

Book Review: *On Critique* by Luc Boltanski

Alexander M. Stoner
 Department of Sociology
 University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (translated by Gregory Elliot), Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011, 191 pp., \$26.95 paper (978-0-7456-4964-1), \$76.95 hardcover (978-0-7456-4963-4)

Over the past few years, French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot have developed a so-called “pragmatic sociology of critique.” In an effort to overcome the perceived shortcomings of Bourdieusian “critical sociology”—namely, the relative neglect of the perspectives of social actors—Boltanski and Thévenot’s work turns to the ways in which individuals justify their actions and legitimize their views to others in quite ordinary, everyday situations (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, 2006). In his most recent book, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, Boltanski goes a step further to argue the interdependence of both critical sociology and a pragmatic sociology of critique.

On Critique stems from three talks Boltanski gave as part of the Adorno Lecture series at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany in November 2008. Each talk is divided in two, making up the six chapters of the book. Boltanski focuses on the sociology of domination throughout and in doing so, he attempts to make explicit the relationship between sociology and critique.

In part one, Boltanski compares two sociological models of critique: Bourdieusian critical sociology and the pragmatic sociology of critique developed by Boltanski and his colleagues. Although critical sociology is concerned with the role of reflexivity in both the discipline of sociology and everyday life, for Bourdieu, the relationship between critical reflexivity and practical reflexivity remains asymmetrical (see Bourdieu, 2004). The pragmatic sociology of critique, on the other hand, reexamines the distinction between critical sociologist and “ordinary” actor. This pragmatist model roots the capacity for critique in the situations where “ordinary” actors engage evaluation and criticism in their day to day activities. Whereas critical sociology requires the critic to assume a privileged position in order to debunk the facades of social reality (as for example in the traditional critique of ideology); pragmatic sociology of critique involves a pluralism of critique. The main contribution of pragmatic sociology of critique, according to Boltanski (pg. 68), has been to show how everyday moments of dispute have the potential to shed light on the relationship between reality (that which

hangs together) and the world (that which is uncertain). It is in these situations that what people are in the process of doing ceases to be self-evident. This underscores what Boltanski believes to be at the core of most sociological questions: “the uncertainty that threatens social arrangements and hence the fragility of reality” (pg. 54). At the same time, Boltanski cautions that the main shortcoming of both pragmatic and critical approaches is the tendency to overstate tacit agreement, or “common-sense,” which effectively glosses over the importance of such uncertainty.

In the second portion of the book, Boltanski develops his main thesis on the interdependence of critical sociology and pragmatic sociology of critique. This requires him to reduce the antagonisms between the two models of critique, which he attempts by way of an elaborate, even sometimes difficult and convoluted, analysis of social institutions. Boltanski starts from the position where radical uncertainty about the social world prevails and explains that the very possibility of critique is entwined with the question of institutions. He explains that the difficulty of conceiving and achieving consensus, in contrast to sociologies that rely on notions of “common-sense,” can be attributed to the fact that each human-being is embodied in a body. This means that every individual’s point of view occupies a different moment in time and a different point in space. As such, no individual has the requisite authority to provide a final answer to whatever is at stake during moments of dispute. In situations where it is necessary to put disagreements to an end, a third party must be delegated a “monopoly of interpretation” (pg. 74). Since this third party must not express their own point of view, the task is assigned to a bodiless being: the institution (pg. 75). Thus, although the bodiless being of institutions provide the scaffolding from which domination operates, only embodied persons can represent them. The intrinsic unease of the institutional order, which extends to the practices of everyday actors, gives rise to what Boltanski calls “hermeneutic contradiction.” That is to say, the threat to reality by the world is both “external”—a reference which, based on the critique of critical sociology, unmasks and challenges “the forms of domination in a certain social order from a position of exteriority” (pg. 50)—and “internal”—a position “carried out from within, by actors involved in disputes, and inserted into sequences of critique and justification, of highly variable levels of generality” (pg. 50). This is the ground for Boltanski’s

Correspondence should be directed to: Alexander M. Stoner, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; astoner1@utk.edu.

contention that critical sociology and a pragmatic sociology of critique are both necessary and mutually dependent.

In the final portion of the book, Boltanski applies this approach to examine political regimes of domination and concludes by discussing some theoretical and practical implications. Chapter five examines the actualization of hermeneutic contradiction in two different regimes of domination: 1) simple domination and 2) complex, or managerial domination. Boltanski pays more attention to the latter, as this regime of domination is “better adjusted to contemporary *democratic-capitalist* societies” (pg. 127). Much of the discussion draws on Boltanski’s earlier work in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Unlike regimes of simple domination, whose aim is the preservation of order, the domination of complex managerial regimes is rooted in expertise and based on systems that “intervene by promoting, managing and orienting change” (pg. 129). As such, managerial regimes represent a new way of controlling critique; that is, by incorporating it. The final chapter revisits the notion of hermeneutic contradiction and its implications for pragmatic sociology of critique and social emancipation. Boltanski concludes on a cheerful note when he explains that a *reflexive* treatment of the notion of hermeneutic contradiction, where everyone understands and lives alongside this contradiction would “open up to people the possibility of having some purchase on the collectives of which they are component parts” (pg. 155). Here Boltanski cites institutional crises, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, as having the potential to create an impetus through which such collectives can then become mobilized.

On Critique represents serious challenges to both main-

stream sociologists, who tend to neglect the concrete daily suffering of social life, and non-reflexive “progressive” sociologists, who tend to “speak for” others by way of projecting their own ideologies onto so-called “oppressed” social groups they then seek to “emancipate.” Although Boltanski’s discussion of critique, domination, and emancipation is powerful, even moving at times, his position on these matters no doubt reflects his own social location as a prominent sociologist in French society, where the role of the public intellectual still exists. The same cannot be said of American society. Because Boltanski fails to make explicit how his efforts in *On Critique* are mediated by the specificity of French culture and history, he is unable to flesh out his relatively optimistic concluding remarks regarding the potential he affords to the widespread animus in the wake of the global financial crisis. Why should mounting frustration correspond, or become transposed into “progressive” collective action equally in different societies, if at all?

References

- Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. 2006. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot. 1999. “The Sociology of Critical Capacity” *European Journal of Social Theory* 2(3): 359-377.
- Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot. 2006. *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2004. *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.