

“It is only in my short book published at La Découverte on Sociology as a Science that I had the feeling to be able to express in a clear and neat way the ideas that I started to elaborate forty years ago”.

Le Nouvel Observateur, 16/01/2011

BOUDON'S ASSESSMENT OF his last book suggests that, despite its size, *Sociology as a Science* should be considered as the best introduction, both for young scholars and historians of social sciences, to the variety of epistemological, theoretical, and methodological writings that Boudon was able, with a tremendous regularity, to disseminate over the years in virtually every language in which sociological literature is published.

Sociology as a Science is indeed a wonderful piece of work that contains a deep, elegant and astonishingly clearly written intellectual auto-biography in which Raymond Boudon reflects at the same time on his own scientific production and on the condition and status of today's sociology.

One diagnosis, one conviction, and one remedy obsessively recur throughout the book. The *diagnosis* is that the diffusion of post-modernism and constructivism in the social sciences as well as the increasingly varied demands that political circles address to sociologists has made sociology more and more sensitive to description and essayism than to explanation. The *conviction* is that this trend must be reversed and that sociology must return to the scientific ambition that animated classics as well as the majority of sociologists in the 1960s and the 1970s. To reach this goal, the *remedy* is to systematically combine “methodological singularism”, *i.e.* to focus only on specific and clearly defined phenomena, and “methodological individualism”, *i.e.*, according to one of Boudon's most lapidary formulations, “to explain the macro by the micro, and the micro by actors' reasons”.

* About Raymond BOUDON, *La sociologie comme science*, (Paris, La Découverte, 2010).

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The five chapters structuring the book clarify the origin, specific content, and applications of this conception of sociology, progressively showing the reasons for which Boudon's work is so peculiar in the context of French sociology and destined to join the narrow group of classics in sociology *tout court*.

In chapter 1, Boudon acknowledges his deep intellectual debt to Lazarsfeld's and Merton's work and teaching – he spent the year 1961–1962 at Columbia. The primacy of explanatory efforts, the focus on delimited and enigmatic empirical phenomena, and the stress on understanding contextualized individual actions were the three fundamental elements of the sociological research carried out by the Columbia group that impressed Boudon the most and that contributed to creating his own conception of sociology.

As he admits, this conception was still unarticulated in his two first books – corresponding to the two dissertations that he wrote to obtain his doctorate (at Sorbonne in 1967), the first dealing with the relation between statistics, mathematics and sociology, the second developing a deep criticism of the scientific ambitions of structuralism.

Chapter 2 shows that, in Boudon's eyes, *L'Inégalité des chances* (1973; English edition, 1974) represents his first mature application of the scientific approach to social phenomena that he wanted to oppose to structuralist and Marxist social science as well as to the growing statistically-oriented American sociology. On the one hand, Boudon considers that the book contains a full application of the paradigm of methodological individualism in that the study demonstrates that the interplay between actors' structural positions and beliefs, opportunities, and preferences can give rise to complex statistical patterns describing highly time-resistant macroscopic regularities, such as social inequality in educational achievements and in chances of intergenerational mobility. Second, Boudon highlights the fact that the book contains a deep technical novelty, i.e. numerical simulation as a tool to test the theoretical model in a deductive manner.

From an historical point of view, it is worth noting that Boudon repeats several times that *L'Inégalité des chances* constituted the fundamental basis of his scientific status in the sociological community, both at national and international levels. The success of this book, he acknowledges, provided him with the greatest intellectual freedom and serenity.

Indeed, the story Raymond Boudon tells the reader in chapters 3 and 4 is mainly the story of the way he progressively refined his conception of methodological individualism after *L'Inégalité des chances*.

More particularly, Boudon exploited, for two decades at least, the analysis of collective beliefs and values, to devise a theory of action avoiding what one may call “instrumental” prejudice, *i.e.* the view according to which, on the one hand, actors’ reasons are essentially utilitarianistic, and, on the other hand, rationality only applies to action means.

Critics might object that this part of Boudon’s work loses the impressive combination of theoretical deepness and technical innovations that characterises the originality of *L’Inégalité des chances*. The issues at stake were so important, however, that Boudon’s choice of giving priority to the theoretical reflection on methodological refinements can easily be justified.

Chapters 3 and 4 thus present the theory of ordinary rationality – Boudon explains that he finally chose the adjective “ordinary” to highlight the continuity between scientific and everyday reasoning. This theory, which, more modestly (and, probably, more appropriately), he sometimes qualifies as “scheme” (the exact French word is “grille”), contains the following basic ideas. First, Boudon postulates that every belief has its roots in a system of reasons that the actor perceives as well-grounded. Second, these reasons can be “personal”, *i.e.* idiosyncratic tastes and motivations, or “impersonal”, *i.e.* reasons based on more or less objective knowledge or moral principles. The distinctive trait of “impersonal” reasons is their “trans-subjectivity” character, *i.e.* the actor’s feeling that other actors may endorse his own reasons. Third, both “personal” and “impersonal” reasons can be ego- or alter-oriented. Fourth, Boudon assumes that actors’ social context, which, according to him, includes institutions, groups and social networks, provides actors with specific pieces of information parameterize actors’ reasons, and, consequently, actors’ actions. The last component of Boudon’s theory of ordinary rationality is its dynamic character. Boudon suggests that, although not in a linear or continuous manner, actors’ systems of reasons refine over time and tend to become more and more easily acceptable for a larger and larger fraction of (group of) individuals. According to Boudon, it is only at the intersection of consequential and non-consequential reasons, of the effect of social context, and of the idea selection process that the diversity of descriptive and normative beliefs across societies and their contingency, as well as their long-term convergences, can be explained.

In Raymond Boudon’s view, apart from the numerous articles published and discussed in the major sociological journals, *Le juste et le vrai* (1995) and *Le sens des valeurs* (1999, English version, 2001) are particularly important in understanding this strand of his work. In my

view, *The Poverty of Relativism* (2005) also provides the English reader with a good introduction to this aspect of Boudon's research.

Chapter 5 contains an application of Boudon's theory of ordinary rationality to what he sees as the peculiarities of the French democracy. In particular, Boudon suggests that the especially strong centralization of the distribution of power in France generated, over time, all sorts of undesirable macroscopic effects such as the existence of a dense network of economic pressure groups and of a mediatic intellectual clique that influence political decision making much more than ordinary electors, a strong moral and political conformism, the especially strong influence of a Marxist way of thinking about society and social hierarchies, and the over-dimensioned role of trade unions in crucial sectors such as secondary and tertiary education.

One of the merits of this final chapter is that it concretely shows the complexity of Boudon's methodological individualism. Contrary to what critics constantly claim (see, recently, R. Jepperson and J. W. Meyer's article published in *Sociological Theory* in 2011), as Lars Udhen (see his chapter in *Raymond Boudon. A Life in Sociology*, Oxford, The Bardwell Press, vol. 4, 2009) correctly points out, "In his explicit statements of MI, he [Raymond Boudon] is always careful to point out that individuals act in the context of social institutions and structures (...) and equally in his analyses of social phenomena".

After reading *Sociology as a Science* one is better able to understand the major pillars of Boudon's contribution to our discipline and eager to explore Boudon's original articles and books in order to get to know the details of his work. Ultimately, Boudon's auto-biography clearly shows that Raymond Boudon will retain a place in the history of our discipline for obsessively defending a complex form of methodological individualism, for enlarging the theory of rationality beyond his narrow utilitarian version, for transforming this theory into a theory of ends and not only of means, and for provocatively defending the crucial role that formal modeling and simulation should play in any mature science.

All in all, *Sociology as a Science* is an excellent introduction to Boudon's intellectual career and thought – one where, Boudon magisterially succeeds in being discrete about himself but deep on sociology.

G I A N L U C A M A N Z O