



# NEOLIBERAL JUSTIFICATION WORK IN SOCIAL BUSINESS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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## Résumé :

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Le capitalisme néolibéral érige l'esprit d'entreprise et la compétition en panacées des problèmes sociétaux. En combinant sociologie pragmatique et analyse critique de discours, nous analysons comment le travail de justification de Muhammad Yunus établit ces principes comme à la fois nécessaires et désirables. Nous éclairons notamment quatre types de travail de justification (autorisation, problématisation, imagination et résolution) et révélons leurs effets sur les épreuves de réalité, de vérité et d'existence. Nous analysons ainsi les effets de pouvoir sous-jacents au travail de justification néolibéral.

**Mots clés :** Travail de justification, Sociologie pragmatique, Analyse critique de discours, Social business, Social Business

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# **Neoliberal Justification Work in Social Business: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Neoliberal capitalism reorganizes society around market tests defining social relationships as competition, actors as entrepreneurs, and private standards as regulation (Du Gay & Morgan, 2013). Current crises reinforce rather than hinder this neoliberal reconfiguration (Crouch, 2011). A reformist nebula leads private companies to engage in a deliberative process on, and actions for, the common good, thereby fulfilling political functions previously performed by the State (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Vallentin & Murillo, 2011) and base-of-the-pyramid strategies (BoP strategies) (Chatterjee, 2014) are typical of this neoliberal responsabilisation transforming the market from an ill to a panacea (Shamir, 2008).

Prior studies analyse this reversal from two opposing perspectives. The functionalist approach conceives market-based programs like CSR and BoP strategies (Prahalad, 2004) as effective solutions for managing societal problems. Conversely, the critical approach interprets market-based programs CSR (Fleming, 2012) and BoP strategies (Arora & Romijn, 2012) as smokescreen masking unbalanced power relationships between capital and labour, the Global North and South, men and women (Banerjee, 2009). Ironically, these opposing perspectives converge in denying the critical capacity of the actors (Brès & Gond, 2014, p. 1350). The first conceives of people as guided by rational necessity, the second sees actors as directed by an illusory necessity; both suggest that neoliberalism imposes itself upon actors.

We build on pragmatic sociology to escape this alternative between rational actors and cultural dopes. Pragmatic sociology (see Boltanski, 2011, 2012; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) assumes that people have a critical capacity to interpret the world, voice their concerns, and address problematic situations. Since then, neoliberal solutions to societal problems result from the justification work articulating critique and capitalism (Daudigeos et al., 2021; Demers & Gond, 2020; Kazmi et al., 2016; Nyberg et al., 2017). Subject to regular testing, they are legitimized through a deliberative process during which multiple actors conduct investigations, evaluate facts, collect evidence, and produce reports to defend their case



(Reinecke et al., 2017). This justification work leads them to make a state of affairs unacceptable, unethical, undesirable, or untrue. Prior studies focus on the moral aspect of this justification work but overlook its power and domination effects central to neoliberal capitalism (Daudigeos et al 2020).

We address this gap by deconstructing the power and domination effects in the justification work of social business. Promoted by management guru Muhammad Yunus (2007, 2011, 2017), this version of the BoP strategies aims to solve societal problems with market-based entrepreneurial solutions. For instance, Grameen Danone Food is a joint venture seeking to fight malnutrition by selling enriched-nutritional yogurts to poor rural Bangladeshis. Building on a critical discourse analysis of the three Yunus' bestsellers, we deconstruct the neoliberal justification work of social business. We show that it is based on four operations: 1) constructing a subject position, 2) diagnosing the crises of capitalism, 3) outlining a consensual utopia, and 4) establishing neoliberal programs as the solution to societal issues. Building on Boltanski's later work, we discuss how the underlying discursive strategies alter reality and disarm criticism and thereby enable neoliberal capitalism to enact its dominant position through discursive strategies.

## **1. THEORETICAL FRAMING**

### **1.1. MORALITY IN JUSTIFICATION WORK**

Justification work is about discussing what is at stake in a situation, against which principles to evaluate this situation, and what conduct to adopt in it (see Cloutier et al., 2017). Drawing from the *Economies of Worth* (hereafter the EW) (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), prior studies assumed that people are subject to an imperative of moral justification regarding their states and the situation they face. People have been continuously engaged in a series of legitimacy tests to question the value of this framework: the *test of state of worth* questions the degree to which a situation's principles are being correctly applied; the *test of order of worth* reflexively questions the appropriateness of the principles being applied (Dansou and Langley 2012). People therefore ground their justification in higher-level schemes to evaluate these legitimacy tests. Each of them describes what would be a fairly governed city: the inspired city is based on artistic expression, the domestic city on tradition, the city of fame on reputation, the civic city on collective interest, the market city on private interest, the industrial city on efficiency, the



'connexionist city' on mobility, and the green city on sustainability (see Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Lafaye & Thévenot, 2017).

Organizations and markets are pluralist situations where these cities clash, leading people to confront their sense of justice (Reinecke et al., 2017). A typical case is the setting of the minimum fair-trade price for coffee (Reinecke, 2010). Criticisms of conventional markets led fair trade actors to question the valuation of goods. The actors mobilise conflicting orders of worth based on production costs (industrial city), social impacts (civic city) and stock-market prices (market city). After a deliberative process, they agreed on a minimum fair-trade price covering the costs of sustainable production, supporting the producers' development, and preserving the growth demand.

This case reflects the recurrent argument according to which compromises between capitalism and criticism drive the market and organizational dynamic. They usually rely on the market and industrial cities (central to neoliberal capitalism) and the other cities (central to criticisms) (Demers & Gond, 2020; Dionne et al., 2019; Patriotta et al., 2011; Taupin, 2012). These compromises fuel the co-optation thesis claiming that capitalism acquires moral legitimacy by recycling criticisms (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

The EW's approach to justification work illuminates the moral and critical factors affecting the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. However, several researchers (see Susen, 2014) criticize it for assuming: that almost every situation is about justice (moralism); that people draw their sense of justice from limited, predefined, and rigid repertoires (structuralism); that these repertoires are the same whatever the cultural area (universalism); that people (and capitalism) can easily move from one justice principle to another (relativism); that it is enough to voice several justice principles to build a compromise (discursivism); and that criticisms are doomed to be co-opted by neoliberal capitalism (fatalism).

### **1.1. POWER IN JUSTIFICATION WORK**

Recent studies address this issue by focusing on the power effects rather than the morality of justification work (De Cock & Nyberg, 2016; Gond et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2019; Nyberg et al., 2017; Taupin & Lenglet, 2017). Most of them draw from Boltanski's (2011) distinction between *world* and *reality*. The former is the flow of everything that happens: it is immanent, elusive, changing, chaotic, and uncertain. The latter is the frame to interpret what actually happens: it is social, testable, fixed, orderly, and risky. Building on this opposition, justification work is about defining a certain version of the world's reality to legitimate a state of things.



This renewed approach assumes that justification work involves three kinds of tests during which people question what is at stake in the situation. First, *truth tests* are highly institutionalized tests unfolding reality to cover the entire world (Boltanski, 2011). Focusing on necessity, they explore the tension between what is and what can be. They are about the question: can reality be other than what it currently is? Second, *reality tests* are moderately institutionalized tests ordering a situation (Boltanski, 2011). Focusing on facts and values, they address tensions between what is and what must be. They are about questions such as: are the tests going properly? Are the outcomes accurate? Are the tests morally fair? Third, *existential tests* are weakly institutionalized tests involving subjective personal experiences (Boltanski, 2011), which are difficult to make explicit and share with others. Focusing on feelings, emotions, and imagination, they explore tensions between what would or could be. They are about the question: could a singular experience be universal?

Justification work frames these tests by either challenging or maintaining the world's reality (Boltanski, 2011). Boltanski's (2008, 2011) main illustration comes from an article he co-authored with Bourdieu on French neoliberal reforms in the 1970's. They show that neoliberal justification asserts that economics is true, markets are effective and changes are necessary. Ultimately, this neoliberal justification work states that there is no alternative political program and no alternative thought (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976).

This renewed approach to justification work rejuvenates classic themes in management and organization studies. First, Boltanski (2011) defines *power* as the effort to shape reality. The power of justification work is not only rhetorical: it does not lie in the strength of the best argument complying with the grammar of the common good. Rather, it relies on the capacity to act on tests by extending or narrowing issues, modifying evaluation principles, selecting participants, affecting the course of action, etc. The moralization of tests is therefore only one strategy within a vast repertoire.

Second, Boltanski (2011) defines *domination* as the process of maintaining reality by preventing criticism from occurring. It is of two types. Simple domination is based on discipline: it is negative because it compels people's actions, usually by force or violence. Totalitarian regimes and slavery are two extreme cases. On the opposite, complex domination is based on liberty: it is positive because it promotes changes. It is typical of neoliberal capitalism and develops by making change inevitable and desirable. These ever-changing achievements complicate critical work: the multiplication of new highly sophisticated tests makes critical interpretation difficult; the co-optation of certain critical motifs makes any



resistance difficult (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). This is clear in the financial intermediation industries where domination operates by constantly changing rules and laws. Although answering criticism, the technicity and proliferation of change weaken the actors' capacity to critically challenge reality.

We build on late Boltanski's work to explore the power and domination effects of justification in neoliberal capitalism to see how it is performed.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. CASE SETTING**

Neoliberal justification work spreads through management gurus (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002). These popular business thinkers give reasons to commit to capitalism by promoting new ways for organizations and individuals to conduct themselves. Social business is typical of such gurusque innovations. It is a set of discourses, practices, and tools aimed at transforming capitalism (Yunus et al., 2010). It is closely associated with a business celebrity, Muhammad Yunus, who is also famous for having founded the Grameen Bank, having received the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, and receiving honorary doctorates from many universities. Yunus' discourse fuels a complex gurusque assemblage involving research centres, training organizations, and consulting firms as well as foundations, business networks, and commercial enterprises.

### **2.2. DATA COLLECTION**

Our data collection captures Yunus' gurusque justification work. Books of management gurus (Carton, 2020) are relevant sources of data for analysing managerial discourse (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). We therefore collected Yunus' three books on social business: *Creating a World Without Poverty* (Yunus, 2007), *Building Social Business* (Yunus, 2011) and *A World with Three Zero* (Yunus, 2017). Altogether, they account for 799 pages in eBook format.

### **2.3. DATA ANALYSIS**

We conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of justification work in social business. CDA is about deconstructing the power effects whereby discourse produces and is produced by social reality (Fairclough, 1989).

First, we read, re-read, took notes, and discussed the three books of the corpus to have an overview of Yunus' discourse. We discovered that a handful of arguments appear in many texts



(e.g., the allegory of the poverty museum). These repetitions are typical of the management guru genre. Methodologically speaking, they cause a rapid data saturation. At this stage, we were thus able to get a first idea of neoliberal social business justification work.

Second, we identified the arguments involved in justification work. In keeping with CDA (Vaara, 2010), we focused on a single text to conduct a thorough analysis of justification work, namely the 2011 Yunus' bestseller entitled *Building Social Business. The New Kind of Capitalism that Serves the Humanity's Most Pressing Needs*. This 247-page book elaborates on the definition, implementation, and future prospects of social business. We analysed the answers that Yunus brings to the grand question 'Why social business?'. We examined argumentative devices like vocabularies, figures of speech, and stories based on classic works in rhetoric. At the end of this analytical phase, we found 30 typical arguments promoting social business.

Third, we assembled these arguments to identify discursive strategies based on their features and objectives. We drew on the discursive strategies already identified in CDA's seminal works (see Vaara & Tienari, 2008) including *naturalization* (appeal to the natural order of things), *moralization* (appeal to an axiological system), *narrativization* (appeal to stories), *authorization* (appeal to ethos, custom, law, etc.), and *rationalization* (appeal to the relationship between means and ends). At the end, we identified 11 discursive strategies for which we analyse the power effects on criticism.

Fourth, we assembled these discursive strategies to identify different types of justification work based on how they frame the relations between criticism and capitalism. The first type of justification work concerns the Yunus' critical subject position, i.e., what he is authorized to say (or not) (Fairclough, 1989). The other three types refer to the problems, objectives, and solutions of social business.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1. CONSTRUCTING THE SUBJECT POSITION**

The first type of justification work answers the question: who is speaking? It constructs a subject position allowing Yunus to define the world's reality.

##### **3.1.1. Authorizing the spokesperson**





Yunus builds a spokesperson position:

Most of us [1] are very impatient by nature. We want [1] to fix things quickly. It's especially true with the huge, global problems that have burdened humankind for centuries: poverty, disease, hunger, homelessness, oppression. [...] And we want [1] to create a plan that will solve the problem overnight. [...] When I speak with young people [2] [...], I don't try to change their impatience. We should be [1] impatient with the terrible social problems we have created [1] and imposed on our fellow humans [3] (p. 118)

Here, Yunus uses personal pronouns [1] to identify himself to a general community. In total, 'we' appears 282 times and 'us' 44 times in the 247 pages of the book. Moreover, he uses expressions such as 'humanity' (pp. 1, 19 and 26), 'human being' (pp. 16, 18, 20, 52, etc.) and 'fellow humans' [3] to speak for the entire human community. Also, the verbatim above reports on conversations between Yunus and community members, namely the youth [2]. This free indirect speech suggests that the author has the mandate to speak on their behalf.

These arguments reflect the authorization strategy claiming the legitimacy to speak for others. Whenever Yunus speaks of 'we', 'us' and 'humanity' or voices people's concerns, he identifies himself with his readership, thus staging their common affiliation to the same epistemic community. As a spokesperson, he does not express himself 'in his own name and from his own body', but lends his voice and his corporality to a bodiless community (Boltanski, 2011, p. 85). The power effect is to build a subject position giving Yunus political legitimacy to define the world's reality (Boltanski, 2011, p. 84). It translates multiple points of view into a single will; simultaneously, he silences the people to whom he lends his voice. It transforms protean criticisms of capitalism into the Yunus monolithic discourse. Ultimately, this discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of its voices.

### 3.1.2. Authorizing the Expert

Yunus builds an expert subject position. The book cover introduces him as the author of several bestsellers and as the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Similarly, the back cover quotes laudatory comments from journalists and experts. This paratext highlights the institutional recognition of Yunus' expertise.

Yunus couples this institutional recognition with different sources of expertise:

I first got involved in the poverty problem as an academician [7], and then personally, almost by accident. I got involved because poverty was all around me in Bangladesh [5]. In particular, the famine of 1974 [...] forced me to become a social activist [6] in addition to being a teacher [4]. [...] I gave up my academic position and founded a bank [7]. (p. 11).

Here, Yunus explains that his expertise comes from his experience as a scholar [4], a manager [7], an activist [6], and a Bangladeshi [5]. He thus claims to master economics and business practice as well as social engagement and field knowledge.





These arguments epitomize the authorization strategy of recognizing someone's competence to speak expertly about society. Position-based authorization states that Yunus is a privileged witness of the problems of, and solutions, to societal issues. Knowledge-based authorization states that he masters valuable practical and scientific knowledge. The power effect is to construct a subject position giving Yunus cognitive legitimacy to define the world's reality. This authorization of experts is different from the above authorization of spokespersons: it is not about expressing the wills, values, or feelings of a community of people, but about expressing *'the world itself'* (Boltanski, 2011, p. 136). This expert discourse achieves a discursive closure suggesting that the spokesman reports only objective facts and natural laws from an overarching subject position (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976). Ultimately, this discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of alternative knowledge.

### 3.2. FRAMING THE PROBLEMS OF CAPITALISM

The second type of justification work answers the question where do the crises of capitalism come from? This justification work allows Yunus to problematize the relations between neoliberal capitalism and societal issues.

#### 3.2.1. Voicing soft critiques of Capitalism

Yunus raises awareness about the crises of capitalism:

But even if [8] it were desirable, business as usual is not really [8] a viable option. We forget that [9] the financial crisis is only one of several crises threatening humankind. We are also [9] suffering a global food crisis, an energy crisis, an environmental crisis, a healthcare crisis, and the continuing social and economic crisis of massive worldwide poverty. These crises are as important as [10] the financial one, although they have not received as much attention [9]. Furthermore, the media coverage may give the impression [11] that these are disconnected crises that are taking place simultaneously, just by accident [11]. That's not true at all [8] (p. 17)

Here, Yunus makes several claims about how to interpret the crises of capitalism. He blames erroneous representations [8], incomplete analyses [9], false hierarchies [10], and unnoticed causal relations [11]. He extends this dichotomy between illusion and reality when he defines social business as a *'great learning process that leads you to [act] and [think] in ways you never did before'* (p. 54). Yunus thus endorses the role of the spiritual guide to raise awareness about the problems of neoliberal capitalism.

Based on this unveiling, Yunus develops the social critique of capitalism:

Income disparities actually increase rather than shrink, since the pie grow faster on the rich people's side [12] than it does on the poor people's side [13] (216).

Today's crisis has been a valuable reminder that all people around the world are undeniably connected [14]. The fate of Lehman Brothers [15] and that of the poor women working in a garment



factory in Bangladesh are linked [16]. [...] This is the time to bring the world together [17] (p. 212).

Here, Yunus contrasts the opulence of the few [12] with the misery of the many [13]. Building on the 2008 financial crisis, he explains that this contrast is not limited to a simple opposition between the global North [15] and the global South [16], but involves connected actors all over the world [14]. He concludes that both Western and non-Western actors must work together to address the crises [17]. In line with neoliberalism, this argument leads Yunus to consider globalization as a virtuous circle. This win-win argument softens the social critique by denying any conflicting interests between Northern and Southern partners (Arora & Romijn, 2012; Chatterjee, 2014).

Yunus also develops the artistic critique of capitalism:

Many of us feel trapped in 'secure' lives [18] that never leave the treadmill of routine work [18] and unthinking consumption [18]. At the same time, we wish we could escape into a different way of life where we can leave our signatures [19] on this planet and discover the endless talents buried within us [19] (p. 54).

Here, Yunus criticizes the disenchantment of the world [18] preventing people from fulfilling themselves in their work [19]. This disenchantment contrasts with the motto of social business, i.e., '*do it with joy!*' (p. 29), promoting the quest for happiness. Yunus indeed explains that social business helps people to unleash their '*energy and creativity*' (p. 16) by giving us '*a new way of framing our existence that offers the opportunity to redesign our lives even as we improve the planet we inhabit*' (p. 54). Typically, passion and skills for theatre, sport, music, or dance are potential '*vehicles for making the world a better place*' (p. 89). In line with neoliberalism, this argument transforms every aspect of personal life into resources to be mobilized in an entrepreneurial project of self-satisfaction and contribution to the common good. It thus disarms artistic critique by offering people new sources of excitement, boosting their commitment to neoliberal capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

Yunus mobilizes the ecological critique of capitalism as well:

All of these economic problems [20] are growing worse just as global environmental trends threaten [21] the future of agriculture [22] around the world. Climate change [21], drought [21], and deforestation [23] are turning vast areas that were once fertile farmlands into deserts [22]. The UN reports that every year an area equivalent to the entire country of Ukraine is lost to farming [22] because of climate change [21] (p. 211).

Here, Yunus explains that climate change [20, 21]. He thus defines an agent/object relationship in which '*nature*' (p. 67) and '*environmental trends*' [21] provoke changes affecting human activities [22]. However, Yunus does not link these phenomena back to capitalism. Excepted for '*deforestation*' [23], he does not discuss how economic activities (e.g., intensive farming)



impact the environment. In line with neoliberalism, this argument frames the fight against climate change as an opportunity to reduce ecological risks on business activities. It softens the ecological critique by considering private companies as part of the solution rather than part of the ecological problem (Nyberg & Wright, 2012).

These arguments are typical of the denaturalization strategy unveiling a problematic situation. Yunus reveals gaps between an observed and an expected situation, then advocates for addressing them. However, Yunus voices a soft criticism of capitalism. He reinserts critiques into the rationality of neoliberal capitalism based on win-win partnerships, entrepreneurship, and risk management. The power effect is the reformulation of reality tests without questioning their core principles. Resonating with the co-optation thesis, this discursive strategy builds on plastic and non-adversarial managerial discourse to make criticism compatible with the incumbent order and preventing it from promoting radical alternatives (Daudigeos et al., 2021). Ultimately, it disarms criticism by absorbing its demands and debasing its arguments.

### 3.2.2. Reducing the problem to a single-cause

Yunus diagnoses the cause of the crises:

This distorted view [30] of human nature is the fatal flaw [30] that makes our economic thinking incomplete and inaccurate [30]. Over time, it has helped to create the multiple crises [30] we face today. Our government regulations, our educational systems, our social structures are all based on the assumption that only selfish motivations [31] are 'real' and deserve attention. [...] And even as our problems get worse, we fail to question the underlying assumptions [31] that helped create those problems [31] in the first place. Once we recognize this flaw in our theoretical structure, the solution is obvious. We must replace the one-dimensional person [32] in economic theory with a multidimensional person [32]—a person who has both selfish and selfless interests [32] at the same time (pp. 18-19).

This dichotomy between one- and multidimensional human beings appears in the three Yunus' books. There are three nested levels of single-cause reduction. The first level establishes neo-classical economic theory as the only cause of the crises of capitalism. Yunus argues that the 'distorted' [30] and '*flawed*' (p. 20) theories produce negative effects on the world. Breaking with the materialist critique of capitalism, this subjectivist argument considers the world as the product of human mind rather than of relations of production. By omission, this over-focus on economic theory therefore suggests that human actors (managers, policy makers, consumers, etc.) and neoliberal technologies (management, marketing, laws, etc.) are not responsible for the crises of capitalism.

The second level establishes motivational assumptions as the only problem in economic theory. Yunus explains that economic theory imperfectly accounts for the many drivers of human conduct [31]. However, he says nothing about other assumptions related to markets,



organizations, and management. In line with neoliberalism, Yunus thus addresses economic issues only at the individual level. For him, the objective is to better understand the motivations that lead individuals to make a particular choice, and then to design institutions conducting them to make good decisions for society.

The third level is about the dichotomy between selfish and selfless motivations [32]. Building on a reasoning by absurdity, Yunus explains that *'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 centre'* (p. 18). For him, selfishness is about profit-maximization (p. 18), selflessness about *'any other aspects of life—political, social, emotional, spiritual, environmental, and so on'* (p. 18). Seen from the EW lens, the former refers to the market city, the latter to the other cities. In line with neoliberalism, Yunus seeks to expand the scope of economic theory to take into account all human activities. These arguments reflect the denaturalization strategy of diagnosing the cause of the problem. Building on the epistemological dichotomy between truth and error, it challenges the taken-for-granted theoretical framework of capitalism: the unrealistic motivational assumptions of economic theory are responsible for the crises. Such a blaming operation is central to critical work by designating the *'guilty parties'* (Boltanski, 2012, pp. 169-170). However, our CDA shows that it also serves to reinforce neoliberal capitalism by attributing a single cause to a complex problem. The power effect is to focus on only one aspect of reality tests, leaving other elements in the shade. The concentration on a single, non-human, and caricatured factor (i.e., economic theory) achieves this discursive closure of the problem. Accordingly, the other actants (including markets, organizations, and management) can therefore be part of the solutions to the crises of capitalism. In sum, single-cause reduction disarms criticism by depriving it of targets.



### 3.2.3. Perfecting capitalism

Yunus advocates for rejuvenating capitalism. Retrospectively, he describes the irrepressible expansion of capitalism:

We have witnessed the triumphal advance [24] of the capitalistic system. The economies of North America, Europe, and Japan [24] prospered to an unprecedented extent [25], and millions of individuals became extremely wealthy [25]. But at the same time, billions of people around the world were left behind [26] (p. 209).

Here, Yunus highlights two aspects of the worldwide expansion of capitalism, especially in the Global North [24]: it entails unprecedented economic development [25], but also causes inequalities [26]. This concession argument takes for granted the overall positive aspects of economic growth, reducing the discussion to the issue of inequality.

Prospectively, Yunus advocates for completing the development of capitalism:

The most important feature of this new global economic architecture will be to complete the half-built theoretical framework of capitalism [27] by including a second type of business [27], social business, in the global marketplace. Once social business becomes a recognized element in the framework [28], it can play a very important role in solving the financial crisis, the food crisis, and the environmental crisis [29] (p. 212).

Here, Yunus describes capitalism as a '*half-built theoretical framework*' [27], an '*unfinished structure*' (p. 170) and an '*incomplete form*' (p. 212). Then, he defines social business as the missing piece [28] fixing any problems [29]. In addition, Yunus develops the dichotomy contrasting '*traditional capitalism*' (pp. 43, 211, 214), '*traditional business*' (pp. 52, 81, 111), '*traditional economic concepts*' (p. 11) and '*traditional NGOs*' (pp. 32, 124) with a '*new form of capitalism*' (pp. 1, 11, 51), '*new form of business*' (pp. 28, 47, 157), a '*new form of thinking*' (p. 42) and a '*new economic architecture*' (p. 213). These dichotomies suggest an evolution towards the '*next stage of development of the capitalist system*' (p. 177). The book's subtitle, *The new kind of capitalism that serves the most pressing human needs*, also echoes this reformist program.

These arguments reflect the naturalization strategy confirming a taken-for-granted framework. The description of positive effects, the part/whole metaphor and the tradition/novelty dichotomy all concede that capitalism is currently flawed in practice, but assume that it is perfect in potential. This discursive strategy thus achieves a '*metapragmatic confirmation*' stating that the social order can only be what it is (Boltanski, 2011). Seen from this lens, any change can only consist in reiterating certain forms taken for granted in order to achieve greater perfection. The power effect is to confirm the general framework in which reality tests take place. This discursive strategy performs a discursive closure focusing critical changes on the adjective rather than on the noun, e.g., on *incomplete* or *traditional* capitalism rather than



*capitalism* per se. Consequently, it disarms criticism by promoting reformist solutions to the crises, without questioning the very existence of neoliberal capitalism.

### 3.3. FRAMING THE CONSENSUAL UTOPIAN FUTURE

The third type of justification work addresses the question what is our societal objective? This neoliberal justification work prophesizes the advent of a desirable future.

#### 3.3.1. Outlining consensual utopia

Yunus outlines a consensual utopian future:

We can describe the world of 2030 by preparing a wish list [33] to describe the kind of world we would like to create by 2030. It might include [33]:

- A world without [34] a single person living in poverty [35]
- A world whose oceans, lakes, streams, and atmosphere are free of pollution [34]
- A world where no child [34] goes to sleep hungry
- A world where no one [34] dies a premature death from an avoidable illness
- A world where wars are a thing of the past [34]
- A world where people can travel freely across borders [35]
- A world where no one [34] is illiterate and everyone has easy access to education through the application of new miracle technology [35]
- A world where the riches of global culture [35] are available to all.

You can probably add dozens [33] of beautiful wishes of your own (p. 218).

Here, Yunus outlines a utopia based on highly prized values like equality, peace, or harmony with nature. Seen from the EW, this utopia articulates different cities, e.g., a world without pollution would be typical of the ecological city. However, such an interpretation does not consider the ambiguity of the above verbatim. First, *inexplicitness* stems from the loose link between the utterance and the related value as for negative paraphrases [34]: it is quite clear that the absence of war means peace; however, it is unclear whether the absence of hunger or premature death means wealth, equality, or dignity; accordingly, the reader can infer different orders of worth from the same utterance. Second, *confusion* arises from highly general values expressed that are poorly defined [35]. Typically, Yunus talks about poverty without defining standards to assess it or saying whether it is subjective or objective, relative or absolute. The same lack of precision is true for dignity, freedom, and equality. Consequently, these values are more slogans than real moral principles meant to rule an ideal city. Third, *pluralism* results from the mobilization of many different values [33]. Their enunciation as a list and the precision that others could complete this list prevents any hierarchy between values.

These arguments reflect the moralization strategy of outlining a desirable utopia based on cherished values. Critical theorists argue that utopia can help people imagine alternatives to capitalism. However, our CDA shows that it can also reinforce support for the existing social





order. In effect, Yunus invokes such abstract, universal, and ambiguous values that everyone can be satisfied with and no one can decently oppose. The power effect is to reframe reality tests based on highly consensual principles. Consensual utopia is typical of 'epideictic discourse' which talks about 'what does not give rise to controversy' (Boltanski 2011: 73). It brings a wide range of antagonistic options and conflicting values into a more general framework on which there is strong agreement (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 279-80). Ultimately, this discursive strategy disarms criticism by depriving it of radical objectives.

### 3.3.2. Praising magical thinking

Yunus states that imagination can change the world:

It is time to take charge of [36a] our future rather than accept it passively [36b]. We spend too much time and talent predicting the future [37b], and not enough on imagining [37a] the future that we would love to see [36a]. [...] (217).

One page further:

Dreams [37a] are made out of impossibles. We cannot reach the impossibles by using the analytical minds [37b] [...]. We'll have to [...] make the impossibles possible [39]. As soon as one impossible becomes possible, it shakes up the structure and creates a domino effect, preparing the ground for making many other impossibles possible [40]. We'll have to believe in our wish list if we hope to make it come true [40]. [...]. Fortunately for us, we have entered into an age when dreams have the best chance of coming true [38]. [...]. So, let's agree to believe in these dreams [41], and dedicate ourselves to making [42] these impossibles possible (p. 218)

Here, Yunus develops two dichotomies: dream/reason [37a/37b] and activity/passivity [36a/36b]. The two sides of each dichotomy do not have the same value: Yunus justifies the superiority of dream over reason on the grounds of the former's capacity to shape the world [39]. He explains that dreams guide people's actions [42] and become real if one believes in them [41]. He adds that dreams can produce their own felicitous conditions [40] in a time that is naturally conducive to their fulfilment [38]. In sum, Yunus praises the performative force of dreams to shape reality.

These arguments epitomize the rationalization strategies establishing magical relationships between an action and an effect. It states that it is enough to think (say, write, imagine, dream, wish, etc.) something to make it happen. The power effect of magical thinking is therefore to shift criticism from reality tests based on empirical situations to existential tests based on subjective mind. In line with neoliberal individualism, this discursive strategy celebrates an omnipotent subject capable of solving societal problems. Replacing experience and facts with individual dreams and wills disarms criticisms by preventing the former from unveiling the contradictions of capitalism.





### 3.3.3. Stating the end of history thesis

Yunus states that capitalism is the ultimate stage of human development:

We can create [43] a poverty-free world if we redesign our system [...]. We can create [43] a world in which the only place you would be able to see poverty is in poverty museums [44]. Someday, schoolchildren [45] will be taken [46] to visit these poverty museums. They will be horrified [46] to see the misery and indignity that innumerable people had to go through for no fault of their own. They will blame their ancestors [46] for tolerating this inhuman condition for so long—and rightly so (p. 16).

This allegory of poverty museums asserts that poverty will inevitably become the vestige of a bygone era [44]: the anaphora insists on the agency of people to alleviate poverty [43]; the prosopopoeia makes future generations speak to prove the realization of this utopia [45]; the use of the future tense rather than the conditional mood makes this event ineluctable [46]. Elsewhere, Yunus reinforces this argument by explaining that *'you don't have to wait. You can see the impact right away—not on the whole of society, but on a portion of it'* (p. 47). He thus suggests that social business has history on its side [see above 38].

These arguments reflect the naturalization strategy of stating that an event happens because of the natural course of things. It explains that the triumph of capitalism and the rise of social business are the fate of humanity. The power effect is to turn reality test into truth test: it shifts neoliberal justification work from the realm of possibilities to that of necessity. This end of history thesis is central to neoliberalism and BoP discourses (Chatterjee, 2016). Closing the field of possibilities, it disarms criticism by making neoliberal capitalism an unsurpassable political regime solving any societal issue. It therefore stimulates people's support of the existing social order by suggesting that they have history on their side (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976).

## 3.4. FRAMING THE SOLUTIONS TO CRISES

The fourth framing operation addresses the question what must be done? This neoliberal justification work portrays social business as the only solution to solve crises and realize utopia.

### 3.4.1. Refuting the alternatives

Yunus debunks alternatives to social business (including (NGOs, foundation, communism, etc.):

In socialism and communism, the state [...] controls the economy [47]. Major portions of the economy—or, in some systems, the whole economy—are kept under the command of government bureaucrats or politicians [47]. [...] There is virtually no competition [48] among business enterprises. In time, efficiency and innovation tend to disappear [48]. Social business offers an option to investors. It is not forced on anybody [49]. It operates in an open economy with free



choice [49]. All players in the marketplace are welcome to create their own social businesses—businesses, governments, individuals, foundations, or any other social or economic entity [50]. Social business helps citizens to undertake activities which traditionally were considered the responsibilities of the government. As a result, government's burden is lightened [50], its efforts complemented by those of civil society (p. 48).

Here, Yunus always uses a chiasmus argument. On the one hand, a biased definition [47] stresses the limits [48] of NGOs and governmental programs. On the other, a reverse definition of social business [49] offers solutions to overcome the aforementioned limits [50]. In line with neoliberalism, criticisms of alternatives and legitimization of social business are all based on market principles such as freedom, competition, and profit.

These arguments reflect the rationalization strategy of discrediting other options to solve societal problems. It states that the conventional means used to achieve societal goals are ineffective or counterproductive. The long list of historical precedents demonstrates that any alternatives to social business are doomed to failure. The power effect is to exclude many problem-solving programs from reality tests. Closing the field of possibilities, it draws lessons from historical precedents in political regimes, business practices, and organizational forms to avoid repeating past errors. This neoliberal justification work equally blames the two sides of the traditional opposition between communism and capitalism (or for-profit companies and the NGOs, etc.). Consequently, it disarms criticism by positioning neoliberal programs as a third way, excluding both conservative and radical options (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976).

### 3.4.2. Exemplifying the panacea

Yunus tells the success story of social business. Chapter two relates the birth of Grameen Danone Foods (GDF). We can summarize this nine-page story as follows (pp. 58-66). All began with a lunch between Yunus and F. Riboud—the Danone CEO (p. 60): Yunus offered to realize his dream of alleviating poverty by launching a joint venture between Grameen Bank and Danone; F. Riboud closed the deal with a handshake. Shortly afterwards, they launched GDF to fight malnutrition by selling affordable enriched yogurt to rural Bangladeshi consumers and to empower women by recruiting them as salespersons (pp. 60-61). However, GDF faced difficulties in terms of distribution, procurement, sales force, and cost management (pp. 62-68). After a trial-and-error process, they finally found the '*winning formula*' (p. 72) by teaching consumers how to store dairy products (p. 71), retaining milk producers (p. 62), involving the families of the female vendors (66) and increasing the yogurts' price (p. 69). Yunus draws a managerial moral from this success story: '*be flexible*' (p.74), '*use help from allies*' (p. 75), and



*'immerse yourself in the culture of the people you intend to serve'* (p. 75). This story recalls the social business founding myth appearing in the three Yunus' books.

Yunus corroborates this success story additional case studies featuring joint ventures between Grameen Bank and BASF (pp. 189-191), Intel (pp. 192-194), or Adidas (pp. 202-204). In total, these success stories account for about 25% of Yunus' (2011) book. Some of them appear in several of his books. The serialization of multiple success stories allows Yunus to inductively infer the general rule that social business can solve any societal problem in any field.

These arguments epitomize the narrativization strategy of portraying success stories. It celebrates a managerial innovation as the panacea to any societal problem. As for the refutation of alternatives, the power effect is to limit the relevant problem-solving programs involved in reality tests. But rather than excluding certain programs, the focus here is on promoting market-based solutions. Exemplifying the panacea is not a neutral description of reality. This discursive strategy selects, assembles, and dramatizes narrative features to highlight how neoliberal principles like competition, innovation, and entrepreneurship address societal issues. It thus disarms criticism by making neoliberal programs a practical model for addressing issues.

### 3.4.3. Calling for synergies

Yunus establishes synergies between social business and alternative programs:

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 [51]. [...] It fits neatly into the capitalist system [51], offering the hope of bringing millions of new customers into the marketplace. Rather than threatening [55] the existing structure of business, it proposes a way to revitalize it [52] (56).

Here, Yunus explains that the transformative power of social business [52] lies in its ability to meld with capitalism rather than challenge it [51]. He thus claims that social business is an ally rather than an enemy of actors engaged in or against capitalism.

Yunus also encourages actors to commit to social business:

A foundation could own a social business [53]. In fact, I think it could be an excellent use of foundation monies to establish social businesses within the organization's sphere of interest. When a foundation gives a grant to a traditional NGO, [...], the money is soon spent [56], and in most cases the NGO is soon applying for another grant to continue its work [56]. By contrast, if a foundation were to provide investment money with which to launch a social business, the business could create social benefits [55] while generating the income to sustain itself [54]. Over time [...] the foundation would get its money back and be able to use it for some other worthy purpose [56] (p. 32).

Here, Yunus argues that governments and foundations fail to achieve their societal objectives [56]. Consequently, he encourages these non-commercial actors to use the market-based solutions [54] of social business [53] to achieve their goals [55]. This is typical of the neoliberal



rationality that seeks to reorganize every area of society around the principles of competition and entrepreneurship.

Finally, Yunus refutes the co-optation thesis:

My response when reporters ask me whether Danone is 'using' me [57] is to reply, 'Is that so? I thought I was using Danone!' [57] Because the involvement of such a big company immediately transforms social business from an unimportant notion into a legitimate concept [58] [...]. So, I think I am using Danone to promote my idea [57]. [...] If Danone is actually using me—you can tell the world that I am here to be used. Please use me! Anybody who wants to use me is most welcome to do that—for a good cause [59] (107).

Here, Yunus uses a prolepsis to anticipate the criticism of co-optation. Reversing the agent/object relationship [57], he states that he is the agent of the strategy, while Danone is only the means to achieve a societal objective. Yunus reinforces this reasoning with the pragmatic argument that the end justifies the means: the commitment of a multinational firm like Danone increases the legitimacy of social business [58] and multiplies its effects [59].

These arguments reflect the rationalization strategy calling for synergies between alternative programs. Yunus legitimates alliances between social business and NGOs, the state, or private companies, claiming that their problems, goals, and interests are aligned. He argues that they must ally rather compete to achieve their own ends. This power effect reorganizes the reality test around business solutions. Typical of neoliberalism, it builds on people's critical capacity to orient entrepreneurial liberty towards a single necessary solution portrayed as necessary. The domination effect is to deprive criticism of alternative critical problem-solution couplings to reinforce 'managerial domination' (Boltanski, 2011).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This article analyses how Yunus' discourse establishes neoliberal solutions as the only solution to societal issues. We have explored critical moments during which this management guru raises and answers the following questions: who is speaking? Where do capitalist crises come from? What kind of world do we really want? How can we achieve it? Four types of justification work address these issues: legitimizing the author, diagnosing the problems, outlining utopia, and promoting programs to move from the problematic to the desired situation. This justification work achieves a great reversal transforming the market from an ill to the sole panacea for societal problems. Combining pragmatic sociology and critical discourse analysis, we have therefore examined the discursive strategies underlying this justification work, their impacts on tests, and their consequences for criticism



#### **4.1. REALITY, TRUTH, AND EXISTENTIAL TESTS IN NEOLIBERAL JUSTIFICATION WORK**

Drawing from the EW, prior studies focus on *legitimacy tests* where people confront conflicting moral principles to (de)stabilize compromises (see Dansou & Langley, 2012; Demers & Gond, 2020; Dionne et al., 2019; Mailhot & Langley, 2017; Patriotta et al., 2011; Taupin, 2012). They concentrate on regimes of justice representing only a tiny part of business life (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Building on late Boltanski (2011), we have addressed this gap by illuminating the combination of three types of tests in the neoliberal discourse of social business. They correspond not to different regimes of action but to different ways of turning the flux of the *world* into a constructed *reality*.

*Reality tests* assess the consistency of a situation. We have shown that they serve to evaluate the (mis)alignment between expected situations and actual situations. For example, the social business discourse deploys reality tests to assess whether capitalism is delivering on its promise of sustainable development, whether the social order meets our cherished values, whether economic theory is correctly modelling human behaviour, or whether programs are meeting their objectives of solving societal problems. Here, justification work is mainly about socioeconomic arrangements involving discourses, practices, devices, theories, and values.

*Truth tests* assess the necessity of a situation. We have shown that they evaluate the (im)possibility that another social order will replace neoliberal capitalism. For instance, the social business discourse deploys truth tests to define people as born entrepreneurs, establish capitalism as an unsurpassable system, prophesize the irrepressible rise of social business, and predict the bright future of humanity. Here, justification work is especially about supranatural forces including the order of things, the true nature of humankind, the natural law of the economy, the spirit of the times, and the fate of human history. Questioning the morality of this natural order of things is nonsense here (Boltanski, 2011).

*Existential tests* assess the personal experience of a situation. We have shown that they serve to evaluate feelings and desires. For example, the social business discourse deploys existential tests to question people's dreams and self-fulfilment. Here, justification work is mainly about the self in connection with imagination, will, and emotions. Again, it is nonsense here to question the morality of these private sentiments (Boltanski, 1999).

#### **4.2. POWER EFFECTS IN NEOLIBERAL JUSTIFICATION WORK**



Drawing from the EW, prior research overlooks power in justification work (see Cloutier & Langley, 2013). At best, it assumes that power lies in the force of the better argument that fits with a common grammar of the common good. Building on Boltanski (2011), we address this gap by defining power in justification work as the action on tests to alter the production of the world's reality.

The first power effect is to *build an authorized subject position* from which to act on tests. Building on CDA, we have deconstructed the discursive strategies allowing a management guru to acquire political authority (as a representative) (DS1) and cognitive authority (as an expert) (DS2). They enrich recent studies by illuminating the pragmatic aspects of justification work, which are not only about *what is being said* but also about *who is saying it*. We have thus shown that justification work does not emerge in a social vacuum, but from people in a position to speak for science, nature, the state, communities, and industries. These spokespersons therefore exhibit the signs of institutional legitimacy to establish their authority to say the '*whatness of what is*' (Boltanski, 2011, pp. 84-85).

The second power effect is to *close the tests*. Building on CDA, we have deconstructed how the neoliberal discourse of social business restrains evaluative principles to assess capitalism (DS3, DS6), the causes of its crises (DS4), the scope of potential changes (DS6) and the solutions to solve societal problems (DS9, DS10, DS11). These closures praise economic liberty, creativity, and free will, even though they take place within a restricted field of possibilities. Their common thread is that they operate on a positive rather than a negative level: they neither forbid nor oblige nor annihilate action; rather, they guide, facilitate, complicate, or make (im)probable certain behaviours and thoughts of the people actively involved in the tests. In other words, they are not about disciplinary constraint but rather about the channelling of freedom.

The third power effect is to *switch the tests*. Building on CDA, we have deconstructed how the neoliberal discourse of social business switches from reality test to truth test. This switch replaces the realm of possibility with that of necessity. Typically, the management guru makes believe that neoliberal capitalism is the ultimate stage of human fate and that the course of things inexorably flows towards this end of history. We have argued that this switch confirms again and again the perfect alignment between societal changes, managerial innovations, and the irrepressible course of things. Building on truth tests, neoliberal justification work therefore inscribes capitalist crises in this deterministic vision of history (Boltanski, 2011: 135). Additionally, we have also illuminated the switch from reality test to existential test. This replaces empirical reasoning with speculative reasoning and the reference to collectives with





that of the self. Typically, the management guru urges the reader to substitute facts and knowledge with dreams and feelings. Boltanski (2011, p. 108) considers that this switch is usually an opportunity for criticism to radically challenge the social order. In contrast, we argue this switch reinforces neoliberal capitalism by masking the forces shaping reality and framing criticism at the individual, rather than the collective, level.

#### **4.3. DOMINATION EFFECTS IN NEOLIBERAL JUSTIFICATION WORK**

EW-inspired studies assume that people have critical capacities and exercise them in action. This assumption led them to lose interest in domination effects. Building on late Boltanski (2011), we address this blind spot by theorizing domination based on the notions of tests, criticism, and reality. Seen from pragmatic sociology, domination effects are about depriving criticism of any purchase on reality. We have shown that they operate on multiple critical parameters.

First, they affect the *sources* of criticism, namely the voices of concerned people (DS1), the causes of indignation (DS2), and critical knowledge (DS7). Justification work in social business translates multiple voices into a single will, different knowing into managerial expertise, and a collective condition into an intimate experience.

Second, domination effects affect the *aim* of criticism, namely its targets (DS4), objectives (DS6), alternatives (DS5), and imagination (DS8). Thus, framing the market as a solution rather than a problem, justification work in social business orients criticism towards reforms aimed at perfecting neoliberal capitalism.

Third, domination effects affect the *expression* of criticism, namely its arguments (DS3), programs (DS9), models (DS10), and means-ends coupling (DS11). Justification work in social business acts on criticism in such a way as to make neoliberal solutions the only way to achieve the objectives of societal transformation.

The common point of these domination effects is that they do not annihilate criticism at all. On the contrary, they are part of a complex (Taupin and Lenglet, 2017) or elusive mode of domination (Daudigeos et al., 2020) in which criticism not only exists but is even encouraged.





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