

Criticizing a Critique of Critical Sociology

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Abstract

I introduce Luc Boltanski's critique of Pierre Bourdieu's critical approach to sociology, and I explain Boltanski's intriguing notion that because the subjects of sociological inquiry are themselves equipped with a critical attitude, the sociologist must abandon any such attitude in order to understand the complex struggle to define value. I then explore the implications of this idea for normative political theory.

“In order to agree on what is just, then, human beings must be acquainted with a common good and they must be metaphysicians” (Boltanski and Thèvenot 2006:145).

In this essay, I will evaluate the critique of Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology offered by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thèvenot. Basing this critique on their notion of a sociology of critical capacity, Boltanski and Thèvenot argue that individuals are themselves bearers of precisely that critical faculty which Bourdieu had argued was the exclusive purview of the sociologist. They further contend that individuals are constantly negotiating a complex transition between realms of value, and they identify a tension between a critical capacity on the part of the researcher and a proper analysis of the subject’s own capacity to criticize. Finally, they argue that a proper understanding of a social world peopled by critical beings is foreclosed by normative activism on the part of the researcher. After setting out Bourdieu’s notion of critical sociology, I will evaluate these claims, closing with some thoughts on Boltanski and Thèvenot’s surprising defense of political compromise.

1 Bourdieu’s Concept of Critical Sociology

Pierre Bourdieu made the innovative move of applying critical techniques to sociology itself. Critical sociology rejects mere description or categorization in favor of critical evaluation of the subject. Bourdieu understood the sociological enterprise to be one of demystification, whereby monopolies of “legitimate symbolic violence” would be exposed and ideologies would be revealed as mere epiphenomena of positional struggle among intellectuals (“specialists in symbolic production”). Arguing that human behavior is only intelligible from the perspective

of power, Bourdieu saw the task of sociology to be the unmasking of the power relations and symbolic hegemony at the heart of everyday life. On his view, common sense itself (“natural attitudes”) is the product of tacit (and tacitly accepted) domination (1977:116). This critical approach can lead to positive knowledge by unmasking tacit forms of domination.

Bourdieu attempted to transcend the subjective-objective distinction by focusing simultaneously on reality and perception of that reality (1990:108). He argued that social reality is shaped by a process of double structuring, whereby subjective perceptions take on objective force. The actual reasons for agents’ discursive performances are inaccessible to them, and indeed disagreement between stated reasons and imputed reasons is taken as evidence for the imputed reasons.¹ Bourdieu is thus led to distinguish between practical and theoretical knowledge, arguing that people have a kind of practical knowledge concerning how to behave, but that this practical knowledge “does not contain knowledge of its own principles” (1990:102).²

2 The Sociology of Critical Capacity

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thèvenot question this critical sociology on a number of fundamental grounds. They set out initially to reconcile explanations of social phenomena that appeal to groups as the motive force and those that appeal to individuals. As an alternative to individual- and group-based explanations, they prefer to set individual rational calculation against the background of social structures which are themselves the product

¹On this point, see Latour 2005, pp.9-10.

²Bourdieu’s reliance on the theorist to explain something that is logically impossible for the ordinary person to understand recalls the godlike figure of the tutor in Rousseau’s *Emile*. It is precisely this “postulate of nonconsciousness” with which Boltanski and Thèvenot will take issue.

of collective determination (2006:26). They begin by arguing that individual actions are inevitably impregnated with collective content, specifically the collective assumptions that undergird, say, market transactions (2006:27). Drawing on this insight, they characterize the opposition between individual and collective determinants of behavior as a false dichotomy, and they argue that explanations based on individuals and those based on collectives suffer alike from the reification of a normative principle into a scientific law (2006:29). Boltanski and Thèvenot note the uncomfortable fact that there appears to be no outside principle to which we can appeal to adjudicate when exactly we should appeal to individual (particular) or collective (general) explanations.

With this paradox established, they resolve it by noting that both individual- and collective-level explanations exempt the mechanism for reaching agreement from analysis. They call these “mechanisms for justification”, and Boltanski and Thèvenot argue that in order to have a basis for association, parties require agreement on some principle that determines relations of equivalence (2006:32). In other words, when a dispute arises parties are subject to an “imperative of justification” that they must satisfy according to relevant “principles of justice” (1999:360). Boltanski and Thèvenot argue that the imperative of justification requires us to justify our behavior on terms others can accept. While this is unproblematic in “natural situations” (2006:36) implicating only one principle of justice, where multiple principles are implemented a “breakdown” can occur, and when this happens people will try to return to a state of contingent circumstances by relativizing those situational elements that caused the breakdown (2006:35).

Forms of equivalence are said to be common where they form a legitimate order, which

Boltanski and Thévenot call a “polity” [*citè*] (2006:39).³ Arguing that people will naturally seek to reduce the complex tension resulting from multiple forms of equivalence, the authors contend that this is done through “tests,”⁴ procedures which lead to agreement on the relative importance of the beings implicated in the particular situation (40). To the extent that beings (people or things)⁵ are “adjusted” to the situation and adjudication with reference to a higher common principle is possible, we can call the situation “natural”.⁶

Boltanski and Thévenot argue that all orders of worth follow the polity model (2006:65). They see such models as essentially “grammatical” enterprises, occupied with clarifying and fixing rules for agreement. Any proposed higher common principle must satisfy polity requirements in order to sustain justifications (2006:66). These requirements stem from a shared sense of the need for rules to guide behavior in everyday life, and a need to be able to fix value judgments on one another.⁷ In short, the polity requirements demand fulfillment of some common good (2006:70-71). In addition, there must be some requirement of sacrifice, indexed to the provision of the common good. The higher common principle is maintained within a construction of worth “showing an equilibrium between a form of sacrifice and a form of common good possessing universal validity,” ultimately producing a harmonious order (2006:72).

Boltanski and Thévenot define critical capacity as the ability “to detach oneself from the

³Much is lost here in translation. By the use of the word *citè*, Boltanski and Thévenot intended to recall Rousseau’s account of the polity, with concomitant implications such as the presence of a collective will.

⁴ “*épreuves de force*”

⁵ “The entities are not necessarily humans; they can be ‘actants’, like in Greimas (1987) – or perhaps Latour (2005)” (Boltanski and Browne 2014:8).

⁶In later work, Boltanski and Thévenot set out the possibility of a compromise as an alternative to a test (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999:375).

⁷Boltanski and Thévenot proliferate conceptual constructs (not to mention neologisms), but do so in isolation from the relevant philosophical literature. This is unfortunate, as their account would benefit from the notion of, for example, a public acceptability criterion (see Estlund 2008), which is essentially what their polity construct amounts to.

immediate environment, to remove oneself from the confusion of what is present in order to attach the available beings to an order of importance[,] constitutes the minimal ability human beings must have if they are to involve themselves in situations without getting lost in them” (146). They argue that human beings engage constantly in this adaptation to new kinds of generality, entering into “an identifiable situation in a given world” and adopting the correct attitudes, even “adapting one’s gaze” so as to ignore situational elements that do not matter according to the standards at issue. In short, Boltanski and Thèvenot argue that ordinary people adopt precisely that critical stance which Bourdieu saw as the exclusive purview of the sociologist.

The authors identify a tension between different forms of generality, in the sense that it is possible to establish equivalence among ‘beings’ in multiple, often mutually exclusive ways.⁸ They identify at least six such “orders of generality,” and they argue that a good deal of social conflict concerns the choice of exactly which order of generality to apply in any particular situation. Calling each of these orders of generality ‘worlds,’ they contend that both our practices of justification for behavior and our analytical frameworks for understanding the social world are order-specific, and do not translate across worlds.

Successful operators will therefore view orders of generality not as objective or given but rather as subjective and negotiable, attempting to induce the interpretation of situations according to the order that supplies them the most effective justifications. They will seek to “devalue one form of justification in order to enhance the value of another”. Calling this plasticity “a defining feature of normalcy,” Boltanski and Thèvenot argue that the absence of this ability characterizes abnormal and pathological behavior (2006:16). Critical operations

⁸Boltanski and Thèvenot use the term ‘beings’ to refer to anything that plays a role in a situation.

performed by ordinary people thus take on some of the critical stance that Bourdieu saw as characteristic of sociological inquiry.⁹ But if ordinary people are themselves bearers of a critical capacity, how can critical sociology claim to reveal the hidden domination and tacit injustices in society? Boltanski and Thèvenot put it this way:

[T]he symmetry between the descriptive languages or explanatory principles used by the social sciences, on the one hand, and the modes of justification or criticism used by actors, on the other hand, made us particularly attentive to the tensions that permeate sociology when it claims to be reconciling a positivist conception of scientific neutrality with a requirement that it engage in social criticism. For critical sociology then confronts the impossibility of capturing the necessarily normative dimensions that support its contribution to the denunciation of social injustices; this impossibility leads it inevitably to place undue emphasis on the externality of science in order to establish the legitimacy of its own practice (2006:14).

In other words, Boltanski and Thèvenot think that a proper understanding of the critical attitude as held by individuals involves a (partial?) abandonment of the critical attitude by the social scientist, who will then be led by turns to the fig leaf of scientific objectivity. Abandoning the critical attitude in this way would seem to preclude much of the fundamentally normative work practiced by contemporary sociologists. Boltanski is explicit on this point:

⁹Curiously, Boltanski and Thèvenot see no need to test this proposition empirically - it is for them a methodological commitment: "...we shall assume that all persons are inherently endowed with the equipment they need to adapt to situations in each of the worlds we have identified" (2006:145).

When working within critical sociology, you are driven by the desire to obtain the truth as fast as possible, in order to help people who are being treated unjustly or falsely accused. This indignation keeps the research going. It is a very efficient motor; it drives you to see or emphasize aspects of the social world which are ignored or underestimated by the contemporarily prevalent discourses. But if there is one thing that indignation does not drive one to practise, it is precisely the sociology of indignation. Coming from the viewpoint of critical sociology, you can do many fascinating things, but you cannot conduct the sociology of critical operations itself. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to analyze an affair with regard to its specific social form...and be a part of it, by introducing one's own indignation into it, no matter how justified it is (Boltanski and Basaure 371).

Boltanski and Thèvenot set out a consistent set of requirements applicable to all the worlds (orders of generality) that they identify. These requirements emerge from the necessity for voluntary agreement. No such agreement is necessary in cases of violence (where behavior need not be justified). At the other extreme, love, there is also no need for justification. Both of these regimes “deactivate equivalences” (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:364-5). However, if individuals seek to induce voluntary agreement to the proposed order of generality, it must (1) never assign worth to persons on a definitive basis (*i.e.* permanently), and (2) that worth must be assigned through ‘tests’ that treat persons equivalently (2006:14).¹⁰ With these

¹⁰Boltanski and Thèvenot state that tests occur with reference to objects against which people measure themselves. People learn to behave “naturally” within a world through the experience of repeated testing. These objects impose constraints on tests by “calling for valorization” (2006:131). Tests are an appeal to the higher common principle to establish the worth of the individuals involved in contestation through an appeal to objects. This situation will only be a ‘pure’ test if measures have been taken in advance to establish

requirements established, Boltanski and Thèvenot argue that any proposed higher common principle that is appealed to to support a justification must meet these polity requirements in order to be accepted by others (compare Rawls 1971). The order of each polity constitutes a common world, and it is within these worlds that natural situations can occur.

We can thus see two possibilities for disagreement: disagreements within a particular state of worth (we might call these factual disagreements) and disagreements regarding the order of worth to be called upon (call these value disagreements).¹¹ The critical capacity enters the picture when value disagreements permit the strategic interpretation of the situation through the lens of a favorable order of value (2006:134). The dynamic character of social interaction is accounted for by the observation that no situation can remain pure for long, as strategic operators vie to critically reinterpret the scene to their own advantage. As Boltanski and Thèvenot put it, the "noise of the world" may be temporarily silenced by a test, but each world "bears traces of the possibility of other worlds" which may enter and "disturb" the situation (2006:135). They argue that the critical outlook is itself a result of familiarity with multiple worlds (2006:136). Subjects cannot "constitute the meaning of a scene by the gazes they bring to bear on it" because they are guided by principles of coherence inherent in the social world and in the arrangement of objects (2006:144). In this sense, social interaction is at once simultaneously subjective and objective.¹²

a common world (2006:138). Boltanski seems to make a mistake, however, in saying that convention is established by objects (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:364). It seems more correct to say that the meaning of objects is established by convention.

¹¹Boltanski and Thèvenot distinguish between two types of value disagreements: shifts of worth, where forms of value from another world intrude on the test, and ambiguous situations which present a challenge to the test by confronting it with a situation which contains objects from several worlds (Boltanski and Thèvenot 1999:374).

¹²I shall say nothing here of Boltanski's "metacritical orientation," but see 2011:26. "having recognized that the exteriorities to which critical sociologies lay claim are always incompletely external, it was a question of exploring the possibility of a complex interiority, comprising, in addition to egress from the context and its critique, a third movement aiming to integrate what external critique still owes to the context it critiques."

Boltanski and Thèvenot have reached Bourdieu’s conclusion by another road, without any reliance on the “postulate of nonconsciousness” (2006:145) on which, they argue, Bourdieu’s argument depends.¹³ As we have seen, Boltanski and Thèvenot regard agreement among individuals unable to establish generalizable equivalences or adopt the critical perspective as impossible. They argue that the chief problem with critical sociology is its inability, by definition, to take the actors on their own terms and understand the critical operations performed by these actors.¹⁴ In short, the critical approach by a sociologist is inimical to a proper understanding of the critical approach used by the subjects of sociological study (Boltanski and Thèvenot 1999:364). By bringing critique into the purview of sociology, Boltanski and Thèvenot seem to have ruled out critique as a default *modus operandi* for social scientists. This strikes at the heart of Bourdieu’s approach, and makes Boltanski’s claim to be synthesizing critical capacity and critical sociology incredible.¹⁵

There is an additional, historically contingent element to Boltanski and Thèvenot’s critique of Bourdieu. They argue that the concept of *habitus* “cannot be a foundation that supports all of the building,” because globalization has scrambled classes and categories to a sufficient extent that appeals to a class habitus fail to parsimoniously explain behavior (Boltanski and Browne 2014:10). This portion of the critique is not theoretical, so I will not discuss it further here, except to note that it seems historically myopic to argue that contemporary developments are unprecedented. Rapid urbanization following the Napoleonic Wars,

I find such passages bewildering, and must admit doubts as to the presence of any semantic content.

¹³Indeed, the metaphysical jugglers described by Boltanski and Thèvenot are if anything too conscious.

¹⁴“critique always has two elements: it has an eye on normativity, but also one on the world which has not yet achieved normativity. It is precisely the confrontation of power relations and justice which leads to the emergence of critique” (Boltanski and Basaure 371).

¹⁵Boltanski has said that “our enterprise was to adopt an attitude of methodological distance vis-à-vis critical sociology – not to deny critique, but rather to make it a fully-fledged subject matter of sociology, to conduct the ‘sociology of critique’” (Boltanski and Basaure 371).

the decline of regional languages and the homogenization of France’s provincial culture no doubt occasioned comparable cross-cutting of classes in the mid-nineteenth century.

3 Discussion

Boltanski and Thèvenot seem to be trying for their own Hegelian synthesis, this time encompassing Bourdieu’s work on power as a special case of behavior that departs from justification.¹⁶ Boltanski reflects that sociology has come full circle and that the subjective-objective distinction has been transcended. He further argues that contemporary work has led to “a unification of ‘critical sociology’ and the ‘sociology of critique’” (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:374). However, it is difficult to see how Bourdieu’s approach can survive even the momentary abandonment of critique. It is likewise difficult to see how Boltanski and Thèvenot’s approach can deal with explanations at variance with those provided by the actors. A great deal of research in psychology and behavioral economics concerns the inability to give coherent explanations for behavior. Similarly, Jonathan Haidt’s work on moral foundations reveals that many behavioral responses are not backed by so much as a shred of calculation.

Perhaps Boltanski and Thèvenot did not intend the sociology of critical capacity to apply to states beyond the situations of agreement to which they confined their study. After all, Boltanski has said “theories are always local” and that the model of economies of worth “was developed merely as a research instrument” and is “not a general social theory” (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:362-3). It thus seems a mistake to set it alongside Bourdieu’s theory, whose generality its author would no doubt enthusiastically aver. In addition, the absence of

¹⁶“You have two opposite theories and the trick is to build a larger frame, one in which the two opposite theories become specific examples of the larger framework” (Boltanski and Browne 2014:12).

a theory of the rise and fall of particular worlds is a drawback inherent in the project, though Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) has addressed this shortcoming by theorizing a mediating role for institutions.

But the differences between critical sociology and the sociology of critical capacity can be drawn more sharply. Boltanski and Thèvenot reject Bourdieu's focus on power.¹⁷ Indeed, they consider situations where people choose to justify their behavior as partial *escapes* from power relations. Calling these "legitimate relations," Boltanski argues that legitimate relations are a specific form of power relations compatible with an everyday sense of justice, less threatened by the critique of injustice" (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:375).¹⁸ Boltanski and Thèvenot want to take people at their word that they are entering into legitimate agreements of justification, rather than simply assuming that their justifications are an unwitting mask for power relations (Boltanski and Thèvenot 1999:364). Another unexplored possibility might be that the regimes of worth exist because of limited cognitive capacity.¹⁹ Boltanski recognizes that "it would be impossible if everyone was permanently calculating what he or she does and what others do for him or her in order to keep the equivalences constant" (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:365), but he does not develop this insight to argue that disputes are costly, and that individuals will therefore have varying tastes for participation in them.

It may be the case that Boltanski and Bourdieu have different understandings of domination. Boltanski has said that "I believe that a world based solely on domination would be in-

¹⁷"Power relations do not play an important role in the frame of analysis chosen for the economies of worth" (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:369)

¹⁸This account parallels Lake's (2009) refinement of Waltz's (1979) theory of international anarchy. Lake introduces hierarchy as an antipodal form of legitimate power relations allowing states to escape from anarchy. In this vein, consider also Plato's distinction between a king and a tyrant (Republic, Book IX).

¹⁹This would track with contemporary research on behavioral heuristics. Compare the argument in Fearon and Wendt 2012 regarding the "logic of appropriateness".

supportable [sic] and would not have a long span of life” (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:371).²⁰ He also argues that a focus on domination leads to a creeping pessimism that makes it difficult to differentiate between conventionally pleasant and unpleasant situations. For Bourdieu, no doubt, this was precisely the point. The argument that a world based on domination would be unbearable ignores Bourdieu’s complex argument for tacit consent to invisible domination.²¹ However, Boltanski’s final argument is more persuasive. He suggests that in a world of inevitable domination, criticism is pointless because it can effect no change. Bourdieu might retort that it serves to reveal hidden forms of power, but as Boltanski would respond, to what purpose?²² This understanding would bring criticism full circle, rendering it a merely descriptive enterprise and thus stripping it of content (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:373).²³ Criticism on Bourdieu’s terms thus seems either impossible or pointless.

To my mind, the most intriguing innovation in Boltanski and Thèvenot’s work is their defense of political compromise. The presence of multiple worlds with legitimate claims on behavior compels the conclusion that there exists no “higher-level principle” on which to draw in order to discriminate among them.²⁴ As a result, dogmatism is fatally undermined, leading to particular and contingent social arrangements that are the product not of unal-

²⁰A common error in translation made by Elliott, Porter and Nice consists in festooning the prose with direct cognate translations from the French even when the English equivalent is some centuries removed from even occasional use (*e.g.* subtend). This is a case in point. The meaning of ‘insupportable’ in French is given perfectly by ‘unbearable’ in English.

²¹ “[M]isrecognition of the reality of class relations is an integral part of those relations” (Bourdieu 1990:136).

²² “I do not understand the idea that knowledge of the laws governing our lives is enough to have a liberating effect. How does my situation change if I know the laws that are dominating me, but cannot evade or transcend them, so that they would no longer be ‘brazen laws’?” (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:374).

²³ “Consequently, the person who is disgusted by the domination must indeed think that there are situations in which consensus is not established on the basis of domination only – if he or she is truly indignant, that is. A project of liberty and a positivistic creed do not harmonize well” (Boltanski and Basaure 2011:373).

²⁴ Compare Walzer (1983) on spheres of value.

loyed principle but of painstaking compromise.²⁵ This position is unlikely to win the hearts of political activists, but it seems to me to be correct. In fact, Boltanski and Thévenot advance it as the foundation of contemporary civic pluralism, and they argue that failure to understand the necessity of compromise is a major source of political conflict. This strikes me as reasonable. A monomaniacal focus on universalizing the values of particular worlds at the expense of compromise seems a perfectly apt description of contemporary politics.

²⁵ *ex*: “The rights of persons as citizens in a civic world are specified in relation to their participation in the industrial one” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999:375)

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