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Which Place for Radical Trial in Genetic Structuralism and in Pragmatic Approach?

Alexander Bikbov

Abstract. The article discusses the use of test / trial as a research tool proposed by different versions of sociology, namely by genetic structuralism owing to Pierre Bourdieu and by pragmatic approach assembled around the work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. The inquiry is contextualized in the author's study of civic mobilization in Russia taking into consideration sustainability and contingencies of institutional frameworks which shape different types of test. A series of publications produced by both sociological currents and employing the concept of trial is examined in order to retrace its actuation in several research contexts. A special attention is granted to a problem of social structures in which test results are resumed. For this purpose, a more attentive reading is offered to Patrick Champagne's and Dominique Marchetti's paper on the affair of 'contaminated blood', and to the book by Nicolas Dodier on outcomes of AIDS epidemic. The results let conclude on the compatibility of pragmatic approach with the Foucauldian concept of dispositive, as well as on methodological implications of field theory in study of trials. Making use of examples from Russian protest movement, the article proposes to complete the typology of tests and to account radical tests which target the abnormal reality and the problematic self together with more conventional public trials and controversies mediated by sustainable institutions.

Keywords. Boltanski, Bourdieu, Normative grammar, Sense of one's place, Test.

Seen at a large distance, post-war French sociology, as well as French social theory in general, presents itself as a well-structured space shaped by scientific schools following a consistent chronological line. In this view, structuralism is followed by post-structuralism, and pragmatism tends to compete and complete intellectual gaps left by post-structuralists. Such a distant image, implicitly referring to a continuous scientific revolution, is widely compromised by an experience of direct immersion into the current academic life in France. It quickly brings to the point that outside small core groups schools exist mostly in form of diffuse trends or paradigmatic orientations preshaped by educational experiences and bolstered by political sensibilities. The founders' generation laid the ground of this condition in the 1960s, replacing the theory as such with case studies revealing great theoretical questions (Vandenberghe 2006, 69). Further on, the struggle for the monopoly over the common intellectual grounds, as Bourdieu defined the basic structure of scientific field (Bourdieu 1976, 89-91), has been rarely taken explicit forms. The only clear exception is impersonated in the figure

of Bruno Latour who professionalized himself in manifestos maker during the last two decades. However even this mode of presence in the field did not reach institutional forms of revolutionary science, namely “deep debates over legitimate methods” (Kuhn 1970, 47-48). In general outline, revolutionary remaking of methodology intrinsic to the 1960s have been muted in the next generations of sociologists by day-to-day scientific work developed under a persistent press of empiric consistency and guided by the care for individual careers, other than by strict intellectual loyalty to scientific schools. In a way, an image given to French intellectual landscape more than a century ago seems to be still valid as per its current condition: “The general aspect of French philosophy may be in a manner likened to that of a city which architects, masons, and artisans build without much previous understanding, each according to his taste and following his bent. They influence each other more or less, they obey more or less the necessities which result from the very nature of their work, just as they are influenced by race and education. But even so the uniformity desirable for strict classification is not attained” (Paulhan 1900, 42 [Fabiani 1988]).

Borderlines that mark theories do still matter in this city, although valid under particular conditions. A partial adherence of individual careers built on empirical research to widely recognized theoretical models designs a paradoxical configuration. Affiliations to scientific schools play a key role in career decisions, and especially in collegiate elections to permanent positions, while publications may manifest a larger intellectual liberty due to less severe checks for methodological conformity. This double bind was translated into an almost explicitly political way the pragmatic approach in social sciences was shaped in France, sheltering such different orientations as the actor-network theory by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour on one hand and the theory of justification by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot on another (Lemieux 2021). Being initially constructed in the late 1980s in opposition to Bourdieusian field theory seen as omnipotent (Blondeau and Sevin 2004), this union looked methodologically questionable already by the late 2000s, in spite of supportive mutual references¹. The complexity of dividing lines and unions resulted in a growing methodological variety. Sociological

research of pragmatic orientation, more permissive in its definition of borders, rarely avoided identification of actors in terms of their social position, originally associated with the field approach. Meanwhile those who claimed a more consistent affiliation to Bourdieusian school could sometimes infuse in their work elements of interactionist methodology without explicit discussion of compatibility issues or over-rationalized agents’ behavior, especially treating their seek for legitimacy, thus implicitly approaching to rational choice theory.

The large margins derived from the double function of methodology as intellectual and career mean revive regular attempts to trace boundaries and possible overlaps in existing approaches. Far from being a particular feature of sociology, oscillations around methods and concepts push some French analysts to broaden the frame when mapping the academic city. One of such attempts belongs to Michel Foucault who clearly opposed theories of experience and subject to theories of rationality and concept (Foucault 1985). Although Foucault cites Bourdieu among other figures, the frame he proposed might be applied only conditionally to major currents of French sociology formed in the 1960-90s, and a need for better navigation tools persists. Difficulties of a clear distinction are aggravated by harsh criticism marking the mutually delimiting Bourdieusian and pragmatic approaches during the 1990s and 2000s. Boltanski’s and Thévenot’s propensity to reduce the concern of genetic structuralism to a pure interplay of force presented a clear omission of Bourdieusians’ work with *habitus* and with the symbolic universe, including social categories and public language. A similar parabolic treatment was offered to pragmatic approach presented as a simple paraphrase of common sense (Gingras et al. 2014, 82). The stake for both core groups consisted in presenting the opponents as seriously lacking intellectual credit and having nothing to do one with another. A way contrasting to such a distinction implied a search of convergence points hidden behind explicit contrapositions and rivalries. One of the first and most visible attempts of the kind applied to Bourdieusian and pragmatic approaches was proposed by a philosopher Thomas Bénatouïl resuming a decade of their competitive expansion (Bénatouïl 1999). Received with attention in France, this analysis was read by some not as much as an epistemological act but rather as an attempt of positional pacification. The author’s own intent to reveal a certain community of the two currents, as well as his global overview of both theory, empirical work and political implications seemed not to be hostile to such reading.

¹ By this I imply foremost Latour’s methodological praise for flattening social interactions (Latour 2005, 165-173) which eliminates assumptions on actors’ agency, including their reflexivity among many others, as well as his further shift towards reflexivity of non-humans, both difficultly acceptable in pragmatic sociology, as in sociology as such.

The purpose of the current inquiry differs from both goals of a rigorous genealogical distinction and of a search for common theoretical grounds. It is more situational, being part of the author's researcher trajectory, even though not entirely alien to both goals. Having Bourdieusian approach as a departure point for my studies of scientific expertise, public administration and history of social sciences (Bikbov 2014a), in the early 2010s I found myself in the middle of Russian civic mobilization, too rich sociologically and too important politically to be ignored. There was no surprise that spontaneous street rallies were less fit to field theory than positional struggles coupled with well-established professional routines. The first research results reported some unexpected features of that mobilization, such as an overrepresentation of participants having higher education and their refusal of permanent political representation, together with explicit epistemological claims overriding fuzzy political sensibilities (Bikbov 2012). Such a combination emphasized the need for a methodologically founded junction between positional properties in social space and highly individualized modalities of participants' civic engagement. A scope of interviews recorded directly in the protest actions let discover that for many participants the quest of meaning generated by the events, as well as their communicative dimension, mattered even more than the purely pragmatic outcome. The vocabulary of test / trial was regularly employed by the protesters themselves, and I put it forward in a conceptual framing of the field work (Bikbov 2014b). A field-based generalization reached a larger methodological problem of possible extensions applicable to Bourdieusian genetic structuralism.

REFLEXIVITY OF ACTORS, SHAKEN UNIVERSALISM AND THE SENSE OF PUBLIC

The concept of test / trial took a core role in pragmatic approach, to such a point that the partisans alternatively designate their work as sociology of trials (Barthe et al. 2013; Lemieux 2021). Elaborated in the framework of justification theory (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]), the concept relates to a choice for study of particular moments in social interactions such as disputes, controversies and scandals, charged with high uncertainty, doubts and explicit criticism which push the counterparts to negotiate the worth of their actions and to seek for equivalence in terms of common good. The entry point to the universe of interactions reveals a certain degree of similarity with ethnomethodological approach based on a breach

into everyday routines which reveals their hidden grounds (Garfinkel 1967, ch. 2). Even though pragmatic sociologists mostly avoid interventionism and hold themselves on observer positions of spontaneously interrupted and negotiated routines. Another crucial difference of pragmatic approach consists in a stress on reflexive and moral dimension of actors negotiations promoting normative structure of communication, while ethnomethodological research targets spontaneously assembled and tacitly functioning structures of social order. The insistence on actors' reflexivity as well as the distance scale to which social interactions were referred brought Boltanski and Thévenot to put forward a restricted list of 'worlds' of worth to which actors refer in their tests and controversies, such as domestic, civic or fame. Evolved ever since in subsequent publications, the short list of 'worlds' was edited and then partly abandoned, while the authors' own reflection shifted further from rational justification to competences and generative schemes, thus bringing them back closer to Bourdieusian approach (Quéré and Terzi 2014). The attention to test situations and to controversies remained nonetheless central for the whole group of studies and students following pragmatic approach.

It is worth saying that intellectual genesis of the concept of test / trial exposed by the initiators does not make ethnomethodology a part of the story. Luc Boltanski refers to a much later 'pasteurization' study by Latour (Boltanski 2002, 284), where test is considered in a higher compliance with the scientific meaning of the term. Laurent Thévenot names Rawls and Habermas whose work might be related to the sense of the just and to communicative action discussed by the theory of justification (Thévenot 2007, 410), even though the precise biographical and intellectual connection remains uncertain.² Some further interpretations clearly point to a proximity of Boltanski's and Thévenot's line to ethnomethodology (Dodier 2005)³, some others seek as far as in Vladimir Propp's fairy tale morphology which examines protagonists' trials as one of the key narrative structures (Lemieux 2018, 41; 2021). Another well detailed argument embraces religious experience, thus broadening the conceptual scheme even more (Martuccelli 2015). One might add to the list the basics of pragmatism coming from John Dewey's work who

² Later methodological self-reconstruction is a rich source but also a more ego-centered one, leaving an equally narrow margin to grasp his personal theoretic inspirations (Blokker and Brighenti 2011; Thévenot 2011).

³ Some others remind of the ethnomethodological inspiration of early Latour's sociology of science (Guggenheim and Potthast 2012, 161), while claiming a fully complementary structure of Latour's and Boltanski's approaches.

considered test or trial as a basic situation forming the trust to things (Dewey 1910, 27). What is even more intriguing, the early research work by Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron and Monique de Saint Martin (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1970]; Bourdieu and de Saint Martin 1975) dealing with education and with the implicit symbolic violence it is based on, focuses on school and university tests as primary material letting discover the hidden violence.

Three major trial frames, scientific (including medical), religious and pedagogic, naturally completed with the legal one, open a large path for exercises and variations letting further expansion of the theoretical framework. In spite of undeniable intellectual attractiveness of such an expansion, the purpose of the current inquiry consists in an opposite move, namely in narrowing down the concept to existing applications in sociological research. The ways the concept is put to work let some of its rich theoretical nuances and connotations be lost, but they also reveal some possibilities which are not necessarily aligned to the original anti-Bourdieuian intent of the pragmatic approach.

Interestingly, the aforementioned frames are not equally represented in the research realized by pragmatic sociologists. The main base of trial studies is composed of labor relationships (Chateauraynaud 1991; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]), science and medical controversies (Dodier 1993; 2003), media scandals (Lemieux 2000) and social movements (Cefaï 2009; Linhardt 2009).⁴ Legal, pedagogic and religious practices have not taken advantage of pragmatic sociology. As these practices lack neither reflexivity, nor contentious background, such a selectivity highlights the way the methodological choice is composed. Aside of eventual particularities of professional itineraries, proper to generations and group affiliations, which might play a role here, it reveals a generally limited quest for methodological universalism in sociology of the 1990s. As opposed to sociology of the 1960s, when founders tended to expand methods on as large range of objects as possible, pragmatic turn is based on an implicit shift from core social contexts defining the trial, except the scientific (medical) one, to public affairs. This shift includes a thematic bias which might not be apparent unless one looks at the scope of the research realized all over the years. If in the early 1990s micro level interactions and low voice controversies were part of the scope (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]; Chateauraynaud 1991), further on we would difficultly find a test case or a controversy which did not involve

large audience, be that media, medical or even labor disputes. Taking for objects cases which draw a wide response, pragmatic approach *de facto* presents itself as sociology of public trials.

DESIGN OF TEST / TRIAL IN RESEARCH APPLICATIONS AND THE ASSUMPTION OF SUSTAINABILITY

To be precise, a steady vector towards public trials does not make a distinctive feature of pragmatic approach. A series of research following Bourdieusian methodology is based on public trial cases, such as a widely echoed scandal of the 'contaminated blood' in the crossing point of medical and media fields (Champagne and Marchetti 1994) or legal implications of writer's responsibility in the French literary field (Sapiro 2007). Examining interdependence and authority relationships reestablished between different professional spaces in the context of the large public scandal, the first of the mentioned studies operates with a concept of test of strength. It is applied to procedural interactions reenacting responsibility and credibility of different professional agencies.⁵ Proceeding with a larger chronology of French literary field and its political structures (Sapiro 2014 [1999]), the second study examines the way writers' fictional texts are politicized when symbolic expression is processed in terms of public admissibility. Following these analyses, one could not miss the attention paid by the authors to discursive forms operated in the controversies, aside with the importance that public externalization causes to in-field relationships. Although trials do not serve a privileged domain for genetic structuralism, they do neither represent an exclusive choice proper to one of the methodologies. Major differences are localized more in the ways the objects are constructed, other than in the primary choice of cases.

To examine these differences, I would give a closer look to two aforementioned studies realized in the same thematic field, the one of the AIDS epidemic (Champagne and Marchetti 1994; Dodier 2003). They do not represent exact equivalents in terms of publication types and dates.⁶ Nonetheless they render better visible some key methodological features proposed by both approaches.

⁵ Pragmatic sociologists would insist in this case that the research faced rather tests of legitimacy than those of strength, thus shifting the focus point from power structures (inquired by genetic structuralism) to structures of rationality.

⁶ The 'contaminated blood' affair studied by Patrick Champagne and Dominique Marchetti, *inter alia*, makes an episode of a longer story exposed in Nicolas Dodier's book.

⁴ Just a few publications are cited from a much larger list.

The two studies refer to a compatible repertory of actor types, such as governmental agencies, medical and research institutions, journalists and media figures, patients associations. The interactions between them are decoded differently. Champagne and Marchetti analyze the conversion of ‘drama’ into ‘scandal’ as a result of structural changes within and between professional fields of journalism, medicine and law. They also tend to explain patients’ growing claims destined to medical institutions as a result of large scale changes in social structure, namely massive schooling and expansion of middle classes who bear a new attitude to body and to the information. In this context knowledge of medical methods and issues is sociologically considered as an integral part of participants’ cultural capital. As opposed to this, Dodier grants to knowledge an autonomous structure in social action. Such questions as the balance between clinical and scientific proofs, the limits of trust to patients’ and physicians’ experience, the evolution of publicly accessible information about the contagion and therapy are seen as issues intrinsic to political interactions. He pays less credit to pre-existent grammars, as opposed to some other pragmatist sociologists, and does not consider positional structures of expert institutions as source of particular controversies, as opposed to genetic structuralists. His study rather focuses on modifications that trials bring to the scope of public knowledge and, consequently, to professional and lay practices.

In this way, Champagne and Marchetti proceed to a public scandal as a dynamic moment in the changing power relations between fields. They conclude their study with the increasing presence of media, and especially of television, inside medical field and with the inverting legitimacy of scientific and media information. The ‘contaminated blood’ scandal certainly contributed to such inversion, but was one of many zones where it operated. Dodier is clearly interested in large scale simultaneous changes caused by a series of AIDS-related trials. He states that they contributed to a deeper shift from the medicine founded on physician’s authority and secret to evidence-based medicine, as well as to the enhanced value of active patient, even if these trials were not the only ground of the shift. He also ascertains changes in attitudes proper to the lay audience of HIV controversies, such as safe sex and fight against stigmatization. For Champagne and Marchetti the trial is resumed in the hierarchy of professional production, whereas for Dodier – in the structure of shared knowledge and knowledge-based practices. If we need for a better general concept of what makes this changing structure in the second case, a Foucauldian synthetic

concept of dispositive sounds to be a correct choice (Bussolini 2010).

Dispositive would not be an arbitrary reference summing up the research by Dodier who cites Foucault in his book, together with the founders of interactionism and ethnomethodology, and years later deeply discusses the concept in a publication co-signed with Janine Barbot (Dodier and Barbot 2016). What is even more important, the concept sounds equally compatible with the design of several other pragmatist studies, including the most influential ones (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]) and referring to historically variable applied rationalities which generate large scale social changes. In reference to social mobilizations and to their competitive grammars, Daniel Cefaï mentions “logics of action that go beyond markets, fields or sectors where they are usually contained” (Cefaï 2009, 249). This makes another expression of the same realm in which trials and controversies leave their imprint. The operative vocabulary of action grammars, rationalities, logics of action, named ‘worlds’ and unnamed large scale changes in knowledge-based practices unchain social research from models referring to the synchronized asymmetries of class inequalities and professional fields. As a result, it offers a way to construct sociological objects on margins of historical events and in compliance with the mode cultural history operates in its exemplary heterogeneity (Burke 2008).

An additional degree of freedom taken by pragmatic approach with respect to the ontology of social inequalities does not eliminate some other presets and constraints inherent to French sociology. One of such presets consists in a privileged attention to institutionally reshaped interactions, as opposed to spontaneous interpersonal ones. All the interest to Goffman’s and Garfinkel’s methodologies gets transformed here in the field of interactions which are unfold in a sustainable network of public institutions. Even though real world public scenes generate a multitude of niches and failures where out-of-frame interactions from both sides (the testers and the tested) remain possible, we hardly find a dedicated pragmatist analysis of actions dropping out from the teleology of an institutionally finalized controversy.⁷ Laurent Thévenot’s attempt to code the scale of familiar (Thévenot 2007) looks a minority effort in this context,

⁷ Another expression of this teleology finds itself in an assumption of actors’ quest for the highest generality, implicit to every test situation: “To criticize or to justify, the persons have to extract themselves from the immediate situation and rise to a level of generality. Therefore, they turn to seeking a position by relying on a principle that is valid in all generality.” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000, 213)

and even his empirical examples mainly absorb the familiar in the procedural. The interpersonal meaning of trial dissolved in institutional forms has much to do with a tacit assumption of structural sustainability and institutional fair play, where action grammars are used as code tables certified in advance by trusted agencies and guiding spontaneous interactions to higher levels of generality. Boltanski and Thévenot originally opposed 'situated' interactions which make a person act and judge "in accordance with the disposition of the situation" to an action predetermined by stable biographical dispositions (Thévenot 2011, 45). Meanwhile the 'situated' social performance adjusted to a highly limited and predetermined set of schemes does not reach the same degree of improvisation as perceived by ethnomethodology or interactionism. Taking for granted the sustainability of public sphere and successful institutional proceeding of tests, pragmatic reconstruction of controversies generally accounts only a limited faction of collisions and adjustments that restart social order.

NORMATIVE AND RADICAL TESTS

What if sociologists mainly faced situations where both the tested and the testers found themselves in uncertain and norm-compromised conditions? It is safe to suppose that sociology as a sustainable intellectual discipline of observation and record would be equally compromised in long term. Still, in mid-term relevant to a life cycle of research projects such a condition could offer a rich field completing the typology of trials. In fact, such situations existed recently in a large scale collective experience and still exist side-by-side with institutionally stabilized public interactions. Russian society of the early 1990s, as well as many other societies passed or passing through a sweeping institutional 'transit', offers a heavy load of permanent trials where neither the tested, nor the testers operate a well established set of normative frames. The distinction between tests of strength and tests of legitimacy, widely accepted in pragmatic approach, does not fit to such a condition, as long as partly legitimate normative frames are in turn subject to test in the very moment the test takes place.

Taking one of the most trivial examples, a school test or exam, we discover that strict disciplinary codes in the early 1990s are maintained even in such 'transit' conditions. Students are controlled in class with respect of communicative and bodily procedure which prevents them from talking to each other, using cribs

and spontaneously leaving the class. Meanwhile in the matter of national history and literature the normative frame essential for correct answers is split at best. Certified manuals used in the beginning of the academic year present Stalin as a thoughtful and careful leader, and Gorky as a shining star of socialist realism and of world literature. A thin booklet destined to substitute some parts of Soviet history and literature in the old manuals is sent to all public schools in the middle of the year. Without radically rewriting the whole Soviet timeline, it considerably corrects the image of Stalin as the master of Gulag and puts in doubt the artistic worth of socialist realism. The revision of school verities is boosted by an explosion of freely accessible information dealing with shadow sides and shameful secrets of the still-existent Soviet order, relayed by teachers in class discussions. What kind of answers would mean a successful completing of the test?

Political sensibilities and social predispositions of students' families, as well as teachers' political preferences acquire a special weight in the student's direction to 'right' answers. But more than presenting a mere alternative of two radically opposed normative schemes, such as Stalin-sage or Stalin-murderer, the trivial and highly procedural school test probes the core institutional capacity to administer interactions between all counterparts. How the teacher and the director should react to individual criticism coming from students who do not accept their note, what line to choose when parents join the dispute, how to manage the difference in evaluations coming from pro- and anti-Stalin teachers? In such situations the trial is rarely resumed in formal certification of students' aptitudes. Some families enter a dispute, the result of which does not limit to an agreement of the highest degree of generality, but might be (especially for the families lacking cultural resources) simply drawn back to a limbo acknowledgment, "that's the time we live in". Some others try to overcome the growing normative uncertainty by bribing teachers. This adds to the test situation a new dimension which largely overcomes the assumption of deliberative justification and still deals with the issue of legitimate compromise. Another family tries to press the director referring to highly placed friends or promise to 'help' the school with the lacking equipment which the school needs badly. They do not always refer to strength, but to the common good discussing resources available to the school in a long run (refurbishment, furniture, computers). Some teachers are simply fired or forced to dismiss, as their political preferences or unavailability to compromise do not let resolve troubles with students and their families.

The orientation in such situations does not imply the same plurality as discussed in pragmatic approach and destined to be integrated by the participants in a balanced way (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000; Thévenot 2007). Opportunism stands for a much more probable outcome of the series of trials, and before any compromise is established a test routinely held by the institution is instantly transformed into a radical test of the institution itself.

Another example comes again from Russian experience and this time is chronologically situated in the ‘new stability’ era, where public institutions are anew credited with massive loyalty and furnished with more transparent modalities of interaction. The early 2010s are marked with a raise of civic movements which are not a result of a long lasting preparatory work realized by trade unions, political parties or NGOs. Instead of well orchestrated and programmatically prepared manifestations in public space, large Russian cities witness unpredictable street assemblies of previously ‘apolitical’ citizens who had not experienced any associative membership and discipline.⁸ Such form of mobilization is not unique for Russia and takes place more and more regularly in disconnected political contexts, be that Brazil, Turkey, Hong Kong or even France. For the majority of protesters coming to streets for the first time this is not a simple test of the institutional order resumed in collectively meditated critique. It is first and foremost an individual trial of passing from resolutely ‘apolitical’ to joyfully ‘awaken’ condition, accompanied with high emotional tension, sense of risk and doubts in one’s own capacity to act well.

The latter is especially meaningful in the context of trial. As opposed to participants empowered by party or associative affiliations, ‘apolitical’ protesters frequently report doubts in their own social and political competence. The original propulsion to join a protest event consists in getting the meaning of it directly on-site, expressed in an affirmative wish to “simply watch and know what is happening”.⁹ The will to know reveals itself more important than a determined vision of institutional change and, in this state of political experience, it differs from the critique boosted by labor unions in Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s account, as well as from knowledge shifts in the trials discussed by Dodier, Champagne and Marchetti. The feeling of being badly placed in social space (partly resumed in a refusal of any political affiliation) or

being institutionally forced to shift into less favorable positions results in a spontaneous construction of deep tests which have an explicit bidirectional character, targeting both the abnormal reality and the problematic self. The movement of 2011-12 poll-watchers assembling previously ‘apolitical’ individuals, many of which were university students or degree holders, was driven by a similar motivation. Individual control and prevention of falsified votes in polling stations was marked by a double sense of test: “I proposed myself as poll-watcher in order to testimony personally if the things go as bad as they are talked about.” Given the situation of high personal responsibility and risk, a readiness to pay the knowledge of reality with an arbitrary arrest, a verbal or even physical aggression (reported from the previous elections) was part of the trial both of the spoiled institution and of one’s own personal qualities.

A similarly conceived trial charged with the same concern of abnormality was based on a mimicry of the norm in growing prohibitive measures against street actions. Given the white symbolic color of the protest, a group of writers and artists invited to join them in downtown ‘white walks’ or ‘test walks’ held in the dates of the declared street actions. The ‘test walks’ were announced through social and traditional media, meanwhile the walking groups and isolated individuals were not holding political slogans and were instructed not to act ‘atypically’. Dressed in white and mixed with the idling public of urban summer week-ends, they moved in the spaces originally chosen for the street actions and later dismissed by the city authorities. The test was held at a slick margin of normality: whether the confused policemen arrested all individuals in white, whether they did not react at all, how they distinguished protesters from stray public, what kind of accusation might be imposed to someone just walking in the city center, along with hundreds and thousands of other passengers? Police control and arrests followed, bringing to police stations individuals casually dressed in white together with those who intentionally put on a white T-shirt or trousers. Joining the walk mostly individually and exposing their bodies as a test tool of the margin dividing normality and abnormality, the participants were not always sharing the same artistic disposition promoted by writers, journalists and other mediators of political imagination. Nonetheless a relatively large public attendance of these actions, from several hundreds to several thousands participants, expressed a need to know the limits of abnormality shared by a much larger educated public in Russian cities. Incidentally, even if artistically inspired, this kind of trial fits difficultly to the notion of artistic

⁸ Social and political background of this mobilization is discussed in (Bikbov 2012; 2017; Gabowitch 2017).

⁹ Quotes come from a large body of interviews recorded during the protest actions in 2011-2017.

critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]), denoting a strive for individual emancipation and authenticity. Anonymous assemblies of variable geometry, vanishing claims for authorship, a growing uncertainty as of the test outcome, place this experience in the same rank with radical tests carried out by individuals doubtful of both their place in the reality and the reality as such.

Here again, social properties of the mobilized assemblies in such deep test situations play a key role to explain their propensity to join a particular kind of risky interactions. Overeducated Moscow public silently walking in the downtown or assisting polling stations with always-on videocameras is certainly different in its test preferences as compared to Hong Kong students tactically colliding with the police equipped for guerrilla, as well as to more popular French Yellow Vests systematically disposed to a painful and risky bodily experience. Meanwhile the ‘bad’ sense of one’s place in compromised or simply understated institutional environment plays a key role in a radicalization of all trials which easily overrides normative grammars presumably destined to achieve the highest degree of generality. In Russian case the wish to know what the protest is doubles the feeling of a bad (frightening) place the country is, translated into a constant discourse of salutary emigration repeated in the interviews.

To conclude this series of examples, I take an example of a young qualified female who emigrated to a European country after two years of participation in civic protests, started learning the local language and joined a university. The emigration is often seen as salutary thanks to an image of alternative reality where an educated, well-intentioned and active person would easily find his or her place. Once in place, the original expectation turns into a widespread disillusionment “no one is waiting for us here,” especially acute in cases when moving from one country to another was prepared by one or two short touristic visits, if any. Emigration, a tensile trial in itself, gets composed of a series of tests which do not have the same meaning for the local public and the newcomers, especially for those who bring a compromised sense of one’s place from the society of origin.

In the probationary phase of her immigration experience, the young female perceives every meaningful interaction as a test: “They certainly look at you all the time asking themselves if she performs well, if she clears the bar.” Sentimental relationships, professional integration, short street or shop interactions present themselves as a challenge for the sense of her place in the new and unknown reality. This is certainly not a procedural test imposed by institutions, neither a critical trial which could be exercised together with a political

minority opposed to a political institution. Actual interactions and their meaning presumably referring to clearly established grammars are in fact overdetermined with a projection of a possible evaluation by the locals and of their anticipated disapproval. Some of these interactions do represent institutional tests, such as visits to the immigration service or negotiating the meaning of her life in couple with a local male. Still the institutional codes remain partly received and partly broken due to her overinterpretation in terms of ‘(not) being good enough for them’.

Such overrated expectations drive self-determined individual to high flexibility and readiness to correct previously acquired dispositions, but they also often protract his or her sense of being ‘not good enough’ for the new place. The same long lasting feeling generates a range of counter-effects, closely associated with the lacking reciprocity and asymmetrical expectations. A frequently repeated topic in immigrants’ talks in respect of the locals consists in an assertion: “They are just stupid, they don’t understand so many easy things”.¹⁰ Such ascribed misunderstanding, a mirror of overcoded expectations and partly uncompleted tests, may cover a variety of topics going as wide as the system of world power relations, ‘correct’ family or gender roles, and the meaning of everyday interactions where some gestures of politeness or local habits may have an opposite sense for insiders and for the newcomers. I’d argue that such a reverse result of radical tests is widespread and would be erroneously associated exclusively with the socialization of newcomers, such as migrant workers or mixed family members. A large body of interviews with Russian protesters and with Yellow Vests participants in France lets conclude that, given all the sensible differences in social background and in the action repertory, there is at least one element in common. Exposing the abnormal reality to test, the protesters return to it the sense of permanent trial which they experiment in public space (mostly Russian case) or in day-to-day professional interactions (the French case) where they are implicitly recalled by the dominant order ‘not to be good enough for all that.’

CONCLUSION

Are trials resolved in knowledge-related dispositives, in Foucauldian terms, which cut the borders of professional fields, social positions and individual dispositions? A positive answer sounds reasonable.

¹⁰ This is equally valid for interviews, when the interviewer is also a migrant and thus not assimilated by the interviewee with the dominant local majority.

Do they necessarily lift the participants to a higher degree of generality and let them seamlessly integrate requirements of different institutions? Only at a condition if such institutions, be that school, state or market ones, are preliminary granted with a sufficient credit and are not hardly compromised in previous trials. Otherwise formal and normative tests easily mutate into radical tests processing the ‘bad’ sense of one’s place together with the sense of abnormal reality. To be precise, routine experience of large social groups already bear all the prerequisites for such tests, even though they might not manifest themselves in extraordinary interactions.

To use the full methodological potential of the concept of test / trial, one may think to complete the set of tests subject to study, paying attention to conditions where bilateral tests are realized in objectively or subjectively compromised institutional environment and target the abnormal reality, other than the reality defined through the norm. Such a radical meaning of test has to do with a fundamental anthropological line drawn from Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss to Bourdieu. Apart from the well established order of social inequalities in European societies which tests the newcomers through its institutional support, such as school exams and procedures of professional co-optation, Bourdieu analyzed social structures of Kabyle society, back in the 1950s and 1960s incorporating rituals as a tool of maintaining the order (Bourdieu 1990 [1980], part 2). In his analysis, complementary to the anthropological common grounds, the ritual serves to cyclically reenact the well known and well ordered universe, while the failure of its high coded procedure exposes the universe to risk of non-reproduction. The meaning and a possible outcome of radical test comes close to remaking the universe, when all the counterparts find themselves at risk of losing their consistent agency. The full meaning of magic trial is certainly never reproduced in secular conditions, mostly serving an ideal type of what a radical test can be. It shows that the reverse side of sustainable trials is a fundamental test of sustainability as such, involving in interaction institutional problems together with the problematic self.

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