

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation.* Oxford: Polity Press, 2011, 200 pp. \$26.95 paper (978-0-7456-4964-1), \$76.95 hardcover (978-0-7456-4963-4)

Sociology's special relation with social critique, Luc Boltanski reminds us in his book, has been a central conundrum for the discipline ever since its formation. On this question, one suspects that most researchers today would more readily and more happily side for Karl Marx than for Max Weber. Crowds of sociologists are probably far less moved by an intellectual thirst for more knowledge than by political hopes for more justice. Unsurprisingly, Boltanski himself does not go against this trend and yet, as it turns out, his book still has a lot to offer in terms of sociological knowledge. Developed out of a series of seminars, the text elaborates a strong argument stating the necessity of critique, to borrow one chapter's title, and goes on to explain some of the challenges it currently has to face. As he proceeds through this program, the author reflects and digresses on a large variety of subtopics like common sense, reflexivity, truth, tautology, emotion, affairs, desire, suspicion, and conspiracy among many others.

Boltanski is quick to underscore the complexity of critique as an object of its own, at least since a distinction emerged between critical sociology and pragmatic sociology of critique. The first approach is exemplified by the work of Pierre Bourdieu whose concept of habitus leaves little margin of maneuver and power of initiative to individuals, if any at all. Habitus basically operates as negative-feedback-loop mechanism so that domination across social positions occurs through people's very own self-adjustments vis-à-vis others within the same social space. Against this, Boltanski and his colleague Laurent Thévenot — who both collaborated with Bourdieu for a period of their careers — sought to develop the second approach in which individuals are no strangers to critical engagement in their everyday life. People do not merely follow their habits or second nature. They are competent enough to evaluate whether activities are being handled adequately or not and they can raise disputes when they see it appropriate. As such, the pragmatic turn was meant to strengthen empirical research by allowing for the exploration of sociological issues never addressed before. However, it did not do as much to reinvigorate the notion of critique as moral imperative. Because

of this, reconnecting with critical sociology seems like a good idea at this stage in Boltanski's mind.

In Bourdieu's brand of critical sociology though, critique is monopolized by sociologists as the enlightened philosophers. Pragmatic sociology of critique releases it back to the ordinary person. Boltanski does not deviate from this path, yet he would like to save critique from becoming too casual, as it were. Presumably critique is not a matter of mere whims and so it needs to be anchored in something greater than any of us. Boltanski therefore proceeds to develop his theory of institution. Boltanski argues that uncertainty is a fundamental aspect of human experience. What we take as reality is nothing but a construction or a projection sustained through our interactions with others. Accordingly "reality" does not cover everything there is out there so that there is a realm of alternative possibilities lying beyond it which Boltanski designates as "the world." Furthermore, the people partaking in reality are themselves bounded by their own physical body, and since everybody has a different body, the definition of reality cannot be attributed to any of them directly. To sustain a reality, it is therefore required to refer to institutions as third party. Indeed, institutions are bodiless entities and it is through their operations that the contours of reality are identified.

Reality is always in danger of being disrupted by the world whenever actual events diverge too much from the categories established along with the institutions themselves. As long as this does not happen, social activities assume the form of rituals. Everything runs as planned and institutions are reaffirmed as the guardians of reality. When things fall apart unexpectedly, rituals give way to disputes calling for the testing of qualification. Doubts are being expressed and in response, we need to verify whether the case at hand is in accordance with the regulations in place. Procedures must be applied to determine what really happened. Thus every time the world reminds us of itself, this gives us an opportunity to revise our construction of reality and modify it.

Institutions are bodiless, but the individuals who represent them are not. It follows that the chance for the world to disturb reality is not only external (since complete control over the circumstances of social action is impossible for logistic reasons alone), but internal just as well. Boltanski speaks of this as a hermeneutic contradiction. The threat, or critique, comes from inside, suggests Boltanski. For example, leaders speaking in the name of the state, science, or the law sometimes perform their role in a way that fails to convince their audience. The leaders reappear as persons or mere mortals only and the institutions vanish as illusions. The conventions holding people together around a sense of reality break down and this automatically opens the door for contestation and de-

mands for social change. This is Boltanski's great idea: there is nothing extravagant about critique for it is an integral part of social life itself. More exactly, critique is the counterpart of institutions. It is necessary in the sense that it is inevitable: where institutions go, critique will follow like a shadow.

In sum, critique happens, quite simply. Still critique can be limited in various ways so as to enable domination in practice. For instance, in traditional societies, the means for the communication of critique were simply lacking in effectiveness. Furthermore, in contemporary democratic-capitalist (neoliberal) societies, critique is handicapped by the fact that change is already being promoted by the elites in power. People are dominated by being forced to change in predetermined ways. At the same time, tests monitoring the shape of reality are constantly updated, through benchmarking for instance, so as to keep reality ahead of people and ahead of critique.

For the most part, Boltanski's discussion is very stimulating, although some negative comments must be formulated. First, Boltanski wants us to believe that, like the Pope in Rome, social critique is infallible. Second, Boltanski's notion of exploitation is underdeveloped. These two points are closely connected. Exploitation overdetermines critique at the conceptual level, so that critique can only be a self-defence reaction against exploitation, which is why critique is always justified and morally right for Boltanski. Yet this is far from being so obvious and undeniable even in light of his theory of institution. If critique boils down to expression of opposition against social structures, then it cannot be limited to laments against neoliberalism only. Attacks against policies promoting equality for women or rights for gays and lesbians, for example, qualify no less as critique, at least nominally. Third, the focus on domination in the last section of the book seems to go against the distinction made between reality and the world. Supposedly, the world is a source of radical uncertainty and yet it is as if Boltanski had a total and perfect knowledge of what lies behind our institutions: social stratification and nothing else. Ultimately Boltanski's theory of institution suffers from this ambiguity.

Dalhousie University

Jean-Sébastien Guy

Jean-Sébastien Guy is interested in sociological theory, both classical and contemporary, in all its forms. Previously, by using Niklas Luhmann's autopoietic systems theory, he has sketched out the basis for a new conceptual approach to globalization which he calls "globalization as society's self-description". Recently, he has published in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* and made a contribution in *Comunicaciones, Semánticas y Redes. Usos y Desviaciones de la Sociología de Niklas Luhmann*.

jsguy@dal.ca