The Fragility of Reality:

Luc Boltanski in Conversation with Juliette Rennes and Simon Susen[1]

Luc Boltanski, Juliette Rennes, and Simon Susen

(Translated by Simon Susen)

Luc Boltanski is a sociologist and Directeur d'études at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Born in 1940, he is the author of 15 books, which are based on various field studies and transcend disciplinary boundaries: nursing, reproduction, abortion, the professional world of cadres, humanitarian issues, and management – to mention only a few of the topics covered in his works. His sociology focuses on the analysis of normative orders and resources mobilized by human actors in order to preserve, or challenge, particular sets of social arrangements. As reflected in the debates sparked by his 'pragmatic turn', the conceptual tools that Boltanski has developed in his numerous studies have had a profound impact upon contemporary sociology – both in France and beyond. His intellectual trajectory is shaped by doubts, methodological revisions, and theoretical shifts, illustrating that Luc Boltanski is a sociologist who is attentive to the construction processes and uncertainties of social life.

Mouvement: Since the 1980s, the kind of sociology that you have endorsed has been characterized as 'pragmatic'. In *On Critique*[2] you use this term to refer to the orientation of the individual and collective works that have been produced by members of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (GSPM), of which you are the founder. Has *linguistic pragmatism* been an important source of inspiration in your work?

Luc Boltanski: To begin with, I would like to stress that the notion that our project can be characterized as 'pragmatic sociology' is a view that, initially,

has been expressed not by members of the GSPM – and, above all, not by me – but by people *outside* our research group. Personally, I have never sought to identify my empirical studies with a particular – clearly defined – theoretical approach. Rather, *I conceive of theoretical work as a never-ending endeavour, whose flaws should by no means be concealed*. This reluctance on my part is, to a large extent, due to the fact that I am well aware of the harmful effects of a certain sociological dogmatism which was common in the late 1970s and which meant that some scholars, regardless of their object of study, had a tendency to base their analyses on a Bourdieusian conceptual framework, which in fact was much *less* rigid than its overly schematic applications may suggest.

Yet, in response to your question, I wish to emphasize that *pragmatism* – especially linguistic pragmatism, by which I was heavily influenced in the 1980s, as well as different pragmatist currents in American sociology, which were inspired by philosophical pragmatism – has played a *pivotal role* in the development of my work over the years. The example of linguistics, which – according to some 'purists' – is used in a rather metaphorical way, is omnipresent in the kind of approach that I have sought to propose. This, I think, is pretty obvious in my recent book *On Critique*. By the way, this is one of the reasons why I decided to dedicate the book to my brother Jean-Élie, who is a linguist and from whom I have learned the few things I know about this area of research.

Mouvement: To what extent have you, when revising your approach, drawn upon Pierre Bourdieu's key conceptual tools, such as 'habitus', 'field', and 'capital'?

Luc Boltanski: The paradox is that, when working with Bourdieu on a daily basis for seven years – between 1969 and 1975 – at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne (CSE, founded by Pierre Bourdieu), I was – if I may say so – less 'Bourdieusian' than the others: whilst working with him, I witnessed the genesis of his conceptual tools, to which I added my grain of salt whenever I was able to do so. I was exposed to processes of trial and error, as well as to constant revisions, which are part of research. As a consequence, I never regarded his concepts as 'frozen' or 'finalized'. In effect, I collaborated with someone who, in terms of his instruments and interpretations, was much more *flexible* and *eclectic* than one may think when considering his theoretical framework and the works of his disciples: he adored Sartre and Nietzsche; he had read Austin and Goffman with passion; he was very interested in ethnomethodology…

I was in the process of putting together a conceptual framework, which was still in the making. For me, for example, the concept of habitus has always been both interesting and contentious. I would say that this concept responds

to a very important sociological problem: how can we combine two levels of analysis, which are usually kept separate from one another, namely 'the *phenomenological* level' and 'the *structural* level', 'the *micro*' and 'the *macro*'? One may suggest that the concept of habitus permits us to shift from *the world as it appears 'within' situations* – in which actors perform and are inventive, creative, and unique – to *the world considered from an 'external' position*, highlighting the logic of reproduction, constraint, and structures. Furthermore, the concept of habitus enables us to account for the existence of a dominant class, which defends its interests and which shares a set of values and forms of action, thereby avoiding the reductive implications of conspiracy theories.[3]

It seems to me, however, that the concept of habitus derives largely from *cultural anthropology*, which constitutes the first disciplinary approach to problematizing the relationship between the 'character' of individual *subjects* and the 'character' of the *culture* in which they find themselves situated. What I have in mind in this regard are, for instance, Ralph Linton's *The Cultural Background of Personality*[4] or Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*.[5] Bourdieu took up this issue, applying it to the question of social classes.

I am sceptical of the view that it is possible to isolate 'cultures' neatly by attributing a distinct 'character' to them, particularly in the context of modern occidental societies. More importantly, it seems to me that what continues to be deeply problematic about the concept of habitus is the fact that it fails to do justice to the *uncertainty* that is built into social life. Within the group of sociologists with whom I developed my ideas in the 1970s, the concept of habitus used to be employed in order to explain *behavioural patterns*. It would give sociologists the authority to say: 'Sure, that's why!' Yet, this position underestimates the significance of other factors that play a vital role in the unfolding of social life, especially the factors that depend on the *structure of the situation*, analysed so brilliantly by Erving Goffman. It is precisely the existence of a *multiplicity of reasons* that can be invoked to attribute meaning to 'what is happening', reasons that are – obviously – *context-dependent*.

Mouvement: Are you suggesting that the tendency to underestimate the uncertainty inherent in social life is due to the *reductive use* of the concept of habitus, understood as an explanatory template, rather than due to the concept itself?

Luc Boltanski: Without a doubt, my reservations are related to the ways in which the concept of habitus can be, and has been, *misused*. In a more general sense, however, it seems to me that my approach differs fundamentally from the works carried out by members of the Centre de Sociologie Européenne, notably in terms of my understanding of sociological research. I would go

so far as to assert that their conception of science was 'Newtonian', which was based on the conviction that *scientific activities are aimed at reducing uncertainty*. According to my own perspective, by contrast, one of the main tasks of sociology is to *demonstrate the importance of uncertainty in social life*. On this account, science should not seek to 'reduce' contradictions, but it should contribute to making them visible and to illustrating how people come to terms, or fail to come to terms, with these contradictions.

Mouvement: Are there any studies, or any particular research objectives, that have triggered these divergences?

Luc Boltanski: One of the crucial paradigmatic turns was my research on *cadres*.[6] Before this shift, an important aspect of the way in which I worked with Bourdieu was not to take objects as they presented themselves in the social world, but to construct, and thus select, certain elements in the field in accordance with a particular research question in mind. The major risk involved in this process is that one finds what one has been searching for from the beginning. Similarly, when one embarks upon a research project based upon coding, one has, to a large extent, already produced the results.

For example, when I worked with Pascale Maldidier on journals such as *Science et vie* and *Psychologies*, we constructed an object defined as 'the journals of average culture'.[7] Hence, we created a concept founded on a hypothesis concerning scientific vulgarization adjusted to a sociological theory of the middle classes. In the research I conducted on the cadres, on the other hand, I proceeded differently. The emergence of this research topic was partly accidental, because I had acquired an interest in the situation of self-taught cadres working for IBM and, suddenly, being exposed to the experience of being made redundant. I became aware of the extreme social and professional *diversity* of these cadres, and I was confronted with the difficulty of having to define them. Therefore, I was faced with the task of developing a genealogy of the constitution of a social group. I had to distance myself from the sociological approach inspired by the concept of habitus, for the simple reason that the diversity of the people I was studying was by no means reducible to a shared habitus.

Of course, I was dealing with a socially constructed group, but it was not constructed through the deductive process of sociological analysis. In other words, I did not embark upon my research with a clear definition of a 'real group' in mind, whose constitution would fit a scheme of sociological categories (for instance, 'the self-taught engineers', who share a career and a relatively homogenous habitus). Rather, I was examining the constitution of a social group that existed in the empirical world and whose mode of existence was not structured by a habitus. It was important to understand

the extent to which this social group, at once, *did not exist* (constituting the result of a political construction process) and *did exist* (because cadres can be categorized as cadres on the basis of their common interests, associations, etc.)

Mouvement: This sounds like a *phenomenological interpretation* of the world: social reality exists to the extent that human actors attribute meaning to this reality?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, but it also expresses a *political* – or, if you prefer, *Marxist* – stance: the point was to take Marx's famous aphorism according to which 'men make their own history' seriously. This is why I traced the emergence of this group back to the struggles of 1936, to the formation of trade unions, and to certain transformations of capitalism. The idea was to explore the genesis of these groups, not by using categories that were external to them, but by *studying how these groups defined themselves*. From a methodological point of view, this was not particularly original, but, compared to what was being done at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne during that time, it was a different way of doing research. It was also during this period that I began to take an interest in the concepts of 'affair', 'dispute', and 'denunciation'. This interest was sparked not only by the conflicts experienced by the cadres that had been made redundant by their companies, but also by the way in which it was possible to draw analogies between their stories and the crises, conflicts, and processes of exclusion that were taking place in my own work environment in the mid-1970s.

It was because of *both* this fieldwork *and* my personal experience that I often thought that I could have conducted an enquiry into the dynamics of dissidence taking place within particular social groups. One example was the Communist Party, notably the role of its dissidents and of those members who were excluded from it. In fact, this is an issue in which I continue to be interested: how a world that – from within – is experienced as a realm of *solidarity and enchantment* can change dramatically and be converted into a world that – from outside – is perceived as a realm of *violence and exclusion*. What is particularly important in this regard is how dissidents can shift from *participating* in a logic of exclusion to *denouncing* this very same logic.

Mouvement: Your article on denunciation appeared in 1984.[8] This was the year in which you contributed to the creation of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale. Was this a 'programmatic' piece of work?

Luc Boltanski: Yes and no. When I wrote this article on the boundaries between socially acceptable denunciations of injustice and those regarded as

'abnormal' (for instance, 'paranoiac'), I saw this as a way of complementing, rather than contradicting, the studies carried out on the weight of class-specific differences in agenda-setting processes. This was an era in which – at the beginning of François Mitterrand's presidency – the *Lois Auroux* were introduced – that is, a series of laws that radically changed labour policies in France, especially in the sense of a greater participation of workers in corporate decision-making processes and with the 'creation of the right of employees to express their opinions about their working conditions'. I sought to demonstrate that, in addition to the social inequalities influencing people's right to freedom of speech, there were norms which impacted upon the denunciation of injustice.

As for the GSPM, it was not created directly as an autonomous research centre with proper funds; at the beginning, it was simply a small research group within the CSE, amongst whose members were Laurent Thévenot, Alain Derosières, Michael Pollak, and others. One of its key ambitions was to study the *normativity of social life*; hence the description 'moral sociology', which was also a reference to the works of Albert Hirschman, in particular to his small book *L'économie comme science morale et politique* [The economy as a moral and political science],[9] which was published in 1984.

Mouvement: Recently, in *Rendre la réalité inacceptable* [Making reality unacceptable][10] and in *On Critique*,[11] you appear to have focused on the possibility of cross-fertilizing two crucial aspects of your research career: on the one hand, the '*critical sociology*', advocated especially by members of the CSE; on the other hand, the '*pragmatic sociology of critique*', which you have developed at the GSPM. As you have demonstrated, one of the chief questions at the heart of both critical theory and critical sociology concerns the acceptance of domination by the dominated themselves. The concepts of 'false consciousness', 'alienation', 'illusion', and 'misrecognition' have been employed by these intellectual traditions, in order to explain the social processes that make this acceptance possible in the first place. You seem to suggest that these concepts fail to do justice to the *critical capacity* of the dominated groups of society. Yet, how is it possible to account for the *acceptance of social order*? This appears to be a question that you do not really address in your latest works. Given the relative unity of the dominant groups, the fragmentation of the dominated groups may be the reason for the absence of revolt, but hardly for their willingness to confirm the legitimacy of a particular social order – for example, by voting conservative. How can we develop a theory of domination without drawing upon the concept of alienation? In a way, this question may suggest that we need something along the lines of a 'pragmatic sociology of domination'.

Luc Boltanski: It is true that this is a very complicated problem, upon which I touch only very briefly in *On Critique*. An underlying theme of the book – a theme which is so complex that it could be regarded as an object of study in its own right – is the relationship between people's acceptance of domination and their demand for relative coherence. It is difficult to live within contradiction, within revolt. There are, of course, forces that make us believe in coherence, and there are political managers who promise people that the realization of this coherence is entirely possible. In the world of labour, one can understand people's acceptance of domination in relation to their *need for coherence*. When someone does a contract job of which he or she disapproves, simply to earn a living, he or she will start realizing that something is not quite right, that the whole thing does not make much sense, that it is meaningless. If he or she continues with this job for a few years, however, he or she may come to the conclusion that it is not so bad after all and that, in fact, his or her work contains some interesting dimensions. The reason for this is that *it is impossible to live within permanent contradiction*.

Mouvement: Are you implying that we are dealing with some kind of 'realism'?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, in a certain way, 'realism' would be a way of redefining 'illusion' from a point of view which would make sense to actors themselves. If one characterizes their behaviour by referring to 'illusion', one makes somewhat problematic assumptions about them: one tells people that they are beautiful, and they believe it; one fakes something, and they believe that it is true; and so on and so forth. It seems to me, however, that we should examine how people *construct* good reasons that enable them to *attribute* coherence to their world and, furthermore, how, when exposed to reality, they *select* elements that appear to make sense. Similar to Herbert Marcuse, I think that people become 'one-dimensional' in order to live coherent lives – that is, in order to survive. To my mind, sociology needs to shed light on these constructions, which allow for a sense of order. It needs to do so, though, without imposing a sense of order upon people that they have never developed themselves. What we need is *a science of imperfect constructions of order, a science of assemblages*.

Mouvement: The question of people's participation in the construction of social orders is intimately interrelated with the question of the difference between the knowledge generated by *ordinary actors* and the knowledge produced by *sociologists* – that is, with the question of the epistemic distinction between '*ordinary knowledge*' and '*scientific knowledge*'. Undeniably, this has always been a central issue in sociological thought, notably in terms of the

significance it attributes to the concept of critique. How do you make sense of the relationship between 'ordinary knowledge' and 'scientific knowledge' in your current work?

Luc Boltanski: I think that, in many respects, the work of the sociologist is very similar to that of the linguist: we are confronted with task of shedding light on, reconstructing, and systematizing what people live through and what they know, or what they think they know, on the basis of their *experiences*. From a political point of view, my approach is close to Proudhon's way of engaging with society. For Proudhon, the task of the 'revolutionary theoretician' is to 'extract explicitly from the practices of social classes the implicit ideas inherent in their actions', as Pierre Ansart has so brilliantly put it in a study dedicated to *The Sociology of Proudhon*.[12] We are, however, dealing with a 'dialectic' to the extent that human practices are shaped by their theoretical representations. This perspective is developed, with great clarity, in *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* [On the political capacity of the working classes],[13] published after Proudhon's death. In a certain way, the early Frankfurt School offered a theory of knowledge that goes in the same direction, assuming that there is an intimate connection between people's construction of knowledge and their experience of the world. For instance, this presupposition underpins Max Horkheimer's famous distinction between 'traditional theory and critical theory'.[14]

Yet, reality is not exclusively shaped by *experiences*; it is also constructed through sets of *structures* put in place by societies, as illustrated, for example, in the creation of a nation-state. Even if it may escape the horizon of direct experience, the nation-state is involved in the unfolding of people's everyday lives. In a small village of Lozère, inhabitants are exposed to the consequences of political and economic decisions that are taken far away from them; the post office is closed because of European policies, their agriculture is subsidised by the state, and they buy products made in China – to mention just a few examples. This is why sociology must not abandon the task of engaging with the level of *experiences and singularities* as well as with the level of *structures and totality*. One of the initial projects proposed by the sociology of critique was, in a sense, to reconstruct critical theory by going in a direction taken by the early Frankfurt School, a paradigmatic direction at whose heart lies *the dialectic between the reality of singularity and the construction of totality*.

Mouvement: What do you mean by 'singularity'? People's singular experiences?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, that's right. For instance, working on the sociological role of critique, I have tried to demonstrate how actors search for elements

in singular experiences that enable them to call reality into question. Furthermore, I have explored how they are obliged to draw upon these experiences in relation to other situations and thereby immerse themselves in construction processes that force them to take the point of view of *totality*. In order for this to happen, they have to create *equivalences*. It seems to me that a 'just' critique, which is not only effective but also adapted to its object, is what allows for this *link between singularity and totality*.

The criticisms that are concerned with drawing our attention to singular cases (for example, the appeal to solidarity that makes us feel touched by a particular 'unhappy' situation) do not call the social order as a whole into question. (By the way, this issue often makes me think of a famous phrase by Helder Pessoa Câmara, one of the founding figures of 'liberation theology': 'When I look after the poor, people say I am a saint; when I reflect upon the origins of poverty, however, they accuse me of being communist.') By contrast, a criticism that jumps too quickly in the direction of totality and squeezes singularity into overly large forms of equivalence (for instance, someone cutting sugar cane in the Dominican Republic is tantamount to a postman working in Clermont-Ferrand) may seem powerful in the sense that it breaks with fragmentation and advocates mobilization on a grand scale. It quickly runs the risk, though, of losing its sharpness to the extent that actors no longer recognize their own experiences, which are always singular, in critical discourse. This is how hypocrisy comes into existence. In fact, without having to go very far, consider the hypocrisy of the French Communist Party in the 1950s–1970s, which, whilst fearing the fragmentation of the working class, made every effort to ignore the specificity of the experiences that women had of their position in society.

Mouvement: It appears that the relationship between *singularity and totality* intersects with another key issue, which is of crucial importance when reflecting upon the role that social critique plays within sociology: the relationship between *immanence and transcendence*. Inspired by the critical studies of the Frankfurt School, in many cases mainly by Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*,[15] many works focus on the contradictory position of the sociologist, who, in order to contribute to social criticism, aims to adopt a position of *exteriority* or *transcendence* vis-à-vis the human world, whilst, as a *historically situated* subject, being trapped in the contradictions of his or her environment. One gets the impression that you have not really engaged with the issues arising from this debate.

Luc Boltanski: That's true, and I would say that this is due to my scepticism towards certain ways of using social theories of knowledge, notably in relation

to frameworks that rely on some kind of 'scientific reflexivity' when analysing knowledge-producing processes. For instance, I have never been convinced by the plea for a self-critical analysis in sociology or by ego-anthropology, both of which are founded on the assumption that one cannot dissociate oneself from social frameworks and from one's experiences. From this perspective, one cannot talk about the Bambara people; all one can confidently talk about is one's *relation* to them. I have always disliked the slightly *narcissistic* dimension of these 'reflexive' approaches, but perhaps this scepticism explains my social aversions…and maybe even my personal aversions!

On a more serious note, I think that the *analogy between sociology and psychoanalysis*, which often underlies this kind of stance, is erroneous. Sociology is not synonymous with a kind of psychoanalysis that takes social positions into account. It is improper when (as is the case in psychoanalysis with this ceremony of initiation, to which Lacanians refer in terms of '*the pass*') professors – who, in relation to their students, occupy a position of power – give themselves the right to be the tutors and judges of the self-reflexive work that their students are supposed to accomplish themselves.

Mouvement: When taking an interest in the fact that all epistemic processes are embedded in socio-historical horizons, one does not necessarily have to perform a self-critical analysis in order to reconstruct one's socio-biographic trajectory and situate oneself reflexively in relation to a particular object of study. Rather, this interest in epistemic processes implies that one aims to shed light on the normative, and historically specific, reference points on the basis of which one constructs objects of knowledge. This reflexive task, though, is not really a starting point in the studies carried out by the GSPM, is it?

Luc Boltanski: Well, I do endorse a form of reflexivity, but certainly not in the sense of a self-critical analysis of the researcher. Self-objectification can be interesting in itself, but I do not consider it to be a precondition for research. In a sense, I rather defend the importance of a 'laboratory' in the social sciences – that is, the ensemble of methodological procedures, tools, and constraints which stand in the way of a pure and simple projection of desire.

Mouvement: On Critique is the product of a series of lectures which, upon invitation by Axel Honneth, you delivered at Frankfurt. Interestingly, though, this book project appears to be motivated by an attempt to open a dialogue with the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, rather than with the contemporary works of the Frankfurt School. In recent years, you have engaged in numerous discussions with Axel Honneth. To what extent has his theory of recognition[16] been a source of inspiration for you?

Luc Boltanski: I have had various remarkably fruitful exchanges with Honneth, but I would stress that our starting points are different. It seems to me that his theories draw upon a form of 'communitarian anthropology'. According to this approach, community is inherent in human beings, and the existence of a communitarian spirit precedes the existence of any mode of social agency. Honneth's starting point is 'recognition', of which he conceives as a kind of anthropological given and which, for him, constitutes the basis upon which society is constructed. The starting point of *On Critique*, by contrast, is a *double uncertainty* built into community life.

Let us imagine the following situation: I am fishing in a river, some children are paddling, farmers discharge liquid manure, and ecologists take samples. At some point, the situation becomes untenable, it becomes indefensible. Consequently, we enter what I describe as a '*metapragmatic regime*', in the context of which actors, forced to step outside the daily rhythm of mere practice, undertake *qualifying* operations, reflected in their assessments and justifications. Thus, they aim to make *judgements* about people and about what is happening around them. Most of the time, this kind of operation is delegated to an institution – that is, to a bodiless being that says: 'This is a fishing river', 'This is a pool for kids', and so on and so forth. This is where the first uncertainty emerges: What needs to be done? Who is who? Conversely, the second uncertainty is due to the fact that the spokespersons of the institution involved have bodies and that, therefore, they can be suspected of being ordinary individuals, who speak from their own point of view.

Hence, contrary to Honneth's framework, my approach examines human beings in terms of *dispersion and uncertainty*, seeking to understand how they develop tools and strategies which enable them to reduce this fragmentation and this indeterminacy. There is a second point of divergence between Honneth and myself, which is more *political* in character: it appears that, unlike me, Honneth attributes primary importance to legal recognition, which is epitomized in the state. He starts with quasi-natural groups whose presence precedes the existence of recognition and which *require* the state to put in place recognition procedures. In my own work, on the other hand, I am concerned with egalitarian modes of action that can be located *outside* the sphere of the state.

Mouvement: Well, you talk about the act of recognition in terms of a socio-ontological presupposition. One may suggest, though, that similar criticisms may be levelled against your 'pragmatic sociology', since it conceives of people's critical and moral capacities as some kind of anthropological given or invariant. How do you situate yourself in relation to *normative approaches* – notably in political theory and in the sociology of social movements – which, instead

of regarding people's critical capacity as their starting point, focus on *political processes of empowerment* – that is, on practices through which collectively organized actors not only mobilize their critical capacity but also generate a 'power to act'?

Luc Boltanski: This is not contradictory. Collective tools for protest rely upon people's critical capacities and upon their latent indignations, without which it would be difficult to understand from where these tools actually derive. You can see this, for instance, in the case of the sociology and anthropology of resistance.[17] Resistance stems from individual experience, expressing a disagreement with reality as it is historically constructed within a given social formation. This experience, which escapes the frameworks of a constructed reality, is what I call '*the world*', in the sense of 'everything that happens' – to use a phrase coined by Wittgenstein. It is always on the basis of experiences that the force of action is formed. It is precisely the task of political work to allow for the formulation and coming together of these experiences, but without erasing their singularity. An experience that is no longer singular is no longer an experience at all. It is just a watchword.

Mouvement: What, if anything, can a sociology that regards people's 'critical capacity' as its starting point say about persons who are considered to be 'incapable', such as 'mad' people?

Luc Boltanski: This is one of numerous questions I would like to reconsider. In the article 'La dénonciation',[18] I grappled with the concept of normality and also with the test of normality [*épreuve de normalité*]. It is true that this concern was then abandoned in *On Justification*:[19] how is it possible to identify a so-called 'normal' personality? This question touches on the issue regarding the need for coherence, which I mentioned earlier. So-called 'normal' persons know that the world is not coherent. In order to be able to live without too many problems, however, they act *as if* the world were coherent (in the sense of 'I know, but nonetheless', formerly analysed by Octave Mannoni).

    I am currently writing a strange book on the simultaneous birth of sociology, the detective or espionage novel, and paranoia as a recognized psychiatric issue, in terms of their relationship with the nation-state's attempt to become the guarantor of reality. For example, according to Emil Kraepelin – who, in a certain way, may be regarded as the inventor of this mental illness – the 'mad' is the one who fails to stop the enquiry.[20] And the so-called 'normal' person is the one who is capable of satisfying herself with reality – that is, with reality as it is socially constructed and as it is represented in official declarations. Reading this psychiatric literature from the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries, one can only be struck by the analogy between 'the mad' and 'the critical'. One gets the impression that, in various descriptions of 'the mad', it is ultimately 'the critical' – that is, the social critic – who is the main suspect. Two of Kraepelin's French disciples, the doctors Serieux and Capgras, do not hesitate to compare the paranoiac with a 'daydreaming sociologist', who, 'owing to his or her penetrating clear-sightedness, knows how to separate truth from secret relations between things, where others see only fate or coincidences'.[21] Behind the portrait of the mad person hides the phantasm of 'the anarchist' or 'the nihilist', who has played a pivotal role in European literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Mouvement: Reflecting upon the roles of the sociologist, the social critic, and the mad person, all of whom are interested in the '*secret* relations between things', we would like to discuss one of the key elements underlying the theoretical architecture of *On Critique*. You suggest that one of the principal functions of institutions is to stipulate what 'is' – that is, to define and construct the frameworks and formats of reality (for instance, 'this is a seminar', 'this is a fishing river', etc.). According to your account, one of the central functions of critical activity, by contrast, is to *challenge* these identitarian relations (along the lines of 'you call this a…?'). Moreover, your seminar series at the EHESS in 2010–2011 focuses on conflicts concerning the imputation of facts and actions. Are we – when attributing causes to situations and events, and when contesting these attributions – dealing with another version of the relationship between institutions and critique?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, the *work of attribution* is central to the role of institutions, especially to that of legal institutions. I recently went to see a fascinating film on this issue: *Cleveland versus Wall Street*.[22] Twenty-one banks are taken to court and held responsible for foreclosing properties and thereby harming Cleveland. In this case, the main challenge is to find out *who* and *what* the causes are of what happened; one of the roles of law is to design instruments in order to make attributions; criticism repudiates the attributions that may have been assigned.

The experience of so-called 'ordinary' persons is based on happenings. These happenings have an immediate significance (for instance, 'this building has collapsed'). In order to 'attach meaning' to them, however, one has to associate them with an entity. These entities can have different orders. It may have to do with 'the force of nature' (for example, with an earthquake and, in other societies, with supernatural forces), and with individual human actors or collective entities. But these can be the object of different, more or less legitimate, imputations, according to which we are dealing with entities that

have been legally predefined (for example, 'University Paris VIII') or with entities that I call 'narratives', such as 'reactionaries'. The former have clear features and are subject to rules that define membership or non-membership, whereas the latter remain blurred. Similar to the role of sociology, the role of critique often consists in modifying imputations by attributing the cause of certain events to entities that are not legally constituted but which contain narratives ('a social group', 'a network', etc.). This operation has always an illegitimate dimension, in the sense that the norms that it has to respect in order to become acceptable are very strict. As far as I know, however, until now these norms have hardly been explored. One easily gets accused of constructing 'theories of conspiracy'.

Mouvement: In *On Critique*, you draw an analytical distinction between 'radical critique' and 'reformist critique'. According to your distinction, 'reformist critique' calls into question the way in which 'reality tests' take place (for example, a recruitment process that is supposed to be egalitarian is accused of being discriminatory), whereas '*radical critique*' – formulated within what you call 'the world', in the sense of 'everything that happens' – calls into question the reality of reality, asserting that another reality is possible (for instance, the abolition of wage earning). Why do we need the concept of 'the world' in order to make sense of 'radical critique'? Is it not due to the contradictions within reality itself that 'radical critiques' emerge?

Luc Boltanski: *The concept of 'the world' permits us to overcome the aporia of constructivism.* The notion of 'the social construction of reality' implies that reality is maintained on the basis of a *background*, which – as you rightly observe – I propose to call '*the world*'. It is by grasping certain elements in the world which reality fails to take into consideration that it is possible to illustrate the *arbitrary character of reality*. Amongst the references that have served as a basis for my argument are, as I should point out, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a world in which anything can happen, which is incessantly changing, and which is in a constant state of flux. Yet, since one cannot live within permanent flux, *one stabilizes the world with reality*. In a certain way, this reality-creating process removes elements from the world. To be sure, this constructed reality is at the same time partial [*partielle*] and biased [*partiale*], in the sense that it tends to reinforce asymmetrical distributions, owing to its resistance to change. Given that reality does not incorporate the world into its totality, which remains always in part inaccessible, critique, which draws upon experience and which reflects a partial engagement with the world, is capable of calling the reality of reality into question and of uncovering its fragility.

Socio-political realities that pride themselves on their robustness can quickly break up when the constitutive elements of a particular order cease to hold together. Just think about events such as the *débâcle* of 1940, as you find it described in many stories, or – somewhat closer to us – the weeks of strike in May 1968, when the quasi-absence of power and the accumulation of piles of rubbish on street corners, going hand in hand with the calling into question of the principal format of tests [*formats d'épreuve*] in the areas of the school, the work place, the arts, the family, sexuality, and gender-based identities.

Mouvement: Is reality a normative structure of the world?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, reality contains principles of justice and what, in *On Justification*, Laurent Thévenot and I call 'tests' [*épreuves*]. Tests can be conducted more or less smoothly. In their concrete application, they can conform – roughly – to their format. Hence, one can make reference to reality in order to criticize what is happening and in order to improve it, but one can also change reality by drawing upon elements from the world. These elements take the form of singular experiences, which become critical political elements through the *construction of equivalences*. As I have just mentioned, however, these equivalences, in order to serve the cause of critique, have to preserve the trace of singularities that they bring forward within a given set of relations. In a way, this is what distinguishes the role of critique from the role of institutions. A specificity of critical speech and action is that they cannot be institutionalized; indeed, if you allow me to make this normative judgement, they *should not* be institutionalized. Yet, this does not mean that critique should not be organized. In my work, I aim to propose an analytical distinction between '*institutions*' (whose role is, primarily, a semantic one by 'saying what is') and '*organizations*' (which ensure tasks of coordination).

Mouvement: From the point of view of contemporary sociology, what is unusual about this distinction between 'reality' and 'world' is the underlying assumption that the world is not always already permeated by horizons of interpretation and perception, which we create in our encounter with reality.

Luc Boltanski: Yes, this is a standpoint that a positivist sociologist could criticize by describing it as 'metaphysical'. The world is not characterized as *either* social *or* non-social. It is *pure immanence*; what happens, and the way in which one interprets what happens, forms part of what happens. A tsunami is also part of the world. It turns *social* when, for instance, one blames human causalities on the authorities' lack of preparation. I once presented the book to a group of *normaliens*, and one of them, a Jesuit, asked me if he could include

the Holy Spirit in the world. I do not have any problem with this: you can include anything you want in the world…although, personally, I would not be at ease with the idea of living in a world in which some kind of divine being would play an important political role!

Mouvement: For you, then, the term 'world' does not mean the same as the term 'lifeworld', does it?

Luc Boltanski: No, because *we live – simultaneously – within reality and within the world*. We constantly make choices within the realm of things that happen to us, thereby incorporating them into the format of reality.

Mouvement: Let us return to the relationship between individual experience and collective dispute, which appears to lie at the heart of your conception of 'the political'. In a large part of the work that you have produced over the past twenty years at the GSPM, one gets the impression that 'the political' is defined, above all, by generalization processes [*montée en généralité*] and the appeal to common rules. In a way, this is essential to the link between 'political sociology' and 'moral sociology'. You yourself have examined the moments in which individuals invoke particular principles or rules, in order to settle their own affairs (for instance, in the context of an inter-individual conflict within a company). In addition, you have studied public moments in which collective groups take charge of things by which they are not directly affected and, thus, seek to transform other people's lives. In the various examples you give in *On Critique*, you do not draw an analytical distinction between different types of situation – for instance, between individual and collective mobilizations, or between those oriented towards individual change and those oriented towards social change. Are you putting forward a 'continuist' conception of 'the political'?

Luc Boltanski: Yes, by definition, this 'continuist' rationale requires us to differentiate between stages and, hence, to draw the aforementioned distinction between individual change and social change, by analysing the dynamics underlying the emergence of affairs, which are also dynamics of politicization. This is, for instance, the main theme of the coedited volume *Affaires, scandales et grandes causes*.[23] By means of a detailed historical analysis, this study examines the transitions between different forms of 'the political'. The concept of 'affair' can refer to a range of things, from a private discussion in an office to a big demonstration. I think it is interesting to study continuity as such, but we must not ignore the fact that, to some extent, affairs always involve the question of *the state*, which, by definition, presents itself as *the*

guarantor of reality. This is an issue that I have not yet explored in sufficient detail. In a sense, an affair is always opposed to the state. It appears that this has always been the case, and this aspect has been scrutinized by Elisabeth Claverie, notably in her analysis of the way in which Voltaire takes position in the *Affaire du Chevalier de la Barre* or in the *Affaire Calas*.[24]

Mouvement: Does the state play a more prominent role in your current research?

Luc Boltanski: The book that I am trying to write at the moment looks into the links between the state and reality from the point of view of the detective or espionage novel. I am interested – principally – in the process by which, at the end of the nineteenth century, the nation-state progressively developed the exorbitant ambition to organize reality under its umbrella (a process that Foucault analyses in terms of 'bio-politics'). Obviously, it is impossible to realize this ambition – especially because of capitalism, which is incorporated into the state, whilst possessing an autonomous mode of functioning. The state seeks to impose a more or less controllable order upon a given territory, defined by borders within which resides a particular population characterized as 'national'. Capitalism, however, is able to transcend these borders. Consequently, a contradiction arises, one that manifests itself in the *tension between the logic of territory and the logic of flux*. The anxiety triggered by this contradiction plays a hugely significant role in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – that is, precisely when expansionist capitalism, on the one hand, and the nation-state's attempt to control everything, on the other, are beginning to emerge.

The thesis that I seek to defend (I say thesis, rather than hypothesis, because it is difficult, or almost impossible, to provide absolutely convincing evidence in support of this claim) is that the appearance of the detective novel, and a bit later – that is, during the First World War – of the espionage novel, and the considerable success that these genres have had ever since, are due to the fact that they implicitly illustrate this contradiction and the anxiety caused by it. The detective novel expresses this on a local level (which clashes with a state, a 'peace state', if we can call it this), whereas the espionage novel does so on a global level (which jeopardizes a state in wartime). In the longer term, my aim is to make a contribution to the study of the crisis of the contemporary nation-state. We are currently witnessing a period in which the nation-state is, at the same time, very powerful and profoundly in crisis, notably because it constantly loses sovereignty under the influence of the extension of capitalism, which is itself both extremely powerful and in deep crisis. The two crises – the crisis of capitalism and the crisis of the state – are obviously interrelated.

A task of the sociology of 'the political' consists in analysing, on the basis of surveys in the present, everything that points at the possibility of overcoming capitalism and the nation-state. This has to be done in such a way that – whilst being able to anticipate, prepare for, and reflect upon the failures of the state – we can think about the possibility of alternative forms of social arrangement. This is the reason why, like many other people nowadays, I am interested in authors who have shaped the *libertarian tradition*. In fact, it is the first tradition of thought that has sought to think about the possibility of social arrangements which exist *beyond the logic of the state*. It seems to me that one central problem encountered by the contemporary French political left is its inability to liberate itself from a quasi-sacred attachment to the state apparatus, as well as from its perpetual and nostalgic glorification of the 'ideals' of the Third Republic. This, I believe, is evident when considering those who call themselves 'republicans', but I also think that this has more general implications. What I find interesting in libertarian thought is its emphasis on both the critique of the state and the critique of capitalism, which are – as Marx had already demonstrated – historically related. This libertarian form of criticism is motivated by a defence of *both* individual liberties *and* equality.

Mouvement: You are a member of the Société Louise Michel, which is close to the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste [NPA; New Anticapitalist Party]. Do you think that the NPA is a political space that is open to libertarian thought?

Luc Boltanski: I am not a member of the NPA. I have never been a member of a political party, and I have no intention of becoming a member of a political party at this stage of my life. I do think, however, that the NPA, which appears to be open to debate, is itself marked by the *tension between republican tendencies and libertarian tendencies* and that, furthermore, the existence of this tension is not an accident, considering the difficulties it currently faces.

As far as the Société Louise Michel – which is independant from the NPA – is concerned, I would say that, for the time being, this is a rather small group of friends and colleagues – such as Philippe Pignarre, Michael Lowy, and some others – who, from time to time, meet in the backroom of a nice bar and who try to organize discussion sessions on the current tendencies of criticism and critical action: from the Zapatistas to the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil; from the Décroissants to the Mouvement Pirate; from Elinor Ostrom's studies of the commons[25] to the works on 'the entrance of animals into politics' – to mention only a few issues. In short, we are a group that organizes seminar sessions and debates covering a vast range of

topics, which has regular meetings of usually about sixty people, which is not yet anything in the way of 'The Academy of Moral and Political Sciences' and which, I hope, will never turn out to be anything along those lines…

Acknowledgement

Notes

1 Original publication: Luc Boltanski, Juliette Rennes, and Simon Susen (2010) 'La fragilité de la réalité. Entretien avec Luc Boltanski. Propos recueillis par Juliette Rennes et Simon Susen', *Mouvements* 64: 149–164. The interview, which was conducted by Juliette Rennes and Simon Susen, took place at the office of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (10 Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, 75006 Paris, France) on 1 September 2010.
2 Boltanski (2011 [2009]).
3 On this point, see Boltanski (2012).
4 Linton (1999 [1947]).
5 Benedict (1961 [1934]).
6 Boltanski (1987 [1982]).
7 Boltanski and Maldidier (1977).
8 Boltanski, Darré and Schiltz (1984).
9 Hirschman (1984).
10 Boltanski (2008).
11 Boltanski (2011 [2009]).
12 Ansart (1967).
13 Proudhon (1865).
14 Horkheimer (1976 [1937]).
15 Adorno (1973 [1966]).
16 Honneth (1995 [1992]).
17 On this point, see, for instance, Scott (1990).
18 Boltanski, Darré and Schiltz (1984).
19 Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]).
20 Kraepelin (2002 [1913]). See also Kraepelin (1881).
21 Serieux and Capgras (1982: 100).
22 A film by Jean-Stéphane Bron, released in August 2010.
23 Boltanski, Claverie, Offenstadt, and Van Damme (2007).
24 Claverie (1994).
25 Ostrom (1990).

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