—in life or in art—and be politically important; it may support racial or gender stereotypes and be condemned as reprehensible. Such questions and criticisms—of concern to inquisitors, authoritarian regimes, and liberal critics alike—are an inseparable part of reading. The pragmatic belief in a universal critical capacity implies that, since moral claims are not only elements of "ideological formations" but are expressed by actors who are capable of perceiving injustice and criticizing it, a reader's criticism of a text is important to the sociologist regardless of his or her class, education, or training in literary criticism and whether or not it succeeds in persuading others. In this view then, moral judgment is not an anomalous reaction to literature but, on the contrary, a natural one, that is, one that responds to the moral competence of texts and their authors.

This last point is crucial: a pragmatic account upholds the principle of symmetry, according to which all sides of a controversy—whether or not they have succeeded in persuading others, whether they defend puritanical principles or progressive ones—are to be treated equally, drawing on the same presuppositions about their common capacity to uphold and defend a moral principle, a <u>cité</u>. This principle of symmetry has been developed in the sociological study of the production of scientific knowledge, which argues, particularly in the work of David Bloor and Latour himself, that a scientific inquiry or experiment cannot be regarded as governed by one

logic if it succeeds and by another if it fails. Rather than dismissing scientific failures as irrelevant for the sociology of science (because such failures must have been caused by inaccurate measurements, faulty procedures, or human bias, whereas scientific successes follow a teleological logic), the sociologist of science sees both success and failure as equivalent in the social process of the production of knowledge. Latour has taken this idea a step further in his principle of generalized symmetry, according to which the actions of humans and nonhumans (microbes, computers, electrons, et cetera) should not be seen as inherently opposed and should be described in similar ways.[17] Along the same lines, critiques elicited in a controversy are revealing for the sociology of morality, regardless of whether or not their assumptions have prevailed. One moral position (for example, the Comstock laws, intended to enforce the "suppression of vice" by those interested in censorship) cannot be explained as "ideology" while another moral position (such as a feminism or post-colonialism interested in counteracting oppression) is understood as inherent truth or non-ideology.

Literary scholar Wayne C. Booth once complained that "too many ethical critics have assumed that their whole task is to damn what is evil or to expose other critics as incompetent or immoral for failing to do so."[18] But aesthetic critics are no less interested in acts of damnation than ethical critics, as they often construe the perceived shallowness of simplistic forms of representation as impinging on the intellects of students and readers. Critical scholarship is no less a moral crusader than Comstock; debates over conceptions of obscenity among nineteenth-century legislators are now transformed into controversies over the representation of women and minorities in arts and literature. All these different perspectives are moral in that they share a concern with the public good and draw upon a general logic in order to determine the correct course of action. Controversies over the moral nature of texts take place both in the halls of

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academia and in political, economical, social, and domestic settings: parents discuss the reading materials suitable for their children; publishers question the merits of the works they are evaluating; reviewers champion or censure; scholars analyze and debate. The fiercer the controversy, the richer the grounds for the sociologist of critique.

One example of such a controversy concerns the status of the sentimental novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a genre that has elicited a wide array of objections—rooted in different arguments and representing a variety of moral positions. As Jane Tompkins notes, the nineteenth-century indictment of sentimentality was framed in moralistic and religious terms, that is to say, sentimental works of literature were seen to cause their readers to lapse from strict adherence to religious and moral principles and to epitomize a nascent mass culture oriented toward indulgence and self-absorption.[19] In these early criticisms, the domestic cité—the realm of the family, kinship, and love—is criticized in the terms of the civic cité, which prizes public responsibility, civic conduct, and a republican contribution to the good of society. For example, concerns were voiced by proslavery critics about what was seen as a misrepresentation of the South in Uncle Tom's Cabin, framed in compelling dramatic prose. Critics feared that the novel, "with its vast circulation, will do infinite injury. Its dramatic power will have no other effect upon the country than to excite the fanaticism of one portion and to arouse the indignation of the other."[20]

What was, for nineteenth-century critics, an anxiety about moral turpitude in the civic sense was transformed in the twentieth century into a concern with intellectual degeneration. For example, some of the modern indictments of sentimentality are less concerned with moral standards and more preoccupied with the notion of "inauthenticity." Indeed, James Baldwin vehemently denounced Uncle Tom's Cabin's sentimentality; he saw in such sentimentality "the

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ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, [which] is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty."[21] Via an interesting detour, Baldwin claims that the excessive solicitation of moral emotions in Stowe's novel leads to a denial of the very experience which gives rise to those moral emotions. As this view became a prevalent one, "[T]wentieth century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority."[22] The degenerative influence of sentimentalism was no longer seen to lie in its provocation of "ill-blood" but in its perceived aesthetic inferiority, its subversion of deep, intellectual debates by turning toward sentiment rather than reason. This concern can be framed as belonging to the cité of inspiration—that of creativity, originality, and thoughtfulness—which is threatened by banality and shallowness.

While civic concerns remain in late twentieth-century criticism, they are relegated to the representational level in concerns over gender roles[23] and racial stereotypes. According to one critic, for example, "the lasting effect of Stowe's masterwork on popular American culture dwarfs that of the slave narrative. With its extraordinary synthesizing power, Uncle Tom's Cabin presented Afro-American characters, however derivative and distorted, who leaped with incredible speed to the status of literary paradigms and even cultural archetypes with which subsequent writers—black and white—have had to reckon … Although Stowe unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging the claim of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes."[24] Interestingly, while questions of literary representation are at the heart of the matter for these latter critics, the

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concerns raised are wider ones regarding the effect of such representations on popular attitudes toward women or African-Americans, making their position no less moral than Comstock's concern with lasciviousness.

Connecting Readers and Texts

At first glance, an approach that considers morality through the lens of formalized logics and controversies may seem incapable of incorporating the emotional aspect of criticism and appear to be promoting a rationalistic and calculated view of literature. Critique, however, is as intimately connected to emotions as it is to morality, and acts as the key link between texts, readers, and social life. The connection between emotions and morality is hardly a new insight for sociologists, as one of Durkheim's central claims in his later work was that strong emotional states—states of effervescence, to use his term—are constitutive of the moral codes held by a society, perhaps the most fundamental of which are "good" and "evil."[25]

Critique, too, is at its core the "critical moment," the moment in which, as Boltanski and Thévenot argue, "people, involved in ordinary relationships, who are doing things together . . . and who have to coordinate their actions, realize that something is going wrong; that they cannot get along any more; that something has to change."[26] This moment is both reflective and emotional: "The person who realizes that something does not work rarely remains silent. He (or she) does not keep his feelings to himself. The moment when he realizes that something does not work is most of the time the moment when he realizes he cannot bear this state of things anymore."[27] While pragmatic sociology does not inquire into the emotional nuts and bolts of moral action or denunciation, its emphasis on affect concurs with recent developments in moral

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psychology, and in particular with the social intuitionist approach, which sees emotions—rather than logical reasoning—as lying at the heart of moral judgment.[28]

Emotions, in other words, are not just a matter of purely bodily responses, but involve both physical stimuli and cognitive recognition. As film scholar Noël Carroll claims, "Emotions require cognitions as causes and bodily states as effects. Moreover, among the cognitions that are essential for the formation of emotional states are those that subsume the objects of the state under certain relevant categories or conceive of said objects as meeting certain criteria."[29] For Carroll, fictional genres direct this process by instilling an emotional state in their audiences. Emotions "call our attention to those aspects of the situation that are pertinent by selectively guiding perception to the features of the stimulus that are subsumable under the criteria of the reigning emotional state."[30] Thus, emotional engagement with the world of fictional characters provides both the impetus for criticism and the evidence to support that critique. Being emotionally engaged with depictions of suffering or injustice and—more importantly— conveying that engagement is a key feature of moral critique. In journalism, politics, and social activism this entails not only reporting what distant social injustices one has seen, but also how this injustice has affected the reporting actor. It is the latter which makes the mere statement of facts into a moral claim, creating a bond of commitment between the actor and the distant other. In fiction, it is the character who can serve as that distant sufferer, and the recruitment of the reader's emotions in the depiction of such a character's situation is what makes the critique offered by the novel into a moral one. Fiction, in fact, may be better equipped to do this than nonfiction through its greater reliance on dramatization and appeals to the reader's imagination. Following Adam Smith, Boltanski suggests that the faculty of imagination rendered necessary by the generalized spectacle of distant others can serve as a source of social bonds, fed by and in

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turn feeding moral sentiments. Through the imaginative exercise of compassion, a form of social solidarity without communitarian loyalty and exclusiveness is made possible, because the spectator, in order to be approved by others, must adopt what Smith called an impartial attitude, the capacity to examine oneself from the standpoint of an outside and uninvolved spectator.

Because much of the semiotic analysis of media and literary texts is based on the Saussurean assumption that the relationship between referents and their signs is arbitrary, it treats the image of suffering as a cultural code, just like any other cultural object. In this semiotic view, the sufferer is a bundle of signs circulated by and for particular institutional, commercial, or political interests (in Barbie Zelizer's work for example, it serves the agenda of the photojournalist).[31] Boltanski's approach to the representation of suffering stands at the opposite corner in that the referent—the sufferer—constrains the codes through which he or she is represented. That is, the relationship between the sufferer and signification is not viewed as arbitrary. The question "what does it mean?" is not addressed as a semiotic question pertaining to the codes, conventions, and symbols by which suffering is made to signify, but rather as a question which pertains to the nature of social bonds in civil society. "What does it mean?" is replaced by "what in the representation of suffering exerts a bond between the sufferer and the spectator of suffering?" suggesting that the representation and signification of suffering are not arbitrary but rather heavily constrained by moral imperatives and bonds. To be receivable, the image of suffering must respond to and navigate between a complex array of moral demands. The work of representing such suffering is not best understood as a semiotic process: rather it is the result of a compromise between conflicting moral exigencies.

Because suffering hinges upon the moral organization of the social world, it is both unstable (precisely because it is constantly open to attack and criticism) and stabilized in the

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form of what Boltanski, reviving the Aristotelian notion, calls topics. "The word topic," he writes, "should be understood in the sense of ancient rhetoric, that is to say as involving inseparably both an argumentative and an affective dimension. Speech here is affected and it is especially by the means of emotions that we can conceive of the coordination of the spectators— each of whom is also a speaker—and consequently the transition from individual speech and concern to collective commitment."[32] Aristotle originally conceived of the topic as an argument in support of a given conclusion which is construed out of the existing opinions or beliefs of the public. Topoi are the rhetorical "places" out of which such arguments are formed and under which they can be categorized. In order to bridge the gap between a mere statement and a wider commitment, a topic must simultaneously draw upon the object in question and on the widely held beliefs of the community. Making oneself present in the text of an argument, a literary work, or another form of artistic expression by letting the audience know how one feels becomes a means of expressing one's moral sense, in the hope of moving others toward a commitment.

Conclusion

The sociology proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot may seem to abandon one of the main vocations of the discipline, namely to criticize actors and social practices. This, however, would be a superficial reading of their sociology because implicitly contained in their work, especially the later work of Boltanski on capitalism, is the notion that institutionalized practices of interpretation may muffle and co-opt ordinary critiques of unjust economic systems. If we want to hold onto critique without subjecting social life to overly broad constructs such as "ideology" or "discourse," what would such critique look like?

A sociology of critique offers an account of the various ways in which social actors object to, resist, or defend their positions. It accounts for these ways, however, by taking seriously the actors' own words. While the work of Boltanski and Thévenot does outline six of the most prevalent logics of justification in contemporary western society, these are in no way finalized or oppressive, as actors have the ability to adapt codes and formulations and to seek out elaborate and innovative ways of expressing their concerns. Furthermore, other cités can and have been elucidated by sociologists, and their validity and applicability to various social settings can be evaluated only by showing how they are received by the actors themselves.[33] Thus, not only does this approach not abandon the critical vocation of sociology, it in fact wholeheartedly embraces it, albeit on new terms and with a shift in focus.

The attention moral philosophers have given to the powers of literature in recent decades and the corresponding attention of literary scholars to the ethical dimensions of literature serves as an impetus for our project, but it also departs from these models in its focus and its goals. Ethical literary criticism is best geared toward a perception of literature as a field which ought to instill certain ethical sensibilities, such as an acceptance and inclusion of others, a responsibility for the common good, or a development of a personal ethical perception. The Levinasian tradition, for example, has taken the question of Otherness and of responsibility into the realm of the aesthetic (while often failing to acknowledge, as critic Robert Eaglestone points out, Levinas's own complex relations to representations in his early works).[34] The status of the Other—whether as a creation of the text or as its creator—has been famously problematized by Derrida, provoking further discussion of the ways in which reading and responsibility are intertwined.[35] Applications of this approach have been extended to the relationship of literary texts and ecology—exploring the notion of nature as a radical Other and of texts as a means for

its incorporation.[36] Another notable approach to literary ethics is offered by Martha Nussbaum, who sees literature as the most appropriate site for the process of ethical theorizing—due to its ability to address ethical issues outside the constraints of formal argumentation and to engage the emotions of the reader. Literature, and the classics in particular, are for Nussbaum of tantamount importance for the creation and maintenance of a good society, one governed by reason and universalist sensibilities.[37] This notion of literature as a site for the cultivation of moral capacities is shared by Wayne C. Booth in his The Company We Keep. Booth argues that careful appraisals of narratives—which are inseparable from ethical and political concerns—and their relationships with readers makes it possible to assess the differential ethical value of specific narratives.

For the sociology of critique, however, the key questions are different. Popular culture is not studied in order to ascertain the benefits of certain cultural texts for the common good, but to discover the ways in which radically different perceptions of that common good clash with each other and how they evaluate, criticize, and justify their positions. Rather than grappling with the place of ethics in literature—whether, as J. Hillis Miller argues, such an ethics is constituted by the text, or whether, as reader-response theorists argue, it comes into existence only when read[38]—a sociological study can explore the ways in which moral issues are explicitly brought to life by the character, by the reader, or by the critic. And here it is not only the classics that serve as relevant examples. Studies such as Janice Radway's Reading the Romance have already demonstrated the importance of novels aimed at the common reader that were long belittled by high-brow critics.[39] A genre such as the sentimental novel can therefore articulate a critique that is no less interesting for the sociologist than the work of Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Jane Austen.

The fact that pragmatic sociology endows readers of all backgrounds with a critical capacity, eschewing the hermeneutics of suspicion that characterizes much contemporary cultural studies, does not make it blind to the existence of hidden interests and inequalities. However, the individual actor is just as capable of understanding and criticizing such underlying phenomena as the sociologist. The importance of this epistemological position is especially significant in the multicultural context of contemporary society, a context in which an abundance of social groups defined by such factors as gender, ethnicity, and religion creates a multiplicity of needs and distinct experiences.

Such a change in perspective also creates a new form of compromise between microanalysis and macroanalysis. By investigating the interactions of individuals, pragmatic sociology departs from the tradition of macro-analysis in French sociology, without thereby yielding to an absolute particularism. Because cités are not only expressed in specific interactions but also extend beyond such interactions, this approach remains open to a consideration of macrosocial elements which constrict and/or enable the actions of the individual.[40]

There is a further advantage to the assumption of the critical capacity of ordinary actors, namely its openness to being surprised by its findings. In both qualitative and quantitative sociological research, the method of analyzing data is established in advance in order to ensure a systematic and coherent research design. When analyzing expressions or conversations, one of the first decisions to be made is whether speakers are to be taken "at their word" or whether they are being motivated by underlying forces that remain unknown to them. Sociology, however, offers no methodological "truth detector" which allows one to determine whether a statement is independently conceived by the actor or engineered by extraneous factors. The sociologist who

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chooses the latter option of a hermeneutics of suspicion is forced to interpret any and all expressions in terms that are already prescribed. As Latour once remarked, "When sociologists of the social pronounce the words 'society,' 'power,' 'structure,' and 'context,' they often jump straight ahead to connect vast arrays of life and history, to mobilize gigantic forces, to detect dramatic patterns emerging out of confusing interactions, to see everywhere in the cases at hand yet more examples of well-known types, to reveal behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings."[41]

Choosing the former, pragmatic option forces the sociologist to take the expressions of ordinary actors seriously and at face value. Admittedly, this choice may lead the researcher astray at times. Not all statements are transparent; deceit is always a possibility, as are hidden interests and motivations. However, to turn this insight into a general principle of social life, and to engage in data collection and analysis while assuming to know ahead of time what the results of this analysis will be, is to miss the richness of the studied phenomenon and to subsume its different aspects under a single set of categories. Assuming good faith on the part of interlocutors, so to speak, allows the sociologist to be surprised by his or her findings, and to truly learn from the data rather than using it to demonstrate a preexisting theory.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990) and Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).

[2] For a review of the "ethical turn" in literary studies see Michael Eskin, "Introduction: The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature?" Poetics Today 25, no. 4 (2004): 557-72 as well as the remaining essays in the issue, and Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., The Turn to Ethics (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[3] Jeffrey C. Alexander, The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003); Jeffrey C. Alexander, The Civil Sphere (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006).

[4] Michèle Lamont, The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).

[5] See, for example, Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983) and M. P. Baumgartner, The Moral Order of a Suburb (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988). For a review of developments in the sociology of morality see Gabriel Abend, "Two Main Problems in the Sociology of Morality," Theory and Society 37, no. 2 (2008): 87-125 and Gabriel Ignatow, "Why the Sociology of Morality Needs Bourdieu's Habitus," Sociological Inquiry 79, no. 1 (2008): 98-114.

[6] Examples include John B. Thompson, The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) and the studies conducted by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. For examples see Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler,

eds., <u>Cultural Studies</u> (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[7] Rita Felski, "Remember the Reader," <u>The Chronicle of Higher Education</u>, Dec. 17, 2008.

[8]Elaine Showalter, <u>Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media</u> (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997) and Elizabeth Lunbeck, <u>The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America</u> (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).

[9] Examples include Luc Boltanski, <u>Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics</u>, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999); Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, <u>On Justification: Economies of Worth</u>, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); Luc Boltanski, <u>Amour et la justice comme compétences: Trois essais de sociologie de l'zction</u> (Paris: Editions Métailié, 1990); Luc Boltanski, <u>De la critique. précis de sociologie de l'émancipation</u> (Paris: Gallimard, 2009); Bruno Latour, <u>Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory</u> (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

[10] This term has been translated from the French as <u>worlds of evaluation</u>, <u>regime of justification</u> and <u>regimes of evaluation</u>. The terms have been used interchangeably in several publications. We use the term <u>Worlds of Evaluation</u> following the 2006 Princeton Univ. Press translation of the book.

[11] Latour, <u>Reassembling the Social</u>, 23

[12] While in this book the writers refer to six <u>cités</u>, which they claim are the most prevalent in Western society, their number is by no means restricted to six. In more recent publications further elaborations have been made and more <u>cités</u> have been formulated. See for example Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, <u>The New Spirit of Capitalism</u>, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2005).

[13] Alexander, <u>The Civil Sphere</u>, 271.

[14] Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, TK.

[15] Beecher Stowe, The Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin": Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 17.

[16] Alexander, Civil Sphere, 77.

[17] Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993) and David Bloor, Knowledge and Social Imagery (Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1976).

[18] Wayne C. Booth, "The Peculiar 'Logic' of Evaluative Criticism," in The Company We Keep: an Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 49.

[19] Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986).

[20] Edward J. Pringle, Slavery in the Southern States (Cambridge, MA: Metcalf, 1852), pp.

[21] James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin": A Casebook, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 49-56.

[22] Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 123

[23] Elizabeth Ammons, "Heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin," American Literature 49, no. 2 (1977): 161-79.

[24] Richard Yarborough, "Strategies of Black Characterization in Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Early Afro-American Novel," in New Essays on "Uncle Tom's Cabin," ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 47.

[25] Émile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[26] Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, "The Sociology of Critical Capacity," <u>European Journal of Social Theory</u> 2, no. 3 (1999): 359-77.

[27] Boltanski and Thévenot, "The Sociology of Critical Capacity," 360.

[28] Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," <u>Psychological Review</u> 108, no. 4 (2001): 814-34 and Paul Rozin and others, "The CAD Triad Hypothesis: A Mapping Between Three Moral Emotions (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) and Three Moral Codes (Community, Autonomy, Divinity," <u>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</u> 76, no. 4 (1999): 574-86.

[29] Noël Carroll, "Film, Emotion, and Genre," in Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, eds., <u>Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), 27.

[30] Carroll, "Film, Emotion, and Genre," 28.

[31] Barbie Zelizer, <u>Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye</u> (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

[32] Boltanski, <u>Distant Suffering</u>, xv (italics in source).

[33] Chiapello and Boltanski, Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot, eds., <u>Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

[34] Emmanuel Lévinas, <u>Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence</u>, trans Alphonso Lingis (Boston: M. Nijhoff and Hingham, 1981). For a detailed discussion of the application of Lévinas in literary criticism see Robert Eaglestone, <u>Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas</u> (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1997).

[35] Jacques Derrida, "Psyche; Invention of the Other," in <u>Acts of Literature</u>, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33-75. For further discussion see Derek Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other," <u>PMLA</u> 114, no. 1 (1999): 20-31.

[36] Hubert Zapf, "Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts," <u>New Literary History</u> 39, no. 4 (2009): 847-68.

[37] Nussbaum, <u>Love's Knowledge</u> and Nussbaum, <u>The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy</u> (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).

[38] J. Hillis Miller, <u>The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin</u> (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1987); Stanley E. Fish, <u>Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities</u> (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).

[39] Janice Radway, <u>Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature</u> (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[40] See Ilana F. Silber, "Pragmatic Sociology as Cultural Sociology: Beyond Repertoire Theory?" <u>European Journal of Social Theory</u> 6, no. 4 (2003): 427-49.

[41] Latour, <u>Reassembling the Social,</u> 22.