

## REVIEW ESSAY/ ESSAI BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

### LUC BOLTANSKI AND THE CULT OF THE INDIVIDUAL THEORIST

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**Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner, eds.** *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'*. London: Anthem Press, 2014, 884 pp. \$US 295.00 (9781783082964)

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**Luc Boltanski.** *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*. Translated by Catherine Porter. London: Polity, 2014, 320 pp. \$CDN 29.95 paper (9780745664057), \$CDN 76.95 cloth (9780745664040)

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**I**n the last decade, Luc Boltanski has become a major figure in Anglophone sociology, and the editors of *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski* (hereafter *The Spirit*)<sup>1</sup> rightly call him the most prominent and innovative French sociologist since Bourdieu. The time is ripe for an assessment of his oeuvre so far, as during the past decade most of his books

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1. All citations to this book will provide the chapter author's name and pages, but no date.

since the 1980s have been translated into English.<sup>2</sup> These include his latest book, *Enigmes et complots* (2012a [Mysteries and Conspiracies, 2014]). To meet the challenge of reviewing 29 chapters and 800 pages of a book on Luc Boltanski, and a 300-page book by Luc Boltanski, while remaining within the already generous space allowed me here, my remarks are necessarily brief and selective. Because it deals with the whole of Boltanski's sociological career, I will start with *The Spirit*, then turn to *Mysteries* at the end of this essay.

Who is Luc Boltanski? Three figures that I will call "Boltanski", "Luc"<sup>3</sup>, and "Saint Luc" appear in *The Spirit*. "Boltanski" is the disembodied author, the name printed<sup>4</sup> on the title page of books and articles and cited in secondary texts, as in "(Boltanski 2011)". For the social sciences, the main justification for a book like *The Spirit* is to assess Boltanski's sociology, to locate it in relation to other theoretical traditions, and to explore its implications for areas he has not explored. How the social scientific work of Boltanski is understood and evaluated depends in large measure on whether it is approached through "Luc" or "Saint Luc".

"Luc" is Luc Boltanski the embodied person who does research and writes books of sociology, sometimes literally side-by-side with others, as in the country house where he and Laurent Thévenot worked on their book, *Economies of Worth* while stew cooked on the floor below (Thévenot 2005, 265-266). With Thévenot and others, Luc founded the

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2. *La souffrance à distance* (1993) appeared in English translation in 1999. Boltanski's reflections on his work with the boss («le patron») — Bourdieu — *Rendre la réalité inacceptable* (Boltanski 2008) has not been translated. Most recently Boltanski has published with Arnaud Esquerre a political cri de coeur concerning the rise of the Front National in France, *Vers l'extrême: Extension des domaines de la droite* [Towards the extreme: extension of the domains of the right] (Boltanski and Esquerre 2014), and a debate with Nancy Fraser, *Domination et émancipation: Pour un renouveau de la critique sociale* [Domination and emancipation: For a renewal of social critique] (Boltanski and Fraser 2014). A growing secondary literature has also appeared in English, including a special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* (2011) and an assessment of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (du Gay and Morgan 2013). There is a large body of literature in French, notably *Compétences critiques et sens de la justice* (Breviglieri et al. 2009) and *Introduction à la sociologie pragmatique* (Nachi 2006).

3. I apologize for this gesture of familiarity, as as I have never met the man, and certainly have no right to address him by his first name. Thévenot calls him "Luc" in his chapter, but he is entitled to.

4. See also Boltanski 2012b [1990], ch. 3; 2013 [2004]. Unlike handwritten manuscripts, autographs, or audio-visual recordings, the embodied person is absent from printed texts (Boltanski 2007b, 381).

Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (GSPM) in the mid-1980s (it folded in 2012). Luc has also written poetry, plays, and a “spoken opera”. Luc has a spouse (the anthropologist Elisabeth Claverie), brothers (Christian, an artist, Jean-Elie, a linguist), children, friends, colleagues, students, collaborators, and critics in France and abroad (Dosse 1999). Interviews and conversations with Luc are often recorded in audio, video and print formats (three such form Part VIII of *The Spirit*). Luc makes political interventions (e.g., Boltanski and Esquerre 2014, Esquerre and Boltanski 2014, 2015), and he has supported Le Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, amongst other activities (Boltanski, Rennes and Susen, 608-609). Luc has a “propensity to self-subversion”, and admits to criticizing and betraying people he is close to (Duvoux 2012, Hertzberg 2008). Luc is an complex, multidimensional figure.

The best assessments of Boltanski’s work in *The Spirit* are written by authors with a long and close familiarity with social science in the making at the GSPM: his erstwhile collaborator Laurent Thévenot, his former students Cyril Lemieux and Mohamed Nachi, and two authors from across the Rhine who have written extensively on the pragmatic sociology of critique, Peter Wagner and Tanja Bogusz. As participants or observers, these authors are well aware of the logic and contingencies of social science in the making at the GSPM with Boltanski, Thévenot, Michael Pollak, and others from the 1980s on. Writing from other traditions, but also well-informed are Louis Quéré and Cédric Terzi, Bruno Karsenti and Irène Eulriet.

Theoretical ideas in the social sciences are not immutable mobiles unproblematically crossing international boundaries; local circumstances, cultures, and preoccupations, and the vagaries of translation change them. Reading *The Spirit* I was reminded of Commissioner Maigret, the protagonist of the French detective novels that Boltanski examines in Chapter 3 of *Mysteries and Conspiracies*. On a trip to London in pursuit of a potential murderer, Maigret spent most a day waited in the lobby of the Savoy, feeling uncomfortable and out of place speaking an unfamiliar language amongst people with odd customs (Simenon 1952).<sup>5</sup> Too often in *The Spirit*, Luc is transformed into Saint Luc, and if they had feelings, Boltanski’s ideas would feel like Maigret..

“Saint Luc” is the imaginary object of a cult of the individual theorist that emerges in several chapters of *The Spirit*. A “disciple” of Bour-

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5. This also happened when the pragmatic sociology of critique crossed the Atlantic, but the collection edited by Lamont and Thévenot (2000) met the challenge through a series of workshops in which French and American researchers confronted their cultural misunderstandings.

dieu, Saint Luc left that sect to lead his own “followers” (Susen, 622, 637, 714). His surname becomes an adjective characterizing a doctrine and even a mission, in phrases of the form “Boltanskian [fill in the blank]” (Susen, *passim*; Outhwaite and Spence, 435; Turner, 449). In a chapter comparing Boltanski and Bourdieu, Simon Susen delineates a catechism of consistent, unchanging concepts in Boltanski’s writing from 1969 to the present. Like a celebrity in the world of fame or renown, Saint Luc absorbs Luc’s network of influences, collaborators, assistants, etc., reducing them to nearly invisible “little people”. Saint Luc appears to create his doctrine *ex nihilo*: ignoring Luc’s collaboration with Thévenot and others in the 1980s, *On Justification* is given a virgin birth by Fowler, and Thévenot even disappears from references to it in Outhwaite and Spence (430, 436). Tempted by the “relativism” of the satanic Bruno Latour, Saint Luc is reproached for having strayed from the true religion of “critical realism” and “materialist analysis” supposedly found in his later works, (Fowler, 84, 75, 86 n9 & n12). As a prophet who tears back veils of ideology to denounce capitalism and neo-liberalism, Saint Luc points the way to a promised land of emancipation (Fowler).<sup>6</sup> The beatification of the individual social scientist is a social phenomenon worthy of investigation in its own right,<sup>7</sup> but it is not helpful for assessing Boltanski’s oeuvre. This is apparent in two prominent contributions to *The Spirit*.

Bridget Fowler’s chapter is given an entire section, and praised for “clarity ... a valuable, wide-ranging, and critical introduction” (Susen, 613). Readers unfamiliar with the pragmatic sociology of critique beware: its chronology is confused, and its summaries of Boltanski’s books are cavalier, idiosyncratic and just plain misleading, elevating minor points and miss the essentials.<sup>8</sup> Simon Susen looms over *The Spirit*, contributing 300 of its 800 pages, including a stupefying 189-page afterword that confronts the weary reviewer with detailed chapter by chapter summaries of what he has just read.<sup>9</sup> Susen’s contributions leave the reader wondering if there are more productive ways to write about sociological work. Is the purpose to classify it into isms, the better to praise or dismiss them? Is it to turn into dogma the “inquiries”, sketches, works in progress of someone who states “Je déteste le

6. Nina Eliasoph (2007) uses the pragmatic sociology of critique to criticize this kind of expectation. See also Boltanski 2002.

7. See for example, Lamont 1987

8. There are even howlers: Fowler attributes a quote by J.J. Servan-Schreiber to Bourdieu and Boltanski, and she conflates the inspired and project politics.

9. For example, Quéré and Terzi’s chapter, which has 36 pages of text and notes, is twinned by 16 pages of summary.

dogmatisme” (Duvoux 2011)?<sup>10</sup> Is it to write about abstractions such as “the nature of ‘the social’”, “the interests of social spaces”, “the space of social grammar”, “the power of power” (Susen) rather than examining how, in the course of inquiries into social issues, a sociologist develops models (“a model must be a model of something” — Boltanski in Boltanski and Browne, 551)? Is the purpose to render the ideas of the sociologist about whom one is writing more opaque? What are we to make of a critic of Boltanski’s “tendency to make relatively simple points in an unnecessarily complicated, and at times convoluted, language” (Susen, 196) who can also write, “From a Boltanskian point of view, the *raison d’être* of social interests is the justification of interests by interested actors: an interested actor has an interest in justifying his or her interests, in order to prove the validity of the principles by which he or she is guided” (Susen, 326)?

It is no wonder that Thévenot (256) warns sociologists against “wooden language”, and that in an interview Boltanski states, “I am not a ‘social theorist’, and I disagree with a common construction of social theorists” in Anglo-Saxon sociology (Boltanski and Browne, 549). Wagner (235) refers to a “research programme” rather than a theory, and the best chapters in *The Spirit* examine the development of that programme or attempt to take it in new directions.

Newcomers to the pragmatic sociology of critique and Boltanski’s work should start with Cyril Lemieux’s chapter on the French reception of *On Justification*, then chapters by Irène Eulriet, Peter Wagner, and Mauro Basaure, concluding with Craig Browne’s interview with Boltanski. With exemplary clarity, Lemieux corrects misconceptions about Boltanski and Thévenot’s seminal book, including several that appear in *The Spirit*.<sup>11</sup> He shows that, as its name indicates, the pragmatic sociology of critique is not a sociology of everything: Boltanski wrote *L’amour et la justice comme compétences* (1990) to develop other regimes of action: two regimes of dispute (justice and violence), and two regimes of peace (love or *agapè*, and «justesse», — adaptation or appropriateness<sup>12</sup>). *On Justification* examines situations of dispute

10. “I detest dogmatism.” For readers who understand French, it is best in the video where it appears near the beginning. Duvoux 2012 is an English transcript.

11. The misunderstandings are not just French, as many have crossed the channel, often via Axel Honneth (2010). See Blokker and Brighenti (2011) for Thévenot’s response to Honneth.

12. Those are my translations: «justesse» is translated as “fairness” by the usually reliable Catherine Porter (Boltanski 2012b, 68); as “routine” by Basaure (2011b, 379 n3), and glossed in French as “adjusted action” [l’action «ajustée»] by Nachi (2006, 82). Boltanski emphasizes that justesse involves tacit

in which people make normative claims in a regime of justice, and disputes, justification and critique are episodic, or social life would grind to a halt. Its six polities («cités») are resources that actors draw on for justifications and critiques in the course of disputes, not lifeworlds or worldviews. Tests of worth contribute to social change as they are subjected to critiques from other orders of worth; they are more than merely meritocratic selection processes. Irène Eulriet shows readers familiar with Jeffrey Alexander's work why they should be interested in *On Justification*, and the pragmatic sociology of critique more generally, and in the process corrects some misconceptions that appear elsewhere in the volume. In his lucid and well-informed analysis of the research programme initiated by Boltanski and Thévenot, Wagner shows how, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* developed issues raised in *On Justification* and addressed its critics. It does so first of all by showing how a new polity develops historically, demonstrating the importance of the social and artistic critiques of capitalism in social change. Nachi agrees that it continues the pragmatic sociology of critique rather than breaking with it, but he also emphasizes what he calls "inflections" in the model, such as more emphasis on power and the adoption of an external critique of capitalism that leads Boltanski and Chiapello to formulate the social conditions for a project polity («cité par projets»). Basaure further develops an argument he has previously made (Basaure 2011a) that Boltanski and Thévenot's political and moral sociology fills a gap in Axel Honneth's work. Returning to "On Denunciation" (Boltanski et al 1984, Boltanski 2012b, ch. 3) and *Distant Suffering* he adds to "originary suffering", the "moral and political" suffering that arises from the failure of a denunciation of injustice to pass the test of normality, i.e., to be taken seriously.

Several chapters use the pragmatic sociology of critique in new areas.<sup>13</sup> Starting from Boltanski's analysis of the regime of love in *Love and Justice as Competences* and the distinction he draws there between *agapè* and *philia* — the former purely disinterested and uncalculating, the latter invoking reciprocity — Ilana Silber argues that there is a tension between them, and that the plural orders of worth in *On Justification* provide a non-reductive route into the complexity of the gift in social life. Her thought-provoking analysis would benefit from incorporating

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equivalences in the uses persons make of things (1990, 111-112; [2012b, 69-70]). See *Le Petit Robert* (1978, 1057): "Justesse 1. Qualité qui rend une chose parfaitement adaptée ou appropriée à sa destination ... 2. Qualité qui permet d'exécuter très exactement une chose."

13. Chapters by Turner, Fuller, and Outhwaite and Spence are more about the authors' own preoccupations than serious efforts to extend Boltanski's ideas, so I won't discuss them here.

Boltanski's ingenious study of agapè at a distance in "La présence des absents" (2007b [1995]). Lisa Adkins's interesting attempt to develop a pragmatic sociology of the future unfortunately neglects analyses of time orientations: the regime of justice looks to the past, while agapè is present-oriented (Boltanski 2007b, 2012b [1990]); the domestic world is oriented to the past (tradition), the market world to the present, and the industrial world to the future. In her chapter on human rights, Kate Nash argues that a human rights polity should be added to the six polities of *On Justification*, but by starting from the simplified version of the polity model (Boltanski 2012b, 53-54), she doesn't see that the full model (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 80-82) adopts the post-WWII human rights regime as principles that any cité or polity must meet in order to be considered legitimate in the western world. The plurality of polities could be used to explore the variety of rights claims made by individual persons, social movements, and NGOs, how those claims are tested in human rights commissions, courts, and other state and international agencies, and how compromises between irreconcilable claims are arrived at (or not), perhaps invoking the logic of the lesser evil that Boltanski found in *The Foetal Condition*<sup>14</sup>.

Bruno Karsenti's brilliant but difficult 2005 review of *La condition fœtale*, reproduced here in a clumsy translation,<sup>15</sup> serves poorly as an introduction to Boltanski's book — I wouldn't have understood it had I not already read both the book and the original review in French. Nonetheless, two of his observations are worth noting. First, building on Boltanski's insight that abortion cannot be understood outside the conditions for engendering singular human beings, he identifies the decision to abort or to carry to term as "fearsome" («terrible»), because *both* abortion and childbirth are irreversible. Second, he identifies its symmetry with Durkheim's *Suicide*: instead of the social regulation of "leavers", *The Foetal Condition* examines the social regulation of "entrants".

As "Boltanski's most philosophical book" (Susen, 16), *On Critique* is a complex and difficult work that raises important issues concerning types of critique, pragmatism, domination, and emancipation. Although he makes valid criticisms and provocatively links it to the epistemological preoccupations of German philosophy (Kant, Dilthey, Schopenhauer, Habermas), Simon Susen's incredibly detailed philosophical reading of

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14. This book also contains a challenging and provocative analysis of the meaning of common humanity and a critique of liberal rights talk in the abortion debates that is relevant to Nash's project.

15. For example, it fails to recognize key concepts such as "the parental project".

*On Critique* is repetitive, selective, and muddies more than it clarifies.<sup>16</sup> Approaching it from the analysis of simple and complex domination, Rob Stones provides a good discussion of Boltanski's distinction between truth, reality, and existential tests. Paul Blokker finds reminders and parallels between some of Boltanski's ideas in *On Critique* and radical-democratic ideas of Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, and sees some solutions to gaps in Boltanski's book in their work. Like Stones, Blokker rightly considers the notion of "emancipation" a weakness, but neither of them offers a convincing alternative. I suspect that Boltanski's conception of emancipation will disappoint those who have revolutionary expectations of it (Nash 365; Boltanski 2002, Boltanski 2011, 108-109, Eliasoph 2007).

As the fine chapter by Tanja Bogusz shows, the pragmatism of the pragmatic sociology of critique lies in the recognition that most of the time people are acting in conditions of uncertainty about the outcomes of their action, not arguing or "attributing meaning" to the world. But by emphasizing the semantic security provided by institutions, and downplaying the coordination of action, *On Critique* gives some warrant to the interpretation of "the role of institutions as providing certainty in a world that is otherwise without meaning" (Blokker, 373).<sup>17</sup> Louis Quéré and Cédric Terzi rigorously question Boltanski's pragmatist credentials, arguing that his pragmatism is linguistic (conceded in Boltanski, Rennes and Susen, 592), that his emphasis on "radical uncertainty" and semantic agreement is misplaced, and that his distinction between meta-pragmatic and pragmatic registers of action neglects the inherently reflexive situated practical nature of all action.

After reading hundreds of pages of uneven commentary on Luc Boltanski's work, it is a pleasure to turn to the engagingly written *Mysteries and Conspiracies* in Catherine Porter's superb translation.<sup>18</sup> Like all of the best work in the pragmatic sociology of critique, it tests and develops a theoretical frameworks in research on new objects, and is ori-

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16. For example, six pages of the chapter are devoted to the first nine pages of *On Critique*, one page to a single paragraph.

17. See Martin 2011 for a sustained critique of this idea.

18. In addition to being wonderfully readable, Porter's translation rectifies an irritant in G. Elliott's translations of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* and *On Critique*: true to the Freudian origins of the term, she renders «instance» as "agency" (e.g., Boltanski 2012a, 114; 2014, 74). Less admirably, she translates the French translation of Orwell's "newspeak", «novlangue» (2012a, 235) back into English as "novlang" (2014, 166). And none of Boltanski's translators seem capable of rendering the French translation of H. Simon's "bounded rationality" («rationalité limitée») as anything other than "limited rationality".

ented by a concern for inescapable tensions in social life. *Mysteries and Conspiracies* tests *On Critique's* framework of the semantic function of institutions on the nation-state, which Boltanski has been criticized for neglecting. The book's unfortunately unsubstantiated premise is that beginning in the nineteenth century the nation-state took on the semantic task of defining and stabilizing "reality" in a context where class inequality and the flux of capitalism compromised efforts to control what happened within its territory. Classic detective and spy fiction — Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, Simenon's Maigret novels, and Buchan's *The Thirty-nine Steps* — dramatized a tension between state spokespersons' official versions of what is happening, and unofficial versions. "Anxiety about the solidity and stability of reality" characterizes both crime and spy genres — another reality lies behind what is customarily taken as real — and after reversals the state succeeds in its task of guaranteeing the security of the population in its territory, thereby quelling the initial anxiety. Rooted in a local environment, detective stories display the tension between unequal social classes and an impartial state in the person of a government official; in spy novels, the tension is between a territory that the state attempts to stabilize and control, and flows that it cannot control, such as of financial and other capital, and political agents.

The two chapters on detective stories are delightful, so it is not surprising that the subtitle of the English translation emphasizes them.<sup>19</sup> For English speaking readers of a certain generation, the Holmes chapter is light work, as the peculiarities of the English state and its class structure are as familiar as Holmes and Watson. The chapter on Maigret is an epiphany, showing how the tumultuous political history of France in the nineteenth century that made the Administration the linchpin of the French state produced a "doubling" of its personnel between the functions of the civil servant and the socially competent private person. Consequently, the roles of policeman and detective, typically divided between two persons in English detective fiction, is combined in the person of Maigret, explaining why he is a more interesting character than Holmes.

The chapter on spy novels is thinner, and shows the extent to which, as Quéré and Terzi argued in their chapter of *The Spirit*, Boltanski combines a structural approach, indebted to Lévi-Strauss's analyses of how myths make contradictions tolerable, with Greimas's actantial grammar.

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19. The different subtitles of the original French book and the English translation give an idea of its contents at the same time as they reveal cross-channel differences which are one of its topics: «Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes» [An inquiry into inquiries] and "Detective stories, spy novels and the making of modern societies".

The chapter analyses the transformations of Buchan's paradigmatic *The thirty-nine steps* in subsequent spy novels, along with discussions of the perennial allegations of conspiracies involving Jewish financiers, anarchists and socialists.

The final two chapters of the book go beyond detective and spy fiction to examine the uses of "paranoia" and "conspiracy theory" in psychiatry and political science as weapons against social criticism from both the left and the right, and sometimes against sociology, especially critical sociology.<sup>20</sup> The keystone is Hofstadter's influential analysis of the "paranoid style" in American politics, and Boltanski questions the use of "categories borrowed from psychopathology to characterize political choices and values to which large numbers of persons were committed" (194).<sup>21</sup> He goes on to analyze denunciations of conspiracy theories, and to propose three conditions narratives must meet to be considered acceptable, or at least open to discussion: a grammar of normality (repeating the results of his thirty-year old study of denunciation, Boltanski 2012b), a grammar of plausibility, and what might be called a grammar of social causality.

The last is the subject of the book's concluding chapter, concerning the entities to which action may be attributed in sociological description. It reviews sociological responses to "Popper's curse", that is Karl Popper's argument that references to collective entities (groups, nations, classes, etc.) in explanations are equivalent to allegations of conspiracy. Boltanski replies that like the inquiries of journalists and of the police, albeit for different purposes and under different constraints, sociological inquiries cannot be restricted to "official" entities such as those recognized as "moral persons" in law, but are obliged to trace the connections between individuals that compose fuzzy, unofficial entities, like a "ruling class", or "organized crime".

The best parts of *Mysteries and Conspiracies* are those that explicate the specific tensions and contradictions that arise in social life, whether in political forms such as liberal democracy, or in types of utterance such as denunciations of injustice, and to show social mechanisms through which people pragmatically manage or render them tolerable without overcoming them. The analysis of Popper's curse and sociology's re-

20. Boltanski's definition of critical sociology falls short of a call to arms: sociology that "aims to be critical, in the sense that it seeks to describe and explain social asymmetries" (252).

21. Peter Baehr and Daniel Gordon (2012) makes a similar complaint about the use of "phobic" in current debates over gay marriage, religious accommodation, etc.

sponses to it is less satisfying. The problem of how people coordinate action without deliberate, explicit agreement, especially on a large scale and not face-to-face, is a key issue for a pragmatist sociology, and Boltanski's reflections are open-ended, even uncertain. Perhaps that is a small price to pay for a sociology that detests dogmatism. Rather than forming a cult of this sociologist, we should both continue our inquiries in his spirit, drawing on both his work and the work of other strands of the pragmatic sociology of critique.

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