

NATHAN SLANGEN

UNCERTAINTY AND EMANCIPATION
A METACRITIQUE OF DOMINATION

Review of: Boltanski, L. (2011) *On Critique. A Sociology of Emancipation*.
Translated by Gregory Elliott. Cambridge: Polity Press, 191 pp.

Krisis, 2013, Issue 3
www.krisis.eu

The French sociologist Luc Boltanski achieved quite some international fame with the 2005 English translation of *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, an ambitious work co-authored with Ève Chiapello. This extensive study presents an analysis of the ideological transformations of the normative framework that justifies the engagement with capitalism between the 1960s and 1990s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 8). The vast scope and detail of the work appealed to critically oriented sociologists and philosophers alike, even though its nearly six-hundred pages might seem daunting to prospective readers. With the 2011 English translation of *De la Critique – Précis de Sociologie de l'Emancipation* a more concise – albeit more exclusively theoretical – work of one of the most remarkable philosophically inclined sociologists active today has become available to a broader audience.

A professor of sociology at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* and co-founder of the research circle *Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale*, Luc Boltanski is a contemporary giant of critically oriented sociology. A former student and co-researcher of Pierre Bourdieu, Boltanski

has increasingly dissociated himself from the critical sociology advocated by his mentor in favor of a pragmatic sociology of critique. These sociological paradigms both define themselves in their respective views on the relation between critique and agency. Critical sociology tends to view actors as having an illusory view of the social structures they are subject to. Consequently, the critical role of the sociologist would be to unmask the structures of domination that actors themselves are blind to. In contrast to this, the pragmatic sociology of critique investigates the ways in which actors use and develop modes of critique in everyday situations they regard as problematic. The upshot of the latter approach is that the sociologist is no longer viewed as external to the social world he or she describes. However, within this paradigm the sociologist is also no longer in a position to provide an overarching critique of social reality. Whether such a critique can still be regarded as necessary and possible is the main focus of the work under review. *On Critique* marks Boltanski's attempt at overcoming the weaknesses of both these sociological perspectives, while retaining – within one framework – their respective strengths, especially with regard to the emancipatory claims of critical sociology.

The relationship between sociology and social critique

In his summary characterization of the sociology of emancipation, Boltanski first sets out to identify the proper object of such a sociology. According to him, the notion of 'emancipation' is inextricably linked to the conceptualization of domination. The pragmatic sociology of critique he showcased in his earlier works¹ has as its object the social practices that constitute society, and focuses on the forms of discursive generality developed in these practices. Critical sociology, aiming for comprehensive critique, has the social order – instead of society – as its object and thus totality as its focus. The focus on 'totality' rather than 'generality' opens up the possibility of an overarching critique. Boltanski calls this type of critique 'metacritique', in order to distinguish it from everyday kinds of critique. *On Critique* outlines a metacritical framework that aims to reconcile the notion of comprehensive 'totality' with the internal perspective proper to more actor-focused sociology. By bringing these elements together

Boltanski is attentive to the tacit requirements characteristic of critical theories.

As Boltanski points out, any critical theory is subject to a dual demand. On the one hand, in order to avoid the charge of rootless utopianism it needs to present itself as an extension of the struggles which actors themselves are engaged in. On the other hand, it needs to distance itself from these local forms of critique in order to avoid merely expressing a specific set of moral dispositions. This demand places sociology in a complex relation with the social order that is the object of critique. In this regard the critical sociology of Bourdieu occupies a position of complex exteriority – its unmasking external critique is articulated by sociologists who are also actors within this same social order. In contrast, the pragmatic sociology of critique occupies a position of interiority with regard to the practices it studies. With *On Critique* Boltanski seeks to regain the possibility of an overarching critique while nonetheless adhering to the actor's point of view. In other words, Boltanski proposes a metacritical perspective that stands in a relation of complex interiority to the totality of the social order. This perspective should allow for critique to fulfill its proper social function: rendering the reality of domination unacceptable.

The role of institutions – reality and world

In order to ground the metacritical program in the sphere of everyday life, Boltanski pays close attention to the role and power of institutions. In his view, the main function of institutions is to 'repair' reality. Institutions repair the damage done by recurring uncertainty and subsequent unease about 'what is', and about what is valid (Boltanski 2011: 57). Within Boltanski's pragmatic understanding of action, uncertainty is at the heart of all problematic situations, regardless of how mundane they appear to be. The primary role of institutions is to help actors cope with the radical uncertainty that underlies human existence. For Boltanski, radical uncertainty is evident in all the situations where choices need to be made or a course of action determined. As the source of everyday unease, radical uncertainty is unspectacularly common. Because of the mundane charac-

ter of these anxieties, the labor of institutions is ceaseless and indispensable. Institutions, whether governmental, scientific, or ecclesial, constantly work to determine 'the whatness of what is'² through the institutionalization of reality-tests (Boltanski 2011: 55). Examples of such tests fall into the categories of risk-analysis, school examination, legal inquiry or the codification of laboratory experiments. In each of these cases certain tests serve to determine what 'really is the case'. Everyday critique relates to the question of applicability or justification of the rules for such tests; for example, the fairness of school exams, the truthfulness of legal statements, or the purity of data-sets are being challenged on a regular basis. However, it is only through the development of a metacritical framework that the power of institutions becomes clear. In this context Boltanski makes an interesting distinction between 'reality' (the whatness of what is) and 'world' (everything that happens). By way of stressing the role of reality-tests in the constitution of reality Boltanski identifies the sources of critique. Reality-tests operate in situations where uncertainty threatens the ordering of reality; they are the extensions of institutional repair. As Boltanski points out, uncertainty arises from the gap between reality and world; i.e. from the 'as yet undetermined'. This *aporia* is ultimately the source of all critique. Boltanski underlines that it would be wrong to consider institutions as inherently malignant. Indeed, without the ordering of reality by institutions there would be no shared reality to speak of. It is only when reality becomes impervious to critique – when it becomes total – that the darker sides of institutions express themselves.

Domination today – management and change

The existence of powerful institutions does not by itself imply a state of domination. After all, institutions need to be powerful in order to fulfill their stabilizing function. However, when people no longer have the power to challenge reality, they exist within a state of domination. This actor-oriented definition of domination allows Boltanski to uncover the structure of current forms of domination. He does this by contrasting it with a more easily recognizable form, the archetype of which is the totalitarian state. This 'simple' form of domination is characterized by the strong ri-

gidity of reality. Institutions within this frame endeavor to limit change to a minimum, or otherwise to render it invisible. In contrast to this, Boltanski points out that the current forms of domination, those that he calls ‘complex’ or ‘managerial’, thrive on perpetual change. Moreover, this new constellation results in the diffusion and inclusion of critique.

‘It is therefore precisely the establishment of a new kind of relationship between institutions and critique and, in a sense, the incorporation of critique into the routines of social life that characterizes these systems.’ (Boltanski 2011: 127)

Reality under complex domination has become plastic; it is continuously molded in order to accommodate nearly all challenges. Under complex domination reality stretches to envelop the world, becoming total. This effectively disables any form of critique, because critique relies on the ontological distinction between reality and world; it relies on the categorical split between the ‘what of what is’ and ‘that what is’.

‘*Reality* is no longer anything but what it is, whether one likes it or not – that is to say, what inevitable is and cannot be other than such. To be what it is, and incapable of being otherwise, is indeed the hallmark of the world. But with the essential difference, by which it is precisely distinguished from reality, that we do not know the world and cannot know it, at least as a totality.’ (Boltanski 2011: 131)

One can easily recognize the role that science plays in closing the gap between reality and world. Reality has become the knowable totality of existence. In its sweeping claim there is an echo here of Adorno and Horkheimer’s 1947 *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Unlike his German predecessors, however, Boltanski is somewhat more optimistic about opening up new possibilities for critique by way of the social sciences. Boltanski’s emphasis on the social scientists’ position of complex interiority keeps him from relapsing into fatalism. By adhering to the actor’s point of view, Boltanski can claim that domination is not distributed equally. There exists, in his view, an international elite for whom reality is not as total as for the rest, and whose members could be considered to form a dominant ‘class’; a class that is dominant because of its privileged relation to reality. What is

distinctive is how the members of this class are exploiting what Boltanski identifies as the hermeneutic contradiction inherent in institutions. This contradiction is rooted in the difficult relationship between institutional language and the situations in which it is realized (Boltanski 2011: 87) – e.g. the monolithic language of reality and truth of the natural sciences in connection to the scientific practices of ‘discovery’³. On the one hand, reality is fundamentally real, while on the other hand it is continuously constructed. Because the elites in question all hold positions within society that determine the rules for the reality-tests that constitute reality, they themselves are capable of taking a relativistic attitude towards reality. They can take liberties which they themselves, and many others similarly placed, deem appropriate to someone of their position. They are the high-rolling traders of the world’s financial districts, scientists massaging research data, lawyers redefining perjury, or politicians still fighting the war on terror; they can break the rule while claiming to remain faithful to the spirit of it. It is part of their *métier* to take liberties with reality; it is part of the call for innovation and creativity.⁴ For the rest of society which has to abide by the rules, reality is just what it is; painfully real. This state of affairs thus contains the asymmetric power relations that constitute complex domination. There are the majority of those whom are powerless to challenge reality, while minority elites have the power to bend the rules of this very same reality. Moreover, in keeping with the status accorded to institutions, the majority of persons are ‘realists’ – accepting reality for what it is. Hence, if sociology aims at emancipation it needs to familiarize ordinary actors with the hermeneutic contradiction and the power asymmetries it facilitates (Boltanski 2011: 154-155).

Conclusion – metacritique, emancipation and the impossibility of sociology

Throughout *On Critique* Boltanski expresses an implicit disdain for the type of sociology that mainly consists of gathering data and creating statistics. These sociological practices are weighed and found wanting – these most common forms of sociology are ‘mere’ extensions of institutional attempts to manage reality. This observation raises the question of what

remains of the scientific project of sociology. Does a metacritical framework undermine ‘normal’ sociological research? Boltanski briefly addresses this issue at the end of his work, by pointing out that sociology (in particular critically oriented sociology) has something impossible about it – an impossibility that makes it worth doing (Boltanski 2011: 159). The impossibility of sociology lies in the fact that reality ‘does not hold’, at least as long as there is a remainder of uncertainty. Sociology is tied to an impossible object – real and constructed, solid yet ephemeral. According to Boltanski the emancipatory role of (meta)critical sociologies is inextricably tied to the nature of this unstable object:

‘Their role is precisely to help society – that is, people, the people that are called ‘ordinary’ – deliberately maintain themselves in the state of constant imbalance in the absence of which, as the direst prophecies announce, domination would in fact seize hold of everything.’ (Boltanski 2011: 160)

Everyone would need to get used to living with the hermeneutic contradictions that penetrate everyday existence. Boltanski maintains that sociology can provide material for political figures in which uncertainty and institutional fragility are cherished within social reality – figures in which the *aporia* between reality and world is considered highly valuable (Boltanski 2011: 155-156). With his *précis* for a sociology of emancipation Boltanski raises the stakes for sociology (and social philosophy). The main point of criticism to be leveled against the work is its near complete lack of concrete examples. This makes it unclear how one would, for example, ‘see the totality from the actor’s point of view’. To the possible question of what remains of the scientific project of sociology it can be answered: far from abandoning the scientific project, Boltanski complicates and enriches the categories by which its work is carried out. With *On Critique* he unearths the Enlightenment potential for emancipation originally inherent to scientific research. As a work in philosophical sociology it is sketchy at times and it suffers from the sociologist’s habit of deferring certain issues to further research, yet overall the echo of its emancipatory calling reverberates long after the first read.

Nathan Slangen is research Master student at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen.

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¹ Most notably: Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot [1996], *On Justification – Economies of Worth*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

² ‘ce qu’il en est de ce qui est’.

³ Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot acknowledge their indebtedness to the work of Bruno Latour and Michal Callon in the preface of *On Justification* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 20].

⁴ This is the result of ideological changes originating in the revolts of 1968, a thesis developed at length by Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* [London: Verso, 2007].