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Boltanski, Luc (1940-)

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Abstract

This article provides a brief introduction to the life and work of Luc Boltanski, who is widely regarded as one of the most influential French sociologists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The article is divided into two main parts. The first part offers a summary of Boltanski's biographical trajectory and academic career. The second part gives a comprehensive overview of Boltanski's major works and intellectual contributions. The concluding section presents a short assessment of Boltanski's overall impact upon the contemporary social sciences, particularly in terms of the international relevance of his writings. The bibliography contains *key* primary and secondary sources, reflecting not only the prolific development of Boltanski's oeuvre, but also the strong influence his work has had, and continues to have, on cutting-edge forms of social and political analysis.

Biographical Facts

Luc Boltanski is widely regarded as one of the most influential French sociologists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He is one of the leading figures of the 'pragmatic' tradition within contemporary social and political thought. More specifically, he – along with Laurent Thévenot – is one of the founding figures of an approach that he himself characterizes as the 'pragmatic sociology of critique.'

Boltanski was born in 1940. He studied social sciences at the University of Paris, La Sorbonne, and completed his *Thèse de troisième cycle* in 1968. This dissertation – entitled *Prime éducation et morale de classe* – was supervised by Raymond Aron; it was published in 1969 and subsequently translated into Italian and Spanish. Boltanski was awarded a *Doctorat d'État* in 1981 for his thesis entitled *Les cadres. La formation d'un groupe social*; this study, completed under the supervision of Pierre Ansart, was published in 1982.

Throughout his career Boltanski has been based at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS), Paris, France. At the EHESS, he has held three major academic positions: *Chef de travaux* (1965–69), *Maître de conférences* (1970–81), and *Directeur d'études* (since 1982).

Between 1965 and 1984, he was a member of the *Centre de Sociologie Européenne* (EHESS/CNRS), directed by Pierre Bourdieu. In 1985, he – together with Laurent Thévenot – co-founded the *Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale* (GSPM, EHESS/CNRS), of which he was the director between 1985 and 1992. At the GSPM, he carried out several research projects and led numerous research programs until its closure in 2013. He has been a Visiting Professor at various universities, both in Europe and in the United States, and he was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University during the academic year 1991–92. Currently, he is a member of the *Institut de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur les Enjeux Sociaux (Sciences Sociales, Politique, Santé)* (IRIS, EHESS).

In the early 1970s, Boltanski was involved in launching the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, when his research was still profoundly influenced by the works of his academic mentor, Pierre Bourdieu. In the mid-1980s, however, Boltanski dissociated himself from Bourdieu's 'critical sociology,' in order to create his own research program, commonly described as the 'sociology of critique' or, more recently, as the 'pragmatic sociology of critique.'

Between 1965 and 1982, Boltanski's key research interests were directed toward the sociology of social classes and social stratification (mainly within the following areas: bodily and medical practices, education, social classifications, and moral norms). Between 1983 and 2009, his sociological investigations were concerned, primarily, with two areas of interest: first, *different notions of justice*, particularly in relation to disputes and critique; and, second, *transformations of capitalism*, especially those taking place between the early 1960s and the late 1990s. In relation to these research foci, Boltanski has sought to develop a 'sociology of critique,' based on empirical fieldwork undertaken in a number of domains, such as the media, state policies, management, as well as new forms of work and organization.

In 2008, Boltanski delivered the Adorno Lectures at Frankfurt, which were subsequently published as *De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009). In 2012, he was awarded the *Lauréat du 1er prix Pétrarque de l'essai France Culture/Le Monde* (2012) for his study *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

As reflected in the themes examined in *Énigmes et complots*, Boltanski has recently embarked upon a critical study of the construction of the modern European nation-state, notably in terms of its systemic capacity to reduce the multiple uncertainties permeating social life. One key issue with which he has been grappling in this context is the question of the extent to which the tension-laden project of the European nation-state has triggered the emergence of 'new forms of representation' in the humanities and social sciences.

Major Works and Contributions

Boltanski has produced a large number of single-authored and co-authored books, edited and co-edited volumes, book chapters, and journal articles. In addition, he has written and published poetry, and more recently, theater plays. For the sake of brevity, the summary provided in this section shall focus on his most influential sociological works.

I

Les cadres. La formation d'un groupe social (Paris: Minuit, 1982) [*The Making of a Class. Cadres in French Society* (Trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)] (Boltanski, 1982; see also Boltanski, 1987[1982]).

As mentioned above, this book is based on the thesis for which Boltanski – under the supervision of Pierre Ansart – was awarded a *Doctorat d'État* in 1981. It provides an in-depth study of *les cadres*, that is, of a powerful social group made up of business leaders, managers, directors, chiefs, supervisors, and executives. One of the defining features of this group is that it projects the image of *a new class*, which is neither bourgeois nor proletarian. Its members may be described as 'highly competent,' 'highly skilled,' 'highly motivated,' and both politically and economically 'highly influential.' Yet, far from portraying them as a homogenous cluster of social actors, Boltanski stresses their *internal diversity*. He does so by drawing upon the information provided in numerous interviews conducted with representatives of this group, enabling him to deconstruct the myth that the emergence of *les cadres* can be regarded as a quasi-natural outcome of social, economic, and technological progress. One of Boltanski's most significant achievements in this study is to have demonstrated the immense internal heterogeneity, along with the profound structural fragility, characterizing *les cadres*. His fine-grained analysis illustrates that the portrayal of this social group as a uniform and homogenous collective force, as well as its triumphalist celebration as the protagonist of a new meritocratic era based on prosperity and progress, must be rejected as a reductive misrepresentation of what is – in reality – a highly complex, heterogeneous, and volatile assemblage of actors.

Critics may have plausible reservations about the Franco-centric – and, hence, geographically and sociopolitically limited – scope of this enquiry. Indeed, the English translation of the original French *La formation d'un groupe social* (*The Making of a Social Group*) into *The Making of a Class* may – contrary to Boltanski's intentions – convey the misleading impression that *les cadres* form a social class, rather than a social group. Such an assumption seems untenable, given the fragmented and unstable constitution of their material and symbolic resources for action, of their internal organizational structure, and of their members' trajectories. In the contemporary era, a significant sociological challenge consists in exploring the extent to which *les cadres* continue to play a pivotal role in shaping social, economic, political, and ideological developments both in and beyond France.

II

L'amour et la justice comme compètences. Trois essais de sociologie de l'action (Paris: Métailié, 1990) [*Love and Justice as Competences* (Trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Polity, 2012)] (Boltanski, 1990; see also Boltanski, 2012[1990]).

This book is of crucial importance in that it is one of the first works marking Boltanski's unambiguous *rupture* with the sociological approach developed by his academic mentor, Pierre Bourdieu. To be precise, it is Boltanski's first major single-authored study that makes an explicit attempt to challenge the arguably scientistic, positivistic, and fatalistic presuppositions underpinning Bourdieu's 'critical sociology.' In essence, this treatise accomplishes this by arguing that people care a great deal about justice. To be exact, Boltanski starts from the assumption that ordinary actors engage – *enthusiastically and critically* – in everyday disputes over different – *and, in many respects, competing* – conceptions of justice. It is particularly in situations in which people's sense of justice is challenged, affronted, or disturbed that they are likely to engage in subtle or open confrontations with others. Unlike Bourdieu, however, Boltanski posits that – instead of acting mainly in strategic, instrumental, utility-driven, or calculating ways – subjects capable of reflection and justification are able to engage in intersubjectively constituted processes of discourse and argumentation, thereby raising claims to validity in relation to different sets of normativity.

People's practical construction of, intuitive immersion in, and critical engagement with '*regimes of justice*' can be considered central to the value-laden unfolding of social life. No less important, in this respect, is the socio-ontological role of what Boltanski refers to as the '*regime of peace*' and the '*regime of love*' (*agapè*), whose existence is due to the fact that some actions are selfless and gratuitous. What all of these grammatically structured regimes of action – between which people, in their everyday lives, move back and forth – have in common is that they require its protagonists to refuse to draw on their *capacity for violence*, which can manifest itself in various – notably, physical, symbolic, and structural – forms of power.

As members of a 'common humanity,' we are equipped with the normative capacity to establish 'orders of worth' in the pursuit of the 'common good,' which transcends the divisive logic of competitive position-taking and merely strategic performativity. One of the main contributions of Boltanski's *Love and Justice as Competences*, therefore, is to have shed light on the *moral foundations of society* by taking seriously people's ability to engage in the construction of *everyday forms of normativity*. In other words, this book is a powerful reminder that our capacity to mobilize the reflexive resources embedded in our critical capacity permits us to build meaningful social relations based on a genuine concern with justice, love, and reciprocity.

III

De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur (avec Laurent Thévenot, Paris: Gallimard, 1991) [*On Justification. Economies of Worth* (with Laurent Thévenot, trans. Catherine Porter, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)] (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; see also Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006[1991]). This study provides numerous useful insights into the pivotal role that processes of justification play in the construction of social life. These can be synthesized in terms of the following levels of analysis:

1. *Ordinary actors are equipped with critical, moral, and judgmental capacities.* Owing to their ability to participate – actively and reflexively – in the meaning- and value-laden construction of different forms of sociality, their claims to objective, normative, or subjective validity are irreducible to mere epiphenomena of an interest- and power-laden struggle for legitimacy in field-specific – and, hence, positionally determined and dispositionally reproduced – realities.

2. *Any attempt to construct a hierarchy between 'ordinary knowledge' and 'social-scientific knowledge'* is epistemologically erroneous, methodologically counterproductive, sociologically untenable, politically patronizing, and philosophically fatalistic. To be sure, the point is not to deny that there are substantial qualitative differences between 'scientific analysis' and 'common sense.' It is crucial, however, to concede that these two levels of epistemic engagement with specific aspects of reality are not as far apart as they may appear at first glance. Instead of undertaking a clear-cut 'epistemological break' with the doxic illusions of common sense, the challenge consists in exploring the extent to which ordinary people's critical capacity constitutes a precondition for, rather than an obstacle to, the possibility of reflection and justification in all normatively codified settings of social interaction.
3. *All activities of justification have both grammatical and processual dimensions*, which can be empirically studied and conceptually grasped. Given their *grammatical* constitution, activities of justification are structured by context-specific logics of rationalization, argumentation, and valorization. Given their *processual* constitution, the underlying objective, normative, or subjective parameters mobilized in order to justify a belief or an action are not only in a constant state of flux, but also contingent upon the changing sets of circumstances in which they are applied by those making claims to validity and aiming to obtain empowering degrees of legitimacy. Different *cités* (polities) may be regarded as idiosyncratic *mondes* (worlds) capable of establishing different *grandeurs* (orders of worth) with different conceptions of *bien comun* (common good), whose validity can be confirmed or undermined by means of different *épreuves* (tests). Irrespective of the spatiotemporal specificity of a social situation, there are no practices of meaning- and value-laden interaction without both grammars and processes of justification.
4. *There are multiple normative orders with corresponding regimes of justification and modes of evaluation*. Six 'worlds', with corresponding 'orders of worth,' are particularly important: 'the inspired world,' 'the domestic world,' 'the civic world,' 'the world of opinion and fame,' 'the world of the market,' and 'the industrial world.' These 'worlds' possess both a '*quotidian*' and a '*metaphysical*' dimension:
   a. Their '*quotidian,*' and thus '*ordinary,*' constitution is reflected in the fact that these 'worlds' permeate the normative structure of *people's everyday practices*, as they find themselves immersed in different *regimes of action and justification* when navigating their way through the social universe. The experiences of passion ('inspired'), trust ('domestic'), solidarity ('civic'), recognition ('fame'), exchange value ('market'), and productivity ('industry') are built into 'orders of worth' by means of which actors engage with, and attribute meaning to, reality on a day-to-day basis.
   b. Their '*metaphysical*' or simply '*philosophical*' constitution is expressed in the fact that the systematic concern with the ontological significance of these 'worlds' can be traced back to the writings of classical, social, and political thinkers: St. Augustine ('the inspired world'), Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet ('the domestic world'), Jean-Jacques Rousseau ('the civic world'), Thomas Hobbes ('the world of fame'), Adam Smith ('the world of the market'), and Henri de Saint Simon ('the industrial world').
5. *Social actors are obliged to possess a certain degree of realism when engaging in disputes.* Put differently, people's participation in the normative construction of social life is inconceivable without their competence to *assess* what is possible, and what is not possible, when faced with a given set of materially and symbolically organized circumstances. People's capacity to be *realistic* in terms of what they can, and cannot, achieve within particular situations is a praxeological precondition for their ability to make judgments about – and, if required, take decisions in relation to – specific issues at stake in changing settings of interaction. Just as they are obliged to make compromises, they are expected to be able to cope with the fact that overt or hidden conflicts form an ineluctable component of social existence. Since, in their everyday lives, they are constantly required to position themselves in relation to normatively codified forms of action, they cannot escape the need to engage in processes of justification.

IV

La souffrance à distance. Morale humanitaire, medias et politique (Paris: Métailié, 1993; Paris: Gallimard, 2007 (Extended version)) [*Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Trans. Graham D. Burchell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)] (Boltanski, 1993; see also Boltanski, 1999[1993]).

This book provides an interdisciplinary analysis of 'distant suffering,' that is, of the experience and effects of perceiving processes of human grief and misery 'from a distance.' Perhaps, the most fundamental sociological issue with which Boltanski grapples in this study is the question of how human actors react when exposed to spectacles of suffering, while being geographically remote from the locations in which tragic or catastrophic events occur. Seeking to respond to this question, Boltanski unearths various sociological, political, moral, psychological, and fictional accounts concerned with the impact of 'distant suffering' upon those who experience it.

The book comprises three main parts. In Part I, entitled 'The Question of the Spectator,' Boltanski explores the normative issues arising from a set of principles and practices to which he refers as 'the politics of pity.' In Part II, entitled 'The Topics of Suffering,' Boltanski draws on literacy sources to examine several intermediary elements that influence the spectator's rational and emotional reactions to gruesome media portrayals. In Part III, entitled 'The Crisis of Pity,' Boltanski reflects on the implications of the fact that spectators can be converted into moral and political actors, particularly when passing value judgments on the alleged facts and happenings to which they are exposed via the media.

In the digital age, those who have direct and regular access to the mass media are habitually exposed to horrific images – such as starving children, bombed villages, war, genocide, and mass graves. It is far from clear, however, what it means to respond accurately and responsibly to such scenarios. For Boltanski, there is no doubt that, in order to overcome

a paralyzing state of sensationalism and voyeurism, spectators must rise above mere feelings of empathy and compassion. The 'politics of pity' is unsatisfactory in the sense that it encourages consumers of mediated misery to focus on the spectacle of suffering, thereby requiring them to observe the unfortunate, rather than to scrutinize – let alone to act upon – the socio-historical roots behind their deprivation. Boltanski, therefore, urges his readers to imagine possibilities of action and thereby challenge the constraining limitations, and detrimental consequences, of the largely passive consumption of information. Granted, the shift from a potentially disempowering 'world of representation' to a genuinely empowering 'world of action' is complex. Yet, the Boltanskian idea of a political and moral sociology cannot be dissociated from the conviction that subjects capable of reflection and justification are able to mobilize their critical resources in order to engage in normatively defensible and performatively empowering forms of action.

V

Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme (avec Ève Chiapello, Paris: Gallimard, 1999) [*The New Spirit of Capitalism* (with Ève Chiapello, Trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso, 2005)] (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; see also Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005[1999]).

This book provides a cutting-edge analysis of the emergence of what Boltanski and Chiapello describe as the 'new spirit of capitalism' in the late twentieth century. Shortly after its original publication in 1999, this study became a bestseller in France. According to Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis, we can distinguish *three spirits of capitalism*:

- The *first spirit*, prevalent in early modern societies, can be characterized as *family capitalism*, in the sense that it prioritizes the individual figure of the bourgeois proprietor and finds its ideological justification, above all, in the 'domestic city.' It is intimately interrelated with the *productive ethos* of Weber's famous Protestant Ethic. Sweeping away the rigid social, political, and economic structures of feudal-absolutist formations, the constitutive component of the 'first spirit of capitalism' is *productivism.*
- The *second spirit* can be referred to as *industrial or organizational capitalism*, epitomized in the protagonist role of 'the manager,' whose societal function is associated with 'organization man.' Emerging in response to the crisis of 1929– 30, it is composed of a combination of *Fordist industrialism* and *Keynesian interventionism*, which may be interpreted as a trade-off between Rousseau's 'civic city' and St. Simon's 'industrial city.' The societal constellation generated by this historic settlement had two major consequences: (a) it contributed to enhancing the acquisitive power of the working classes in particular and people's chances to benefit from upward social mobility in general; and (b) it contributed to the rise of a relatively autonomous salaried professional labor force, especially in the liberal professions, arts and sciences, and public sector.
- The *third spirit* manifests itself, most clearly, in the *city of projects*, in which market-driven principles – such as 'flexibility,' 'adaptability,' 'creativity,' and 'mobility' – play a pivotal role in developing an ever-more elastic, and seemingly forward-looking, capitalist system. Also described as the *new spirit of capitalism*, it is inextricably linked to the rise of neoliberalism and neomanagerialism, especially from the 1970s onward, indicating the restoration of large-scale *market discipline* along with a shift toward the increasing *financialization* of capital flows. One of the paradoxical achievements of this 'new spirit' is to have succeeded in appropriating the subversive forces that sought to undermine the legitimacy of capitalism for its own purposes. The elastic and flexible nature of this 'new spirit' emanates from capitalism's capacity to promote and integrate discursive processes of debate and critique, thereby ensuring that, as a politico-economic system, it is both structurally and ideologically highly adaptable. The idea of *dominating by change* is essential to contemporary forms of social domination.

The rise of the 'network man' illustrates not only the emergence of a new systemic and ideological *modus operandi* of capitalism, but also its new spirit's capacity to take seriously four sources of indignation: *inauthenticity*, *oppression*, *misery and inequality*, and *egoism*. The former two were central objects of different versions of *artistic critique* and the latter two were principal matters of concern under the umbrella of *social critique*. It is one of Boltanski and Chiapello's noteworthy achievements to have demonstrated, with considerable empirical evidence and conceptual precision, that most contemporary forms of capitalism possess the capacity to *incorporate* normative processes based on critical discourse into their mode of functioning. In this sense, categorical openness to debate, controversy, and constant re-assessment has been converted into one of the normative cornerstones underlying the 'new spirit of capitalism.'

VI

La condition fœtale. Une sociologie de l'engendrement et de l'avortement (Paris: Gallimard, 2004) [*The Foetal Condition* (Trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Polity, 2013)] (Boltanski, 2004; see also Boltanski, 2013[2004]).

Undoubtedly, this is one of Boltanski's most controversial books – possibly, because it deals with one of the most contentious issues in contemporary society: *abortion*. In this study, Boltanski draws upon accounts and statements collected from hospital settings as well as upon in-depth interviews conducted with women who have undergone abortions. In his insightful socio-philosophical interpretation of the discursive data upon which this enquiry is based, he directs his readers' attention to the profound *ambivalence* that appears to be built into abortion as a social practice. To be precise, for Boltanski, abortion exposes a contradiction that is inherent in all human life forms: on the one hand, we assume that individual human beings are *unique* and *distinctive*; on the other hand, we are confronted with their *replaceable* and *disposable* nature, without which there would be no demographic renewal and no societal regeneration.

Boltanski, therefore, proposes to examine the ways in which human beings are engendered by dissecting the symbolically mediated controls and constraints that are imposed upon them by society, of which they can become fully-fledged members

only to the extent that they are both willing and able to share its – normatively charged – conception of species-constitutive existence. On this view, a fetus is not a human being 'in itself,' ensconced within the female body, but, rather, a human being 'for itself,' to the degree that it is *symbolically constructed* and *discursively considered* as such by the members of a given society. For Boltanski, one twofold categorization is particularly important in this regard: the *project fetus* and the *tumoral fetus*. The former is desired by its parents, who attribute positive characteristics – such as 'meaningfulness,' 'fulfilment,' 'love,' and 'life plans' – to its existence. The latter is deprived of the privilege of forming an integral element of a parental endeavor and, in extreme-case scenarios, may be reducible to a nameless, replaceable, and undesired form of being, whose non-existence is preferred to its existence by those who have the power to decide over its future.

In the human world, then, sexual reproduction is never simply a *biological* affair but always also a process of *social* construction, especially in terms of how it is both interpreted and regulated by members of particular cultural life forms. Boltanski demonstrates, in a neo Durkheimian fashion, that every *social order* constitutes a *moral order*: a set of interrelated practices performed by ethically responsible actors whose decisions – irrespective of whether these are made consciously and unconsciously – have normative implications both for those who undertake them and for those who are, directly or indirectly, affected by them. Whatever one makes of Boltanski's analysis, owing to the contentious nature of this subject, *The Foetal Condition* cannot fail to challenge – and, in some cases, irritate – those contributing to contemporary controversies concerning abortion.

VII

De la critique. Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) [*On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Trans. Gregory Elliott, Cambridge: Polity, 2011)] (Boltanski, 2009; see also Boltanski, 2011[2009])

Arguably, *On Critique* is Boltanski's most philosophical book. It provides an in-depth analysis of the conceptual underpinnings of the 'pragmatic sociology of critique,' focusing on the following six key dimensions:

1. Boltanski reflects on the task of *critical theories.* One of their vital concerns is the sustained effort to scrutinize the causes, symptoms, and consequences of *power relations* within particular historical contexts, especially those that are entrenched in societal systems of domination. In this respect, a fundamental difference between Bourdieu and Boltanski becomes evident. According to the former, ordinary people are largely *unconscious* of the workings, and essentially *naive* about the implications, of power relations. According to the latter, ordinary people are not only *conscious* of, and *realistic* about, power relations but also able to problematize the tangible implications of their existence. For Bourdieu, it is the task of 'critical sociologists' to uncover the underlying mechanisms that determine the asymmetrical structures permeating the interest-laden practices of *strategic agents*, who compete for material and symbolic resources. For Boltanski, by contrast, it is the mission of 'sociologists of critique' to recognize that human beings are *moral and reflexive actors*, whose critical capacity permits them to assess – and, if necessary, justify – the normative validity of their performances.
2. Boltanski aims to *reconcile Bourdieu's critical sociology with his own pragmatic sociology of critique*. Thus, he seeks to combine and cross-fertilize two seemingly antagonistic approaches. The former appears to advocate *social determinism* and *positivist scientism*, favoring the epistemic capacities of scientists over those of everyday actors, who seem to be deluded by doxic preconceptions based on common sense. The latter appears to endorse *social pragmatism* and *interpretivist normativism*, proposing to take ordinary people seriously in terms of both their performative capacity to shape the world and their discursive capacity to provide reasonable justifications for their beliefs and actions. Rather than conceiving of these two sociological approaches as diametrically opposed and irreconcilable, Boltanski aims to demonstrate that useful insights can be gained not only from comparing and contrasting, but also from combining and integrating, these two paradigmatic frameworks.
3. Boltanski grapples with the principal functions of *social institutions*. Their most essential task, it seems, consists in producing solidified – or, at least, seemingly solidified – realms of social interaction, enabling humans to cope with the uncertainty inherent in all worldly life forms. Boltanski draws an important distinction between 'world' ('*monde*') and 'reality' ('*réalité* '). While the former encompasses 'everything that is the case,' the latter comprises 'everything that is constructed.' Put differently, the world is 'everything that happens *to* people,' while reality is 'everything that is constructed *by* people.' To the extent that institutions convert our encounter with the world into an experience founded on the illusion of relative certainty, they can be regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* of the material and symbolic construction of reality. Institutions, therefore, constitute 'bodiless beings' that fulfill the task of defining what Boltanski calls 'the whatness of what is' or, to be exact, 'the whatness of what appears to be.'
4. Boltanski examines the role of *critique* in the normative consolidation of social life. Critique constitutes a driving force of historical change: it permits both individual and collective actors to shape the development of society in accordance with their discursively articulated search for principles that are defensible in terms of their practical worth and normative validity. For Boltanski, two registers of action are crucial in this respect. On the one hand, the *practical register* is characterized by relatively *weak and rudimentary levels of reflexivity*, presupposing a considerable tolerance for differences and discrepancies, as well as sustaining a set of codified arrangements that guarantee the reproduction of society. On the other hand, the *metapragmatic register* is marked by rather *elevated and differentiated levels of reflexivity*, involving an implicit or explicit reference to the normative force of critique and, at the same time, allowing for the articulation of two metapragmatic forces: *confirmation* and *justification.* People's ability to confirm and justify the legitimacy of their actions is central to their capacity to participate in the construction of normatively regulated constellations.

Confronted with *hermeneutic contradictions* emanating from the potential discrepancies between 'world' and 'reality,' human actors are in a position to question the apparent givenness of objectivity by facing up to the genuine arbitrariness of all forms of normativity. Illustrating the 'pragmatic' dimension of Boltanski's framework, it is crucial to recognize that processes of critique cannot be dissociated from three types of 'test' (*épreuve)* undertaken either to *reinforce* or to *undermine* the legitimacy of a specific ensemble of social constellations: (a) 'truth tests' (*épreuves de vérité*), (b) 'reality tests' (*épreuves de réalité*), and (c) 'existential tests' (*épreuves existentielles*). From a Boltanskian perspective, the emancipatory transformation of society is inconceivable without a critical engagement with the normative constitution of reality.

5. Boltanski discusses the concept of *domination.* More specifically, he draws a distinction between two fundamental types of domination: *simple domination* or *primitive domination*, on the one hand, and *complex domination* or *managerial domination*, on the other.

   '*Simple forms of domination are monolithic* in the sense that, under their authority, control over a particular population is monopolized by a state or overarching institution. Here, people are deprived of fundamental liberties (such as freedom of speech, expression, and communication) as well as of basic rights (such as civil, political, social, economic, and human rights). Under regimes of 'simple domination,' the exercise of power is relatively *arbitrary* and unambiguously *asymmetrical*. Obvious historical examples of this type of domination include absolutism, fascism, and any kind of dictatorial government whose exercise of power is motivated by normative principles based on political authoritarianism.
   '*Complex forms of domination are polycentric* – or, in a more radical sense, even *centreless* – in the sense that, under their influence, power structures are circular, amorphous, volatile, and in a constant state of flux, lacking an institutional or ideological epicenter. Here, people's essential liberties and rights are not only largely respected, or even defended, but also instrumentalized in order to foster the legitimacy of the hegemonic political and economic system in place. Under regimes of 'complex domination,' the exercise of power is – at least in principle – *democratic* and – albeit, admittedly, to varying degrees – *criticizable*. Contemporary scenarios that can be described in these terms are *democratic–capitalist societies*, shaped by cultures and institutions based on political pluralism and, hence, by the fact that critique is incorporated into the routines of everyday life. For Boltanski, then, the emergence of the 'new spirit of capitalism' is inextricably linked to the possibility of *dominating by change*, which is based on categorical openness to criticism and, thus, on the capacity to obtain legitimacy by advocating the aforementioned neomanagerial ideals, such as 'flexibility,' 'adaptability,' 'creativity,' and 'mobility.'

6. Boltanski expresses his own view of the conditions underlying processes of human *emancipation.* In his eyes, these processes are based on individual or collective practices that *promote the critical project of a reduction in the material and symbolic privileges of dominant social groups* and thereby *contribute to a more balanced distribution of capacities for action.* To be sure, Boltanski does not propose a utopian blueprint envisaging the construction of a perfect society. Owing to the anthropological optimism that undergirds his writings, however, he dares to believe that the construction of a world based on emancipatory life forms is both desirable and possible. Such a world would not be determined by constraining sources of social domination, such as privilege, status, and authority. Rather, it would be shaped, above all, by people's purposive, cooperative, and creative capacities allowing for individual and collective experiences of self-realization.

VIII

Enigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes (Paris: Gallimard, 2012) [*Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2014)] (Boltanski, 2012; see also Boltanski, 2014[2012]).

In this book, Boltanski draws an analogy between two domains of modern writing, which, at first glance, do not appear to have anything significant in common: on the one hand, the development of two *literary genres*, namely *detective stories*, which are based on methodical enquiries, as well as *spy novels*, which are built around plots and conspiracies; on the other hand, the development of the *human and social sciences*, which are founded not only on systematic investigations but also on what may be described as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' Particularly important, in this regard, are the following three scientific disciplines: *psychiatry*, known for fabricating seemingly evidence-based conceptions of paranoia; *sociology*, inspired by the enlightening mission to uncover the underlying causal forces that determine both the constitution and the evolution of the social world; and *political science*, seeking to explain the origins of major historical events by reference to conspiracy theories.

Thus, what *detective stories* and *spy novels* have in common with the *human and social sciences* is not only the fact that they emerged – and underwent profound paradigmatic transitions – in the same *historical context*, that is, in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, but also the fact that they are driven by the ambition to shed light on the *mysteries and conspiracies* whose existence escapes people's ordinary perception of reality. Hence, they seek to call taken-for-granted assumptions about the world into question, by providing logically coherent accounts, and evidence-based explanations, of the multiple factors influencing different patterns of human action.

According to Boltanski, the most powerful institutional expression of the attempt to organize and unify reality by regulating and controlling the behavior of a population living within a given territory is the modern nation-state. Central to his socio-historical analysis in this book is the assumption that, in the modern age, speculations and suspicions about *conspiracies* became a motivational driving force behind both popular and academic conceptions of the exercise of power. Inevitably, the search for hidden sources of influence involved the ideological construction of a dichotomously constituted reality: on the one hand, an *official reality*, based on appearances, public performances, and superficial impressions; on the other hand, an *unofficial reality*, founded on underlying structures, hidden

causal mechanisms, and concealed social forces. What crime and spy fiction have in common with positivist conceptions of science, then, is that they presuppose a *discrepancy* between these two levels of reality: 'appearance' *versus* 'substance,' 'interpretation' *versus* 'explanation,' 'imagination' *versus* 'observation,' 'fiction' *versus* 'authenticity.'

By putting the works of major detective and spy novelists – such as G.K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Le Carré, and Graham Greene – under sociological scrutiny, Boltanski demonstrates that their writings reveal fundamental features not only of fiction-based genre, but also of modern society, especially with respect to the reciprocal relationship between modern institutions and modern science. According to Boltanski, the nation-state's ambition to exercise unlimited control over the reality constructed within the boundaries of its territory is aimed at the *stabilization* of volatile sets of social relations. The binary distinction between 'normal' and 'deviant,' which undergirds this socio-political project of the state, is as central to detective and spy novels as it is to the functionalist spirit permeating the works of the founding figures of sociology – that is, the writings of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber.

Boltanski emphasizes that *detective stories* and *spy novels* are fundamentally different in the following sense: within the former, the state tends to be portrayed as essentially 'apolitical'; within the latter, the state tends to be conceived of as deeply 'political' or even as a 'war state.' Given the profound uncertainty permeating capitalist societies, which are characterized by processes of constant and rapid technological and demographic transformation, spy novels and the social sciences serve a complementary function: in the early modern era, the widespread diffusion of the term 'paranoia' is inextricably linked to the paradigms of 'conspiracy' and 'suspicion,' which inform the exploratory spirit pervading both spy novels and positivistically inspired social science – especially psychiatry, sociology, and political science. Boltanski has illustrated – with great skill and considerable eloquence – that the *hermeneutics of investigation*, which one encounters in detective stories, and the *hermeneutics of conspiracy*, which is central to most spy novels, contain significant historical and presuppositional similarities with the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, which lies at the heart of the founding disciplines of the human and social sciences.

Conclusion

Given the wide-ranging scope and scholarly originality of Boltanski's writings, it may hardly be surprising that he is generally regarded as one of the most prominent contemporary French sociologists. In fact, his considerable influence manifests itself in the emergence of an extensive secondary literature concerned with the multifaceted aspects of his oeuvre. His influence spans far beyond Francophone (see, e.g.: Bénatouïl, 1999a; Gadrey et al., 2001; Nachi, 2006; Negri, 1994; Susen, 2012; Thévenot, 2006) spheres of social and political thought. Indeed, his international impact on current academic debates is reflected, particularly, in recent and ongoing Germanophone (see, e.g.: Bogusz, 2010; Boltanski and Honneth, 2009; Celikates, 2009: esp. 136–157) and Anglophone (see, e.g.: Bénatouïl, 1999b; Blokker, 2011; Honneth, 2010; Susen, 2007: 7, 146n.8, 147n.31, 167n.5, 202n.89, 202n.93, 223–224, 227n.25, 228n.50, 229n.51, 229n.52, 271n.24, 319, 322, and 325; Susen, 2011b: 370; Susen, 2011a: esp. 447–450, 453–456, and 459–461; Susen and Turner, 2014; Wagner, 1999) controversies concerned with both the empirical and the conceptual significance of his various contributions to the humanities and social sciences. While it would be erroneous to reduce Boltanski's project to a mere – albeit sophisticated – response to the work of his academic 'patron,' Bourdieu, there is no doubt that his proposed paradigm shift from 'critical sociology' to a 'pragmatic sociology of critique' has opened hitherto unexplored intellectual avenues in the attempt to do justice to the pivotal role that critical capacity plays not only in the pursuit of sociology, but also, more fundamentally, in the daily construction of society.

Note

A more detailed version of this article was published in Susen and Turner (2014); see Susen (2014).

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