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Elusive domination and the fate of critique in neo-participative management: a French pragmatist approach

Abstract

In this theoretical paper we investigate how domination has adapted to the new social settings of a flexible and pluralist economy. Building on French pragmatic sociology, we propose an understanding of organizational domination whereby workers are enabled and encouraged to overtly express critique, yet work is nevertheless effectively obtained from dominated actors. Domination is here mainly understood as a system through which workers are engaged in action despite critiquing that action. We propose the concept of elusive domination as a combination of three mechanisms that undermine critique's capacity to influence organizational power arrangements. First, ideological plasticity allows elusive domination to disarm critique by depriving it of its argument. Next, a combination of fast-changing rules and sacred conventions prevents critique from settling, and thus deprives it of its object. Finally, emotions displayed in the workplace are filtered. The encouragement of positive and constructive critique coupled with the repression of uncomfortable feelings deprives critique of its source of indignation. The consequences of such developments for current debates on organizational domination are discussed, and implications for the delineation of possible emancipatory pathways are suggested.

Keywords: Boltanski, critique, domination, French pragmatism, neo-participative management, pluralism, self-managed organizations, holacracies.

Introduction

Within management studies, critical perspectives associate domination with an abusive organizational order marked by the existence of enduring asymmetries of power. The latter are said to originate in wider structures of domination that contribute to the reproduction of an unfair social order (Burawoy, 2012; Courpasson, 2000; Leflaive, 1996). How the mechanisms that support organizational domination are understood is then a matter of conceptual perspective. Following Gramsci, domination can be said to rely on consent when individuals deliberately and consciously participate in the perpetuation of the prevailing order (Burawoy, 1979; Levy & Egan, 2003). Alternatively, following Bourdieu, systems of domination can be regarded as hidden when the prevailing order is reproduced without the conscious intention of individuals (Golsorkhi, Leca, Lounsbury, & Ramirez, 2009; Kamoche, Kannan, & Siebers, 2014). Critique is absent from these two accounts until extant systems of domination are scrutinized in contexts where either conditions for individuals' consent are no longer met or hidden processes are brought to the surface. Domination and critique 'collide' in anticipation of the possible disruption of the prevailing order.

Yet what happens when systems of domination are reproduced despite the basis of social life no longer being 'a place of passively accepted domination or even domination accepted unconsciously but instead a site full of disputes, critiques, disagreements' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 45)? A French pragmatist perspective contends that in such contexts critique may no longer denote an occasion when domination is challenged. Rather, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue in their study of the new spirit of capitalism, contestation is disarmed by its effective integration into systems of domination. From this perspective, domination is no

longer seen as a structural feature of social relations but instead as a set of mechanisms that undermine the transformative potential of critique (Boltanski, 2011, p. 117). Following these insights, we offer in this article elusive domination as a formulation that indicates how, within neo-participative management, critique can indeed become a feature of organizational domination that has the overall effect of disarming dissent.

Central to our view is actors' engagement in organizational action, as framed by the notion of 'regimes of action' (Boltanski, 2012; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Put simply, organizational members 'are not content to act or react to the actions of others. They review their own actions or those of others in order to make judgements on them' (Boltanski, 2011, p. 3). These take the form of critiques that are based on an assessment of moral principles, constituting the *regime of justifications*, as well as an appraisal of standards and rules, which form the *regime of fairness*, and their consequences in terms of feelings and sentiments, encapsulated in the *regime of emotions* (Cloutier, Gond, & Leca, 2017). Critique occurs when these moral principles are questioned, when standards and rules are perceived as no longer appropriate, or when the organization is seen to have inflicted some form of suffering provoking indignation. Here, however, we point to occasions when critique fails to gain purchase on prevailing social arrangements; that is, when domination appears elusive to the critique of actors and therefore much harder to counter. Our argument is that while actors are active (rather than passive), critical and willing to condemn injustices, there exist organizational contexts, such as those offered by neo-participative management, that eliminate the possibility of critique getting a grip on reality (Boltanski, 2011, p. 117), which frames what we refer to as 'elusive domination'.

Following Burawoy (2012), processes of domination are best understood in the light of the prevailing spirit of time and place. Gramsci's conceptualization of domination was rooted in the context of European advanced capitalist societies of the interwar period. That of Bourdieu was developed with reference to the reproduction of French elites in the 60s and 70s. Here we hypothesize systems of domination situated by the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). The third spirit of capitalism describes the period since the 1990s in which organizational governance has become associated with structures that are 'minimally hierarchical (if at all so), flexible, and not restricted by boundaries marked out a priori' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, pp. 103–104). Organizations reflect the fluidity of capital and goods with mobility and flexibility as key themes. Against understandings of domination based on acceptance of the status quo and reproduction of sameness, as conveyed by organization studies drawing on Gramscian or Bourdieusian perspectives, we propose *change* as the normative base of managerial domination, encapsulated in recent trends of 'less-hierarchical organizing' (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), such as holacracies (Robertson, 2015) and other heavily decentralized and de-bureaucratized experiments (Getz, 2009; Laloux, 2014). These organizational forms, which we classify as falling under the umbrella of neo-participative management, celebrate worker autonomy and the decentralization of authority (Hamel, 2011; Hirschhorn, 1998; Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Job titles are replaced with (supposed) consensual decision-making based on decentralized working, whereby workers are expected to act entrepreneurially in their specialized area.

In our effort to explore the possibility of elusive domination we outline a case vignette of a contemporary French pastry manufacturer that embarked on a change programme based on a discourse of 'the market', 'choice', 'entrepreneurship', and

‘empowerment’ (Du Gay & Morgan, 2013, p. 2). We explore how ‘normalizing change’ set in place a disruptive action frame that celebrated controversies and justification practices (Cloutier et al., 2017). Whereas recognized systems of domination try to exclude dissent, critique in our pastry manufacturer was tolerated and positively promoted. What is interesting is how critique was channelled to reinforce managerial objectives rather than setting the scene for contestation. On this basis, we explore elusive domination as exerted through a combination of mechanisms that undermine critique to influence organizational power arrangements. First, ideological plasticity allows elusive domination to disarm critique by depriving it of its *argument*. Next, a combination of fast-changing rules and sacred conventions prevent critique from settling, and thus deprive it of its *object*. Finally, emotions displayed in the workplace are filtered. The encouragement of positive and constructive critique coupled with the repression of uncomfortable feelings deprives critique of its *source of indignation*.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. In the next section we offer a brief case vignette to highlight the changes associated with neo-participative management, using this to leverage our contention that domination has become elusive to critique. This is explored in the following section with reference to the ideas offered by French pragmatism regarding ‘regimes of action’. In offering our analysis of elusive domination, the final section discusses the consequences of such developments for current debates on organizational domination and suggests implications for the delineation of possible emancipatory pathways.

Vignette: searching for elusive domination in a neo-participative setting

As contemporary organizational ‘innovations’ go, neo-participative management and associated ‘models’ – such as spaghetti organization (Foss, 2003), holacracy (Bernstein, Bunch, Canner, & Lee, 2016; Robertson, 2015) or ‘liberating management’ (Carney & Getz, 2009; Peters, 1992) – are exemplary of the latest expressions of flexible and pluralist organizations. They have recently garnered much attention among practitioners, yet there is limited research, to date, that tries to unpack the consequences of such work innovations (see Lee & Edmondson, 2017 for a recent review of this literature). Ours is an effort to consider such organizational arrangements by revisiting domination through the lens of regimes of action to assess the emergence of what we term ‘elusive domination’. Using an illustrative case vignette (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013), we draw on the fieldwork of one of the authors to outline COOKIZ¹ – a French pastry manufacturer that in 2006 initiated reforms toward neo-participative management, especially inspired by the ‘liberating management’ model (see Appendix). Since then, COOKIZ management has proudly celebrated their radical revisionism, extolling the virtues of the approach so that COOKIZ is seen as a prime example of the transformation towards neo-participative organizing in France. The vignette thus provides some ‘snapshots’ of the case. These early insights will be further developed in our theoretical argument.

The move towards flexibility and pluralism at COOKIZ

At COOKIZ we identify dimensions of a *flexible* and *pluralist* order, starting with its status of subcontractor in a fragmented value chain. Indeed, COOKIZ produces biscuits for a large panel of retailers, ranging from gourmet brands to supermarkets, which are sold under the retailers’ brands. It is in this operating context

¹ COOKIZ is a pseudonym for the company.

that COOKIZ management appropriated themes of alternative and sometimes militant or radical organizing (Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014). The result is a pluralist social order in which workers are encouraged to act innovatively, taking a direct role in decision-making processes. Such involvement is not limited to line-specific issues, continuous improvement and target setting for production; indeed, this decision-making devolution has extended to issues usually seen as outside the remit of production teams, such as local recruitment or product and service innovations.

The then-CEO of COOKIZ who led the ‘liberating management’ programme reveals the motivation behind this break with the past: *‘The fundamental reason for the change we stand for, of our project, is a deep-seated conviction that corporations need to reform themselves, but really, deeply! ... We must change everything! ... My challenge is ... really to put people at the heart of the system, and at the same time to meet the market’s expectations, to be competitive... eh, no one escapes these rules’*. The motivations expressed borrow from a vocabulary of ‘radicality’, linking the deep reform of structures, aligned with market demands, with a humanistic agenda (Carney & Getz, 2009; Getz, 2009; Getz, 2011).

The practical realizations of this positioning are numerous: the abandoning of formal systems of appraisal and removing clocks to stress the primacy of ‘trust’ and ‘autonomy’ so workers, in theory, can shift towards self-management. In this new world, the expression of one’s own views about work processes, products and ‘the future of the company’ is encouraged, as evidenced by a day-long stoppage of shop floor production lines at the main site, that ensured all 450 employees of this plant could participate in what was termed a ‘collective intelligence’ exercise. Here, production decisions rely on implementing a ‘bottom-up’ approach deliberately deemed ‘rebellious’, whereby the workforce is encouraged to challenge the status

quo: *'We wanted everyone, each and every one of us equally, to try to work like each person wished to work. We didn't want to give a blueprint. It had to come from the shop floor, this new way of doing things'* (Line worker 62, member of the event's coordinating committee).

Other actors reveal that this deeper involvement of workers may also serve their mobilization in a more results-driven corporate culture: *'There's a profit-oriented culture at COOKIZ: the focus really is profit, profit, profit. We've even started talking about the service rate, the return rate, the P&L numbers, etc., with people on the line and they relate to it! ... The numbers are available to anyone, so people definitely look at them'* (Middle manager 69). Worker performance is shared and managed using self-monitoring systems such as the physical display of weekly results and quality rates, with the support of a technical infrastructure including SAP software. Participation is framed in terms of 'the factory of the future', with each new initiative ensuring that the (managerially-defined) idea of performance subsumes the espoused well-being of the workers: *'Well the aim is... everybody's well-being, company, workers, shareholders, and everybody, everybody is winning'* (Line worker 55). This organizational model attempts to garner widespread support by claiming to create a workplace where profit and self-fulfilment are accommodated.

By positioning COOKIZ at the forefront of *'tomorrow's corporation... and even, tomorrow's society,'* senior management insisted the firm was not settled in a structured (perhaps rigidified) model (Carney & Getz, 2009). Rather, the intent was to ensure that organizational and product innovations would shake up daily routines. This principle was implemented through the deployment of consultants and managers from the main manufacturing site for COOKIZ (the oldest and the first to implement

‘liberating management’ in 2006) to other sites in an effort to ‘go further’ in their radicalized mode of operating driven by change and innovation.

Permanent change is a mode celebrated with investments towards fostering an ever-innovative – and fast-moving – corporate culture, including not only basic cross-level product innovation but also collaborative relationships with local start-ups. Training in ‘intrapreneurship’ emerged alongside the establishment of a new in-house business incubator hub to encourage innovative thinking. Such developments ensured the new norm in the workplace was to celebrate innovation, with the idea of good work and good craftsmanship effectively shifting: *‘because we...we are constantly moving... Our work is moving all the time. [...] Every time we get new information, data... we bounce back’* (Technician 34).

Against this backdrop, it is not unsurprising that change was not universally embraced since this ethos challenged how workers understood their role and place on the shop floor. And yet, there is little evidence of resistance or shop floor ‘push back’, which was (we thought) unusual.

The consequences of organizational reform: acquiescence or resistance?

As part of the change programme, middle and line management positions were stripped out and replaced with (fewer) coordination positions that were loosely defined as ‘technical expert’. As one plant manager stated: *‘Well, basically since [...] the jobs’ descriptions hadn’t been defined to the last centimetre, right, so each person, from where they stood, [...] they had to figure out in which perimeter they could operate and in which way’* (Middle manager 69). In turn, the content of the technical expert positions remained very flexible, which had consequences: *‘What I experienced when I was [an expert] was that...well I would be there, not knowing*

where to go exactly, to the [line] 2, or the 6, or the 10. I was grabbing bits of information left and right, yeah...so once in a while, we were quite, quite confused when it came to who would decide, let's say, to stop the line' (Line worker 67). Feelings of isolation were not uncommon. After the 'liberation', Rose, who was a supervisor for twenty years, spent two years jumping from coordinating SAP, to being in charge of continuous improvement programmes, to logistic support; she was not alone when she said: *'It feels like essentially people don't see what you're doing here...it's like... it's like you're doing nothing... [Rose cries]'* (Supervision worker 33).

Workers were also actively encouraged to review the production process when such involvement was oriented towards finding practical or economical solutions to production issues, or when they stressed the value and prestige of participation in the innovation groups that contributed to the strategic ends of COOKIZ. Yet some workers recounted the difficulties they encountered in attempting to express their disagreement with the 'vision', or their discomfort with the new organization and roles. Thus, while the drive for flexibility created a 'dynamic' work environment, the focus on innovation effectively circumscribed the ways in which individuals could reflect on their work experience.

Interestingly, the less invested workers reported feeling additional pressure to engage in participation processes. They also reported that weekly meetings were not always welcoming for people to voice conflicts and unpleasant emotions: *'We are doing too many things at once, and yet again we are asked to take part in each and every group. We are 'the bad guys' if we don't go... For example, we asked for a new pump to avoid mixing chocolate and vanilla filling ... but they said no, it's too expensive... But they're ok to take people off the line, and that's a cost, to go to the*

meetings' (Line worker 66). In contrast, all workers were encouraged to challenge the status quo during dedicated playful moments, for example at the 'collective intelligence exercise' when individuals were invited to express their wants and desires in a fun atmosphere: *'we wrote on table cloth what we wanted for the company... with coloured pens'* (Line worker 66).

It was also clear that, for those who appeared less able or willing to conform, there was always the suspicion that they were 'doing less'. Many looked elsewhere for work (to our knowledge 18 of 27 supervisors resigned from the plant between 2006 and 2013): *'We had many supervisors and some had to go. So people could leave in a natural way, and as long as they chose to leave happily, all the better'* (Middle manager 69). Commitment to the new way of working reflected a question of personal willingness to accept the uncertainty of the workplace, which was to be celebrated and embraced. Within this understanding, opting out was not to be seen as a rejection of the system but recognition that this arrangement demanded a new relationship that did not suit everyone. The discomfort and disillusionment behind those departures were thereby repressed, while the dominant narrative of COOKIZ as an enjoyable workplace was reaffirmed.

Theoretical development: domination as an elusive process

Sketching out the COOKIZ example – a capitalist organization with advanced neo-participative management practices – we have begun to elaborate the coexistence of critique and domination. In this article, we indeed posit that to examine domination in late modernity, it is not only necessary to highlight the more or less explicit pervasiveness of the dominant ideology (Golsorkhi et al., 2009; Levy & Egan, 2003),

but also to show how contestation is disarmed by its effective integration into systems of domination.

In order to do so, we follow a French pragmatist perspective (Boltanski, 2012; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Building on a Weberian tradition, French pragmatists are interested in the ideology that justifies why people engage in capitalist enterprises (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Unlike the original work by Weber, however, French pragmatists do not think that ‘when capitalism is firmly in the saddle, it has less need of moral justification’ and stands by itself (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 46). On the contrary, they study how in different periods capitalism relies on different ideologies and justifications. According to the French pragmatists, ideologies are not the sole prerogative of dominant classes who would like to keep workers behind a veil of ignorance. Rather, organizational members actualize ideologies in mundane situations in order to motivate their personal engagement in action (Boltanski, 2011). Thus, critiques, disputes and justifications are part of everyday life in the workplace.

In accordance with French pragmatism, we theorize domination along three dimensions that align with different ways in which people engage in action, which Boltanski (2012) calls regimes of action. Following this frame, people may engage in organizational action according to: the regime of justifications, based on an assessment of moral principles; the regime of fairness, following shared rules and conventions with a low degree of reflexivity; and the regime of emotions, whereby emotions constitute specific drivers to action. Boltanski relates the expression of critiques to each of these regimes; that is, one can denounce the moral principles of an organization in the regime of justifications, stumble over usually taken-for-granted rules and conventions in the regime of fairness, or react to intense emotions in the

workplace. From each of these situated experiences, critique can originate. In the next section, we focus on the setting of the flexible and pluralistic organization that incarnates the latest spirit of capitalism in which each of these expressions of critique are tamed. For each regime of action, we point to the mechanisms that deprive critique of its capacity to radically contest domination. In doing so, we refer both to our overview of the COOKIZ example and the relevant literature. Figure 1, below, introduces the mechanisms rendering domination elusive to critique in each regime of action.

----- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE -----

The regime of justifications: ideological plasticity deprives critique of its argument

Organizational members are – according to French pragmatists – repeatedly engaged in interpretation to make given situations fit with a limited set of abstract principles of justice or moral grounds that help them qualify and assess situations (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). The works of Boltanski and Thevenot (2006) and Lafaye and Thevenot (1993) refer to a diversity of principles of justice – namely the inspired, domestic, civic, opinion, market, industrial and ecological principles. Each principle of justice allows individuals to categorize, rank or calibrate what is of high or low value, and supports their justification efforts. Sometimes disputes arise when opposing views are confronted in public (Boltanski, 2012; Cloutier et al., 2017). Organizational disputes encompass both disagreements about the value to be assigned to an individual or object according to a given principle of justice, as well as confrontations regarding the principle of justice on which the assessment should be based (Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011; Taupin, 2012).

Importantly for French pragmatists, the maintenance of the dominant social order rests on the capacity of capitalism to be justified, and hence on its capacity to renew its spirit, i.e., the moral principles that ground its justification (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). At the organization level, social order is (re)produced when organizational members assess their day-to-day situations with principles of justice that align with the assumed principles of the dominant order. Reflecting on the developments shaping the rise of new flexible organizational forms promoting participatory management, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) find evidence of a shift in the principles of justice associated with capitalist companies in the last few decades. While adherence to the dominant social order rested, since the end of World War II, on a compromise devised between industrial and civic principles, the new spirit of capitalism now locates the gratifications attached to one's commitment to the social order in the autonomy afforded by participation in temporary projects. Within this new spirit, as demonstrated in the all-day 'collective intelligence' exercise and the ongoing encouragement of worker participation in innovation processes at COOKIZ, an openness to a plurality of ideas is now among the qualities expected of organizational participants.

Interestingly then, as at COOKIZ, obedience to the social order rests on a paradox, since organizational members are asked to conform to the principles of late modernity that value their autonomy, their capacity to offer new ideas and to think differently. Conformity then encompasses an injunction to engage in work situations critically. In this case, critique becomes part-and-parcel of the way individuals confront change. Yet, such critique is unlikely to disrupt practices significantly for two main reasons.

First, every time a new critique emerges and questions the former justification, the organization makes the new critique its own thanks to its ideological plasticity. As noticed by Nyberg, Spicer and Wright (2013, p. 437) in their study of corporate engagement with climate change in Australia, ‘corporations are now routinely involved in forms of stakeholder dialogue which are often less about ensuring increased accountability, and more about incorporating potential critics into their own strategy formulation processes and thus closing down radical challenges’. This ability to appropriate the rhetorical content of critique is even more tangible in neo-participative management systems, where multiple critiques emanate from inside the organization. As our vignette illustrates, management at COOKIZ made the most radical discourses of alternatives – responsibility, autonomy and anarchist principles – their own to promote their capitalist project. In these organizational settings, the maintenance of domination is ensured via moves to deprive critique of its argument (i.e., the moral principles that ground the justification for change) and thus, ultimately, of any effectiveness (Huault & Rainelli-Weiss, 2013). Workers’ critique confirms the dominant principle, instead of subverting it (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Reinecke, van Bommel, & Spicer, 2017).

Second, rhetorical efforts supporting putative win-win arrangements help such organizations to loosely connect plural and often contradictory principles of justice (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). A good example of such supposedly win-win solutions is the widely diffused discourse on corporate social responsibility (CSR). As mentioned by Fleming, Roberts and Garsten (2013, p. 340) commenting on the rise of CSR: ‘This is the explicit revival of the assumption that has perhaps been mainstream CSR’s enduring feature: that we might have both global capitalism and sustainability, corporate control and welfare, a consumer society and green solutions, etc. [...] As a

number of commentators have noted, this ‘win–win’ expectation underlying much CSR practice and ideology misses the structural nature of the capitalist economic imperative’. Hence, the organizational forms that fit with the latest spirit of capitalism are populated with multiple principles of justice that are held together in loose connections (Kazmi, Leca, & Naccache, 2016; Nyberg, Wright, & Kirk, 2017).

Here again, our vignette of COOKIZ helps to illustrate how, in flexible and neo-participative management systems, the market and its corollary profit-orientation and individual accountability for performance is made compatible with workers’ desire for more autonomy and responsibility (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Explicit in the expression of reforms undertaken in COOKIZ was the opportunity to serve the needs of the individual as an autonomous being in terms that supported market rules and profitability.

To sum up, within pluralist and flexible organizations like those embracing neo-participative management features, two mechanisms in the regime of justification deprive critique of its argument (see Figure 1). First, the great ideological plasticity of managerial rhetoric leads to the appropriation of the radical discourse of critiques. Second, managerial rhetoric accommodates critique by connecting conflicting principles of justice within putative win-win solutions. Here again, critique’s main arguments seem compatible with the incumbent order and critique is no longer able to promote radical alternatives.

The regime of fairness: fast-changing rules and sacred conventions deprive critique of its object

Whereas principles of justice are made explicit via public discourse in the regime of justifications, they are tacit in the regime of fairness (Gomez & Jones,

2000). In everyday situations, principles of justice are supported by a range of conventions that recall more or less explicitly the sense of justice. Conventions may be defined as a common form of evaluation that reduces coordination uncertainty by qualifying the frame and object of interactions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Gomez & Jones, 2000). They help organizational members to assess what is of high or low value according to a given principle of justice, and their behaviour is deemed appropriate or fair when they follow the dominant conventions in place. Conventions rest on explicit cognitive representations such as standards, formal rules, rankings or indicators that guarantee their stability and increase confidence in a shared interpretation (Gkeredakis, 2014).

The explicit expressions of conventions constitute for principles of justice what French pragmatists call reality tests. Indeed, these are socially constructed proofs of the relevance of principles of justice (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). As Boltanski (2011, p. 105) states: ‘in organizations, people and things are constantly subjected to reality tests so that their quality and quantities are confirmed’. However, the notion of a test supposes a space for critique in the regime of fairness. Organizational members can either denounce the way in which existing reality tests are conducted and thus call for a purification of the test, or they can create new tests based on different assessment devices that may ultimately become conventions if they become taken-for-granted (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

In flexible and pluralist organizations, the opportunity to criticize reality tests is not easily achieved. Focusing on change, the latest organizational expressions of the new spirit of capitalism eliminate those conventions and associated material expressions that hinder the quest for ‘flexibility’ and ‘agility’. To avoid the ‘bureaucratic trap’, formal rules are in short supply. And because work is light on

rules, there are few opportunities to measure, exemplify or disclose injustice, which generates a *de facto* deregulation of the workplace (Reed, 2011). As noted in our vignette, the emergence of ‘technical experts’ and the suppression of formalized roles and defined procedures effectively deprived workers of the means to evaluate the new workplace. Put another way, ‘the deconstruction of social categories [...] helps to disrupt work relations, and particularly the tests governing access to employment, promotion, certain levels of remuneration, and so on’ (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 315).

This situation is compounded because the rules that are available, or at least their material expressions, are constantly threatened by the will of the management to implement continuous change (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010; Du Gay, 2003). Critique becomes instrumental to this project devoted to flexibility. At COOKIZ, the key manufacturing site symbolized and enabled efforts to achieve flexibility, acting as the knowledge hub from which staff could be deployed to instigate continuous change. The constant push for change had the effect of squeezing the time available for assessment of any injustice, to name it and denounce it. Such a management mode generalizes a sense of emergency and temporariness (Finchelstein, 2011; Hassard, 2002), with strong implications for critique. At COOKIZ, pressure to ‘constantly innovate’ dictates the agenda of participatory spaces. Critique loses its object when a new innovation priority emerges and team members are shuffled between participative groups.

Fast-changing rules are not, however, the sole mechanism preventing a radical critique rooted in the regime of fairness from emerging in flexible and pluralist organizations. Without censorship, organizational members are in principle encouraged to address any topic they want in the participatory spaces created by

management. However, as illustrated in our vignette, employees rapidly came to feel that some concerns were more appropriate to these spaces if they wanted to be heard. Some matters are prohibited – effectively, if not formally – and thus the scope for critique is circumscribed. Here we refer to organizational taboos, i.e., the limits placed on talk about sacred matters, which participate in the maintenance of dominant norms and the definition of deviant conduct and identity (Land, 2008, p. 1195; see also Hoon, 2014; Martin, 1990). In COOKIZ, the dominant taboo was to question the basis of flexible and innovative organization, framed by foundational principles that constitute the dominant ideology of capitalism (Goll & Zeitz, 1991; Nyberg et al., 2017; Petersen & Willig, 2011). The potential for critique was effectively limited to particular work-related issues – where conventions reflect (and encourage) fluidity in work processes, critique has nothing to grasp and falls short of meaningful objects.

To summarize, flexible and pluralist organizations are characterized both by fast-changing temporary rules and sacred conventions (see Figure 1). This context is detrimental for critique, which is deprived of its objects of contention. On the one hand, ever-changing rules constitute unstable ground on which to build radical critique and the rapid pace of change quickly renders any given critique obsolete, generating a constant need for new critiques. Critique is thus highly unstable. On the other hand, some sacred conventions are never questioned and critique remains circumscribed and mostly instrumental to the never-ending pursuit of newness.

The regime of emotions: filtered emotions deprive critique of its source

Beside justifications and conventions, the regime of emotions points to a third way in which people engage in action (Boltanski, 1999; Boltanski, 2012; Boltanski & Godet, 1995). In this case, how people act is not framed by existing conventions or by reference to explicit principles of justice, as in other regimes. The regime of emotions

is instead a coordination mode through which engagement goes beyond calculation, as it implies a low degree of reflexivity. In other regimes, equivalence rules allow individuals to categorize, rank or calibrate what is of high or low value, which ultimately triggers their engagement. In the regime of emotions, mediating devices are much less important than in the regimes of justifications or fairness, because there is no need for qualification to judge equivalence. No equivalence can be set where action is guided by emotions. ‘Loving without condition’ or ‘blind violence’ are two ways to exemplify the incommensurability of this mode of interaction (Boltanski, 2012).

If people engage in action on the basis of their emotions, social orders rest on the capacity to govern people’s emotions, not only their reasoning (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998). This idea is in line with the concept of ‘emotional regime’ developed by Reddy (2001), who sees social structures as emotionally governed. In his view, ‘any political regime has to establish a certain normative emotional regime and to define and separate highly valued emotions from deviant ones’ (Baumeler, 2010, p. 276). While emotional regimes play an obvious role in engaging people in action, they also have strong implications for the possibility of critique. Emotions are considered as the necessary condition that ignites indignation, rendering critique possible: ‘The formulation of a critique presupposes a bad experience prompting protest, whether it is personally endured by critiques or they are roused by the fate of others. This is what we call the source of indignation. Without this prior emotional – almost sentimental – reaction, no critique can take off’ (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 36).

In flexible and pluralistic organizations that espouse the new spirit of capitalism, we contend that critique and domination can go together because those organizations

encourage certain emotional states that have in return a profound influence on the nature of critiques that are expressed in the workplace. At first glance, the expression of emotions is warmly welcomed at COOKIZ – as the key slogan of the ‘new model’ indicated, ‘people [are] at the heart [of the organization]’. However, as our vignette illustrates, organizational members’ emotions are filtered. Two mechanisms are especially visible. While employees are supposed to show a ‘happy face’ at work, leaving their possible negative emotional states aside, they are also encouraged to propose ‘happy critiques’ or diet critiques that would foster innovation and change without radically challenging the organizational project (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010). At COOKIZ, enthusiastic, invested workers affirm their adherence, and signal this investment by being (productively) critical in the innovation or intrapreneurship groups. Moments of exaltation are staged, such as the initial day-long ‘collective intelligence’ gathering. Regarding this event, during which the lines were stopped, many workers recall the joy of using coloured pens as part of transgressive and fun activities.

At the same time, employees who do not conform to this model of a happy, enthusiastic and productive critique find that more confrontational or difficult emotions are ostracized, their validity contested. A case in point at COOKIZ was the problem of the mixing pump referenced in our vignette, which workers were unable to voice in the form of a positive and constructive critique that could connect to the company’s innovation drive. Several issues could thus not be heard and were discarded. More generally, some employees experienced isolation and disarray within the ‘happy’ work collective, as they could not find a space in which to voice uncomfortable feelings. The only form of expression of discomfort or discontent tolerated in such cases is exit. Even then, leaving ‘happily’ seems best. Whereas a

(happy) voicing of critique is tolerated – even praised – when it expresses adherence to the project (that is to say, strong and unquestioning loyalty), a silent exit is the only form of resistance that seems to be left in the neo-participative system. These two mechanisms – happy critique and happy face – hamper the emergence of more subversive contestation. In COOKIZ, where critique is structurally supported and advanced, the limited scope for such critique was unsettling for many, with the response often revealing a lack of agency insofar as, for many supervisors, seemingly the only viable course of action was resignation.

Many organizational scholars have already highlighted the emergence of a ‘human relations’-based capitalism that aims to enhance workers’ positive emotions in order to foster loyalty and long-term engagement (Hochschild, 1983). In line with these precepts, strategies to elicit positive emotions have flourished, such as those found in ‘corporate culturalism’ (Casey, 1999; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009) and ‘be-yourself policies’ (Endrissat, Islam, & Noppeney, 2015; Fleming, 2014; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). If some research has underlined the potential of a value-laden ethical approach that focuses on good management practices for the benefit of employee well-being (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013), many studies have also denounced the effects of an ‘excessive positivity’ (Collinson, 2012; Fineman, 2006; Vince & Mazen, 2014). Not only does this excess mask the contentiousness of relationships at work, but by denying the very existence of the dark side of employees’ experience, it also becomes a form of violence in itself (Vince & Mazen, 2014). This selection and orientation of emotions has consequences for the expression of critique. It can disarm critique insofar as alternative voices are perceived as betrayal or even not perceived at all because they do not fit with the shared fantasy (Cederström & Grassman, 2010; Collinson, 2012; Gabriel, 1995; Vince & Mazen, 2014).

Reflecting on how emotional display is filtered in modern organizational forms that espouse the new spirit of capitalism, we then argue that domination rests on two processes in this context: the encouragement of positive and constructive critiques (happy critique) and the exclusion and silencing of difficult feelings (happy face) (see Figure 1). The effect of these mechanisms is to deprive critique of its emotional source, a necessary foundation for any critique.

Discussion

Through our discussion of COOKIZ we depicted how flexible and pluralist organizations undermine critique at three levels, namely by depriving it of its argument in the regime of justifications, by depriving it of its object in the regime of fairness, and by depriving it of its source in the regime of emotions. Our concept of elusive domination, anchored in a French pragmatist perspective, aims above all to contribute to the Critical Management Studies literature. In the following paragraphs, we develop our main claim, which is that the elusive form of domination – embedded in the flexible and pluralist spirit of our time – departs from other forms most commonly envisaged in organizational analysis as it subtly disarms critique instead of generating consent or simply going unnoticed. By way of conclusion, we suggest some implications of these mechanisms of elusive domination for the delineation of possible emancipatory pathways.

To underline our contribution, we begin by contrasting this elusive framing of organizational domination with two prevailing conceptions. One defines domination as a process relying on consent (Burawoy, 1979; Levy, 2008). The other sees domination as a hidden process consisting in masking asymmetrical power relations (Golsorkhi et al., 2009; Maclean, Harvey, & Kling, 2014).

In the first approach, actors are aware of the asymmetry implied in a given social setting, but consent to it. As Burawoy (2012, p. 203) puts it, ‘Gramsci believed that workers actively, deliberately and consciously collaborate with the reproduction of capitalism: they consent to a domination defined as hegemony.’² The Gramscian perspective indeed suggests that domination relies on ideological leadership whereby some conscious attachment to core elements of the prevailing order is secured from dominated actors (Femia, 1981). The latter come, at least in part, to regard dominant values and norms as an expression of their own aspirations and interests (Levy, 2008), thus providing a ‘rational, cognitive basis [to] consent’ (Burawoy, 2012, p. 194). At the organizational level, managerial domination can therefore be said to lie in employees’ conscious submission to the status quo and agreement to play by the rules of the organizational game (Burawoy, 1979).

In the second approach, actors are not even aware of the asymmetry implied in a given social setting. Domination systems are ideologically-based regimes that act through unconscious manipulation. Bourdieu (1990, p. 126) argues that it is because conspicuous forms of social violence are neither acceptable nor accepted that they have ‘to be disguised under the veil of enchanted relations’. Structures of domination are beyond being denounced because subjugated groups are always ignorant of such structures. Within an organizational context, this means that domination manages to create endless ‘zones of indifference’ (Barnard, 1968[1938]).

Common to both perspectives is the idea that the stability of the prevailing order depends on the degree to which systems of domination succeed in steering clear

² We acknowledge that Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and consent have given way to diverse interpretations (see Femia (1981)), but here consider the prevailing way in which these have been put to work in the field of organization studies.

of contestation. In the first case, the rise of critique or discontent would signal the weakening of consent, leading to lower forms of hegemony where cultural domination is threatened and requires supplementation by coercive means so as to maintain stability (Femia, 1981; Levy, 2008). In the second case, as a masked system, domination would collapse or at least erode if the consciousness of the dominated were raised (Golsorkhi et al., 2009). By contrast, in line with French pragmatist insights (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), elusive domination acknowledges that organizational domination may allow some interplay with critique. Such possible interplay is well exemplified by the mechanisms observed at COOKIZ, by which critique becomes a feature of organizational domination that has the overall effect of disarming dissent.

The potential for domination and critique to coexist is not entirely new. We see a similar argument in the works of James C. Scott who insisted that, in the face of domination systems, critique is often hidden or disguised (Scott, 1990). If it appears that consent prevails despite the presence of objective patterns of domination, it is not necessarily because subordinated groups have consented to or internalized the values of those in power. Rather, it is because of a narrow focus on public situations, which are occasions when the powerless have no other choice than to abide by the will of the powerful. It is on these occasions that adherence to dominant values and discourses may look unqualified (Scott, 1985; Scott, 1990).

When subordinates are beyond their masters' eyes and ears and can safely – i.e., without fear of punishment or retaliation – give voice to their recriminations, they then develop discourses and practices that testify both to their consciousness of being dominated and their refusal to accept this state of affairs. In Scott's words, one needs to distinguish between the 'public transcript' and the 'hidden transcript' (Scott, 1990).

The former corresponds to the discourses and practices that subordinates engage in when under the gaze of dominant groups; it is thus likely to be the realm of obedience, quiescence and subservience. The latter corresponds to the words and deeds of subordinates when they regain control over their environment; it is therefore more likely to be the realm of resistance and challenge to the current order.

Within organization studies, the influence of Scott's conceptualization of domination has led to some increased attention to low-profile forms of contestation (Courpasson, 2017). In particular it has been suggested that, rather than disappearing, critique of the corporate order has progressively taken renewed forms (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Hodson, 1995). In the combined face of domination systems that are deemed to be increasingly sophisticated and pervasive (e.g., Kunda, 1992; Sewell, 1998; Willmott, 1993) and of a socio-economic context that has rendered the balance of power decreasingly favourable to workers (Du Gay & Morgan, 2013), the form that criticism can take is more often than not covert (Fleming & Spicer, 2002). Challenges to domination therefore must be sought in the 'subterranean realms of organisational life' (Fleming & Sewell, 2002, p. 863). Cynicism, as a way for workers to distance themselves from prevailing corporate discourses and injunctions while limiting their exposure to reprisal, provides a good illustration of forms of critique that keep such a low profile towards domination (Fleming, 2005; Fleming & Sewell, 2002).

To be sure, elusive domination shares commonalities with Scott's approach, namely awareness on the part of the powerless of their subordination and absence of consent to this order of things. Furthermore, both perspectives underline the persistence of domination in spite of the sustained presence of critique. As Boltanski has it: 'This is also to say that the 'ordinary' people who suffer these effects of domination lose neither their sense of justice, nor their desire for freedom, nor the

correctness of their interpretations of what is happening in reality, or (if you like) their lucidity. But it is made impossible for them to act' (Boltanski, 2011, p. 125).

However, an important difference between the two approaches lies in the role attributed to critique. For Scott, critique (albeit mostly covert) is still envisaged by powerful groups as the expression of a challenge to their domination. This aligns with Gramscian and Bourdieusian understandings, for which the emergence of critique means either the erosion of consent to domination or the unveiling thereof. By contrast, from a French pragmatist perspective, the relation between elusive domination and critique is not seen as merely confrontational 'but as a more subtle one' (De Cock & Nyberg, 2016). In pluralist organizations, the breaches opened by critique are no longer seen as possible signs of structural weaknesses in the domination system. Rather, critique is considered a fundamental constituent of the flexible and pluralist domination order, which eventually contributes to its own reinforcement. For this reason, critique no longer needs to be confined to the domain of the hidden transcript; it can instead be integrated into the public transcript without posing any real threat to the dominance of the powerful. Elusive domination can be said to create a context in which dissent has limited substantive implications for the prevailing organizational order.

Conclusion: elusive domination and emancipation

By framing elusive domination in this way, it might be suggested that the possibility of resistance is denied, which undermines emancipation in terms of workers being enabled to make changes to their world. However, notwithstanding the acute challenge posed by neo-participative management, in presenting these ideas we reject the notion that domination totally removes the possibility of emancipation. In line with our claimed French pragmatist approach, we indeed want to keep the

possibility open for critique to regain purchase on reality (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Fraser, 2014). The formulation of a comprehensive set of recommendations as to the form a credible emancipatory pathway should follow certainly goes beyond the objective of the present paper, which has for its main focus the analysis of the mechanisms by which domination is ensured in neo-participative settings. This being said, the latter is a prerequisite for advancing towards the former since ‘there can be no real revival of critique if the reasons for its current ineffectiveness are not analysed’ (Boltanski & Fraser, 2014, 41, our own translation). We thus feel authorized, by way of conclusion, to suggest some preliminary thoughts such as would logically stem from our analysis of elusive domination. Based on the mechanisms we endeavoured to describe, frustrating elusive domination would mean giving back to critique the argument, the object and the source of which it has been deprived by neo-participative management.

Thinking first in terms of argument, it is worth noticing that capitalism never succeeds in accommodating all types of critique at the same time (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). While neo-participative management has been especially successful in making radical discourses of responsibility and autonomy its own, as embodied in the new spirit of capitalism, other types of critique exist that may prove more difficult to respond to whenever they surface (Chiapello, 2013). In particular, companies like COOKIZ may appear helpless in the face of a revival of social critique: this could for instance aim to denounce the inconsistency of the workers’ taking over of new responsibilities and the absence of corresponding material rewards, or the precariousness that ever-changing roles impose upon workers.

Second, giving back to critique an object would mean activating the possibility of interrogating those conventions that are set in stone. While this may

prove difficult, we nonetheless identify in neo-participative management an important weakness, which lies in its inability to completely live up to its promise of liberation. As seen at COOKIZ, there is a genuine push in the direction of a democratization of decision-making, but without debate being allowed to extend its scope to the fundamentals of the liberation approach including its reliance on permanent change and its unabashed drive for profit. Workers may eventually come to the conclusion that there is no other way to resolve such contradiction inhering in the neo-participatory project than by gradually turning such a project itself into a new object for critique (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Roberts, 2005).

Third, giving back to critique a source of indignation would imply that actors regain some room for expressing angry and nasty critique in place of its solely happy and constructive counterpart. As underlined in our vignette, a noticeable feature of COOKIZ is the presence of psychological suffering among workers, which means that the fuel required to power such critique already exists. Against management's recommendations, some of the production teams of COOKIZ have already acknowledged the importance of negative emotions and conflict for the healthy functioning of work relations (Boltanski, 2012). We might expect that members of those teams will in the future not necessarily continue restricting the voicing of negative feelings to the sole frame of their production line work but similarly extend it to the participative meetings and groups in which they interact with managers.

Finally, while we have thus far logically focussed on ways of reinvigorating critique so as to mirror our analysis of the mechanisms of elusive domination, it is probably worth remembering that voicing critique is not the only way for workers to channel their dissent. There also remains the possibility of exit (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 42; Hirschman, 1970), that is, when workers choose to revert to

companies whose management relies on more traditional bureaucratic schemes, or to becoming their own bosses. As mentioned in our vignette, this is what happened at COOKIZ with the departure of several supervisors. The next step consists of ensuring that these resignations are recognized for what they are, i.e., a rejection of neo-participative management and not, as management would like it to be seen, the mere recognition that such a system does not suit everyone.

To summarize, ours is an attempt to ignite interest in the ways in which organizational domination has evolved in the new spirit of capitalism. In this endeavour, we see value in reflecting upon how domination is understood in Critical Management Studies and the possible contribution that follows from scrutiny of the work of French pragmatist scholars.

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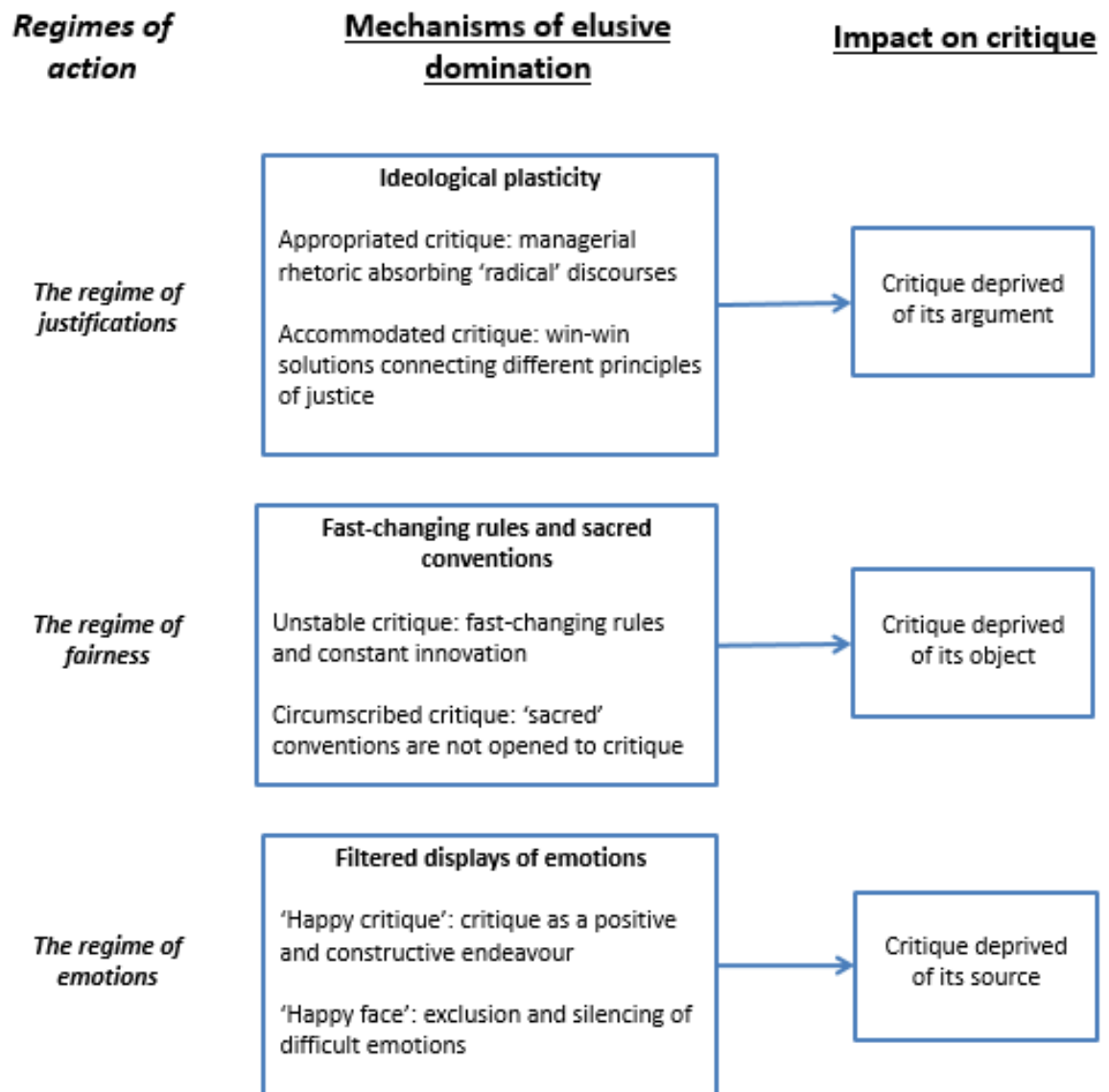
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Figure 1



Appendix. The COOKIZ Case

Research design and methods. Data were collected by one of the authors during four visits, of one week each, to the headquarters and three plants. Most data were thus collected from July 2013 to December 2013, during which time she conducted a total of 69 in-depth interviews (on average, 20 at each of three industrial sites and 12 at the headquarters) with line and technical workers, top and middle management. Archival data were also gathered, such as local documentation and newspaper articles.

Case description. COOKIZ is an industrial biscuit manufacturing group based in France comprising, at the time of data collection in 2013, approximately 750 people working in five plants. Consequently, employees are mainly line workers or technicians, as well as agro-food engineers and middle (plant and production) managers in each plant, but also include administrative staff, support functions managers and top managers at the headquarters. COOKIZ products – breakfast snacks, sweet and salty biscuits – are exclusively sold under retailers' brand names, ranging from discount to gourmet stores, making COOKIZ one of the top players in their industry. Founded in 1883, the company went from being a single-plant, family-owned, local business to a multiple-plant industrial group after it was sold to a private equity fund in 2001. It then acquired two competitors in a series of buyouts (in 2006 and 2009). Following declining results, the original plant was downsized in 2002. This decision sparked violent confrontations with local unions, fed up of years of authoritarian and paternalistic rule. In 2006, looking to boost production and foster a common 'culture of innovation', the newly appointed CEO decided to try a more 'bottom-up approach'. A transformation process, inspired by 'liberation management' (Getz, 2009; Peters, 1992), was launched. This process was widely publicized as COOKIZ boasted two-figure growth for 10 years, with revenues growing from €50

million in 2002 to €250 million in 2013. The ‘liberation’ involved significant organizational and managerial changes (see also Author’sOwnWork, XXXX). Line management jobs were ‘suppressed’, and their former responsibilities shared among self-organized line workers, gathered in ‘autonomous production units’.