



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Susen, S. & Turner, B. S. (2014). Preface. In: Susen, S. & Turner, B. S. (Eds.), *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'*. (pp. xxiii-xxix). London, UK: Anthem Press. ISBN 9781783082964

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/18928/>

**Link to published version:**

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

---

---

---

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

[publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk)

---

## Preface

*Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner*

The fact that Luc Boltanski is widely regarded as one of the most influential French sociologists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries should be reason enough for putting together a collection of essays concerned with the major intellectual contributions that he has made to the humanities and social sciences. In our view, Boltanski has emerged as the most prominent, and also most innovative, French sociologist since the death of Pierre Bourdieu in 2002. It is ironic that, despite both the magnitude and the originality of Boltanski's oeuvre, one finds only few systematic commentaries, let alone edited books, on his work in the vast industry of contemporary sociological enquiry. The purpose of this volume is to fill this gap in the literature by creating opportunities for debate capable of representing the wide range of discussions that Boltanski's writings have sparked amongst researchers in the humanities and social sciences over the past decades.

As reflected in the title of this book, the 'spirit' of Luc Boltanski is inextricably linked to a paradigm commonly known as the '*pragmatic sociology of critique*'. In general terms, Boltanski is committed to studying the social conditions of human existence: (a) as a 'sociologist', he is concerned with its *relational* constitution; (b) as a 'pragmatic sociologist', he is interested in its *practical* constitution; (c) as a 'pragmatic sociologist of critique', he grapples with its *discursive* – and, hence, both *political* and *moral* – constitution. More specifically, Boltanski is determined to take ordinary actors seriously, insisting that they possess vital reflexive – that is, cognitive, normative, and evaluative – capacities, by means of which they shape the parameters underlying the daily construction of social life.

A cursory glance at the Table of Contents will suffice to notice that this volume seeks to cover a large variety of issues and controversies related to, and influenced by, Boltanskian thought. To this end, the book is divided into nine key – thematically organized – parts.

*Part I* – entitled ‘Introductory Remarks’ – provides three preliminary essays putting Boltanski’s work into context, making a case for its wider intellectual significance, and offering a detailed chapter outline.

*Part II* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski and (Post-) Classical Sociology’ – consists of a long essay aimed at giving a comprehensive and critical overview of Boltanski’s oeuvre, notably in terms of its relation to the continuing relevance of Marxian, Durkheimian, and Weberian ideas for the development of contemporary forms of social and political analysis.

*Part III* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski and Pragmatism’ – includes three essays scrutinizing the extent to which it is justified to characterize Boltanski’s sociology as ‘pragmatic’, particularly with regard to noteworthy commonalities and differences between his own work and the writings of other thinkers whose terminological and methodological tools are – for the right or the wrong reasons – associated with ‘pragmatism’.

*Part IV* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski and Critique’ – contains four essays on the role of the concept of ‘critique’ in Boltanski’s writings. Crucial in this respect is the ‘later’ Boltanski’s rigorous attempt to draw upon fundamental theoretical convictions defended in the studies of different representatives of the Frankfurt School.

*Part V* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski and Critical Sociology’ – comprises three essays on the tension-laden intellectual relationship between ‘the master’ (Bourdieu) and ‘his disciple’ (Boltanski), aiming to identify principal areas of convergence, divergence, and integration between these two high-ranking scholars.

*Part VI* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski and Political Sociology’ – is based on six essays that assess the relevance of Boltanski’s pragmatic framework to normative matters as diverse as ‘human rights’, ‘the state’, ‘democracy’, ‘recognition’, ‘public culture’, ‘Euroland’, and ‘indignation’.

*Part VII* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski and Contemporary Issues’ – presents four essays that propose to explore the intellectual value of Boltanski’s writings in relation to present-day disputes on controversial areas of sociological investigation, in particular the following: ‘the sociology of abortion’, ‘the sociology of the gift’, ‘the sociology of the transhuman’, and ‘the sociology of the future’.

*Part VIII* – entitled ‘Luc Boltanski in Conversation’ – contains three interviews with Boltanski, which are preceded by a brief contextualizing commentary.

These interviews – which have not been previously translated into, let alone published in, English – convey important information on the biographical and intellectual milestones underpinning Boltanski's personal and professional trajectory.

*Part IX* – entitled 'Luc Boltanski and His Critics' – offers a comprehensive Afterword, which is intended to provide a synoptic interpretation of the numerous scholarly contributions made in the foregoing chapters.

Modern sociology is internally fragmented in terms of its divergent areas of investigation. It is also divided, however, across various traditions, which may be defined by reference to their ideological, conceptual, methodological, linguistic, national, or even continental specificity. In particular, there are significant paradigmatic differences between sociology in the United States of America and sociology in continental Europe. For a long time, Anglo-American sociology has been dominated by the pursuit of empirical and applied research agendas, frequently portrayed – and, sometimes, even caricatured – as 'positivist' programmes. By contrast, continental-European sociology – notably in its Francophone and Germanophone variants – has been, and continues to be, characterized by a profound philosophical bent, a sustained interest in normative questions, and an inclination towards the formulation of abstract theories.

Talcott Parsons was one of the most prominent scholars guided by the attempt to bridge the divide between Anglo-American sociology and classical European sociology. Yet, his influence was short-lived and contested. The polarization of sociological traditions is often reinforced by stereotypes and clichés about seemingly insurmountable antinomies that separate the two sides of the Atlantic.

In light of this transatlantic discrepancy, it appears that we are confronted with a *historical* divide: Anglo-American sociology – because of its pragmatist and positivist underpinnings – may be perceived, at best, as 'ingenious' and 'naïve' or, at worst, as 'complicit' and 'conservative'; continental-European sociology – because of its philosophically grounded and, in many cases, hermeneutics-inspired foundations – may be seen, at best, as 'conceptually sophisticated' and 'theoretically informed' or, at worst, as 'hopelessly abstract' and 'largely irrelevant' to practical matters and policy needs.

Another dimension attached to this paradigmatic separation concerns *epistemological* issues, especially those touching upon questions arising from the controversial relationship between 'facticity' and 'normativity'. It appears that in the dominant versions of Anglo-American sociology there continues to exist a robust commitment to the ideal of '*value neutrality*', which critical

theorists consider to be an illusion of positivist thought experiments. It seems that in most currents of continental-European sociology, on the other hand, one still finds a strong emphasis on the presence of ‘*value-ladenness*’, permeating not only all claims to epistemic validity but also all forms of human sociality. Owing to its interest in the contentious relationship between ‘*facticity*’ and ‘*normativity*’, sociology – understood as a ‘*critical*’ endeavour – inevitably grapples with ethical questions, which – arguably – constitute an integral component of human reality in general and of social-scientific scrutiny in particular.

Last but not least, one may allude to several *methodological* differences: Anglo-American sociology is heavily influenced by ‘*quantitative*’ research agendas, whereas continental-European sociology has, at least traditionally, stressed the importance of ‘*qualitative*’ factors and preoccupations in the development of explorative strategies. Rightly or wrongly, the former tend to be associated with ‘*positivist*’ modes of analysis, whilst the latter are, for the most part, brought into connection with ‘*interpretivist*’ forms of enquiry.

To be sure, there are important exceptions that illustrate that the aforementioned typology runs the risk of painting a *reductive* picture of what is, in reality, a highly amorphous and diversified field of scholarly activities and sociological investigations. For instance, the Anglo-American scholar C. Wright Mills attempted to create a sociology that was both conceptually critical and relevant to the issues of the day. Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny that the gap between the aforementioned research traditions remains significant and that, moreover, the discrepancies between radically different conceptions of ‘*doing sociology*’ continue to be a major source of controversy in contemporary intellectual discourse.

We believe that this volume demonstrates that the work of Luc Boltanski can serve as a valuable bridge that contributes to overcoming counterproductive antinomies in the social sciences. Along with Ève Chiapello, Boltanski has undertaken systematic empirical sociological research – based on both quantitative and qualitative data – in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005 [1999]).<sup>1</sup> His ethical concerns are paramount in his writings on love and justice – notably in *Love and Justice as Competences* (2012 [1990])<sup>2</sup> – as well as in his studies centred on experiences of grief, sorrow, and misery – particularly in *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (1999 [1993]).<sup>3</sup> Together with Laurent Thévenot, he has tackled normative issues that are crucial to key debates in both classical and contemporary political theory, as illustrated in his focus on justice in *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (2006 [1991]).<sup>4</sup> In *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (2011 [2009]),<sup>5</sup> he has engaged – both thoroughly and constructively – with the writings of different representatives of the Frankfurt School, seeking to propose a critical theory capable of doing

justice to the complexity that characterizes not only mechanisms of social domination but also processes of human emancipation.

In the course of his academic career, Boltanski has developed a distinctive approach which, as mentioned above, is commonly known as the '*pragmatic sociology of critique*'. In terms of both its conceptual and its empirical orientation, this sociological framework is concerned with a wide range of theoretical and practical problems. Throughout his writings, Boltanski has not avoided direct confrontation with fundamental issues in sociological theory, such as the age-old debates on classical antinomies (such as 'objectivism' versus 'subjectivism', 'positivism' versus 'interpretivism', and 'social holism' versus 'methodological individualism'). What is striking in most of his works is that Boltanski gives special weight to the *critical capacities of human actors*, who, in his view, are only too aware of the multiple forms of social inequality created by the structural dynamics that drive modern capitalism. As shown in his studies, ordinary people are able to grasp significant elements of the material and symbolic intricacies pervading their existence. The indignation they express towards routine injustices is only one obvious example illustrating this point. Challenging mainstream assumptions concerning the strict separation between 'facts' and 'values', Boltanski's work demonstrates the degree to which socio-philosophical enquiry – including the study of cultural norms, interactional conventions, and ethical standards – does not have to be 'data free'. In fact, his writings remind us that any solid critique of injustice that claims to be anchored in real-world practices needs to be substantiated by reliable research findings regarding inequalities in wealth and income.

There is much anxiety about the value of modern sociology and its relevance to important current issues. Narrow professionalism appears to discourage wide-ranging and bold sociological enquiry addressing the major problems of highly differentiated societies. As, we trust, this collection of essays makes clear, Boltanski's writings are an inspiration to researchers who seek to tackle social and political problems, but who aim to do so with theoretical sophistication and procedural rigour.

In recent decades, Bourdieu has become popular as a passionate advocate of '*critical sociology*' or – as it is often labelled, mainly in Anglophone circles – '*reflexive sociology*'.<sup>6</sup> As even his fiercest detractors will be willing to concede, Bourdieu offers useful conceptual and methodological tools for sociological analysis. It appears that, in terms of paradigmatic impact, Boltanski has moved in a similar direction, but, arguably, with a greater understanding of the *normative* dimensions permeating everyday social practices. Let us consider one prominent example. Drawing on Aristotelian philosophy, Bourdieu's writings have significantly contributed to making the concept of 'habitus' play an increasingly central role in contemporary sociological discourse. In essence,

habitus constitutes a conglomerate of objectively determined and subjectively naturalized dispositions that make people perceive, appreciate, and act upon different aspects of reality in particular ways. From a Bourdieusian perspective, social actors tend to reproduce the praxeological imperatives of their habitus – and, more importantly, they do so, to a large extent, *unconsciously*. If they find themselves immersed in the ‘right’ social field and if, furthermore, they are equipped with the ‘appropriate’ material and symbolic resources to position themselves comfortably in relation to others, the taken-for-grantedness of their habitus can make them behave like ‘a “fish in water”’<sup>7</sup> – to use Bourdieu’s expression.

Of course, as demonstrated in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1999 [1993]),<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu – similar to Boltanski – is prepared to accept that human actors can find their sense of dignity challenged by experiences of social inequality. Yet, it is far from clear to what extent he succeeds in taking ordinary people seriously – especially with regard to their capacity to reflect upon the multiple forms of injustice to which they are directly or indirectly exposed in their everyday lives. One of the major strengths of Boltanski’s sociology is, precisely, that it accounts for the fact that human subjects, irrespective of whether they are scientists or laypersons, possess empowering reflexive – that is, cognitive, normative, and evaluative – capacities, enabling them to construct discursively mediated realms of interaction, contemplation, and justification.

Growing social inequalities rub up against our sense of belonging to a ‘common humanity’ (a concept that is – strictly speaking – a tautology, since, by definition, the very idea of ‘humanity’ is based on *shared* – and, thus, *common* – features of the species-distinctive entities included in this category). Boltanski’s sociology is deeply ethical because it is grounded in this notion of a ‘common humanity’, of which he conceives as an ever-present motivational – and, indeed, civilizational – resource. This resource is the main basis for his socio-ontological optimism – that is, for his firm belief that the social world is, in principle, always open to change and renewal. We hope that this volume has succeeded in contributing to this sense of optimism and that, more significantly, it will inspire those who aim to transform society for the better by generating emancipatory – that is, universally empowering – human practices.

## Notes

- 1 Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 [1999]). See also Boltanski and Chiapello (1999).
- 2 Boltanski (2012 [1990]). See also Boltanski (1990a).
- 3 Boltanski (1999 [1993]). See also Boltanski (1993).
- 4 Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]). See also Boltanski and Thévenot (1991).



- 5 Boltanski (2011 [2009]). See also Boltanski (2009).
- 6 Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992a). See also Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992b). Cf. Boltanski (1990b).
- 7 Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992a: 127). On this point, see also Susen (2007: 206).
- 8 Bourdieu (1999 [1993]). See also Bourdieu (1993).

## References

- Boltanski, Luc (1990a) *L'amour et la justice comme compétences*, Paris: Métailié.
- Boltanski, Luc (1990b) 'Sociologie critique et sociologie de la critique', *Politix* 10–11: 124–134.
- Boltanski, Luc (1993) *La souffrance à distance*, Paris: Métailié.
- Boltanski, Luc (1999 [1993]) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boltanski, Luc (2009) *De la critique : Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Boltanski, Luc (2011 [2009]) *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Cambridge: Polity.
- Boltanski, Luc (2012 [1990]) *Love and Justice as Competences*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Polity.
- Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello (2005 [1999]) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso.
- Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot (1991) *De la justification : Les économies de la grandeur*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot (2006 [1991]) *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (ed.) (1993) *La misère du monde*, Paris: Seuil.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (ed.) (1999 [1993]) *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Cambridge: Polity.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc Wacquant (1992a) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc Wacquant (1992b) *Réponses : Pour une anthropologie réflexive*, Paris: Seuil.
- Susen, Simon (2007) *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*, Oxford: Bardwell Press.