Lost and found: transforming assistance at digital Deutsche Bahn

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Cover image: Temporary signage at Siegen main station in July 2017, during a major refurbishment (2015 to present). The photograph has been taken by Jörg Potthast.

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Lost and found: transforming assistance at digital Deutsche Bahn

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Abstract Paying close attention to the intricacies of the episode below, this paper sets out to reflect in situ a shift to digitizing "lost and found" services. Foreshadowing a more extensive study on a contemporary redistribution of assistance at Deutsche Bahn, it refers to a pragmatist tradition concerned with preserving the condition of voice. Following this vein, it faces a purist critical attitude – epitomized in the practice of economics (Orléan 2014), which defends market forces ("exit") as a way to outperform voice in any situation of decline, decay or dissatisfaction (Hirschman 1970). Anti-elitist suspicions, brought to perfection by another branch of social sciences, have become a powerful ally of this position. Rather than criticizing elitism and privilege, however, the present contribution draws on ethnographic research which displays the ambiguity of privileged users' encounters with assistants. Exploring ambiguous patterns in the practice of assistance, it seeks for a politics of pity which has been largely absent from current appraisals of digital sociality.

Keywords Social studies of technology, infrastructure, digital practices, assistance, exit and voice, privileged users, situated judgement, consumer dissatisfaction.

In February 2015, on the way back from meeting with the rector of the University of Siegen (and negotiating the conditions of my appointment), I lost both my wallet and my mobile phone on a regional train. Therefore, when changing to a connecting (intercity) train, I boarded without a ticket and without a piece of identification. Offering a pdf version of my ticket on the screen of my laptop, the conductor, to my great relief, accepted my excuse and let me get away with it.

He even jokingly took his pincers and pretended to validate the ticket on the screen. (Back in 2015, train staff were not equipped with devices for validating visual data.)

Since he was so accommodating of my misfortune, I took his gesture as an encouraging signal to address another aspect of my clumsy situation: I worried about my lost credit card. Without a mobile phone, I was unable to block it.

He quickly grasped my concern, took me to the train staff compartment and introduced me to a colleague who swiftly offered her private phone to me. Due to an unstable network connection, it took a painfully long time to get a hold of the phone number for the lost property office and the credit card supplier.

Finally connected to the correct service line, I had to identify myself to a speech processor. Given the bad quality of the connection, this proved to be an almost impossible task. Repeatedly, again and again, I failed to articulate the necessary information, including my name, my birth date and, of course, the number of my credit card to the automated voice service.

Desperate to pass the trial of my capacity for precise articulation, I raised my voice to the point of making public (rather than protecting) private information. I kept fumbling with a mobile phone that was not my own. Increasingly nervous about occupying the (very small) staff compartment for an inappropriate amount of time (about one hour), I kept assiduously elaborating on the obstacles that I was encountering to the various staff members dropping in and out of the compartment.

Paying close attention to the intricacies of this episode, the following section [1] will suggest that the story as I experienced it exemplifies a contemporary redistribution of "lost and found" services. To date, the social sciences, struggling to understand how "digitization" relates to "assistance" (is it all about assistance? Does assistance really matter?), suffer from the shortcomings of individualist or collectivist thinking, depicting assistance according to the model of either free market ("exit") or political process granting universal rights and claims ("voice") (Hirschman 1970). Following a tour d'horizon through recent offerings from the relevant literature [2], the present contribution will go beyond this dichotomy. Instead, it will return to a particularly influential account of the social practice of assistance, the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, and to the related question, both puzzling and contentious, of how to think of a "politics of pity" (Hannah Arendt; cf. Boltanski 1999, 3-19). Considered through the dual lens of praxiographic and comparative analysis, the opening episode offers a clue and to the current shift towards digitizing assistance as the unvoicing of critique [3]. The contribution will close with a cautionary note: Comparative praxiography engages with forms of critique that may be easily denounced as "elitist". Therefore, rather than muting the question of how "critical capacities" and "privilege" relate to each other, the present contribution prepares for a practical exercise in critique with Deutsche Bahn [4].

Foreshadowing a more extensive study,[1] I will refer to a pragmatist tradition concerned with preserving the condition of voice. This line of pragmatism has faced a purist critical attitude – practiced by economics (Orléan 2014), defending market forces ("exit") as a way to outperform voice in any situation of decline, decay or dissatisfaction (Hirschman 1970). Anti-elitist suspicions, brought to perfection by the social sciences and, more recently, propelled widely by enthusiasm surrounding the potential of digital technology, have become a powerful ally of this position. How then, by way of exercising, to bring ways of doing critique back in which risk being easily denounced as "elitist"?[2]

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1 *Workplace Studies zur Einführung. Zum Umgang mit Technik und zur Arbeit an Störungen bei der Deutschen Bahn* (in prep.) will include and comment on about 20 episodes following that of „lost and found".

2 The argument has been developed as part of "Normal interruptions of service. Structure and change of public infrastructure", a subproject of "Media of cooperation" (CRC 1187, University of Siegen) and discussed on the occasion of a closed workshop of this research consortium (April 16, 2021). Thanks to comments by participants of this workshop and thanks to both careful and critical readings by Timo Kaerlein, Siri Lamoureaux and Richard Rottenburg, it has greatly improved.

[1] Lost and found

The train attendant takes his pincers and snaps (into the air, close to the screen of my laptop). This is exactly what he is supposed to do, controlling and then validating who is authorized to be on the train. He has certainly taken a look at the screen copy of my ticket. But he also confirmed that I had indeed lost my ticket. In that sense, he has acted as a lost property officer. Broadening a general rule for inspection to considering the particularities of a singular case, the train attendant did not say a word. Snapping in silence, his gesture came with a shock. For a short moment, he seemingly took on his routine, disregarding (if only in gest) the fact that, as a matter of duty, he was about to ruin my laptop.

The long and noisy sequence that follows sharply contrasts with the swift elegance of a feigned threat imposed in passing. Throughout the second part – even though I was conspicuously trying to minimize my bodily presence and even though I could not be sure of having an audience (let alone to control it) – I was talking through the whole episode, whether on the phone (trying to reach the directory inquiries, the lost property office, the credit card supplier) or to the staff. Whenever a member of staff had to get some work done inside the small compartment, I expressed my regret for squatting in their workplace.

Despite being out of place and having to manoeuvre in awkwardly close quarters, I did not even consider leaving the compartment. First, as the rechargeable battery of the mobile phone was low, it needed to be operated with a power cable which was rather short. Second, I could not think of another way of saving my credit card. (Having been admitted on board the train, I was still four hours from home. Talking to the lost property office on the phone, I was told that, so far, it had not received my belongings. About a week later, everything except the money in cash was sent back to me.) What is more, I could not think of another more or less confined space in the train which would, to some extent, keep my personal data away from the public and the use of a private phone under the eye of its owner.

Unlike the person in obvious need for help that has to wait for the Good Samaritan (and sees two members of the local elite passing by), I was lucky to have been assisted by the first person available (and was advantaged by this person's authority). Further inverting the biblical parable, the place I was brought to did not turn out to be safe. Rather than being handed over to another person in charge, I was condemned to waiting, unable to move and failing to mobilize for further assistance.

In comparison, why was it so easy to find assistance in the first place (when I was at my seat)? The answer points to a flaw in the analogy: Unlike in the parable, the assistance – the lost property office - was

already there with me: I had brought it on my laptop. Back then (in 2015) it was surprising and noteworthy to have a digital copy of a lost ticket. Within a short period of time, this has become a common practice. To *check this* (or just about anything) with a mobile device has become a kind of remedy procedure to any problem, or even a norm. In 2015, trains operated by Deutsche Bahn did not offer WLAN to their passengers. Since 2020, passengers of Deutsche Bahn who happen to be smartphone users are kindly requested to use a new application for validating tickets themselves without turning to train attendants.

In contrast to the punctuated assistance, assertedly one-off, in part one, mobile devices are now equipped with apps designed to allow for constant navigating. (Once a train is delayed, for example, passengers inquire "DB Navigator" for alternative connections.) As long as they are connected to the internet, users are busily acting as self-employed "lost and found" agents through the Navigator App. The two-fold episode thus encapsulates a remarkable shift. Once a centralized office designated to a single purpose, "lost and found" is now covering a wide range of purposes neither restricted to opening hours nor confined to a specific location and has spread to countless mobile devices almost always ready at hand.

As long as users do not lose their customized "lost and found" devices, they offer generalized and permanent companionship (Turkle 2011). This is where the story gets odd. Even though admitted to an auxiliary platform (the staff compartment), I struggled to reach remote "lost and found" services. Therefore, if mobile devices have become integral as "lost and found" appliances (in a broad sense), it may be hard work (or impossible) to compensate for their loss.

Having swiftly passed the test in phase one (at my seat, being allowed to stay on the train), I did not expect a second one (in the staff compartment). Also, I was not prepared to be subjected to locational constraints many users of mobile devices may now judge to be negligible (or simply deny). Once again, the episode shifts to another configuration of assistance. In a technical parlance, this allows for both comparing and exploring the situated practice of constituting victimhood in terms of a dynamic "actantial system" of relations (Boltanski et al. 1984, 6-7): How do victimization and (non)assistance relate to each other? With regard to this relationship, what exactly is going on here, between part one and part two? As stated before, the second part of the episode is much longer and strikingly loquacious. Rather than silently enjoying having been admitted on the train, I found myself struggling with unexpected obstacles to "voicing" my problem. Therefore, of course although far from any measure of humanitarian catastrophe, there is an opportunity to observe practicalities in the emergence of "distant suffering" (Luc Boltanski)

and to come up with a researchable question: In a period of digital transition (in the midst of reconfiguring "lost and found"), what are the obstacles (both old and new) to having a voice? Is this inquiry going to add something to the ongoing discussion on the joint exercise of giving voice to and assisting victims, often sceptical of this category ("victim") (Barthe 2017, 69)?[3]

So far, the episode has been read to illustrate a shift towards digital assistance. Undeniably, there is a redistribution of "lost and found" services towards those affordances to be found in devices privately owned and often put to highly personalized uses. At this point, the present contribution refrains from further contemplating the singularity of the opening episode. Instead, it will review a broader corpus of literature on how to account for generalizable patterns in the way assistance is offered.

By broadening the focus, it will not consider a world in which anything you might ever have lost, whether on the train or elsewhere, has been made traceable and is therefore certain to be found and brought back. Using the lost property platform now offered by Deutsche Bahn (not yet available in 2015), this vision of full traceability is highly suggestive.[4] The remarkable level of efficiency in this "Lost & found" service however, relies on passengers who have kept track of all the lost items' specifications in order to fill in the search form properly. In this case (including detailed product specifications), if found, the lost object will be sent back within a few days, upon reception of an online payment covering administration and postage. It is therefore advisable to keep an archive of all the information on anything you may lose (or bring only things to the train which you have bought on the internet and therefore are already documented online).

Investigating the shift illustrated by the opening vignette, the striking inconsistency inherent to digitization, opposing a grand vision ("To save everything…) and a narrow solution (…click here") (Morozov 2013), is to be questioned anew: Why is it that "we" are disappointed by Deutsche Bahn and other unreliable organizations, but ready to adopt digital companions (even if) promoted and equipped with software by the same organizations? If mediated by digital devices, what are the consequences for the politics of pity?

Turning to the literature available, the next section will sometimes leave the train and look at other

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3 For a larger part, the work of Luc Boltanski is devoted to making explicit the stakes involved in this exercise. The present paper will draw heavily on it, discussing the case of public transport.

4 See https://www.bahn.de/p/view/service/bahnhof/ fundservice_verlustmeldung.shtml

places, too. It doesn't only discuss the state of the art as depicted by social sciences alone, but rather also focuses on the social sciences themselves. Caught in a dilemma between observation and action (Boltanski 1999) or trapped in divergent historicities referred to as the victim's paradox (Barthe 2017), the social sciences are often reluctant to advocate the promise of digital assistance or to deplore the depoliticisation of pity.

[2] Pity vs. compassion and justice?

a) Denying a politics of pity

With regard to individual consumption, whether taking the formally organized or the informal path, voicing dissatisfaction may ultimately result in stabilizing the status quo and in merely deflating the problem (Galanova 2011, 181). This fatalist note has been amplified since both sales and ensuing complaints have moved online, leaving clients without critical resources for mobilizing and re-evaluating. The more control is shifted to the vendor, the more likely critique is to be muted (Eisewicht 2015). IT-based services, welcomed as a means of revolutionizing assistance (Zuboff and Maxmin 2002; cf. Rammert 1998; Biniok and Lettkemann 2017), presumably remobilizing market forces, did not foster small-scale entrepreneurial activities but rather tech giants and a monopolistic dystopia. Furthermore, as any user can attest, operating a search engine is not equivalent to practicing assistance that is fine-grained and well-tuned to the individual case with each one being singular to some degree. Far from offering a radical market ("exit") response to distant suffering digitizing assistance has (negatively) affected the possibility of victims having a public "voice". The supposedly binary logic of this opposition (exit vs. voice), coined and questioned by Albert Hirschman (1970), is underlying the following discussion. It will be made explicit further down.

Envisioning the consequences of individual consumption driven and shaped by digitization, urban studies, long deploring the disappearance of public space (Sennett 1977), have brought overwhelming evidence that networked infrastructures have been accelerating a process of socio-spatial fragmentation (Castells 1996). Against the backdrop of splintering urbanism (Graham and Marvin 2001) and heavily divided cities (Beckert 2020), withstanding fatalism and arguing for hope (Coutard and Guy 2007) is a delicate mission. But it does not require nostalgically commemorating the origin of civility (usually suspected to be found in benign urban places). Rather

than searching for the public in places which may have never existed (outside a circumscribed form of subjectivity), research informed by STS has taken contemporary infrastructures as a strategic site for inquiring controversies and more recent (emerging) publics by means of situated analysis (Potthast 2007).[5] Considering assistance to privileged customers as a topic of inquiry, the opening episode contributes to a deeper exploration of this line of research, adding to research on "urban splintering" and the formation of "premium networked spaces".[6]

It may not come as a surprise that there is almost no research on the politics of pity in the particular field of transport. Observing everyday practices of assistance among users of public transport, temporary disruptions of service have been found to be a resource for facilitating contact among strangers (Pütz 2017). This study brackets the current redistribution of assistance in public transport (if reading it, operators may be encouraged to further capitalize on the collective resilience displayed by its users). And, on the macro-side, there are accounts which conceive of policy choices and macro-economic conditions as if everyday practices did not matter (Luik 2019). Addressing what could be considered structural flaws in terms of infrastructural politics, this latter form of attention to the macro is often critical of a single (national) operator (Deutsche Bahn).[7] Whether critical and referring to macro-economic categories or attentive to the microscopic detail of assistance, searching for a politics of pity has not been on the agenda of either camp. It may even seem alien to its proponents. Defending a politics of pity, the following section will struggle to introduce this mode of politics in positive terms. Facing what appears to be a phantom species, it will draw on a recent interpretation of a classical example.

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5 "Strategic siting" in the sense of research-economic scarcity. To stay with the quoted example, pointing to hub airports and their "Bodenhaftung" (complementing the social study of air traffic at altitude zero) sets a counterpoint to "The *rise* of the network society" (Castells 1996; cf. Potthast 2007, 7ff.; italics added).

6 The latter expression has been put to exploratory uses. For example, a special issue by *Flux*, introduced by Géraldine "Pflieger (2008), has considered Switzerland as a "premium networked space". How then about managing disruption in Switzerland's public transport? For a recent empirical contribution, see Röhl in press.

7 Further contributions by journalists which have found a wider audience include Esser and Randerath 2010; Cordero 2020.

b) Reclaiming a politics of pity

Responding to the condition of distant suffering, both compassion (taking proximity as a prerequisite for action) (Boltanski 1999, 6) and a politics of justice (taking general categories as a prerequisite for action) (ibid., 3f.) are inadequate choices.

Pointing to the limitations of both communitarian and liberal approaches, Luc Boltanski refers back to the Good Samaritan: the elite who incorporate the rules of justice (a priest, a Levite) fail to give assistance (repeatedly, as if confirmed by experimental evidence), and on the other side, the Samaritan is helping in spite of cultural distance (Luke 10:25-37).[8] The quasi-experimental (clear-cut, almost mechanical) setting of the parable does not leave any room for speculating as to a way out of the dilemma, which would involve merely adding either compassion or procedural justice. The parable does not contain any suggestion for fostering proximity (bringing people together to the point of belonging to a common body). Nor does it provide a clue for how well-educated members of the functional elite, fully devoted to following general rules, could learn from the parable, adjust to a new role model and keep their status.

If the Good Samaritan has politics, it resides in its quality as a parable: To do its work, the story needs to be told again and again, stimulating and then performing narrative reason. This may result in turning the silent condition of suffering into voice. Along the way obstacles to this process of voicing are brought to the fore. Stressing the transformative quality of narrative reasoning, the present contribution resonates with Luc Boltanski (and his reading of Paul Ricœur) (Boltanski 1999, 8). Unlike the program of Ethnomethodology which takes a similar analytic interest in forms of practical reasoning, Boltanski's attention is not restricted to reflexivity in the wild (that is – strictly absent of prior investment in form by an outside expert in sociology or adjacent discipline) but extends to how raw forms are brought to revisions and refinements, elaborating conventions and related devices for probing claims of justice (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; see Potthast 2017). This is how the quest for a politics of pity reconnects with a project of emancipation. Rather than merely detecting a modern asymmetry in the mediation of distant suffering (which might nurture a fatalist attitude), the social sciences are called on to take an active part in this project (Boltanski 1999).

The Good Samaritan is instructive in pointing to the limits of both communitarian and liberal responses to distant suffering. Due to a number of simplifica-

tions, however, it does not yet qualify as a blueprint for a politics of pity. First and foremost, at any given point in time, there is only one victim and one observer. There is no one else around who could be a further threat. There is no one else who could be expected to help in the first place. Second, the miserable situation of the victim is self-evident. It does not need further interpretation. Reaching a diagnosis does not require prior experience or training. Therefore (and third), the act of assisting (or not) can be regarded as an isolated variable. Commenting on the Good Samaritan (and drawing on Arendt), Boltanski stresses the immediacy of this particular charitable act, carried out in silence, by-passing the mediation of language and thus to be distinguished from pity, which is inclined towards broader generalisation. "Perhaps we should postulate the existence of a compassionate emotion, but to the extent that the person it affects is immediately moved no place is left for its expression as such. Quite the opposite is the case with pity which generalises in order to deal with distance, and in order to generalise becomes eloquent, recognising and discovering itself as emotion and feeling" (ibid., 6).

Extending on the contribution by Boltanski, there is a twist. On the one hand, the Good Samaritan is clear on the limitations of codifying the obligation to assist. With regard to formal rules, those who pass by without assisting, are trained at best. Fully trained to respecting the code, they have become blind to the reality of someone in need of their assistance. On the other hand, the story is told in a way that suggests reducing the act of assistance to an isolated variable. In this sense, rather than signalling a warning of the mind-set of those who "stick to the rules", the story may be understood as a call for codifying an obligation to assistance. The Good Samaritan thus leaves us with an unresolvable tension in both underestimating the complexity of suffering (suggesting a variable-like understanding) and alerting us to the consequences of misrepresenting reality in precisely this way (blindly following rules) (ibid., 10f.).

Still following the reading by Boltanski, related to this ambivalence, there is another puzzle. Adjacent to the question of (mis-)representation (and the risk of underestimating the complexity of the situation), there is an issue about social structure. Some of the participants (those who fail to give assistance) are depicted with regard to their social position. By contrast, it is striking that information on the social status of the other parties is not made explicit (the Samaritan) or missing altogether (the victim). One way to make sense of this asymmetry, of course, is to opt for a bluntly moralist reading: Assume a causal link between misrepresenting reality and (upper class) social status. But how then to escape a bias imposed by social structure? There is an obvious danger of self-incrimination: How to uncover an elite bias in perception without claiming a privileged status for oneself?

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8 For an English translation termed "New International Version", see https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2010%3A25-37&version=NIV

In terms of scholarly filiation, it is precisely this question that has led Boltanski to distance himself from his mentor and long-term collaborator Pierre Bourdieu (Boltanski 1990). In this particular case, however, there is no need to go into the details of academic inheritance. Boltanski is not that much concerned with members of an elite failing to act. Drawing on his earlier work on a relational model of victimhood (Boltanski et al. 1984), he is curious as to the victim being presented as a person without (social) qualities.

Clearly, if the condition of the victim is understood in terms of social status, codifying an obligation to assist (Boltanski 1999, 14f.) is an even more difficult endeavour. Furthermore, the promise of re-engineering assistance by means of IT, sensors and algorithms, has to be looked at in this light. Depicting the (privileged) status of the victim, as found in the opening episode, having once more inverted the Good Samaritan, offers a starting point for exploring a politics of pity from this angle. As the victim, in this case, happened to be the author himself, this is also an exercise in ethnographic reflexivity. To put it in terms of the model underlying the present contribution, two positions of the "actantial system", namely the "plaintiff" and the "victim" (see Boltanski et al. 1984), merge into one person.

At the beginning of the train episode, the question of social status was partially neutralized: Wearing a uniform, train staff are supposed to give equal attention to their customers. Even if one is inclined to think that the attention paid by train staff to their passengers is guided by a hierarchy of status displayed by passengers, the presence of staff contributes to mitigating status differences.[9] In the second part of the episode, the question of status comes up again. On the one hand, both the voice recognition device and the bad connection may be considered as constraints that affect the victim independent of his status. On the other hand, although services provided through algorithms have been initially thought of as incarnating the ideal of impersonal treatment (strictly independent of the social status of its recipients) (Geser 1989), to have been offered a private phone, I had certainly enjoyed a privilege. Therefore, as the train operator (Deutsche Bahn) is on the verge of transferring more and more services to online platforms, this shift in service delivery is likely to affect clients differently with respect to social status, albeit in subtle ways. The more Deutsche Bahn redefines its business model according to standards set by Google (Wieduwilt 2019) (capitalising on data/arranging for a platform which allows for outsourcing all kinds of services), the more carefully this shift is to be explored with regard to status and privilege.

Talking to friends and colleagues, I realized that, although frequent users of public transport, many of them had not accessed a service counter area (*Reisezentrum*) of Deutsche Bahn in a long time. Ready to explain the advantage of online services, their narrated accounts quickly bring up this point. If in need of assistance, there seems to be a decision as clear-cut as follows: to queue (at the *Reisezentrum*) or not to queue (instead using a digital device)? Asking the reader to consider the practice of assistance anew and moving beyond a binary understanding of voice (*Reisezentrum*) vs. exit (digital platform), the opening episode lends itself to an interpretation introduced and then exercised, over and over, by Albert Hirschman (1970; 1981; 1993). On the one hand, Deutsche Bahn's ambitions to "become like a Google on rails" (Wieduwilt 2019) are to be taken seriously, as it will result in a weakened "voice", and a petrifying "exit" as a default option instead. On the other hand, the analysis cannot stop here. As laid out elsewhere (Potthast 2019), Hirschman's original contribution on "exit, voice and loyalty" (Hirschman 1970) sets the stage for how to work out this tension (invoked by its title). Observing the state of Nigerian railways, it starts on a heavily fatalist note: Since the privileged have opted for "exit", the remaining customers (who have not "abandoned the railways for the trucks") are facing decline but lack a "voice" (ibid., 45).[10] In the following, however, Hirschman does not stay with fatalism or elite blaming. Instead, he obsessively explores how "exit" and "voice" recombine, in various ways and at different levels (cf. Potthast 2019). This pattern of inquiry can be regarded as a form of engagement, as a way of exercising in the name of preserving the condition of voice.

Assisting victims in raising their voices may take various forms. In extreme cases, it may imply supporting a whistle blower over a long period (while collecting evidence on organized crime inside, for example, a pharmaceutical company, the mafia or a white-supremacist movement).[11] Usually, adopting this kind of long-time engagement requires more than individual training but implies establishing a very close relationship. It therefore seems unlikely to be able to simultaneously macro-structure the victim's case. How best to cope with the requirements of both singularizing (by cultivating a relationship) and generalizing (by investing in categorical work)? Each of the two operations being demanding in itself, the task of bringing both of them together is

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9 Describing solidarity among passengers in the absence of staff, contributions by Breviglieri 1997 and Pütz 2017 do not have an eye on status differences.

10 When Hirschman died, the Economist's obituary quoted the Nigerian railroad example ("Exit Albert Hirschman", December 22nd 2012).

11 On these examples, see Kolhatkar 2019, Perry 2018, Caesar 2019.

prone to defying common sense.[12] Responding to this task, one has to connect different practices of historicizing. To put it broadly: The micro-history immanent to mobilizing for a cause has to be aligned with the macro-history of institutions and their categories. Or, condensed to a paradoxical formulation: To recognize a victim presupposes a category the origin of which is both connected to the victim's experience and may be more recent than it. In the case of French veterans working in facilities for nuclear testing, this is blatantly clear. In the moment of being exposed to radiation, victims were unable to draw on any pre-established epidemiological category (Barthe 2017, 72). Faced with a fundamental uncertainty in linking a bundle of symptoms highly unstable over time to events which may have caused them, they struggled in passing as "normal" victims (Boltanski 1987). If the work of these associations has been particularly demanding, this was not only related to laypersons' struggles to establish a sound historical documentation. Rather, it consisted in bringing together multiple timeframes of both a macro-history of categories and a micro-history of experiences (Barthe 2017, 71ff.). Obviously, this condition, imposed on voicing and generating acceptable reports of those who suffer, appeals to the help of sociologists (Callon and Latour 1981). Taking part in macro-structuring (ibid.) victims (Boltanski et al. 1984), they are invited to discover a politics of pity, both as a necessary historicizing complement to assistance conceived of in terms of justice (adding to the history of general principles) and to mere compassion (adding to the history of community bonds sometimes presented as natural).

c) Re-aligning voice and exit

Why bother with Deutsche Bahn train staff? Why take interest in the details of service work? Why bring scrutiny to sections of a service industry which is assisting the privileged? Why not stay at a distance and try to be critical of social inequality? If the experience depicted in the opening episode illustrates a partial failure of mediating "distant suffering", how then to take victims seriously further down the ladder of status positions and the obstacles they may meet in articulating their voice? Why consider the case of French "Metropolitan" veterans involved in nuclear testing rather than the local populations exposed to contaminations and accidents in Algeria (1960-62) or Polynesia (1966-74) (Barthe 2017, 63ff.)?

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12 This question has been raised by Luc Boltanski before turning to the "politics of pity". For the original paper, see Boltanski et al. 1984, for a German version, see Boltanski 1987, for an English translation of an extended version, see Boltanski 2012, 169ff.

To take another example: Why listen to the reports by residents of rich neighbourhoods, complaining about incivility and insecurity? Is there anything realistic and instructive about them? Why take an interest in their being heavily dependent on service staff? In order to contain their wealth, the super-rich have established islands and circuits which have very little in common with places and spaces used by other people (Paugam et al. 2017). Within "premium networked spaces" (Graham and Marvin 2001), erected for the most fortunate (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1998; Farrell 2020), withdrawal or "exit" has become a default strategy (Lessenich 2016). Rather than presupposing, however, that "exit", conducted in closed circuits or "loops", re-enforces itself (cf. Castells 1996), it is worth looking at an entire workforce which makes this happen.

Therefore, in order to respond to the hegemony of exit, local and situated economies of service have to be closely considered. For example, if privileged consumers express dissatisfaction about a given "quality of service", can this provoke a re-alignment of "exit" and "voice", rather than merely reproducing this dichotomy? Even Galanova, particularly reluctant to consider consumer dissatisfaction in terms of critique and harshly pessimistic of its overall effect, suggests that the forms of "communicating dissatisfaction" she has analysed, if recombined, open up to new ways of voicing critique (Galanova 2011, 181). While her study is based on analysing phone calls, a number of studies have provided ethnographic descriptions of much closer and more personal forms of relating to customers (and dealing with their complaints). Studying how flight attendants raise the status of their clients (and lower their own), Hochschild has coined the term of "emotional labour" (Hochschild 1983; cf. Murphy 2016). Hochschild underlines that this kind of service work is both long-term and open to future encounters (contrasted with the work of bill collectors which is supposed to keep interactions to a minimum, both in terms of length and frequency) (Hochschild 1983, 138ff.). The level of exposure (to clients) in the field of domestic services, however, is still higher. Serving clients on a plane or in a luxury hotel (Sherman 2007), the workforce is only temporarily in proximity to the fortunate. This, however, does not compare to those employed under the condition of being constantly available, both at the door of private residences (Bearman 2005) and behind it.

d) Permanent service work

The practice of elite service staff has often been described as deeply ambivalent. Detective novels, for example, have featured its complicity at best (Boltanski 2012, 98ff.). Apart from enumerating a lar-

ger workforce, historical accounts of "court society" have accomplished a similar task. They have closely analysed how service work, supposedly orchestrated in every detail, was accomplished in practice (Elias 2007). To put it simply, this line of argument is suggesting that, although impressive, the dominance of Versailles cannot be measured in terms of manpower. (Up to 10,000 people were living at Court.) Instead, to account for its power, one has also to grasp the extra-ordinary fragility in the ways relations are acted out. As aptly demonstrated by the procedure of getting Louis XIV up and dressed, this fragility results from imposing an analytic gaze on all the parties involved. Equipped with this perceptive faculty, each of them will register minor distinctions and the absence thereof. Even the least microscopic modifications will leave them in a state of uncertainty about their current and future status (ibid.).

In the contemporary world, the power and fragility of corporate organizations has been depicted as a matter of "digitization". By analogy to the Versailles argument, the way organizations draw on IT services is barely understood if laid out in numbers. Rather than attributing the success of a company to some abstract "degree" of digitization, it is the minutiae of service encounters, displaying huge variations, which deserve analytic scrutiny. It is not merely a matter of perception, if IT service encounters are framed as meeting "gurus", "hired guns" or "warm bodies" (Barley and Kunda 2004). Notably, while these characterizations tell us about different modes of dependency and stigma, all of them relate to a common pattern. The ambivalence of IT service work resides in the fact of its being temporary.

Drawing together what has been said on temporary versus full time personal service on the one hand, and the process of digitizing organizations on the other, the following hypothesis is worth being considered: Are customers of Deutsche Bahn experiencing a shift from receiving assistance in disruptive moments alone to permanent coverage by digital devices? This shift implies a redistribution of accountability (Röhl in press). It may result in exposing the users of public transport to the ambivalent nature of non-stop assistance. If explored in terms of managing disruption (ibid.), there is a striking continuity from personal services in court societies to ambient artificial intelligence in contemporary societies (cf. Krajewski et al. 2017) which deserves further scrutiny: Are we experiencing a revival of feudal service relations? This finding would be in sharp contrast to a more commonplace tale of digitization as a move to codified (and therefore presumably "impersonal") service work.

To return to the question raised at the beginning of this section: Why not distinguish between those in need of assistance because they really suffer and those, while enjoying permanent assistance, may be merely suffering from an uncertainty of status? Paying

attention to the latter has been worthwhile, because it has brought up a further distinction: Permanent assistants may pose a threat in and of themselves.[13] If exposure to service staff is divided up and/or a matter of shift work, customer service relations will differ, both in terms of power and dependency. The case of caring for the elderly at their homes or at residential places offers a telling example (Staab 2014, 152ff.).

Taking their genealogy seriously, digital practices need to be questioned as to their relation to either permanently personalized or to organized settings which divide up service work. If the study of digitization includes the question of assistance, it has to be aware of this difference (cf. Büchner 2018). Studying "assistance to the privileged", the question of how "privilege" and "critique" are related has to be raised – leaving behind a binary conception of voice and exit, unable to capture its alignments, and missing opportunities for re-inventing critique.

[3] Digital sociality put to comparative praxiography

a) A lack of comprehensive analysis

Deutsche Bahn is going through difficult times. For example, it is far from achieving its timetable; over a long period of time, a great many connections have been missed, leaving an enormous number of passengers stranded (Diener 2019). It therefore has to provide for a vast range of "lost & found" services (in a broad sense, including the use of the "DB navigator", and so on). As depicted above, the management of disruptions has been transferred to IT infrastructures which heavily depend on the use of personal devices. This rearrangement implies codifying assistance in a way that offers options for exit. It is blatantly clear that these options have been introduced one-by-one, each of them offering a particular solution to a particular problem. Deutsche Bahn has not declared a new business model, though, which would draw together single initiatives in the management of disruptions. It is therefore important to closely look at how exit options interconnect. Are they a matter of independent choice and fully reversible by Deutsche Bahn or its clients? Or are they about to line up irreversibly? If black-boxed, voicing complaints (once out of the box) will face the obstacle of unquestionable algorithmic reason.

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13 For a particularly chilling example in fiction, see *Chanson douce* exploring the case of private child care (Slimani 2017).

So far, limits set by "search engines" in this context have hardly been questioned. By and large, customer complaints are dealt with at the level of individual compensation, such as the *Fahrgastrechte* which refunds a certain percentage of the ticket price depending on the delay. With regard to this refund scheme (*Fahrgastrechte*), the only major concern was why it took so long to be available online (Schwenn/hw. 2018; Hauser 2021). Neither auditing authorities (*Bundesrechnungshof*) nor consumer policy associations (*Pro Bahn*), trade unions nor specialized journalists have brought sustained attention to digitizing assistance. There is, of course, no shortage of "white papers" painting a holistic approach to a digital future. While the campaigns about "strong rails" (*Starke Schiene*) or "digital rails" (*Digitale Schiene*) (Bahn Manager 2019) have enjoyed press coverage, attention paid to the digital transformation is rather scattered. There is hardly any reporting beyond announcing punctual "innovation", often presented without any context. In other words, the question raised with regard to digitizing assistance is still waiting for careful description and comprehensive analysis. This absence contrasts strikingly with thick descriptions portraying rail traffic stations as workplaces (Heath and Luff 2000; Ross 2001) and how these change over time (Joseph et al. 1995; Boullier 1996).

b) Methodological requirements

Back to the episode: Since I had been my own travel agent, booking and saving the ticket on my own laptop, I was allowed onto the train. Dealing with the loss of personal belongings by using someone else's own portable device was a more demanding issue. Why did staff members not dispose of a more standardized way to handle what I suppose to be a frequent situation? (I did not consider asking a fellow traveller for assistance on that subject.) More than once, I needed help from the mobile phone owner's assistance in using her device. Each time I asked for help, I tried to demonstrate trustworthiness, both to her and to her colleagues.

Both the first and the second part of the opening episode contain elements of a redistribution of "lost & found" towards users and staff members ready to act as private persons. As a methodological requirement, analysing this shift necessitated combining praxiographic descriptions (including the uses of technical devices) and a thorough comparison. Bringing together analytical strengths exploited by Foucauldian comparison (Foucault 1973) and a praxiographic take on situated practice in developing technology as introduced by the SCOT model (Pinch and Bijker 1984), Jens Lachmund (1992) has excelled in comparative praxiography. His analysis of how the stethoscope reconfigured medical practice crucially

added to understanding Foucault's revolutionary hypothesis of muting the patient in order to impose the clinical mode of listening to the patient's body (by means of auscultation). The present chapter, devoting microscopic attention to redistributing or "reconfiguring" (Suchman 2007) assistance at Deutsche Bahn, is both inspired by this example, and concerned about a similar implication (of muting voice) in the field of public transport.

[4] Doing privilege and bringing critique back in?

Critique of indecent behaviour is an easy target of critique itself: It may be regarded as lacking externality and suspected of merely passively displaying a privileged position. In light of this critique, critique of incivility does not even have an active quality. The only activity inherent to this form of critique is debunked in polemical terms: It consists in denying (mystifying and defending) privilege (cf. Gayet-Viaud 2019). Fuelled by populist discourse, depicting immanent critique (of incivility) as an exclusive practice has become commonplace.

Put this way, critique may suffer from being either overly immanent (critique of incivility) or put itself at the risk of being overly external (critique of this critique). Taking privilege and its denial as its subject, the latter (external) critique will struggle to define a sound foundation for itself, as if divided from and outside the social structure it seeks to objectify. It therefore draws from a scholastic attitude which may be, in turn, a target of critique (Pierre Bourdieu). The question of external versus immanent critique leads to an endless cascade of loops. Are critical social scientists condemned to outperform each other in turning through these loops and to radicalise their critique of an "academism" gone radical (Lapeyronnie 2004)?

As suggested by authors drawing on pragmatist traditions of thought, there is an escape to the regress into critique of critique of critique… into monologue (ibid.). Drawing on the early work of Luc Boltanski, the present contribution did not put this pragmatist orientation centre-stage. While he can certainly be characterized as pragmatist malgré lui (cf. Bogusz 2018, 274f.) and malgré some of his more recent contributions (Gonzalez and Kaufmann 2012), the work of Albert Hirschman, though certainly rooted in the history of ideas and political thought, has been, for Boltanski, a more influential inspiration for studying critique as a situated activity. While Hirschman has recurrently argued that presupposing "voice" and "exit" as clear-cut alternatives will result in mistaking "exit" as a superior option, Boltanski and his collaborators have brought this theme to further elaboration. "To conclude, we

must confess that as we wrote virtually every page of this book [the *New Spirit of Capitalism*, J.P.] we could not help asking ourselves what Albert Hirschman, whose work, more than any other, sustained us throughout this long journey, would think of it" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2004, XXX; cf. Boltanski et al. 1984, 6). In turn, the way Boltanski and Chiapello have historicized a recent shift in capitalism with regard to the role of critique has set a reference for comparative praxiography.

By and large, the (critical) social sciences have not engaged in this project. Of course, they have often read Hirschman (and sometimes included a chapter on "exit and voice" into canonical collections) (Hirschman 2010). But they have rarely moved on to practically inquiring constellations of exit and voice. For instance, this may imply making (documented) use of privilege (hence not denying it) in order to escape from its consequences (reproducing social order), re-investing privilege as a creative practice or turning assistance into critique as a matter of exercising. Commuting with Deutsche Bahn since the "opening episode", I have kept a logbook, documenting disruptions of service and related encounters (see FN 1). Accompanying and reflecting in situ a shift to digitizing assistance, I have felt increasingly uneasy about social sciences' preoccupation with criticizing elitism and privilege, inclined to an academicist version of fatalism.

On the one hand, unlike critique, drawing on a universal imperative (to justify), calling for and receiving assistance is often a matter of privilege. On the other hand, working out this privilege is not only a matter of obligation (*Noblesse oblige!*) but of rehearsal. The aim of this sort of exercise is not to get done with it (to reach a new best score; to establish a reference for a museum). To a pragmatist eye, critique aims at closing dispute; bound to a pragmatist conception of exercising, however, it is open-ended.

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