



The division of labor of criticism in social systems theory

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to show how social systems theory can contribute to the critique of society. To this end, it uses the distinction between systemic sociology of critique and critical sociology of systems and proposes a program of division of labor between them. The central thesis is that the tasks of offering an original sociological critique of society and observing the realization of diverse social critiques in different systems and contexts can be complementary. The contribution of systems theory is to enable original sociological criticism without claiming moral superiority. To realise this contribution, sociology needs to specialize its critical work and stop repeating judgments formulated by other perspectives. To outline this cooperation, we take as an example the case of criticism at experts in different functional systems.

Keywords: critical sociology, sociology of criticism, Systems theory, criticism at experts.

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Introduction

The thesis that Luhmannian social systems theory has the potential to critique society has already been extensively explored (Möller & Siri, 2016; Palmieri, 2024). The central tenet of this thesis is that systems theory can provide a fresh momentum to Frankfurtian-oriented critical theories of society (Fischer-Lescano, 2010), by identifying and developing, for instance, parallels between the theories of Luhmann and Habermas (Amato & Barros, 2018). In a different vein, we also sought to explore the possibility of a systemic sociology of criticism (Dutra, 2018; Rocha & Costa, 2021), whose task would not be to offer a new critique of society, but rather to take criticism as an object of sociological observation. Rather than engaging in direct competition with other forms of social criticism through the enhancement of its systematic structure and the refinement of its normative assessments, the field of sociology should adopt a second-order observation approach. The objective of this approach is to elucidate the manner in which critical observations are formulated and disseminated within society, along with the distinctions that underpin their formulation and circulation (Luhmann, 1997).

The present article puts forth a proposal to distinguish and delineate a program of division of labor between a systemic sociology of criticism and a critical sociology of systems. The central thesis posits that the tasks of offering an original sociological critique of society and observing the realization of social criticism in different systems and contexts can be complementary. This complementarity is predicated on sociology's endeavor to disassociate itself from normative positions that are recognized and resonate within its object, thereby distinguishing itself from alternative forms of social criticism that it observes. The objective is to proffer original assessments of problems and contradictions in varied social systems. However, it should be noted that, in this division of labor of criticism, originality does not entail moral and prescriptive superiority over other forms of valuation. Rather, originality signifies the production of assessments guided by a scientific perspective.

To illustrate this cooperation, we will examine the case of criticism of "experts" in different social systems. *Systemic sociology of criticism* involves the observation of practices and discourses of immanent denial of the character of normality and necessity attributed to certain crystallized relationships between "experts" and "laypeople." In contrast, *critical sociology of systems*

is concerned with reevaluating the generally negative assessment that the “official discourses and representatives” of the respective systems (lawyers, journalists, politicians, and other professionals who occupy positions of orthodoxy in their systems) make of social criticism of “experts,” especially when it is conducted by laypeople who are culturally distant from *the establishment* of each system.

1. Critical sociology and sociology of criticism in systems theory

In Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems, there are two meanings of criticism (1997, p. 1116; 2018, p. 995). The first refers to a type of generalized and common immanent social criticism in social systems, a social practice that would be the object of a sociology of criticism and in relation to which sociology has no special authority. In this first sense, social criticism consists of the immanent observation of the contingency of social structures (Kieserling, 2014, 2015; Esposito, 2017). Elena Esposito (2017) posits that it is a communication from the system itself—hence immanent—that problematizes the necessary character of its definitions of normality. In modern society, this type of critical communication is made possible by the fact that functional systems internalize their own negation.

This approach offers a potentially fruitful avenue for observing the inherent social criticality within a functionally differentiated society. Each functional system—including law, economics, politics, science, sports, intimate relationships, religion, and art—facilitates the dissemination and generation of internal communications that modify prevailing patterns of valuation and negation of the necessary character of social phenomena (Kieserling, 2015). The semantic and programmatic plurality of functional systems stimulates the immanent negation of structures (anti-structures, informal structures, etc.), which can occur on a large scale, with situations of decline and rise, largely independent of the effects that these critical communications may or may not trigger on the structural evolution of these systems.

From the perspective of systems theory, the task of sociology is to exercise reflexivity on social criticism, thereby raising the question of the conditions of possibility and the limits of critical communication. In Luhmann’s terms,

this is a question of autology: reflecting on the conditions of possibility of social criticism, whether in science or outside it, taking into account the layers of the social that must be exempt from all questioning, criticism, and problematization, so that critical communication of social structures is possible. This entails not only the examination of the conditions that render social criticism possible, but also the constraints that must be acknowledged and accepted in conjunction with these possibilities. Immanent social criticism cannot be considered a negation of a social system in its entirety. It is not logical to criticize law, economics, politics, education, and religion as systemic totalities, given that these social systems internalize their own criticism and negation.

From the perspective of systems that observe themselves and their environment, everything can be contingent, but not at the same time. To illustrate, the legal communication process exhibits functional differentiation, characterized by the formation and autonomization of the lawful/unlawful binary code. This coding system serves to construct behaviors and facts relevant to law, and it cannot be regarded as contingent. The code asserts itself as a necessary dimension for the system. Its contingency can be observed at the level of the reflexive theories of each functional system (legal theory, theology, political theory, etc.), but not in communicative practice itself. According to Schimank (2016, pp. 85-86), functional systems are characterized by their ability to reify their codes. In stratified societies, the hierarchical distinction between nobility and commoners was perceived as an eternal cosmological necessity, as it reflected the divine order that guided the temporal order of the mundane world. This perception was influenced by the religious monopoly of observation and the concept of social hierarchy as an immutable aspect of divine order. In contemporary society, the absence of a unifying cosmology that legitimizes these hierarchies is evident. Consequently, there is no valid systemic reference necessary for all social subsystems. We live in a polycontextual and functionally differentiated society that does not allow for this possibility.

However, within each functional system, the respective binary codes (to have/not to have in economics, lawful/unlawful in law, transcendent/immanent in religion, true/false in science, etc.) are valid as a “temporalized necessity.” That is to say, they assume a necessary character in communication, but this does not result from an extramundane quality as in medieval

cosmology. Rather, it results from the impossibility of observing the binary difference at the moment when operations are guided and constituted by this difference. In the context of law, for instance, the distinction between lawful and unlawful is predicated on a temporalized necessity. This is due to the fact that, in the praxis of decision-making that gives rise to and perpetuates legal codes, it is inherently impossible to observe these codes from a distance as contingent. This phenomenon signifies a substantial and foundational constraint on the potential for immanent social critique. The contingency of various legal structures (laws, jurisprudence, etc.) can be observed, and thus their immanent critique can be made, but this requires the binary difference between lawful/unlawful to be taken as a necessary and unproblematic reference.

All immanent critical communication is predicated on the systemic code, operating under the assumption that binary opposition and differentiation in relation to other codes are unproblematic references. Consequently, a functionally differentiated society, while providing internal positions for mutual deconstruction and deontologization between systems, also establishes limits for deconstructive and critical communications. Communication that does not take place within the confines of society is not a possibility, and this is also the case for critical communication. Immanent social criticism does not reject society; rather, it merely observes the contingency of some of its structures. The objective of political projects designed to transform society is to utilize social criticism as a tool to exert influence on the structural evolution of social systems. These projects are intended to address the fractures, inconsistencies, and structural contradictions that are inherent within society and its constituent subsystems.

Despite Luhmann's relative neglect of the analysis of conflicting functional system structures, the contingency and variability of systemic structures, as opposed to the necessary nature of binary codes, are readily discernible in the distinction between code and program. While binary codes are necessary for the system, as they constitute its identity, the social structures that guide the allocation of code values (programs) are contingent. Furthermore, other social structures can serve as contingent conditions for functional systems, including social roles and the social identity attributed to individuals. While these structures may ultimately reach a state of stability and acquire a characteristic of normality, their criticism and replacement do not destroy

the unity of the system. This unity is ensured by the reproduction of the code, even in situations of strong change and structural contradiction. In summary, generalized immanent criticism is capable of envisioning enhancements to its system in various domains. However, it is incapable of posing a “criticism that calls into question the system’s right to exist” (Kieserling, 2014, p. 91).

In this first sense, social criticism would be regarded as an object rather than a task of sociology. Luc Boltanski (2013) and other authors of the new French sociology (Vandenbergue, 2006) propose to differentiate critical sociology from the sociology of criticism. They emphasize that criticism is an everyday social practice and, in a sense, banal, rather than a noble task proper to sociology. In a similar manner, the concept of a systemic sociology of criticism should be discussed as a theoretical framework that analyzes communications that negate the necessary nature of specific systemic structures.

The second meaning of immanent criticism refers to an original task of sociology, as critical sociology of systems. The task at hand involves the differentiation of forms of critical communication produced by other social subsystems from those that are specifically sociological in nature. According to Luhmann, the immanent social criticism of sociology can be original in relation to other forms of social criticism. However, this originality does not imply that scientific descriptions hold superior significance compared to other modes of communication. Indeed, the critical sociology that Luhmann endeavors to cultivate is intrinsically linked to its capacity to perceive itself as a contingent perspective, thereby facilitating the relativization of the very function of science within the ambit of a functionally differentiated society. In accordance with Bourdieu, Luhmann’s sociological framework entails the objectification of its own capacity for objectification (the autology problem):

The requirement for scientific objectification of reflexive performances does not, therefore, lead us to affirm the primacy of the scientific function of seeking truth over other social functions, but, on the contrary, to abandon any projection of functional primacy by relativizing the very process of self- thematization as a specific function performed by a subsystem of society (Luhmann, 2018, p. 955, author’s translation).

Luhmann associates this objectification of reflective performance with critical sociology in this second sense. That is to say, he considers critical self-reflection that focuses on the relationship with the object itself as the main focus of observation. Critical sociology is defined as the examination of its relationship with the object, with the objective of observing its immanent contingency and negativity through the reconstruction of relationships in which selected and fixed structures assume the condition of alternatives alongside other possibilities for structural development (Luhmann, 2018, p. 955).

According to Luhmann (1997, 2018), the Frankfurt School undermined the notion of criticism, transforming it into a superficially appealing catchphrase that is laden with morality and confined to a first-order mode of observation. This is because it pays little attention to the objectification of its own reflective performance. Two common misconceptions of this normative conception of criticism must be avoided in order to develop a specifically sociological criticality. The first misconception is the confusion of the immanent negativity of social processes, such as the processes of commodity circulation and capital accumulation, with the obligation to value these processes negatively. The second misconception is the postulation that social science must criticize its object in the well-known formats of criticism of ideology, criticism of institutions, criticism of domination, and criticism of distorted and asymmetrical communication (Luhmann, 2018, p. 956).

In order to avoid these two misconceptions and develop a specifically sociological criticality, Luhmann believes it is necessary to purge the idea of criticism of its moral impulses, adapting it to the complexity of the social system and the relationships of cognition and opacity involved in the observation of the social by the social. The decanting of this moral impulse is imperative for sociological criticism to achieve sufficient distance from its object (other social systems). This distance is crucial for the criticism to be original in relation to the existing valuations in society. The fundamental task of critical sociology is not to presume negative critical valuations of its object, but rather to ensure that the object's self-descriptions do not impede the capacity of science to generate its own descriptions and valuations. Sociological criticism is not equipped to direct or substantiate inclinations toward transformation or preservation of the object under scrutiny. While critical sociology discerns the contingencies, selectivity, and negativity

inherent in social structures and processes, it must refrain from attributing to its object the systematicity, unity, and criticality that are the hallmarks of scientific observation. Science has a tendency to exaggerate the systematicity of its object, projecting levels of coherence that can only make sense for the functional system of science itself. This phenomenon, termed the “over-identification of society” (*Überidentifikation der Gesellschaft*) by Luhmann, signifies a projection of unity and integration, characteristic of scientific inquiry, onto its complex, inconsistent, and non-unitary object:

With regard to the object, criticism, as a scientific maxim, can only mean that the object must not prevent science itself from criticizing itself [...] At best, a critical theory can improve its own relationship with society as its object (Luhmann, 2018, p. 956, author’s translation).

Consequently, sociology is only capable of addressing sociological problems, as the production of scientific truths about the economy, politics, and the family does not directly cause changes in these social systems:

When one wishes to criticize effectively, that is, when one really wants to achieve or change something, it is always necessary to pay attention to the fact that these changes cannot be made sociologically, but economically in the economy, politically in politics, etc. That is, the limit of sociology is its translatability into other logics (Nassehi, 2016, p. 213, author’s translation).

In essence, Luhmann’s critique demands that sociology develop the capacity to recognize the manner in which its functional perspective constructs a distinct world, one that differs from the world constructed by the other functional perspectives that constitute the societal environment in which science is also embedded (Luhmann, 2018, p. 958). The foundation for sociological criticism must be established upon a second-order self-observation plan. However, this does not grant it a distinct status, but rather a differentiated and original one in relation to other forms of criticism.

In a functionally differentiated society, of which science is a part, there exists a limited pluralism of values (Weber speaks of “polytheism of values”) and world constructions that cannot be reduced to a common denominator. It is important to note that this is not a case of absolute relativism. Instead, it is a variety of relativism that is limited by the actual differentiation of

functional systems with their value references, normativities, and specific possibilities for immanent social criticism. This variety of references, while stimulating the pluralization of forms of immanent criticism, also indicates the set of values that are taken as unproblematic parameters for social criticism, thus imposing limits on criticism itself. Systemic theory does not yield a comprehensive perspective; rather, it produces a partial view of the contingency of the structures of its object (Kieserling, 2014, p. 92). The problematization of certain social structures is only possible “when others are ceased from being questioned by the fixing of values” (Kieserling, 2014, p. 94, author’s translation).

The act of fixing values implies that criticism, including that from the sociological perspective, cannot ultimately challenge the existence of the system. However, it does possess a wide range of potential for denaturalizing certain aspects of the system and proposing alternatives. Therefore, critical systems theory deviates from the Enlightenment’s conventional approach of reconstructing systemic structures exclusively on the basis of reason. As demonstrated in the specific instance of binary codes for functional systems, immanent criticism, akin to all forms of communication, is only possible through the acceptance of this binary distinction as unproblematic: “The selection of a systemic reference consequently necessitates the adoption of a certain degree of systemic reverence” (Kieserling, 2014, p. 89, author’s translation).

The necessity for theory to embrace social values positions systemic theory in closer alignment with other forms of immanent critical theory. For Luhmann, the premise that a scientist who wishes to take a critical stance toward his object can and should evaluate it based on internal criteria constitutive of that same object applies. The crux of the issue for Luhmann lies not in the evaluative dependence of theory, but rather in the production within sociology, even when grounded in evaluations derived from its object, of original evaluations characteristic of scientific observation guided by the true/false code:

The prevailing forms of critical sociology, in their adherence to the standpoint of their object, exhibit a deficiency in originality in their valuations. Frequently, critical sociology appears to be a distant echo of what can already be heard within the system itself (Kieserling, 2014, p. 93, author’s translation).

The originality of sociological criticism is achieved by distancing itself from the immanent normativity of the object, especially from its self-descriptions that bring an exclusively negative assessment of deviant action and structural contradictions. This conceptualization of distance does not imply evaluative neutrality; rather, it signifies the commitment of immanent criticism of sociology to the evaluative distinction between true and false. Within this evaluative paradigm of science, immanent criticism assumes the form of observations that challenge the normative simplifications that social systems introduce in their self-descriptions. This process serves to illuminate the systemic functionality and rationality of deviant structures and patterns of conduct.

This critical sociology, characterized by its original valuations, aims to reevaluate the negative valuation that systemic self-descriptions attribute to deviant and informal structures. As is often the case in critical theory, normative self-descriptions of the system tend to see normatively compliant actions exclusively as solutions and deviant actions exclusively as problems for the system: “Contrary to the commonly held belief, an analysis of the difference in complexity between system and systemic structure reveals the potential for both actions, including deviant ones, to solve systemic problems” (Kieserling, 2014, p. 94, author’s translation)¹.

From the perspective of its object, the original valuation of sociology offers the possibility of a critique of the normative self-description of the system based on the consequences of this self-description for the system itself. The crux of this critique lies in the unilateral imposition of normative conformity on systemic operations. The distinction between system and structure facilitates the observation of the rationality of certain structures that are inconsistent and contradictory with each other. These structures ensure the system’s relations with an even more inconsistent and contradictory environment. Immanent criticism is defined as the act of highlighting the inherent inconsistencies within a system. The insistence that the system be consistent stems from an ontological standpoint and must therefore be rejected by critical systems theory. Complex systems necessitate structural alternatives that are not necessarily consistent with each other in order to address diverse challenges: “Systems are not systematic, and in an even less

¹ Functional deviant actions aim to reorganize and reprogram the use of systemic binary codes, while dysfunctional deviant actions seek to deny the binary code itself.

systematic environment, it would be less rational to aim for such a high level of internal order” (Kieserling, 2014, p. 97, author’s translation).

At this juncture, critical sociology of systems can contribute to broadening the descriptive and evaluative horizons of systemic sociology of criticism by highlighting the non-systematic nature of social systems and the functionality of deviant practices and structures in relation to current normative self-descriptions. While the latter engages in the observation of practices and discourses of immanent denial of the character of normality and necessity attributed to certain systemic structures, such as their programs and the crystallized relations between “producers” and “consumers,” the former is concerned with reevaluating the generally negative assessment that the “official discourses and representatives” of the respective systems make of social criticism, especially when it is conducted by laypeople who are culturally distant from the current experts. However, in order to engage in this “division of labor of criticism” in an original and productive way, it may be better for critical sociology to revise its self-definition in the sense suggested by André Kieserling:

Rather than employing critical sociology, it would be more appropriate to utilize evaluative sociology (*wertende Soziologie*) in the future. The prevailing interpretation of the term “critical” encourages us to focus on negative assessments, which, from the abstract perspective in which sociology should be evaluated as a unit, lacks a foundation. Critical judgment can be presented in a positive manner (Kieserling, 2015, p. 148, author’s translation).

2. Criticism of experts as an object

Contemporary society appears to be experiencing an abundance of criticism. One of its most notable manifestations is the critique of experts. For some time now, the public of voters, readers, patients, believers, parents, and students have been engaging in a practice similar to that of soccer fans criticizing coaches. Specifically, these groups have been evaluating the authority and decision-making standards of experts in their respective systems. This evaluation is based on new demands for inclusion that require a redefinition of the relationship between experts and laypeople.

It also involves a growing questioning of how experts produce and deliver performance and services in their respective functional systems of society.

Specialists, particularly those in professions such as education, journalism, medicine, the clergy, and science, function as the “guardians” of the values, commandments, and rules that govern their respective spheres of value. These actors are the primary guarantors of opposition to the processes of enemy intrusion and colonization, conducted by forces and criteria foreign to the “specific legality” (Max Weber) of each sphere. Their identity and professional performance are inherently defined by their affiliation with the internal values of their respective social spheres (Schimank & Volkmann, 2017, p. 40). In the interest of upholding the integrity of their respective domains, these professionals must resist the imposition of external criteria, particularly when “laypeople” assume a leadership role in defining the routines and working conditions of “specialists.”

The prevailing tendency to place stable trust in specialists from various systems appears to be more characteristic of the period that Peter Wagner (1995) designated as “organized modernity” than it is a universal trait of modernity, as Anthony Giddens (1991) had previously theorized. The post-World War II era was characterized by the emergence of organizational structures that relied on widespread trust in specialized and standardized production of goods, services, and performances within a diverse array of functional systems, despite the presence of significant regional and social disparities. In this regard, Parsons (1951, pp. 438–439) points out in his analysis of the doctor-patient relationship in the United States in the 1950s that patients were expected to refrain from seeking more than one doctor to compare opinions and treatment recommendations. Trust in the specialist was a deeply institutionalized norm.

The organizational changes that shook or dissolved the certainties of “organized modernity” also affected the relationship between laypeople and specialists in society as a whole. This change is subject to a variety of interpretations. However, a favorable interpretation has emerged, characterizing this phenomenon as a cultural shift that fosters a predilection for “post-materialistic” (Inglehart, 1990) and emancipatory values. The post-World War II period was characterized by the dissemination of prosperity, economic stability, and access to education, which collectively enabled subsequent generations to exercise greater autonomy in their value

orientations with respect to economic considerations. Consequently, the pursuit of self-realization and personal autonomy would have given rise to a novel political culture, characterized by a pervasive suspicion of all forms of hierarchy and the valorization of expressive individuality. The thesis of the popularization of “artistic criticism,” originating in the counterculture of the 1960s, follows the same line of pointing to a shake-up in the confidence of hierarchical relations of production and consumption (Boltanski & Chiapelo, 2009) in the last decades of the 20th century.

In a similar vein, Jürgen Gehards (2001) presented a sociological interpretation of the German experience with this cultural change, drawing upon social systems theory. According to the author, between 1960 and 1989, demands for inclusion and the forms of conduct of “public roles” underwent rapid structural change in their relationship with “experts” in different functional systems. Patients (health system), voters (politics), consumers (economy), students and parents (education), and defendants (law) began to demand and obtain opportunities to participate in experts’ decisions about the production and delivery of services and performance in various functional systems. This brought to light two fundamental and interrelated elements: a *demand for individualization of the public*, articulated as a rejection of passive and standardized inclusion in health, education, the world of work, politics, law, and the mass media, and a *critique of the way in which doctors, teachers, factory supervisors, politicians, judges, and journalists produce and deliver services* in their respective functional systems (Gerhards, 2001, p. 167).

The demand for individualization of the public in inclusion processes and the critique of the specialized production of performances and services in society’s subsystems are constitutively linked, since the problems raised by one on the “demand side” are formulated by the other on the “supply side.” The consumers of systemic deliveries begin to question quality (i.e. the nature of the production and delivery), scope (i.e. the quantity and recipients of the delivery), and the social composition of producers (i.e. who is capable of producing what in each system). This results in a relativisation of the differentiation of roles between ‘laypeople’ and ‘specialists’, but without leading to the abolition of this differentiation. From a “supply-side” perspective, the focus is on broadening the programming horizons of functional systems, that is, identifying and creating functional equivalents and institutional alternatives for the production and delivery of systemic

performances and services. This results (in the social dimension) in greater openness to competitors and actors seeking to occupy specialised roles with new patterns of production and delivery. In this sense, the “public revolt” already bears the mark of functional differentiation, as it takes the form of a search for functionally specialised alternative solutions to equally specific problems. As a practical result of this “revolt,” the invention and production of new solutions and programs materialized as specifically economic, educational, medical, legal, and political alternatives (Gehards, 2001, p. 179). The effectiveness of criticism is directly linked to its relatively disciplined character as an internal negation of functional systems, that is, to its condition as criticism that negates structures, but not the values and codes that define the existence of these systems.

In its emergence, this “revolt” attracted a relatively familiar audience to the predominantly progressive milieu of the social sciences: highly educated people employed in the service sector, who took advantage of the increased prosperity and expansion of education in the postwar period. This social segment’s capacity for mobilisation, articulation, and organisation enabled the attraction of attention to its demands and criticisms, thereby establishing a permanent situation to which medical, legal, educational, journalistic and political organisations reacted with structural changes in the relationship between ‘experts’ and ‘laypeople’. Nevertheless, the sociocultural proximity to this upper-middle-class audience gave rise to the impression that the ‘revolt’ would be disciplined and that the authority of social science and scientific criticism of society would be unshaken by generalised mistrust of experts.

The error in this analysis may have been the assumption that the “revolt” would invariably be led by the “enlightened” who recognise the value of specialised and scientific criticism of society under the familiar formulas of criticism of inequality, domination, and alienation. It is evident that the “public revolt” and criticism have become autonomous from their initial proponents, disseminating unpredictably throughout 21st-century global society. Although the “revolt” against the establishment of different functional systems was initially led by progressive sectors, it is now indisputable that the cultural and political right wing is spearheading this process in Brazil and other countries; and this is not being driven by the so-called “enlightened sectors” of society, but by a much broader set of audiences, whose social criticism has hitherto attracted little interest from

the social sciences. An exemplary illustration of this phenomenon is the criticism of professional journalism from the perspective of “new media,” which, as anthropologist Letícia Cesarino (2022, p. 15) terms it, constitutes the “anti-structural dynamic”.

Instead of the relatively disciplined “enlightened criticism” of yesteryear, contemporary sociology finds itself at a juncture where it is no longer able to ignore the social criticism that emanates from what is often termed “healthy human understanding”. However, this “healthy human understanding” is not that which has been disciplined by Marxist training, as Gramsci (1994) would have desired, nor is it formed by the new vulgate of “decolonial” epistemological populism, with its predilection for the “literary and philosophical approach” to “affections” (as posited by Mar Castro Varela, 2023). Rather, it is a type of common sense that has revolted in an openly “undisciplined” manner against the current “experts”, as evidenced by the criticism of professional journalism based on “new media”. To provide an illustration that is particularly pertinent to the predominantly progressive milieu of the social sciences: within the education system, the “public revolt” gave rise to a profound and enduring critique of the administrative and pedagogical hierarchy in schools. This critique ultimately led to a comprehensive restructuring of the roles of teachers, administrators, parents, and students, as well as the emergence of forms of self-organisation by the public. The objective of these changes was to institutionalise new rights and claims of participatory inclusion. In European countries and even in the most prosperous and “enlightened” environments of countries such as Brazil, parents and students began to have more rights to participate in decisions regarding the allocation of children to classes and grades and in the definition of pedagogical content (Gehards, 2001, pp. 172-173). From the 1960s to the end of the 20th century, the predominance of a progressive bias, sustained by the protagonism of the “enlightened” middle classes, appears to have fuelled the belief that expanding the powers of participation of “laypeople” did not threaten the authority of the current “experts.” The cultural and political-ideological affinity with these “enlightened lay people” ensured the continuity of the sense of security of these “experts.” As long as criticism of the administrative and pedagogical hierarchy was made against the backdrop of a culture shared with the establishment of the education system itself, everything was fine. The crux of the issue lies in

the fact that the door opened by the “enlightened” was subsequently thrown wide open by the “normal people,” who also took the initiative to openly question the authority of the prevailing “experts”² and demand participation in the internal life of schools, including the definition of content. This time, however, this was done with other cultural and ideological orientations and new and relatively powerful forms of public self-organisation, which often proved to be strange and hostile to the progressive environment of the “humanities” and their pedagogical agenda of moral “enlightenment,” a position that was supported in an unthinking and militant way by most social scientists who did not strive to differentiate scientific criticism from so-called “enlightened” criticism of their immediate social environment. An illustration of this unthinking proximity of social science to progressive militancy is the recurrent and loose use of terms such as “revisionist” and “fascist” to characterize so-called Bolsonarism, replacing scientific evaluation with moral adjectives (Lima Junior, 2024, p. 2).

At present, the “experts” who constitute the *establishment* of numerous functional systems, including journalism, the education system, the arts system, and a significant proportion of the religious system, appear to concur with and advocate the criticism promulgated by the “enlightened” public in the late 20th century. This criticism has thus been elevated to the status of official normative self-description, which is to be defended from the more recent “undisciplined” criticism of the “normal people”, whose cultural and political orientation appears to be predominantly anti-progressive. This transformation of criticism into official self-description appears to be applicable to “decolonial criticism,” which has become mainstream in various segments of the education system, the humanities, and the arts. If this description is accurate, it suggests that the relationship between “experts” and “laypeople” should be understood in a dynamic and procedural way. In this scenario, “laypeople” can play a creative role in driving not only the redefinition of their relationship with “experts”, but also the introduction of cultural and institutional innovations capable of reprogramming the production and delivery of services and performances in different systems of society (Kern, 2011, p. 286).

² It is important to note that the terms “normal people” and “current experts” do not, of course, have the meaning of sociological concepts in critical sociology of systems. The purpose of these terms is to articulate the semantics employed by right-wing social critics that a systemic sociology of criticism must observe.

In this process, which combines criticism and social creativity, new experts may emerge from the articulation of demands and networks of links between different publics (Kern, 2011, p. 297). These new experts will challenge the authority of the establishment to program and produce systemic deliveries with new conceptions about the quality of what is produced and delivered, the extent of deliveries, and the social composition of their producers. In social movements that redefine the roles and relationships between audiences and experts, sectors from different public use their possibilities for articulating demands and their networks of connections to form and develop “secondary specialized roles” (Stichweh, 1988; Volkmann, 2010). These include the reader engaged in producing news, the fan interested in tactics who becomes an individual analyst of top players’ performance, and the self-taught believer who becomes a pastor. These individuals are capable of altering authority relations with traditional “experts” in each social sphere and thus influencing the programming and production of their respective services and performances. The creative potential of “secondary specialized roles” is predicated on the ambiguity and structural vagueness of their program of action. This challenges the distinction between specialists and “laypeople”, creating new roles capable of altering the power structure in a given social subsystem.

In certain conditions, the public can thus articulate such issues in such a manner as to bring about innovative solutions to existing problems. When these innovative solutions are accepted as legitimate forms of action, they can gain durability and generalisation, and become institutionalised as new routines in a given functional system. In this way, they can become part of the work programmes of the “legitimate specialists” themselves. As Thomas Kern suggests, this process can be summarised as follows:

When social movements – that is, movements of the public – successfully generate new forms of legitimate action, their institutionalisation leads to a change in previous role structures, in such a way that the roles of the public and the specialist are equally altered. Initially, members of society assume secondary specialised roles, whose individual components are, on certain occasions, integrated into the roles of legitimate experts. In certain instances, entirely new specialised roles are established (Kern, 2011, p. 299- 230).

This phenomenon appears to be identifiable in various social spheres, especially following the widespread adoption of digital social networks such as YouTube and Instagram. In the domain of sports journalism, for instance, there are fans who have committed themselves to the study of tactics, whether or not they have received training in journalism. These individuals analyse games on individual YouTube channels, thereby achieving not only popularity and financial gain, but also access to the group of “legitimate experts,” who make special appearances on programmes presented by renowned journalists who comment on soccer. Equivalent examples can be found in religion, art and food criticism, and to a great extent in investment consulting, political analysis, and educational criticism. This dynamic appears to elucidate the manner in which the “experts” constituting the prevailing *establishment* of numerous functional systems have embraced the social critique articulated by the “enlightened” public web during the late 20th century as an official normative self-description. A subsequent development is the challenge to this “legitimate criticism made official” by the “undisciplined criticism” of the “normal people”, who does not subscribe to the cultural and ideological orientations of the establishment. Undoubtedly, the empirical task of great importance would be to map the cultural and ideological orientations and cognitive frames of the “secondary experts” who advance new forms of social criticism in different functional systems in order to identify how these actors challenge the authority of established experts. The most probable scenario is a very diverse picture within each system and also between different systems. Nevertheless, even in the context of this possible picture of diversity, it seems plausible to hypothesise that a significant portion of these so-called “new experts” challenge the authority of the progressive establishment and the “legitimate criticism” established as the official norm in various functional systems. If this hypothesis is correct, then it would be worthwhile to consider the following question: how does this political and cultural reorientation of the “public revolt” affect the authority of sociology, especially critical sociology? In what ways does this “undisciplined” social criticism, which is largely culturally foreign to the humanities, challenge the form and content of critical sociology as specialized criticism? Are there “secondary specialized roles” engaged in critiquing the authority of sociology with the potential to restructure the relationship between “specialists” and “publics” in our

discipline? Or, given that the science subsystem does not have a public consisting of individuals with no scientific background, such as those who are fans of soccer or readers of newspapers, but rather consists of scientists themselves, does this mean that it is immune to the revolt by the publics of other systems?³

3. Critical sociology and its relationship with established experts and outsiders

The following diagnosis of the relationship between critical sociology and experts from different functional systems should be regarded as a set of hypotheses concerning the originality/lack of originality of the dominant trends in sociological criticism of society. The demonstration or refutation of such hypotheses is an empirical task that this article cannot undertake and present.

In its “strange” and “undisciplined” variation, from the perspective of the progressive establishment of systems such as education, religion, art, law, journalism, and the educational sphere, social criticism directed at specialists seems to indirectly affect sociology itself. This occurs because our discipline is strongly identified with the specialized critique of ideology, institutions, domination, and inequality—established formulas of “legitimate and official criticism” that shape the professional identity and practice of those educators, priests, artists, and journalists who share with us the same progressive cultural milieu. Through these formulas, critical sociology tends to reiterate the systematic character that prevailing self-descriptions and normative critiques attribute to social systems, thereby devaluing the “deviant” criticisms that outsiders direct toward the “established” figures within their respective systems, as if such criticisms were always reducible to relations of ideological domination, institutional control, and the manipulation of asymmetric communication⁴.

³ It is important to note that the dissemination of scientific knowledge does not form part of the core operations of the scientific system, even when such dissemination is carried out by scientists. Its core operation is the specialised publication of scientific literature.

⁴ Another example of “deviant criticisms” can be found in those formulated by non-progressive specialists who criticize contemporary reality based on normative parameters that differ from—or even coincide with—those of progressives, often without explicitly declaring a critical intention, as in the case of the Hungarian-Canadian sociologist Frank Furedi.

By often assuming the standpoint of the “prevailing specialists” within certain functional systems, critical sociology seems trained to devalue non-progressive critique, as if its proponents were either a majority of innocent victims deprived of the social and cognitive resources needed to cope with contemporary forms of ideological mystification, or a minority of perpetrators who “construct” this system of domination and institutional control. Insofar as it accepts this role as a “distant echo” of the negative evaluations that the “established” direct toward the criticisms and participatory claims of outsiders, critical sociology ends up relinquishing its potential originality—namely, the capacity to offer a second-order evaluation of prevailing evaluations, free from any prior commitment to the perspectives and descriptions already embedded in its object of analysis.

A salient illustration of this phenomenon is the interplay between sociology and the so-called “authoritarian threats” and “disinformation” that are disseminated by digital platforms within the context of political public opinion. In recent years, with the rise or consolidation of the “radical right” in positions of power, the “defense of democracy” and of “truth” has become a central agenda of the established journalism in many countries. In Brazil, for instance, major media corporations – which have long exercised a highly concentrated control over mass communication on television and, to a lesser extent, in print journalism – have begun to preach the value of “truth” against the “disinformation” disseminated on digital platforms. In recent times, however, progressives considered it their task to combat the manipulation and control of information promoted by this very oligopoly. The fundamental proposition of this progressive critique was that the mass media constitute a system that could be oriented towards the pursuit of truth, provided that distortions such as oligopolistic concentration and ideological manipulation in favour of dominant economic groups were corrected.

With the rise of bolsonarismo and the growing influence of digital platforms within political public opinion, progressives have lost their former prominence in this line of critique. Now, the loudest voices denouncing “media manipulation” come from the audiences of the “radical right,” often through the emergence of new mass communication channels and organizations operating in virtual spaces. There is no doubt that these “new specialists” in communication produce and disseminate false or misleading information about the political and social world in pursuit of economic and

political objectives. What is noteworthy, however, is that in this new situation, traditional media companies and their journalists have begun to bear witness to—and even “inflate”—their commitment to “truth,” claiming for themselves the prerogative to verify and define what counts as true or false.

Seemingly convinced that truth can in fact serve as the guiding value of the mass communication system, critical sociology has tended to echo the standpoint of established journalism in its “defense of truth and democracy,” rather than maintaining analytical distance from the dispute and offering its own assessment of the situation. In the case of the relationship between mass media and the value of truth, the first task of critical sociology would be to question the self-description—reproduced both by the “established” and by outsiders—according to which this is indeed a central or relevant value for the system. As Palmieri (2024, p. 212) emphasizes, Luhmann (1996) provides a critical counter-description in which truth is merely a lateral and ornamental aspect of the mass communication system, regardless of who controls its resources and organizations. What is at stake here is not ontological truth but rather truth in the scientific sense—the sense invoked by journalists and their critics in the self-descriptions they produce of themselves and their practices. What journalists claim as their “commitment to truth” is something fragmentary and occasional, always subordinated to criteria such as novelty and news value. Only science possesses in the pursuit of truth a central and structurally constitutive orientation.

This is not a moral judgment in the sense of accusing the mass media of being uniformly deceitful. Such a claim cannot be sustained within the framework of a systems theory perspective, which emphasizes differentiation and the “polytheism of values” (Weber) in society, rejecting any societal centrality of science and scientific truth in relation to other spheres and value systems. Rather, it is an original assessment through which sociology performs its second-order observation of the viewpoints and evaluations that are already well known and widely reproduced within its object of study. In doing so, it does not deny the legitimacy of wishing for less disinformation in journalism. It merely proposes to observe the contradictions and the ideological use of the value of truth itself—by both progressives and their adversaries—within a system whose logic is not, in fact, effectively oriented by this value as its primary reference. Certainly, this entails abandoning any utopian expectation of a mass communication system entirely free of

distortions, manipulations, and selectivities. But it also means drawing attention to the function of these phenomena—those described normatively as “deviant”—for the very operation of the system itself.

Whether in this or any other system: in order to exercise its original critical task and thus contribute to the sociology of criticism, critical or evaluative sociology cannot be committed to defending the current experts in education, politics, journalism, art, or religion, echoing their points of view. A critical re-evaluation of the prevailing negative assessments made by these experts concerning the criticism they receive from the public and from “secondary experts” is imperative. Sociology must engage in critical scrutiny of the self-description of systems, encompassing internal social criticisms that have been institutionalised, and undertake a re-evaluation of the judgments that progressives make regarding non-progressive criticism (Luhmann, 1992, p. 126-147).

Final considerations

This article has sought to delineate how social systems theory can contribute to the critique of society. In this regard, I have utilised the distinction between systemic sociology of critique and critical sociology of systems, proposing a programme of division of labour between them. The central thesis of this study is that the tasks of offering an original sociological critique of society and observing the realisation of diverse social critiques in different systems and contexts can be complementary. The contribution of systems theory is to enable an original sociological critique without any claim to moral superiority. In order to achieve this objective, sociology must specialise its critical work and cease to reiterate judgments formulated by other perspectives. I have demonstrated the feasibility of this approach in the context of criticisms directed towards experts. To the extent that critical sociology accepts the role of a “distant echo” of the negative evaluation that “established experts” make of the criticisms and claims of participation they receive from outsiders, it ends up abdicating its possible originality in offering an original second-order evaluation of current evaluations, without prior commitment to the points of view and descriptions that its object already brings.

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