

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (translated by Catherine Porter)

On Justification: Economies of Worth

Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2006, £23.95 pbk, 400 pp.

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At last, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's famous book, *De la justification*, was translated into English and published in 2006. First published in France in 1987 (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1987) and edited in a much-revised form in 1991 (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991), it is an important book that has been the origin of numerous works and debates in French social sciences.

How do people justify their positions? How do two persons reach an agreement? On what basis can we develop criticism? Boltanski and Thévenot's book gives not only precise answers to these questions but also promotes a new way of doing sociology, which gives plain attention to the moral structure of social life. The authors develop their innovative framework at the intersection of social justice theory and pragmatic linguistics. As in Walzer (1983) and in Elster (1992), they focus on the plurality of forms of justice called 'worth'. But contrary to them, orders of worth are not strictly linked to a social sphere (school, love, politics) or to the specificity of a scarce good or of a necessary burden (organ for transplant, first rows in battle, etc.). In any situation, they can equally be invoked by anybody in order to criticize, to justify or to reach an agreement with someone else. Hence it is necessary to study the pragmatics of justification, that is, how people do things with words, ideas, and moral arguments.

The economy of worth has two levels: the polity and the common world. A polity is a 'legitimate order', that is the '*higher common principle*' that will 'sustain justification' (p. 66). This principle according to the authors should meet six axioms: common humanity and common dignity, principle of differentiation and an order of different states, an investment formula and a common good (p. 74–6). This principle of justice could be seen as universalistic, meritocratic and Rawlsian. Anyone can be evaluated according to it. Its application produces a motivating hierarchy. It comes along with a principle of redistribution: higher states are granted only if the attribution of this state of worthiness benefits everybody and particularly the lower states (p. 77).

How do Boltanski and Thévenot identify the different polities? Because they are 'rarely made explicit in ordinary contexts', they 'extract these constructs from canonical texts' of political philosophies of the common good (p. 67). Six polities are distinguished: the inspired polity (whose 'grammarian' is St. Augustine), the domestic polity (Bossuet), the polity of fame (Hobbes), the civic polity (Rousseau), the market polity (Adam Smith), and the industrial polity (Saint-Simon).

But the level of polities is too formal to be effective. Attributing a quality to a person requires some 'tests' of worthiness in a real world with objects. That is why, to become effective, polity should be extended to qualified things (objects and subjects) in a coherent common world. For instance, in the domestic world, engenderment

according to tradition is the *higher common principle*, superiors (father, King, ancestors) and inferiors (child, I, unmarried) are examples of *subjects*, rules of etiquette are the *objects*, rejection of selfishness is the *investment formula*, family ceremonies could stand for *tests of worth*, etc. The localized subjects, objects, tests of the common world are discovered through the reading of six management textbooks. Therefore the plurality of worth is well illustrated: each worth can be used on the same object, the firm.

In a same common world, people share the same worth. Disagreement can find a solution through a test of worth. But agreements are more difficult to reach when people invoke different orders of worth. Typical criticisms are addressed from one common world to another. For instance, the civic world will criticize the impulsivity and the individualism of the inspired world (p. 251), whereas the latter will disapprove of the sterilizing legalistic-bureaucratic approach of the former. But two common worlds can also assuage critical tensions that separate them by finding compromise on possible common objects and features of the two different worlds. Man in revolt and gestures of protest could be figures of compromise between the civic and the inspired worth. Although it focuses on the possibility of peace and agreement, one should not forget that compromises between orders of worth will always remain precarious and at the mercy of revival of a deeply based criticism. Through the detailed and careful building of two matrices, the matrix of criticisms and the matrix of compromise, Boltanski and Thévenot go way beyond the technical study of figures of rhetoric. They paint with a sensitive touch the cultural invariants of the quarrels of our time.

In the mid-1980s, Boltanski and Thévenot's *Justification* was seen as revealing of the 'return of the actor', as a pragmatic shift of French sociology against the social deterministic tradition and finally as a way of reintroducing 'freedom' in the cold sociological world. With this opus, these two former pupils of Pierre Bourdieu were offering a way of doing sociology as opposed to that of their former master. Bourdieu's 'critical sociology' is considered a common form of 'relativism' (p. 340–42), a way of criticizing one worth and of reducing it to some form of interest, 'without making explicit the position from which the denunciation is issued'. The faculty granted to individuals to have a valid and autonomous moral life, and to switch from one world to the other, was a way to give people their liberty back.

However, I would claim that Boltanski and Thévenot's book is also very much inspired by structuralism and is in a sense structuralist. It is an application of textual structuralism to moral justification built in the 1960s by authors like Roland Barthes, Julien Greimas or even Michel Foucault. I would even say that, contrary to its anti-deterministic claim, it contains also a deterministic epistemology, although looser than the classical one. Elaborating a grammar of morality means that structural forms produce some kind of determination: only some combinations of elements are possible, others, improper or even monstrous, are impossible (like the good example of a monster given on p. 231: distributing political tracts – civic world – at the door of one's grandmother – domestic world).

Among the numerous questions addressed to Boltanski and Thévenot's work, the issue of idealism is perhaps the most discussed. The authors offer with this book a way of doing sociology orthogonal to the traditional one, indifferent to social

determinants (classes, age and gender) and focused on the morality of the actors. But sometimes, there is also a shift from a positive analysis towards a more normative position: it is not just what the structure of morality *is* but also, on occasion, what it *should be*. For instance, the crucial importance given to common humanity in their model of justice could be questioned. As Walzer (1983) remarked, distributive justice is linked to a limited world of persons (organized as clubs, families or neighbourhood) who do accept to share. The limitation of justice to the full members might not be easily established by a test of worth. Moreover, some forms of order like the eugenics polity (p. 80) are rejected as '*illegitimate value*' because they do not respect the first axiom of common humanity. Therefore, we wonder what kind of social status the authors would give to a racist justification that has for higher common principle the purity of the race and the exclusion of a part of humanity.

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Theodor W. Adorno (edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor)

Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory

Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 2006, £35.91, 691 pp.

ISBN: 3-518-58385-9 (also available in English, published by Polity, 2008, ISBN: 0-7456-4285-3).

David Jenemann

Adorno in America

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Cultural sociology is a new branch of sociology whose disciplinary identity as a self-conscious project spans over just a couple of decades. But its origins as well as his name are much older. What cultural sociologists owe to Durkheim and Weber, as well as to Simmel, or for what it matters Franz Boas, as founding fathers, is indeed a debatable issue, around which whole intellectual projects can take shape. But the seminal contribution given by Theodor W. Adorno – a follower of both Weber and Simmel as cultural analysts – is still too often overlooked. Nevertheless, if there is something like a production of culture approach at the beginning, and perhaps at the centre, of