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Harnessing Disarmed Criticism to Reinforce Neoliberal Capitalism: The Case of Justification Work in Social Business

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Vivien Blanchet
Claudine Grisard

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Vivien BLANCHET[a]

Claudine GRISARD[b]

Abstract. This article analyses how dominant discourse reinforces neoliberal capitalism. While most critical studies focus on manufacturing consent, we show how dominant discourse both harnesses and disarms criticism to establish change as a mode of complex domination. We investigate how the 'guruesque' discourse of social business puts capitalism to the test. Our discourse analysis highlights how three Muhammad Yunus' books align subject positions, problems, objectives, and solutions to make neoliberal programmes the solutions to societal issues. Taking the theoretical turn in pragmatic sociology, we build on late Boltanski's work to show how this justification work connects world and reality differently in truth, reality, and existential tests. We make three contributions. First, we revisit how justification work disarms criticism, showing that it is less about reaching moral agreement than about depriving criticism of its voices, targets, imagination, and alternatives. Second, we reconsider the notion of tests, showing that truth, reality, and existential tests combine within a single discourse to equally legitimate the neoliberal reality. Third, we advance knowledge on complex domination,
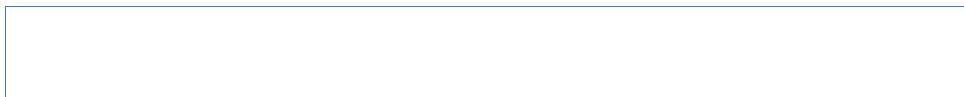
[a] **Burgundy School of Business, vivien.blanchet@bsb-education.com**

[b] **Queen Mary University of London, c.grisard@qmul.ac.uk**

showing that claims for critical change nurture a process of creative destruction supporting neoliberal capitalism.

Introduction

The current crises are reinforcing rather than undermining neoliberal capitalism. Management research has increasingly investigated how the dominant discourse establishes entrepreneurship, competition, and private deliberation as respectively the dominant identity project, dominant social relation, and dominant regulation process of any activity (Rhodes and Fleming, 2020; Fougère et al.; Da Costa and Silva Saraiva, 2012). It especially highlights how CSR, BoP, and microcredit discourses achieve a great neoliberal reversal transforming the market from an ill to the panacea to societal issues (Vallentin and Murillo, 2011; Arora and Romijn, 2012; Chatterjee, 2014; Kazmi et al., 2016).

However, these studies remain unclear about the interplay between this dominant discourse and the many counter-discourses criticising neoliberal capitalism. Most of them focus on the process leading people to consent to domination (see Burawoy, 2012). They assume that the issue for the dominant discourse is to pacify criticism. They focus on the defensive work against criticism but neglect the offensive work playing with criticism. They disregard how the dominant discourse exploits criticism as a strategic resource to legitimise neoliberal capitalism. This blindspot is all the more problematic as the dominant neoliberal discourse permanently

calls for critical change to challenge the status quo by giving people more freedom, more autonomy, and more responsibilities (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

In this article, we take the nascent theoretical shift in pragmatic sociology to reverse this perspective (Boltanski, 2011). Considering the active role of criticism, we argue that the dominant discourse legitimises neoliberal capitalism not based on consent but on dissent. Studies in pragmatic sociology help us to illuminate the critical processes whereby actors perform reality by testing the situations they face. Drawing on the Economies of Worth (EW) (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), most pragmatic studies focus on how people engage in critical deliberation to achieve moral legitimacy (Patriotta et al., 2011; Taupin, 2012; Kazmi et al., 2016; du Plessis and Just, 2022; Anesa et al., 2022). Their major contribution is to show how the dominant discourse draws from criticism the moral content to enrol people in capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). However, a growing body of research disputes these EW studies for focusing on the content of arguments to the detriment of their institutional context, on moral tests to the detriment of other ways of testing neoliberal capitalism, and on stability to the detriment of instability (see Cloutier and Langley, 2013). A few pragmatic studies have started to use Boltanski's (2011) later work to fill these gaps (e.g., Daudigeos et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2019; De Cock and Nyberg, 2016; Taupin and Lenglet, 2017). They highlight how dominant actors put neoliberal capitalism to the test to make permanent change in its main mode of domination. However, they remain unclear on how they combine multiple ways of testing capitalism within a single discourse.

In this paper, we draw on these emerging pragmatic studies to capture the dual nature of the dominant discourse, which advocates *change* as a *reproduction* strategy for neoliberal domination (Boltanski, 2011). Specifically, we use this theoretical framing to analyse the dominant discourse of social business. Through this managerial innovation, management guru Muhammad Yunus (2007; 2011; 2017) promotes market-based entrepreneurial programmes as

the panacea to solve all societal problems. The core idea is to combine the best of two worlds: the financial viability of for-profit organisations with the societal impacts of non-profit organisations. This managerial innovation is becoming increasingly popular with both field actors and researchers: multinationals, NGOs and public organisations are developing social businesses to solve problems of poverty, pollution, or health all over the world; in parallel, prestigious universities and business schools are developing academic journals, research centres, and training to support them, thereby helping to shape future managers. In line with Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), Chiapello and Fairclough (2002), and Kazmi et al. (2016), we analyse how the 'guruesque' social business discourse combine managerial practices with academic knowledge. We unpack how Yunus (2007; 2011; 2017) blurs the line between the neoliberal discourse and the critical counter-discourse to legitimise the expansion of capitalism, thus harnessing a disarmed criticism.

We make three contributions. First, we revisit how justification work disarms criticism. While most pragmatic studies focus on moral compromising, we argue that disarmament involves depriving criticism of grip on *reality*. We show how the social business discourse deprives criticism of its voices, targets, imagination, and alternatives. Contrary to EW studies, we thus put the emphasis on conflicts rather than on agreement. Second, we reconsider how justification work puts capitalism to the test. While most pragmatic studies assume that some tests are conducive to maintenance and others to change, we argue that these different tests combine in the dominant discourse to reinforce neoliberal capitalism. We show how it covers the *world* with *reality* in *truth tests*, hierarchises different *realities* in *reality tests*, and singularise *reality* in *existential tests*. We thus underline the polymorphic nature of the dominant discourse. Third, we clarify how justification work serves as an instrument of *domination through change*. We demonstrate that criticism fuels a process of creative destruction, opening

up new avenues for the development of neoliberal capitalism. We show that the dominant discourse is not about conserving the status quo but about perpetual change.

1. Renewing the Pragmatic Approach to Domination in neoliberal capitalism

1.1. EW studies: a restrictive moral approach to domination

In line with the Economies of Worth (EW) (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), pragmatic studies assume that people legitimise domination in an argumentative process with a focus on moral justice (Reinecke, 2010; Roquebert and Debucquet, 2022; Dionne et al., 2019; Kazmi et al., 2016; Ancelin-Bourguignon et al., 2019; du Plessis and Just, 2022). To do so, people conduct investigations, collect evidence, and produce reports to test capitalism as if they were involved in a trial (Boltanski, 2012). Throughout this justification work, they connect singular situations to abstract polities defining what would be a fairly governed society (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). These polities reflect conflicting conceptions of the common good. For instance, the *market polity* is based on private interest, whereas the *civic polity* is based on collective interests.

Clashes between these polities provoke crises of moral legitimacy. In such critical moments, people engage in tests to question the managerial rationalities, programmes, and technologies underlying capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Four main criticisms challenge them: social criticism addresses injustice, artistic criticism addresses the loss of meaning, ecological criticism addresses damage to the environment, and conservative criticism addresses the collapse of tradition (Chiapello, 2013). Justification work appropriates their moral content to legitimise capitalism. This justification work is not just rhetoric but actually transforms capitalist regimes over time. In the 1960's, for instance, social reformers, management gurus, and politicians have appropriated the artistic criticism to shift from Fordist

capitalism to neoliberal capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). They have established change, mobility, and informal control as sources of enthusiasm, security, and fairness. More and more pragmatic scholars argue that we are facing a new critical moment during which justification work recycles multiples criticism in promoting CSR solutions (e.g., Chiapello, 2013; Kazmi et al., 2016). In doing so, justification work constructs moral compromises combining the market, industrial, and projective polities central to capitalism with other polities from which criticism emerges. Ultimately, EW studies shed light on how moral plasticity legitimates domination in neoliberal capitalism.

However, EW studies imperfectly capture several aspects of capitalist domination. First, they focus on *what* people say and *how* they say it but pay little attention to *who* talks to *whom* and with *which* effects. Hence, they overlook the institutional field in which domination takes place (Cloutier and Langley, 2013). Second, EW studies focus on moral issues, but omit to look at other sources of legitimacy supporting neoliberal capitalism (Daudigeos et al., 2021). Third, EW studies centre on justification *"repairs"* situations (Patriotta et al., 2011: 1829) or *"maintains"* domination in occasional critical moments (Taupin, 2012), but overlook about how justification work use criticism to perform permanent change as an internal mechanism of neoliberal capitalism (Daudigeos et al., 2021).

1.2. OC studies: a multifaceted approach to domination

In *On Critique* (OC), Boltanski (2011) develops a more nuanced approach to domination to address these gaps. He reasserts the centrality of justification work in legitimising domination. However, he shifts the analysis from the question of agreement to that of conflict: justification consists less in reaching a legitimate moral arrangement than in disarming criticism to keep it from subverting the social order.

Boltanski (2011) therefore broadens the definition of *test* as an evaluative process in which people struggle to transform the continuous flux of the *world* into a stabilised constructed *reality*. Here the *world* refers to *"everything that happens"* and *reality* to the interpretation of what happens: the former is immanent, elusive, chaotic, and uncertain, while the latter is social, testable, orderly, and risky. Boltanski (2011) considers three kinds of tests through which people can turn the *world* into a *reality*. **Truth tests** explore the tension between necessity and possibility, i.e., between what is and what can be. They are about questions such as 'what is the natural order of things?', 'can reality be other than what it is?', etc. **Reality tests** explore the tension between facts and norms, i.e., between what is and what must be. They address questions such as 'are the tests going properly?', 'are the outcomes accurate?', 'are the tests morally fair?', etc. Finally, *existential tests* explore the tensions between collective experience and subjective experience, i.e., between what is and what is felt. They address questions such as 'who am I?', 'what do I feel?', 'could my singular experience be universal?', etc.

However, Boltanski (2011) offers little empirical evidence to support this renewed theoretical framework. He refers almost exclusively to his own article on the rise of neoliberal capitalism in 1970s France (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976). They make three main arguments. First, people's capacity to maintain or subvert domination depends on their subject position within the field, i.e., whether or not they have the authority to define the world's reality. Second, elites use two kinds of justification work. In truth tests, they appropriate knowledge from social sciences and the myth of progress to promote neoliberal reforms as necessary. In reality tests, they make a strategic use of political history to promote them as relevant. Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976) say nothing about existential tests. Third, neoliberalism does not involve the conservation of the status quo but permanent change.

A growing body of research is using this renewed version of pragmatic sociology to address the limitations of EW studies in three ways.(see Daudigeos et al., 2021; Nyberg et al.,

2017; Gond et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2019; Taupin and Lenglet, 2017; Wright and Nyberg, 2022; De Cock and Nyberg, 2016; Barros and Michaud, 2020).

First, they better consider the institutional context in which justification work takes place. Islam et al. (2019) show how justification work in the UN Climate Change Summits varies depending on the actors' positions in the field: industrialised countries engage in truth tests to confirm their dominance; small vulnerable countries engage in reality tests to advocate reformist changes; and NGOs engage in existential tests to promote radical change. Gond et al. (2016), De Cock and Nyberg (2016), and Wright and Nyberg (2022) make similar arguments regarding the shale gas industry, financial markets and barrier reef protection. However, these OC studies do not acknowledge actors' critical capacity to equally maintain or change situations. Moreover, they use different explanations to account for maintenance and change. They thus contravene the *principle of reversibility* and *principle of symmetry* central to pragmatic sociology (Boltanski, 2012).

Second, OC studies nuance the role of morality in legitimising domination in neoliberal capitalist domination. Nyberg et al. (2017) observe that the actors involved in controversies on fracking thematise different polities but recode all of them according to the market polity. They conclude that this justification work does not lead to moral compromises but to the supremacy of one polity over all others. Ancelin-Bourguignon et al. (2019) reach similar conclusions about how justification work recodes the artistic polity along neoliberal lines in the case of creativity management. Based on this, OC studies conclude that domination is based less on the construction of moral compromises than on the disarmament of criticism. Some rare studies seek to escape the moral framing of EW studies. Daudigeos et al. (2021), for instance, show how neo-managerial technologies establish sacrosanct conventions and channel emotions to deprive criticism of its targets and indignations. However, they assume that these multiple ways

of testing realities fall into separated regimes of action. Thus, they do not consider how they combine within a single discourse.

Third, OC studies also reconsider the dialectics of maintenance and change in neoliberal capitalism. Studies on financial markets show how the cult of permanent innovation leads to fast-changing rules and proliferating devices making critical work difficult (e.g., De Cock and Nyberg, 2016; Taupin and Lenglet, 2017). In the same vein, Daudigeos et al. (2021) describe how justification work supporting the expression of criticism normalises change without undermining neoliberal domination. However, this literature has mainly focussed on changes inherent to the legal and managerial tangible apparatus. Less is known about the constitutive role that discursive aspects play in relation to changes in reinforcing neoliberal domination.

In this article, we aim to advance this shift from EW-inspired studies to OC-inspired studies. We investigate how justification work combines world and reality in putting neoliberal capitalism to *truth*, *reality*, and *existential tests*. We seek to understand how this interplay reinforces domination by depriving criticism of any grip on *reality*.

2. Methods

2.1. Case setting: the rise of social business

Prior pragmatic studies highlight how justification work in CSR, BOP, and microcredit programmes reinforce domination in neoliberal capitalism (e.g., Kazmi et al., 2016; Chiapello, 2013; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). We investigate a similar market-based solution to societal issues called *social business*. The inventor, 2006 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus (2007; 2011; 2017), defines it as a business model challenging conventional approaches to create, capture, and share value based on seven principles: 1) focus on societal issues, 2) financial sustainability, 3) no dividends, 4) investment in self-development, 5) environmental consciousness, 6) better-than-standard working conditions, and 7) joy. The year

he invented social business, Yunus was ranked the 6th most influential management guru in the world by Thinkers50.

Social businesses address societal issues such as poverty, pollution, or unemployment. The most known is Grameen Danone Food (GDF), which increases Bangladeshi women's income through the sale of nutritionally fortified yoghurt to poor children in rural areas. Other social businesses involve multinationals (e.g., Adidas), NGOs (e.g., Ashoka), or public organisations (e.g., the City of Paris). But most of them are small businesses. Higher education institutions (e.g., HEC Paris) also devote courses and research programmes to promote this managerial innovation.

2.2. Empirical materials: the guruesque discourse of social business

In line with prior pragmatic studies (e.g., Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002; Kazmi et al., 2016), we collected data to capture the *production* (rather than *reception*) of this dominant discourse. We gathered reports, case studies, press releases, promotional videos, etc. from the Yunus Social Business website (the foundation supporting social business) and from the Yunus Centre Paris website (the organisation promoting social business in the Paris region). This gave us an overview, albeit unstructured, of the promotional discourse of social business.

We collected Yunus' three "guruesque" books on social business to get a closer look at their intertwining. These are the primary data of this paper. Altogether, they account for 799 pages in eBook format. Millions of copies have been sold around the world and about 5000 citations have been recorded on Google Scholar, indicative of their influence.

2.3. Data analysis: justification work in testing neoliberal capitalism

We thoroughly re-read our empirical materials several times. We discovered that the same arguments appeared again and again, e.g., the allegory of poverty museum. These repetitions are typical of the management guru genre (Kieser, 1997). Methodologically speaking, they cause rapid data saturation.

We then focused on Yunus' three books to conduct a fine-grained discourse analysis of the guruesque discourse of social business (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Kazmi et al., 2016). We investigated from which standpoint and with which arguments Yunus legitimises social business (first-order themes) (appendix 1). We scrutinised the vocabulary (lexical fields, etc.), figures of speech (prosopopoeia etc.), and narrative devices (actantial schemes, etc.) used to back up the arguments. We also examined argumentative intertextuality, i.e., how Yunus responds to criticism through refutations, concessions, quotations, or changes from one book to another. In the end, we captured the main arguments of the social business discourse.

Next, we analysed how these arguments combine in discursive strategies (second-order themes). We inductively discovered that they are about framing subject positions, problems, objectives, and solutions. We interpreted their effects on criticism, drawing on Boltanski (1999) and Boltanski (2011) to analyse subject positions, on Boltanski (2012) to analyse denunciation, on Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) to analyse co-optation of criticism, and on Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976) to analyse the framing of objectives and solutions. At this stage, we observed that many discursive strategies talk about human nature or subjective experience. As they de-moralise the question at stake, they fall outside the EW framework (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). This led us to replace the analytical grid of the different polities with a focus on the discursive strategies disarming criticism (Nyberg et al., 2017).

Finally, we connected these discursive strategies to different ways of testing *the reality of the world* (third-order themes). We show that some discursive strategies elaborate on necessity, others on political projects, or on subjective experience. We drew on Boltanski (2011) to associate them with truth, reality, and existential tests respectively, describing three process of justification work in social business.

3. Neoliberal justification work in truth, reality, and existential tests

We describe how Yunus' justification work aligns subject positions, problems, objectives, and solutions differently in truth, reality, and existential tests. We show how each configuration connects the world and reality to reinforce domination in neoliberal capitalism.

3.1. Truth tests: naturalising domination in neoliberal capitalism

3.1.1. Subject position: lending the expert authority

The introduction in all three books legitimises Yunus' authority to speak. Yunus (2007: xi)writes: *"Because the microcredit organization I founded, Grameen Bank, has successfully brought financial services to poor women in Bangladesh, I am often invited to speak with groups that are interested in improving the lot of women"* (additional verbatims in appendix 2). Other panegyrics complete these glorious self-portraits: former US President Jimmy Carter celebrates Yunus as *"a practical visionary who has improved the lives of millions of people"* and the book covers quote Yunus' other bestsellers. What we see here is a threefold authorisation: Yunus claims practical expertise; dominant actors give him institutional legitimacy; and the public gives him recognition. In the end, Yunus not only speaks on his own behalf, but with the support of many (dominant) actors (Boltanski, 2011). Through this process he positions himself as a legitimate speaker.

All three books refer to Yunus' Ph.D. in economics, his twenty or so honorary doctorates, and the many research centres in prestigious universities created around the social business concept. They place Yunus (2017: 122) at the heart of a *"growing network of university programs […] where professors and students are researching, studying, experimenting with, and learning about new ways of organizing and growing economic activity"*. Yunus (2017: 117) emphasises that this academic expertise serves to assess the impact of social business: "*It will constitute a strong argument for including [social business] in the list of tools to be deployed by governments and social service organizations"*. In the end, Yunus does not speak for himself but lend his voice to science (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976) in order to solve crises.

Ultimately, Yunus constructs an overarching subject position combining practical and academic expertise. He claims to report only hard facts and natural laws, "*showing things as they are with a transparency that excludes any mediation and confers an implacable necessity on the 'facts'"* (Boltanski, 2011: 139). He therefore purports to hold a discourse of veridiction, saying what is true and untrue (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976) and for which there is no space for contradiction. Building on managerial doxa, this discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of its voices.

3.1.1. *Problematisation: debunking the flawed traditional economic theory*

This overarching subject position supports the problematisation of capitalist crises. Yunus (2007: 247) argues that *"poverty is caused by the failure at the conceptual level"*. This theoretical framing is reflected in the recurrent use of the lexical field of *theory*: this word and its variants appear 38 times, 22 times and 35 times in the three books respectively. However, Yunus (2011: 20) does not clearly define what *"the flawed economic theory"* means: he mentions no definition, no school of thought, no corpus. Traditional economic theory refers to

nothing in particular. This vague argument allows supporters of neoliberal capitalism to embrace social business without suffering any contradiction.

Nevertheless, the author is quite clear about what is wrong in the so-called *"traditional economic theory"*. Yunus (2011: 18) argues that *"the biggest flaw in our existing theory of capitalism lies in its misrepresentations of human nature"*. He contrasts two conceptions of it: one assumes individuals are selfish *"one-dimensional beings"*, whose sole motive is profit maximisation; the other assumes that individuals are both selfish and selfless *"multidimensional beings"*, whose motives include economic, aesthetic, spiritual, and political concerns among others. Yunus (2011: 18) develops this dichotomy to debunk traditional economic theory: *"economists have built their whole theory of business on the assumption that human beings do nothing in their economic lives besides pursue selfish interests. […] [But] if the profit motive alone controlled all of human behaviour, […] there would be no churches or mosques or synagogues, no schools, no art museums, no public parks or health clinics or community centres"*. Here, counterfactual reasoning unveils the contradiction between what theory says and what people actually do. Insisting on this gap, Yunus shows the the discrepancy between the false *reality* of theory and the true *world* (Boltanski, 2011).

Yunus (2011: 18) criticises the effects of this flawed economic theory: *"Instead of theory imitating reality, we force reality to imitate theory. […] Our government regulations, our educational systems, our social structures are all based on the assumption that only selfish motivations are 'real' and deserve attention"*. Here the problem is the performativity of theory: traditional economic theory shapes the reality it claims to represent, for our great misfortune. It twists our view by encouraging individual action and blind us from other alternatives, probably based on the collective.

Ultimately, the social business discourse reformulates criticism of capitalism as a theoretical issue. The question is not whether capitalism is good but whether its theory, *"traditional economic theory"*, is true (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976). Yunus demonstrates the falsity of its assumptions and their perverse performative effects. He targets *"the traditional economics theory"*, which relies on individuals' self-interest driven by profits. However, Yunus does not say anything about actors that enact neoliberal capitalism (enterprises, government, etc). Yunus clears them all from any of their responsibility related to crisis. Hence, these neoliberal actors can be part of the solution. This discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of its targets.

3.1.1. Objectives: imagining the utopia of the end of history

Yunus (2017: 30) uses his criticism of economic theory to frame a utopian future: *"once you replace the basic assumptions of mainstream economic thinking with the new realities revealed by social business, a new, more complete, accurate, and effective countereconomics emerges"*. In this quote, the shift from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional beings supports the project of completing capitalism. This argument finds an extension in the programme to move from *"traditional capitalism"* (Yunus, 2011: 44) to *"a new form of capitalism"* (Yunus, 2011: 51). This call for critical change is not about the noun but about the adjective, i.e., not about capitalism per se but about one particular historical form. This argument achieves a discursive closure imagining the future only within capitalism.

Yunus (2011: 16) couples this discursive closure with the neoliberal argument that *"We can create a world in which the only place you would be able to see poverty is in poverty museums. Someday, schoolchildren [...] will be horrified to see the misery and indignity that innumerable people had to go through for no fault of their own"*. Here, the future tense rather than the conditional makes the realization of this utopia ineluctable; the prosopopoeia makes

future generations testify to its achievement. Yunus (2011: 47) argues that this prophecy is already being fulfilled, explaining that "*you don't have to wait. You can see the impact right away*". This eschatological argument of *"the end of history"* inscribes neoliberal capitalism in the natural order of things (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976).

Ultimately, the social business discourse opens up a critical space by imagining a utopian society without misery. But the author simultaneously closes this critical space by making neoliberal capitalism inevitable. This discursive closure is typical of *"confirmation"* work, establishing that one particular *reality* can cover all the possibilities of the *world* (Boltanski, 2011: 72). This naturalisation of neoliberal capitalism disarms criticism by depriving it of its imagination.

3.1.1. *Solutions: social business as panacea*

Yunus frames social business as the only solution to move from the problem to the objective, i.e., from traditional to new capitalism. He explains for instance that *"in socialism and communism, […] there is virtually no competition among business enterprises. In time, efficiency and innovation tend to disappear. […] [In contrast], social business enhances competition and freedom of choice by giving people more choices of goods and services. […] In many cases, social business offers a promising alternative to failed government programs"* (Yunus, 2011: 48-49). Yunus (2011: 28-50) debunks any alternatives to social business (2011: 28-50), from NGOs to alternative political regimes, like here. He systematically uses chiastic arguments based on a biased definition stressing the limits of the alternative and a reverse definition of social business overcoming them with neoliberal credo such as freedom and competition. The symmetry effect suggests that only social business can overcome their limitations.

Yunus contrasts past failed solutions with actual successful social business solutions. Building on his practical expertise, he recounts the fortunes of Grameen Danone Food (GDF) (Yunus, 2011: 58-66). This pioneering social business began with a lunch between Yunus and the Danone CEO. Shortly afterwards, they launched GDF to fight malnutrition and empower women in Bangladesh. After a trial-and-error process, the managers finally found the *"winning formula"*. Yunus (2011: 188-204) corroborates this success story with additional case studies featuring joint ventures between Grameen Bank and dominant economic actors including BASF, Intel, and Adidas. In total, these success stories account for about 25% of Yunus' (2011) book. Their serialisation allows the author (2007: 244) to inductively infer the general rule that *"almost all social and economic problems of the world will be addressed through social businesses"*.

Ultimately, the social business discourse is based on pragmatic arguments on what works and what does not. Building on academic expertise, Yunus draws lesson from the past to show that traditional solutions are doomed to fail. Building on practical expertise, he tells success stories of *"real-world experiments"* (Yunus, 2007: 244) to make social business the panacea. This double movement closes the field of solutions by suggesting that we have already explored all the possibilities of the *world* (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1976: 45). It disarms criticism by depriving it of alternatives.

3.1.1. *Summary: Neoliberal justification work in truth tests*

The common thread in the four aforementioned framing strategies is to inscribe social business in the natural order of things (Boltanski, 2011): the authority of Yunus' expertise is supposed to report on the *world* as it is, the denunciation of the error of economic theory to depict a more accurate *reality* of it, the definition of the objectives to prophesise how this *reality* will inevitably evolve, and the formulation of the solutions to explain what works and what

does not. In truth tests, the combination of these four discursive strategies thus gives rise to a justification work process covering the *world* with *reality*.

3.2. Reality tests: politicising domination in neoliberal capitalism

3.2.1. Subject position: authorising the spokesperson

Yunus (2017: 119) draws his political authority from his interactions with multiple audiences: *"I have many opportunities to speak with young people about their lives, the challenges they face, and their hopes and dreams for the future. It has long been obvious to me that young people everywhere […] are deeply dissatisfied with the social and economic system"* (additional verbatims in appendix 3). This quote gives young people a voice. Elsewhere, Yunus relates his conversations with poor people and business leaders. Each time, he uses free indirect speech and prosopopoeia to lend his voice to other actors. These rhetorical figures suggest that he has a mandate to express the concerns of those he speaks for (Boltanski, 2011).

The author also makes extensive use of first-person plural narration. *"We"* and *"us"* appear 282 and 44 times respectively in Yunus' (2011) 253-page book. These personal pronouns support identification arguments assembling the author, the reader, and many other actors into one community. They suggest that Yunus is expressing collective concerns.

Additionally, the author extensively talks about *"human being"*, *"humankind"*, and *"fellow humans"*. In typical fashion, he states that *"the world of social business will benefit not only the poor, but all of humanity"* (Yunus, 2017: 26). These generalising synecdoches *"increase the stature"* of the collective he speaks for (Boltanski, 2012: 207). This rhetorical figure gives Yunus' political project a universal character.

Ultimately, the social business discourse constructs a subject position giving Yunus the political mandate to define reality on behalf of a collective to which he lends his voice. This

discursive strategy involves translating multiple points of view into a single will. In so doing, the spokesperson silences the people he speaks for. This *"hermeneutic contradiction"* deprives criticism of its voices (Boltanski, 2011: 84-87).

3.2.1. Problematisation: voicing enfeebled criticism

Voicing enfeebled social criticism

Building on his spokesperson position, Yunus devotes several chapters to voice concerns about misery: "*If you have ever found yourself thinking, 'I don't like the way things are around me; it's painful to live in a world where hunger, poverty, disease, illiteracy, and unemployment afflict so many people; I want to see these terrible things disappear'"* (Yunus, 2011: 54). This quote expresses the sources of indignation of social criticism. Yunus (2007: 3) uses many other quotes to describe the unbalanced relations between the rich and the poor, global North and South, and men and women. References to well-known social critics like NGOs and heterodox and left-wing politicians support this criticism. These intertextual arguments blur the frontiers between the dominant discourse and the critical counter-discourse.

Yunus (2011: 15) develops this social criticism to diagnose the cause of problematic situations: *"[poverty] is not the result of any incapacity on the part of the poor"* but of the *"system we have built, the institutions we have designed, and the concepts we have formulated"*. Yunus (2007: 86) phrases this argument metaphorically: *"The poor are like bonsai trees. When you plant the best seed of the tallest tree in a six-inch-deep flowerpot, you get a perfect replica of the tallest tree, but it is only inches tall"*. In these verbatims, the *"system"* and the *"flowerpot"* refer to no one in particular. As for *"traditional economic theory"*, these empty signifiers point to vague culprits.

This problematisation leads Yunus (2011: 215) to reconsider the relations between the rich and the poor: *"Some people seem to believe that […] the total pie of wealth is of fixed size […]. In reality, the economy is—or should be—an ever-growing pie. The rich can get richer and the poor can get less poor at the same time; there is no conflict"*. This quote turns conflicts into win-win relationships. Other similar arguments concern the relations between the poor and multinationals (e.g., Lehmann Brothers). All of them reorganise the actantial schema of social criticism, transforming persecutors into saviours (Boltanski, 2012). These arguments suggest that the dominant economic actors are not part of the problem but of the solution. They thus recode criticism along neoliberal lines.

Voicing enfeebled ecological criticism

Yunus (2007: 203) uses his political mandate to voice concerns on ecological issues: *"Problems ranging from climate change and water shortages to industrial pollution and high-priced energy […] pose life-and-death difficulties"*. The first two books address these sources of indignation of ecological criticism diffusely throughout the text, while the third devotes a 17-page sub-chapter to the decarbonisation of the economy. This evolution is a response to the rise of ecological criticism.

Yunus (2007: 205) diagnoses the cause of ecological issues: *"non-renewable resources are rapidly becoming depleted as the demand for them increases exponentially. […] Thus, in the form of capitalism under which most of the world is currently organized, there is an unhealthy connection between the environment and economic growth"*. This typical quote criticises resource predation. However, empty signifiers and the passive voice make it vague about those responsible for this ecological problem.

Yunus (2011: 211) discusses the consequences of ecological problems: *"global environmental trends threaten the future of agriculture around the world. Climate change,*

drought, and deforestation are turning vast areas that were once fertile farmlands into deserts". This develops an agent/object relationship in which natural forces endanger economic activities. It reflects the neoliberal framing of ecological concerns as issues of risk management, thereby reversing the actantial schema of ecological criticism, making the persecutors the victims (and vice versa) (Boltanski, 2012).

Ultimately, the social business discourse thematises the social and ecological criticisms. However, it recodes their denunciation along a neoliberal line such that the persecutors become the saviours. This appropriation prevents criticism from tapping into the *world* to challenge the *reality* of neoliberal capitalism (Boltanski, 2011). This discursive strategy thus disarms criticism by depriving it of its targets.

3.3. Objectives: imagining a political utopia for a better world

Yunus contrasts social and ecological problems with a utopian political future. In each book, he writes wish lists to imagine "*a world without a single person living in poverty; A world whose oceans, lakes, streams, and atmosphere are free of pollution; A world where no child goes to sleep hungry; [...] A world where people can travel freely across borders; [...] You can probably add dozens of beautiful wishes of your own*" (Yunus, 2011: 218). This verbatim expresses utopian ideas with negative sentences, abstract values, and without hierarchy. Accordingly, it is unclear whether the absence of hunger means wealth, equality, or dignity, what poverty actually means, or whether freedom to travel is more important than environmental pollution. Yunus invokes so many vague values that everyone can be satisfied with them, and no one can viably oppose them (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Ultimately, the social business discourse does not engage in moral deliberation on what a fair society is. Instead, it performs an *"epidictic discourse"* talking about *"what does not give*

rise to controversy" (Boltanski, 2011: 73). This discursive strategy aims to reinforce *reality* by making neoliberal capitalism consensual. It disarms criticism by depriving it of its imagination.

3.3.1. Solution: making social business a vehicle for political change

Yunus positions social business as a vehicle for moving from social and ecological problems to the consensual utopia. Yunus (2017: 166) seeks to shape the actors' conduct by redefining their role and objectives, starting with that of the state: *"I am not giving the impression that 'government is the problem'. […] Its role is to keep the economy and the society moving in the right direction. […] Well-run governments have an important place in helping societies unleash the creativity of entrepreneurs"*. This typical quote reflects the neoliberal argument that the state's mission is to stimulate and channel entrepreneurial activity. Yunus (2017: 172) specifies that *"government officials may choose to outsource the provision of basic health service and education to organizations from the citizens' sector. […] Government can provide investment funds for social businesses focused on education or health care"*. This verbatim describes alliances in which social business becomes the means for the neoliberal state to achieve its objectives.

Yunus (2011: 56) insists that social business improves rather than challenges the functioning of capitalism: *"social business has a better chance of changing the world than some past ideas because the concept is so powerful yet so flexible and accommodating. […] It fits neatly into the capitalist system […]. Rather than threatening the existing structure of business, it proposes a way to revitalize it"*. Again, this verbatim shows that capitalist actors can use social business to their advantage.

Yunus (2011: 107) discusses the risks of the capitalist appropriation of social business: *"my response when reporters ask me whether Danone is 'using' me is to reply, 'Is that so? […]. I think I am using Danone to promote my idea. […] If Danone is actually using me—you can*

tell the world that I am here to be used [...]—for a good cause'". This response develops the pragmatic argument that the end justifies the means: there are synergies between social business and large companies to achieve their goals; the commitment of multinationals multiplies the positive effects of social business.

Ultimately, the social business discourse reconstructs *reality* so as to merge without contradiction with the capitalist structure. It channels the agency of actors by redefining their goals and aligning their interests. It establishes social business as the obligatory passage for any political agenda, especially those aimed at solving societal problems. This discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of alternatives.

3.3.1. *Summary: Neoliberal justification work in reality tests*

The common thread in the four aforementioned framing strategies is to inscribe social business in a collective political project (Boltanski, 2011): the political authority of the spokesperson is supposed to express the will of collectives, the expression of social and ecological criticism to voice indignation based on discrepancy between the *world* and *reality*, the definition of objectives to agree on common values for organising another *reality*, and the formulation of solutions to create synergies between the actors involved in it. In reality tests, these framing strategies thus reinforce one another to establish an acceptable *reality* for people living in a common *world*.

3.4. Existential tests: personalising domination in neoliberal capitalism

3.4.1. *Subject position: authorising the affected spectator*

Yunus claims (2007: 44) first-hand experience of misery to legitimise his authority to speak: *"I first got involved in the poverty problem [...] almost by accident. I got involved because poverty was all around me in Bangladesh. In particular, the famine of 1974 pushed me*

out of the university campus [...]" (additional verbatims in appendix 4). This quote emphases the *"welling-up of emotion"* dramatizing Yunus' authentic commitment (Boltanski, 1999: 83).

Yunus (2011: 11) relates how this first-hand experience affected his views: *"I found it increasingly difficult to teach elegant theories of economics in the classroom while a terrible famine was raging outside. Suddenly I felt the emptiness of traditional economic concepts in the face of crushing hunger and poverty. I realized that I had to be with the distressed people [...]".* These three sentences contrast two realities, one from academia based on scientific knowledge, the other from Yunus' inner self based on first-hand experience of misery. They frame this contradiction as a loss of meaning. This *"deprivation"* triggered the *"desire"* to give new meaning to his life (Boltanski, 2011: 113)

Ultimately, Yunus' social business discourse insists on his singular experience. Whereas "*the world looked on in seeming indifference"*, Yunus (2007: 44) saw the misery with his own eyes, and was affected by it. This hyper-personalized subject position gives him the quasi-monopoly of legitimate speech on *reality*. It thus disarms criticism by depriving it of its voice.

3.4.1. *Problematisation: voicing enfeebled artistic criticism*

Building on this position as affected spectator, Yunus (2007: 54) relies on feelings to diagnose the problems: *"many of us feel trapped in 'secure' lives that never leave the treadmill of routine work and unthinking consumption"*. He criticises the loss of meaning in consumption and at work. He voices the sources of indignation of artistic criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). The theme of loss of meaning serves as an equivalence between Yunus' intimate experience and those of his audience.

Yunus (2017: 60) highlights the causes of this loss of meaning: *"I've encountered endless numbers of bright, energetic women and men who feel stranded by the limitations of today's economy and our flawed policies"*. He adds that *"a human being is born to be active, creative,*

energetic, and a problem solver, […]. Why should we allow anybody to unplug a creative human being and deny that person the opportunity to use his or her amazing capacities?" (Yunus, 2017: 60). These quotes highlight how modern work is constrained by human nature: it frustrates people by preventing them from fulfilling their potential and becoming who they really are.

Ultimately, the social business discourse thematises the artistic criticism to draw from the *world* the elements capable of re-enchanting *reality* (Boltanski, 2011). But it simultaneously shifts artistic criticism from a project of *"'deliverance' of a condition of oppression"* to one of *"'emancipation' from any form of 'determination' liable to restrict the self-definition and self-fulfilment of 'individuals'"* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 433, italics in the original). By personalising problems, this discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of its targets.

3.4.1. Objectives: imagining the utopian entrepreneurial society

Yunus (2017: 79) builds on this requalification of artistic criticism to imagine a utopian entrepreneurial society: *"in a world of universal entrepreneurship, women can design their work lives as they wish, using technology to work when they want and from wherever they want"*. This quote replaces the lexical field of constraint with that of liberty of choice. It states that the only the utopia of an entrepreneurial society can enable the poor to express their natural potential.

Yunus (2017: 62) elaborates on work: *"[people] can be […] entrepreneurs in their own right rather than relying on the favor of a job from other entrepreneurs"*. He later (2017: 126) adds that *"we should tell […] that they can be job seekers or job creators, and that they should prepare to make this choice. We need to encourage girls and boys to dream big dreams […], and then to plan specific projects and businesses […] that will help to make that imagined world a reality"*. This quote asserts that job creators do not work for others but are the producers of

their own professional projects. It contrasts the alienating capitalist wage society with the liberating utopia of entrepreneurial society. This argument perfectly reflects the cult of *"genuine autonomy"* and *"personal fulfilment"* in neoliberal capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 90).

Ultimately, the social business discourse opens up a critical space by drawing in the elements of the *world* to re-enchant *reality* (Boltanski, 2011): it promises to offer more freedom to allow people to fully express their potential and give meaning to their lives. But at the same time, it also closes the field of possibilities by using this entrepreneurial utopia to extend neoliberal rationality to every aspect of life. It thus disarms criticism by depriving it of its imagination.

3.4.1. Solutions: producing entrepreneurial subjects

The author frames social business as the only option for moving from the problematic to the desired situation, i.e., as the only way to re-enchant work. Yunus (2011: 54) emphasises the transformative power of social business: *"Social business [...] is a great learning process. [...] You quickly discover you are acting and thinking in ways you never did before. New challenges arise that force you to exercise intellectual and emotional muscles that have long gone unused. Past experiences that you'd almost forgotten suddenly become relevant and useful. You are exploring a new world that was totally unknown to you"*. This passage depicts social business as a process of transforming oneself (Boltanski, 2011): it brings about a new relationship with the *world*, a new understanding of *reality* and a new conception of the self.

Yunus (2011: 92) explains how this transformation gives new meaning to work: *"almost any personal passion can be transformed into a vehicle for making the world a better place. [...] Is there any way to use your talents to create a powerful social business? Certainly there is! [...] Starting a social business should be fun, enjoyable, exciting, challenging, and*

fulfilling". This quote suggests that every aspect of life constitutes human capital available for entrepreneurial projects. The lexical field of positive emotion dramatizes this abolition of frontiers between professional and private lives as highly desirable (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). This argument finds an extension in the social business credo *"do it with joy!!!"* (Yunus, 2011: 29). Overall, these arguments express the neoliberal idea that individuals are responsible for the production of their own satisfaction.

Yunus (2017: 65) explains how to guide individuals through this transformation of the self: *"[We] started with a campaign to redirect the minds of young people from the traditional path of hunting for jobs to one of creating jobs for themselves and others through entrepreneurship. We invited children from Grameen families to repeat the mantra, 'We are not job seekers, we are job creators'"*. He later (2017: 68-69) tells how this educational programme scouts, selects, trains, and supports would-be entrepreneurs in launching their social business, and also devotes several pages to extending such educational programmes to elementary school, high school, and university to enhance students' entrepreneurial spirit. Education (particularly management courses) serves to produce neoliberal subjects.

Talking about this neoliberal subject, Yunus (2011: 217) celebrates the power of imagination throughout the three books: *"[…] We spend too much time and talent predicting the future, and not enough on imagining the future that we would love to see"*. One page later, he says that *"we'll have to […] make the impossibles possible. […]. Fortunately for us, we have entered into an age when dreams have the best chance of coming true"*. These verbatims develop the passivity/activity and reason/dream dichotomies. Contrary to truth tests, they assign negative value to the first terms and positive value to the second. They suggest that dreams have an inherent performative force, as if it were enough to wish something to make it happen.

Ultimately, the discourse of social business translates the resolution of societal problems into a project of self-fulfilment (Boltanski, 2011). Shifting the tests from the realms of facts and politics to that of dreams, it celebrates an omnipotent neoliberal subject capable of producing its own satisfaction in solving any problem. It thus suggests that individuals are capable of constructing the reality they dream of on their own. This discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of the search for an alternative.

3.4.1. Summary: Neoliberal justification work in existential tests

The common thread in the four aforementioned framing strategies is to inscribe social business in a personal project of self-fulfilment (Boltanski, 2011): the authority of the affected spectator is supposed to communicate an intimate experience of the *world*, the expression of artistic criticism to build on it to reveal gaps between the *world* and *reality*, the utopia of an entrepreneurial society to re-enchant *reality*, and the production of the entrepreneurial subject to allow individuals to become the producers of their own *reality*. In existential tests, these four discursive strategies lead to a justification work process to elicit a desirable experience of *reality* within neoliberal capitalism.

4. Discussion

This article shows how Yunus' guruesque discourse frames social business as the only solution to societal issues. We analyse the justification work whereby he aligns subject positions, problems, objectives, and solutions along neoliberal rationality. We reveal that this justification work connects *world* and *reality* based on the nature of things in truth tests, on a political agenda in reality tests, and on a self-fulfilment project in existential tests. We therefore described how the combination of these tests exploits a disarmed criticism, turning critical change into a strategy of domination reinforcing neoliberal capitalism. Advancing the recent

theoretical shift within pragmatic sociology, we thus shed new light on the interplay between the dominant and critical discourses.

4.1. Reconsidering justification work in neoliberal capitalism: four deprivations in the disarmament of criticism

We enrich pragmatic studies on the disarmament of criticism. We highlight that criticism can be present but inoffensive at the same time. However, we break with most pragmatic studies considering that this disarmament is the outcome of compromise building. Instead, we argue that this disarmament involves depriving criticism of 1) its voices, 2) targets, 3) imagination, and 4) alternatives. We uncover how justification work achieves these four deprivations.

The ***deprivation of voices*** involves framing the subject positions. Contrary to Anesa et al. (2022) and Wright and Nyberg (2022), we do not relate these subject positions to particular polities (e.g., the expert position to the industrial polity). Instead, we show that they all consist in converting institutional resources into evidence of the guru's authority to speak for others. The aim of such conversions is to translate the will of many people into those of the guru (and vice versa). While prior studies focus on *what* people say and *how* they say it, we thus clarify the institutional position of *who is speaking.*

The ***deprivation of targets*** involves framing the problem along neoliberal lines. We argue that this does not only consist in thematising multiple polities (Anesa et al., 2022) or appropriating social, ecological, and artistic criticisms (Kazmi et al., 2016). Building on early Boltanski's (2012), we show that disarmament involves a deeper justification work transforming the persecutors into saviours or victims.

The ***deprivation of imagination*** involves framing the objectives along neoliberal lines. Counterintuitively, we show that a utopia can serve to close rather than open up the field of possibilities. Specifically, the social business discourse frames the utopia of the end of history

as inevitable, that of the political future as consensual, and that of entrepreneurial society as desirable.

The ***deprivation of alternatives*** involves framing the solution along neoliberal lines. We uncover how justification work channels actors' agency in three ways: first by associating it with natural forces that remain timeless, second by linking it to collective ability, and finally by connecting it to a strong individual will.

We therefore highlight how these deprivations give rise to ***multiple configurations within a single discourse.*** The first configuration is based on cognitive legitimacy: it claims that an expert has the authority to define a theoretical problem, complement the economic theory of capitalism, and define how to put this renewed theory into practice. The second configuration is based on political legitimacy: it claims that a spokesperson has the authority to express collective concerns, outline a common political project, and steer actors towards collaboration to achieve it. The third is based on personal legitimacy: it claims that an affected spectator has the authority to share intimate experiences, map out a personally desirable future, and orient others towards committing to a self-fulfilment project. We show how the strong coherence of each configuration achieves discursive closure.

4.2. Reconsidering tests in neoliberal capitalism: multiple ways of connecting world with reality

We also enrich pragmatic studies on testing neoliberal capitalism. Breaking with Reinecke, 2010,Patriotta et al, 2011, Taupin, 2012, for example, we demonstrate that the social business discourse rarely engages in moral testing. Building on vague, abstract, and consensual principles, justification work performs an epideictic discourse seeking to escape rather than engage in moral deliberation (Boltanski, 2011). Instead, we reveal that this discourse often *de-moralises* societal issues, referring sometimes to the nature of things and sometimes to intimate

experiences. As these tests fall outside the scope of the EW (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), we provide a wider analysis of how people put neoliberal capitalism to the test.

Specifically, we uncover three ways of combining *world* and *reality*. In truth tests, justification work is about **covering**. The social business discourse claims that the neoliberal reality embraces the whole world. Since nothing is possible outside neoliberal capitalism, it becomes a *necessity*. In reality tests, justification work is about **hierarchising**. The social business discourse confronts different realities of the world pretending that one is superior to the other. Since neoliberal reality fits with political will, it becomes *relevant*. In existential tests, justification work is about **singularising**. The social business discourse draws elements from the world to personalise neoliberal reality. Since it resonates with people's inner selves, it becomes *desirable*.

Based on this analysis, we revisit two claims established by the few authors that have started to engage with Boltanski's (2011) concepts of *world* and *reality*. First, most of them relate each test to specific actors (e.g., existential tests to radical social movement in Islam et al. (2019)) or specific regimes of action (e.g., existential tests to regime of love in Daudigeos et al. (2021). In contrast, we demonstrate that one actor can engage in truth, reality, and existential tests simultaneously within a single discourse. Second, Islam et al. (2019); De Cock and Nyberg (2016) concur with Boltanski's (2011) argument that truth tests are conducive to maintenance, reality tests to reformist change and existential tests to radical change. In contrast, we demonstrate that all these tests can equally reinforce neoliberal domination. They all offer dominant actors the opportunity to readjust the relations between *world* and *reality* in times of crisis.

We conclude that the dominant discourse of neoliberal capitalism is about linking the necessity of the natural order of things, the volition underpinning the political project, and the

desire driven by one's intimate sentiments: with circular reasoning, it states that we must strongly desire an inevitable political world in order to inevitably produce the political world we strongly desire.

4.3. Reconsidering domination in neoliberal capitalism: domination through change as creative destruction process

We also enrich recent pragmatic research on domination through change (e.g., Taupin and Lenglet, 2017; Daudigeos et al., 2021). We describe how the social business discourse blurs the lines between the dominant discourse and the critical counter-discourse, thereby dissolving the classical distinction between conservatism and reformism. On the one hand, the social business discourse carries within itself a critical project aiming to transforming the economic model, political action, and individual identities for more responsibility, autonomy, and freedom. On the other hand, this critical project is not about undermining but about strengthening neoliberal capitalism. We therefore interpret this duality as a kind of creative destructive process whereby its critical force challenges certain aspects of reality but only to open new avenues for reproduction. With this argument, we go beyond Taupin and Lenglet (2017); Daudigeos et al. (2021) and argue that domination through change is not only based on fast-changing rules or ever more complicated managerial technologies, but also about the critical project inherent in this dominant discourse.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted how the dominant discourse harnesses disarmed criticism to perform domination through change. In line with seminal work in pragmatic sociology, we have focused on the production rather than reception of this dominant discourse. Future research could investigate how people appropriate or resist to it. This would offer a more complete view of the critical process whereby actors test neoliberal capitalism to make reality

(in)acceptable. Future research could also investigate how this neoliberal discourse about social business participates in the subjection process of both students and managers whenever it is implemented and how it transforms organisational work.

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