

# **BOLTANSKI: A SOCIOLOGY OF ACTION REGIMES, POLITICS, WORLDS AND GRAMMAR.**

## **I. The research program of Boltanski's sociology.**

Summarizing Luc Boltanski's sociology is no easy task. It is not easy first of all because my English may not be entirely up to the task, for which I want to apologize in advance. Secondly, it is not easy because Boltanski's vocabulary is at first sight rather strange, and very different in any case from what I would call the "classical vocabulary of sociology". Thirdly, it is not an easy task because it is a sociology which has many different implications, so that it is not always clear what should be considered to be most important in the work of Boltanski and his co-writers.

Probably the best what to introduce the lecture is to say there are different layers in Luc Boltanski's work. There are different layers because there are different projects.

1. The first layer is what I would call the work's **epistemological immanentism**. Indeed Boltanski opposes "critical sociology" and "sociology of critique". Critical sociology can be said to correspond to the work of Bourdieu and his followers. If we describe this sociology in a very sketchy way, as Boltanski himself does in his polemical texts, we can say that the purpose of the sociologist is to explain to people the real meaning of what they do. Or better still, because it is not really a question of "meaning" from this point of view, the task of the sociologist is to explain to people the causal mechanisms that make sense of what they do. Those mechanisms are structured fields and habitus produced through socialization. The rules that govern the fields organize competition for symbolic retributions and the "habitus" could perhaps be described (in my formulation) as some kind of unconscious weapon that will be used differently by the dominant and the dominated. One could even say that it will decide who will be in a dominant position or otherwise.

In this kind of sociology, at least in the way it is seen by Boltanski (and I tend to share his view), the sociologist knows more about the actors than the actors themselves. Indeed when the actors think they behave on the basis of authentic desires, preferences, evaluations, the sociologist can always trace those mental states back to some habitus formation, to unconscious strategies, and ultimately to the structures of the field. For instance, I am quite sure that I like Beethoven because his music is very powerful, lying somewhere between the classical harmonies of Mozart and Haydn and the sometimes tiring excesses of romanticism. But in reality I like Beethoven because I am driven by my desire for distinction which tells me that, in the "petit bourgeois" academic world where I live, liking Beethoven is a necessity to be valuable. I just try unconsciously to follow the rules of the field. But as my semi-proletarian habitus did not prepare me to *naturally* appreciate Beethoven, I cannot feel that the metallic sound of Herbert von Karajan – that was much favoured when I was young – is now desperately out of fashion.

Naturally this example is a caricature of a Bourdieu-like analysis but we can assume that it describes accurately enough what most Bourdieu's followers remember of his theories -- it is a rather common *operationalization* of his concepts. Of course we know the main objection to that description. The objection is this: if I am driven by my habitus when I think I authentically feel, reason, desire, argue, then what protects the sociologist from being driven by his own habitus when he is describing mine? On what grounds can he claim that he has a privileged access to what unconsciously determines me? We could even go further and

ask: if nothing can be authentically valued because everything is the product of a causal mechanism, then on what grounds can any critique of anything ever be justified?

But the interesting thing about Boltanski's proposal is that it brings the question back to an empirical matter: this kind of treatment of arguments *is not*, as Bourdieu wrongly holds, the privilege of the sociologist. Disqualifying a belief, an argument, or a preference on the grounds it is unconsciously determined by wrong causal mechanisms, or because it is in fact a cover for some disguised interests, **is a very common feature of the discourse of the actors themselves**. When an atheist exchanges ideas, for instance with a religious person, he may of course try to demonstrate that the existence of an almighty god is rationally implausible. But he may just as well try to explain to his interlocutor that his own belief in god is just a wrongly caused belief. This supposed irrational belief may be caused by the fact that he is afraid of death, by a process of socialization that imposed on him things which he cannot get rid of, or by an irresistible desire to see some global meaning or some global justice in the world.

This is the subtlety of Boltanski's position: when we carefully observe real controversies in the social world, we discover that ordinary people are perfectly able to behave like bourdieusian sociologists. They are able to recognize the interests at stake behind an argument, or even to trace it back to some habitus, naturally without invoking the term Bourdieu was giving to the mechanism. So, there is nothing especially "sociological" in the perspective of critical sociology. Boltanski's proposal is that we should change our focus: instead of a *critical sociology*, what we need is a *sociology of critique*, in fact an empirical description of the way controversies are taking place, the way people propose justifications and criticize the justifications of others, the way some justifications "win" or "lose," and the way people at the end agree on a result or remain in dispute. That sociology of critique is the subject of his well-known book written with Laurent Thevenot, "*On Justification*".

This move from Bourdieu to Boltanski seems to me to be epistemological in nature because it changes the perspective of the sociologist. The social scientist is no longer supposed to have any kind of privileged access to some critical point of view. The critique is no longer a way of making sense of social structures and human behaviour. It is reintegrated within the social world and becomes in itself an **object of empirical investigation**. This is probably the core meaning of the famous sentence, "taking justifications seriously." We could say, succinctly, that the project of Bourdieusian sociology was to "explain away" people's justifications and that his weapon for doing this was sociological critique. From the boltanskian perspective, we have in some sense to take those justifications at face value and try to show them in operation, highlighting the ways they are used, their effects, their *grammar*. In the second part of my lecture, I would like to outline the concepts which Boltanski and Thevenot use for such a description. But before this, I must say a few words on the other layers contained within Boltanski's sociology.

**2.** The second layer, or to say this better, the second main feature of Boltanski's sociology, is what I could call its **ontological pluralism**. What does it mean? The whole redescription of the role of critique is not subordinated to any kind of global sociology. Boltanski does not seek to replace an ontological description of social action based on interests, habitus and fields by another ontology that would rest on justifications and moral beliefs. Nor does he simply say that a "true" ontology would attribute causal effectiveness both to interests and moral facts. His position is rather that human action is able to follow different paths according to the circumstances. So the unit of analysis for the sociologist is neither the individual nor the

whole. Rather, it is the *situation*. Different situations will induce what he calls different *regimes of action*. According to the regime of action which prevails in a given situation, different kinds of capacities inherent in human beings will be mobilized.

To distinguish clearly between the various regimes of action, Boltanski and Thevenot propose a double grid:

- First, are we in a situation characterized by peace or conflict?
- Second, are we in a situation where equivalence matters between people and things, or is this not the case?

The first criterion is easy to understand: a war, but also a marital quarrel, a strike, or a trial, and so on, pertain to regimes of dispute. A night out with one's partner is normally within the regime of peace. But such is also the case of an ordinary day at work, a lecture, and so on. So, peace characterizes situations where people are in agreement (about the definition of the situation itself and the way things are happening). By contrast, dispute characterizes situations in which people disagree.

The second criterion is a bit trickier. "Equivalence" describes situations where things and people are compared or measured on the basis of some criterion. "Non-equivalence" characterizes situations where this comparison or measurement is not relevant. For instance, an exam or a sporting event is typically a situation of "equivalence": people are ranked according to some criteria and receive gratifications in relation to the way they perform. Most situations at work are situations of "equivalence". Now, a fight in the street is normally a situation "outside equivalence": there are no rules to limit what is allowed or not. So is also a relationship of care or love between two people: the partners will not compare what they give and what they receive from each other. Should they begin to do so, and start to calculate, then the nature of the situation would change immediately and probably would turn into a dispute. I think we could sum this up by saying that "equivalence" is what makes situations "accountable".

If we cross the two criteria, then we have a grid that can probably be applied to any situation involving interaction between people. Of course it will not lead to a *complete description* of this situation, and the two criteria will leave many dimensions of human action outside their scope. But it appears to be an interesting double focus to begin with. So, Boltanski proposes the following description:

a) *Peace + Equivalence* is what he calls "*paix en justesse*," that is to say normal routinized situations.

b) *Peace outside equivalence* is what he calls "*paix en amour*": when he says "*amour*" he does not mean "erotic" love but rather those kinds of situation where peace is not accountable, like parental love or mystic love, or perfect friendship, and so on. He refers to the old Greek term "agape" to characterize those kinds of situations.

c) *Dispute + equivalence* is what he calls "*dispute en justice*" Any situation where there is at the same time disagreement but also accountability may be so characterized. As we submitted earlier, it could be a trial, a competition, an exam, and so on, that is to say any situation where there is at the same time a dispute about retribution and some kind of criterion that links retribution to a form of investment.

d) *Dispute outside equivalence* is simply violence. It may be physical or symbolic violence. Those situations arise when there is no proportionality rule that limits the use of strength.

The most important part of Boltanski's world is dedicated to the regime of action he calls "dispute en justice." The main empirical object of Boltanski – though not the only one – is **justification**. Of course we understand easily enough that there is no need for justification if we are in peace or violence. For justification to be relevant we need both dispute and equivalence. I will return to this later, but before I do so I would like to tackle the third layer of his work.

**3.** The third feature of Boltanski's sociology is its **ontological non-determinism**. The central characteristic concept of this feature is the concept of "test". Here is his definition of the "test" in the official English translation of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005): "*The test is always a test of strength. That is to say, it is an event during which beings, in pitting themselves against one another (think of an arm-wrestling match between two people, or the confrontation between a fisherman and the trout that seeks to elude him), reveal what they are capable of and, more profoundly, what they are made of. But when the situation is subject to justificatory constraints, and when the protagonists judge that these constraints are being genuinely respected, the test of strength will be regarded as legitimate*" (2005: 31).

This quotation requires further comments because we are here, in my opinion, at the very heart of Boltanski's perspective.

- First, we should notice the proximity of this concept to the notion of justification with which I began. Interestingly, this notion of justification was elaborated at the end of the eighties and published in a book, *On Justification*, that deals mainly with micro-interactions. But the quotation above is extracted from *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, a book published ten years later and dealing with tests at "macro-levels" where the entities are very "big" concepts, like capitalism and its ideology (its "spirit").
- Second, there is a very special flavour to the French word "épreuve" that makes it difficult to translate into English, because "épreuve" is most often used in the sense of "adversity". So the French word conveys almost unavoidably both meanings at the same time and although we very often use in French the word "test," it seems difficult to equalize "test" with "épreuve."
- So, we see that here the word "épreuve" is not only tailored to help making sense of situations of dispute. It is probably the most central concept in Boltanski's sociology, which is why his sociology is sometimes called "sociologie des épreuves". To take a step further and see what is at stake in this concept, I suggest we consider another quotation, from a passage that is very close in the book to the one above: "*The notion of the test breaks with a narrowly deterministic conception of the social, whether based on the omnipotence of structures or, in a culturalist perspective, the domination of internalized norms. From the viewpoint of action, it puts the emphasis on the various degrees of uncertainty haunting situations in social life*" (2005: 30).

If we sum up the first three points (epistemic immanentism, ontological pluralism and ontological non-determinism), we are left with a description of the social world that we could sketch in the following way. Social life is made of situations of peace and situations of

conflict, or dispute. The normal course of events is a routinized kind of social life where peaceful and accountable situations prevail. If this were not the case, we would live in something like a chaotic universe. This is close, I think, to what Anthony Giddens calls “ontological security.” But this normal course of events is often interrupted by phases where things are questioned and those situations of test introduce an irreducible indeterminacy within the social: they break the chain of causality. It is impossible to achieve complete social determinism because such determinism would suppose that we know what people are made of and **that we are able to know only through the test itself.**

#### 4. I shall now proceed on with the fourth feature of Boltanski’s sociology, its **ethical pluralism.**

This is probably the most well-known layer of the Boltanskian project because it introduces us to the famous concepts of polities and worlds. But I would like to be clear on one point: when I speak of “ethical pluralism,” I do not speak of course of the position of the sociologist himself. Passing from critical sociology to a sociology of critique, the social scientist implicitly commits himself to a position of axiological neutrality. “Ethical pluralism” is then a feature of the observed society, and surely not something that characterizes the position of the observer.

In the first quotation above, we noted that any test is a test of strength. But the author adds that, “*when the situation is subject to justificatory constraints, and when the protagonists judge that these constraints are being genuinely respected, the test of strength will be regarded as legitimate*” (2005: 31). So, just as there is a difference between dispute in violence and dispute in justice, there is a difference between the two kinds of tests. What is it that differentiates the two? The difference simply lies in the fact that the protagonists accept and respect constraints on the use of strength. That is the very operation of **justification**. Justification is, for Boltanski, an “*ascent to generality*” (I failed to find the exact English translation but it must not be very different). This means that every actor in the test considers that he must put forward an argument that might *convince his contradictor*. If he does not offer such an argument, we leave the situation of a “test of justification” and fall back on the case of a “pure test of strength.”

But what is interesting about Boltanski’s proposal is that he holds that this “ascent to generality” may take different paths. This is because there are different kinds of “principles” that people can invoke to try to win the test. There are different forms of the “common good” that can serve as criteria to assess the dispute. Here it is important to notice that those forms of the common good, those principles of justice, are not *values* in the canonical sense of the term in sociology. Indeed “values” are some kind of principles to which people can *adhere*. So, in classical sociology, values are an attribute of *actors*. The “principles” of justice in Boltanski’s sense are various definitions of the “common good,” available in the philosophical background of a society, that *any person* can try to mobilize according to the situation. Let us not forget that the “basic core” of Boltanski’s social ontology is neither the individual nor the social whole but the *situation*. In various situations people can mobilize various principles. People involved in a dispute can also agree or disagree according to what is the relevant principle. So there is not *one form* of the common good in a society but possibly many. How many forms, and what they are, are for Boltanski pure empirical questions that must be investigated by the sociologist and that vary from one society to another.

To find out what there is behind this idea of ethical pluralism, perhaps the best way is to illustrate it by some concrete examples. There is one, which I invented in front of my students for pedagogical purposes, that could be useful here. Let us imagine the routine situation in which a postman distributes the mail every day. This is typically an ordinary situation of peace (“*paix en justesse*”). It is a situation of peace because in normal situations problems do not arise in the distribution of mail. Also, it is a typical situation of equivalence: each letter or package must go into the right mailing box according to the indications written on it. Now let us imagine an incident: the postman has to distribute a registered parcel to a man who is not at home. His wife is, but the rules of mail service impose that the mail should be delivered only to the person it is destined for, so that it cannot be delivered to the wife. Yet the wife claims the mail. The postman justifies his decision by the rules of the mail service. The woman tries to ascend to a more general argument, which is that mail *must* be delivered, which is indeed part of the definition of a mail service. Then the postman rejoins by taking a step further and referring to the *secret nature* of mail, as a rule meant to ensure the protection of privacy. It is difficult for the wife to go higher than this. But she may switch to another justification register and say: “*Well, John, what is the matter with you today? Why make such a fuss for that stupid letter? Did you quarrel with your wife this morning?*” In the language of Boltanski, the woman’s argumentative move can be described as a shift from one form of common good to another: from a “civic” form of common good, characterized by the reference to official rules and to collective actors, to a “domestic” form of common good, characterized by the reference to tradition and loyalty. Boltanski would say that the woman tries to redefine the situation in terms of the “domestic polity.”

The concept of “polity” is a central one in the study of processes of justification. By “polity,” Boltanski means what we could call an “argumentative kit” articulated around a definite form of the common good. Each form of the common good is a “principle” of political philosophy available in the background of a definite society. How many polities there are, and which ones, is a matter of empirical investigation, and this may be different for any society. Boltanski limits his own ambition to contemporary France and within those limits he perceives six “polities”:

- The *civic polity*, articulated around the idea that the collective prevails. The civic polity mobilizes the registers of representativeness, legality, officialdom.
- The *domestic polity*, which has as its core principle the idea of tradition, and which mobilizes the registers of loyalty, friendship, family, and so on.
- The *market polity*, which is based on the principle of competition and articulates ideas of interest, richness and the importance of money.
- The *polity of fame*, which rests on the central principle that “reality is what people think it is,” and which capitalizes on core ideas such as opinion, glory, social recognition...
- The *industrial polity*, which is articulated around the principles of efficacy and performance. The winner in that polity is the most efficient person.
- The *inspired polity*, built on the principle of creativeness.

In the second part of the lecture I shall further characterize these “polities,” as Boltanski calls them. Before this, I would like to draw your attention to some points that have to be noticed.

- Again, there is no easy translation for the French word “cité,” which can mean either “polity,” “town” or “city.” I found no dictionary that offered “polity” as a possible translation but this meaning is indeed present in our French philosophico-political language -- when we say, for instance, “*être engagé dans la cité.*” Moreover, the word “citizen” (*citoyen*) derives from that meaning.
- The various principles that animate the “polities” must be considered again as potentially usable by any person according to the situation. They do not consist in personal values as they could be determined let us say by socialization, but rather in argumentative registers, that may be mastered differently by different persons but that anyone can try to mobilize in order to redefine the situation in a more favourable way. This is what the woman is doing in the example above: seeing that there is no way she can win the contest within the civic polity, she tries to draw the postman into the domestic polity where the situation is much more favourable to her, because within the domestic polity general legal rules simply *do not have any currency*.
- This “ethical pluralism” is an *empirical pluralism*: what is at stake is not the moral principles of the sociologist but the moral principles that are available within a definite society and that can be used by its members. From Boltanski’s viewpoint, the six polities above do describe the French society. Further, we can reasonably say that they constitute a rather good description of west-European principles of justice.
- Those principles are entirely situated within the context of the “test of justification.” Therefore, they make no claims in terms of a global sociology. Even if it is very deeply articulated, the model of the “polities” is not meant to be generalized to other regimes of action. It addresses only the questions of public justification and public critique.
- It is very interesting that this *empirical* ethical pluralism was born only a few years after the *normative* ethical pluralism of Michael Walzer, as presented in his *Spheres of Justice*. We must remember that *Spheres of Justice* was published in 1983, when Boltanski and Thevenot were conceiving the first intuitions of *On Justification*. The French authors indicate that they did not know anything of “spheres of justice” when writing the first draft of their own work. Besides, Walzer was not known in France at that time, except by a few specialists. *Sphere of Justice* was anyway not translated into French before 1997. This unintentional convergence is then interesting because it allows us to apprehend a global change of flavour within western political philosophy at that moment. Pluralism seems to have appeared simultaneously within a normative philosophy of justice in the United States and within an empirical sociology of justice in France. Now, we must add that the pluralisms of Walzer and that of Boltanski and Thevenot, although they share an indisputable common flavour, are significantly different in nature. From Walzer’s position, pluralism is a characteristic of goods: each good has its own sphere and each has to be distributed according to its own criterion. Boltanski’s pluralism, as I have said, has to do with the cohabitation of various registers of justification which people may mobilize according to the situation. Yet no situation, as we have seen with the example of the mail, naturally imposes its own “polity.” People’s main competence as far as justice is concerned is indeed their ability to shift from one polity to another and to try to redefine the situation.

## II. The model of polities and worlds.

1. Having pinpointed what constitutes, in my view, the four main characteristics of Boltanski's sociology (epistemological immanentism, ontological pluralism, ontological non-determinism and ethical pluralism), I suggest we further explore the model of "polities" that constitutes the core of *On Justification* and that will again be used afterwards in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

A "polity" is not just a general principle or a register of justification. To be characterized as a polity, all constructions must satisfy a certain number of "axioms." We could call this a "grammar of justification," following the proposal made by Bruno Frère. It seems indeed rather close to the principle of a grammar that, at the same time, empirically describes the rules that people effectively follow when using a language and, on the other hand, proposes some normative generalizations in order to make those effective uses more coherent.

The first axiom is that of "*common humanity*." This axiom simply says that no principle-based construction can be considered as a "polity" if it conceives of some human beings as lying outside of mankind. It is not always self-evident whether this axiom (like the others) is just formalizing the empirical fact that no public justification can hold if it does not respect it or if the axiom introduces a normative distinction between legitimate and illegitimate constructions. A cue is given by the way Boltanski and Thevenot treat the problem of the "eugenist polity" imagined by the Nazis and that failed. They do not simply say that a "eugenist polity" would have been illegitimate. They also say, in some sense, that it was *impossible*: because it was impossible to *really* consider categories of people like Jews as non-human while at the same time having them do things that are essentially human, like orchestral music for instance. Here we have to remember that, in the model of the polity, violence is left out of consideration. We are entirely within the process of public justification. But the authors are not clear about the consequences entailed. Does it mean that Nazism as a political system was condemned to fail or just that it could not give birth to a stabilized system of public justification? And what are the empirical social consequences of the failure of public justifiability for any social system? Here, we touch upon what may well be a deliberate limitation of the model of polities that concerns only one regime of action. But at the same time Boltanski always accepts this limitation, saying that the model fits the object and nothing more. It is perfectly suited for the study of public controversies. It does not claim to account for all social situations.

The second axiom (I do not follow exactly the order of the book) is the necessity of *two ordered states*. What does this mean? The core of justification is the question of distribution principles. In other words, each person may have to confront at least two possible situations: she wins or she loses. In the very simple example of the postman, there are exactly two states: the case where the woman gets the mail and the case where she does not. It is important to grasp that, within such "justice disputes," two kinds of resources are distributed: objects (here the mail) but also, and mainly, the worth of persons (who "wins" and who "loses," who is worthy and who is not). In the absence of at least two ordered states, there would be no disputes and no need for justification. It would look like the Marx's "abundance society," say, and for that reason Boltanski and Thevenot call this hypothetical situation an "Eden."

The third axiom is that of *common dignity*. This means that nobody is in principle excluded from the test and that the result of the test is never completely definitive. If you are a tennis woman and you win a title, the test makes you the "worthiest" but only for a while. The next



year, you may decide to take part in the same competition and you may lose it. If you are a murderer and you are judged guilty, you lose the test, but not necessarily for the term of your natural life: after a time (which may be long, so long that you will never see it) you become again an “ordinary person” with a “second chance.” The common dignity implies, for instance, that a society that would consider some persons as definitely less worthy than others could not be analysed through the model of “polities.” This leads the authors to suggest that the domestic polity is in some way on the border of the model because the worth of the persons in the domestic polity is given by tradition and is difficult to re-evaluate. We could take the feudal model of justice as paradigmatic of the “domestic polity,” for instance.

Taken together, axioms 2 and 3 imply a difficulty: if nobody’s worth is “ascribed,” to borrow a term from classical sociology, and if there must be place for different worths, how will those different worths be attributed? The axiom that serves for this is the *investment axiom*. The principle of investment is that to be worthy in one “polity” always implies renouncing one’s worth in one or more other polities. For instance, in the example of the postman, the wife cannot win as long as the situation is defined in terms of “civics”. So she introduces the register of “domesticity” which is much more interesting for her. Why? Because behaving “officially” is worthless in the domestic polity. The rules of the mail service will be of no help to the postman confronted to that register of justification. He is “worthy” within the civic polity only because he speaks not in his own name but on behalf of “official authorities,” in the name of “the law,” in the name of the “rules.” Achieving worthiness through civics supposes that you drop all signs of singularity: you give up being a singular individual linked to other singular individuals, and in that, you renounce worthiness in the domestic world.

With this investment axiom, we see once again how close this conception of justice is to the normative conceptions of Walzer. For, Walzer too, there is a contradiction between the spheres: no good in a complex society may be dominant, that is to say, no good may be able to purchase all others. A just society in that conception is a society where inequalities tend to compensate for each other across the spheres because some kinds of exchanges are “blocked”: you cannot purchase love or political power with money. Love is only legitimately attributed through love (personal inclination) and political power can only be legitimately attributed through your ability to convince your fellow-citizens. For that very reason, Walzer judges that his own society, the United States, is in some sense tyrannical because there is much too much purchase power attributed to money.

In the case of Boltanski and Thevenot, the problem is again not the normative definition of a “just society” but an accurate description of how people justify themselves in public disputes and what kind of justification is able to stop the dispute and produce agreement.

2. At this point, it is necessary to introduce the notion of “world,” which was implicitly present almost from the beginning of my exposition but was not explicitly mentioned. The world is nothing else than a “polity in concrete situation.” While the notion of “polity” points to the principles and axioms that organize the dispute, the concept of world insists on the *real situation*. If I could suggest some disputable analogy, I would say that the “polity” is to the “world” what grammar is to an actual conversation. So, there are as many worlds as there are “polities” but the world implies the presence of certain objects, certain kinds of people and so on. We should add that, for instance, a daydream is typically an object of the world of inspiration whereas a chronometer is typically an object of the industrial world. A family portrait is more typically an object of the domestic world and a banknote an object pertaining to the market world. But all this cannot be taken simply at face value. For instance, if the

banknote is devotedly kept in a family display cabinet because it is the first one won by the founding ancestor of the family, then we can surely infer that it is an object of the domestic world. On the contrary, if the family portrait is reproduced and sold to tourists, it becomes an object of the market world. And so on. But even with this proviso, objects contribute to an assessment of the plausibility of certain worlds rather than others. For instance, in the case of the postman, the uniform is a powerful sign of the world where the dispute takes place. If the woman can convince the postman that he should drop it and sit down in the kitchen to take a cup of tea while they are speaking, the “reality” of the domestic world becomes much more salient.

Worlds are not only characterized by objects but also by some kinds of persons. A deputy-mayor is typically a person from the civic world and a CEO is typically a person from the market world. Rather than persons, Boltanski and Thevenot use the word “beings,” because it may include other kinds of beings as well. We could say for instance that the family cat is a being from the domestic world, while a fairy is a being from the world of inspiration. So, although I mainly insist on “polities” because they are the core of the conceptual frame behind justification, real justification takes place within worlds replete with different kinds of typical devices and beings. Each world is also characterized by its own rule of investment, its own form of dignity and so on. They are “metaphysics,” but contrary to what happens in critical sociology, those metaphysics are constructions used by the persons themselves, not products of the sociologist. For Boltanski and Thevenot, this ability to live within worlds, and mainly to travel *between* the worlds, is a central competence of the actors involved in all kinds of disputes about justice.

**3.** Where do principles, polities and worlds come from? Boltanski always insists that his description of the polities is purely empirical. Not every society gives the same importance to processes of public justification. And the relevant forms of the “common good” that can arbitrate between claims inside the process of justification may vary deeply from one society to another. Indeed, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello discover a seventh polity, the “polity of project,” that seems to them not reducible to the other six which were described ten years before in *On Justification*. I will not speak of this seventh polity here, but it shows that his description must be considered neither as a general theory nor as being complete. Nevertheless, he considers that each polity has deep roots in the politico-philosophical background of the society where it is available. Or, to say this maybe in a more neutral way, each polity has received a “canonical expression” in a given political philosophy. He then traces back each of them to the work he considers as the most canonical expression of it. So, the *inspired polity* is for him best expressed in St Augustine’s work, the *City of God*. The *domestic polity* is traced back to the work of Bossuet. The *market polity* can be seen in *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith. The *civic polity* is to be found in *The Social Contract* by Rousseau. He links the *polity of fame* to Hobbes and the *industrial polity* to the work of the French social reformist Saint Simon.

I cannot discuss at length the relevance of each of the chosen books when it comes to expressing a polity. But it indicates that the “grammar of justice dispute” is not just a matter of empirical observation of society here and now. It is also embedded in the various political traditions that irrigate the French society. So the fact of pluralism is not just an expression of late modernity, as this has been conceived by some contemporary sociologists. Rather, it is the result of an accumulation of layers of political philosophies throughout history. Perhaps this ought to be developed further, which I might do during question time if you are interested. But this point helps us to understand the turn taken by Boltanski’s sociology

between *On Justification* and *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which was published ten years later.

### III. Boltanski and Ideology: The New Spirit of Capitalism.

1. Some people have contended that Boltanski, in the book he published in 1999 with Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, left his own epistemological principles aside because he reintroduced some kind of a critical position. However, I think this reproach is misleading. The undoubtedly more critical tone of this book, when compared to those of the past ten years, is not “critical” in the sense he himself attributes to Bourdieu: the “moral stance” taken by the authors against the evolution of capitalism is in no way an attempt to “explain away” the ideological beliefs of ordinary people. On the contrary, Boltanski and Chiapello try to document carefully how the process of the critique of capitalism has always been turned at the end into some kind of ideological support *as an extension of their model of politics and world and still taking seriously the justifications of the actors*. I will not develop the whole story here, for this would be long and probably tedious, and I just intend to suggest briefly in what sense Boltanski and Chiapello, in their book, describe the **ideology** of capitalism.

2. Two passages in the introduction, which deserve to be quoted at some length, help us to make it clear what is at stake in the book.

The first is located at very beginning of the introduction and exposes the subject of the book.

(a) *[This book] is not merely descriptive, but proposes, by way of this historical example, a more general theoretical framework for understanding the way in which the ideologies associated with economic activity are altered. We stipulate that the term “ideology” is to be construed here not in the reductionist sense to which it has often been reduced in the Marxist vulgate – that is to say, a moralizing discourse intended to conceal material interests, which is constantly contradicted by practice – but as developed, for example, in the work of Louis Dumont: a set of shared beliefs inscribed in institutions, bound up with actions, and hence anchored in reality”* (2005: 3)

The second quotation occurs just a few pages later, when Boltanski and Chiapello present their first approach to the notion of the “Spirit of Capitalism.”

(b) *“The spirit of capitalism is precisely the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it. The justifications, whether general or practical, local or global, expressed in terms of virtue or justice, support the performance of more or less unpleasant tasks and, more generally, adherence to a lifestyle conducive to the capitalist order. In this instance, we may indeed speak of a dominant ideology, so long as we stop regarding it as a mere subterfuge by the dominant to ensure the consent of the dominated and acknowledge that a majority of those involved – the strong as well as the weak – rely on these schemas in order to represent to themselves the operation, benefits and constraints of the order in which they find themselves immersed”* (2005: 10-11).

3. After having read these two quotations, can we conclude that Boltanski has betrayed his own research program? In my opinion, definitely not. I will just conclude this lecture by trying to show very briefly how the four features of this program I referred to in my first part are at the very core of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

• First, it appears from the quotations above that Boltanski and Chiapello abide by the principle of “epistemological immanentism,” as I decided to call their position developed in *On Justification*. There is no question of trying to “unveil” the illusions of the actors – or of the “persons,” to follow their own vocabulary – as the point is rather to describe the way in which public justifiability is also a concern for capitalism as a whole. It is the more so in a “sophisticated” capitalism where what is asked from workers and consumers is not only passive consent but active agreement, not to say enthusiastic commitment.

• As to the second point, that is “ontological pluralism,” *The New Spirit of capitalism* does not depart from the position articulated ten years before. Justification is just one aspect of the global behaviour of the capitalist system. The critique is another aspect and the system can also simply operate a “blind move” -- “*déplacement*”-- that renders it less vulnerable to the critique. This kind of move is clearly what is implied by the change in the nature of power within capitalist firms, where more power goes together with less authority: the systemic constraints that oppose the workers to the clients and that impose continuous competition among workers themselves progressively replaced the power of “bosses” over workers. So, at the individual level as well as the systemic level there is room for different kinds of move and different kinds of agency and we are reminded of the different “regimes of action” although they are not officially named that way.

• The third aspect, “ontological un-determinism,” pervades the book, which describes the way in which the various critiques of capitalism always have ended up as the basis of another form of capitalism. The authors explain how the principle of “autonomy” that was central to the critique of the students’ and workers’ movements in France in the sixties became the basis for a “connexionist” world in which the master word was going to be “flexibility.” We are facing a “trick of history,” as Hegel would have called it: we think we are fighting against capitalism but we are just helping it to adapt to new ideological circumstances and new technological environments. Again, there is no question in this development either of a big “plot” or of causal determinism. Boltanski and Chiapello just point to the empirical fact that, until now, capitalism has always been sufficiently polymorphic to incorporate the seemingly most radical critique that were addressed to it and to use that critique as so many devices to adapt (changing at the same time some apparently very central features of its own nature).

• And the fourth aspect, “ethical pluralism,” is also at the core of a book that shows how the “spirit of capitalism” has profoundly changed, at least twice since the birth of the “social question”: from the very harsh capitalism of the nineteenth century, which was completely immersed in bourgeois values and despised the workers, to the postwar “welfare capitalism” that was indeed a semi-collectivist form of economy with very strong social concerns, and again from that “welfare capitalism” to the “cognitive capitalism,” where knowledge and networks are the two master words and where workers have gained (some) autonomy at the expense of security in all meanings of the term. In describing these evolutions, Boltanski and Chiapello, although they are undoubtedly critical of the most contemporary capitalism, show that this new form can also rely on a “spirit” which entails a form of public justification based on the central idea of “activity.” The ethical pluralism, here, refers more to a diachronic series of different “spirits” than to a synchronic diversity of conceptions of what is just and what has “worth.” But above all it is important to recognize that, inside the same “social formation,” there is room for very different modes of operation and also for very different modes of public justification.

In conclusion, although the object of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is very different from that of *On Justification*, it seems to me that we are confronted to the same research program and that this program can be very useful for understanding empirically, and for shedding light of great subtlety, on the society in which we live.

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