

Preface to the English translation (Cambridge, UK: Polity, forthcoming 2020) of Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement: une critique de la marchandise*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

Sociology is at its most instructive and broadly useful when it struggles to make sense of the relation between the large structures that constrain our behavior by defining markets and institutions and the way our practical, everyday understandings of justice and fairness can both reproduce and challenge, even transform those constraints. Sociology is at its most daring and self-sacrificing when, going further, it attempts to understand this relation with both the structures and the practical criteria of judgement in motion—when, in other words, it attempts to combine the macro- and micro-sociology of the present, to bring together two terms whose poverty, especially in combination, already hints at the inevitability of partial failure. No one has pursued this audacious and invaluable program more masterfully than Luc Boltanski. Beginning with *Les Cadres* (1982), and passing through *On Justification* (2006), with Laurent Thévenot, *On Critique* (2011) and *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2018), with Eva Chiapello to *Enrichment* (2020), with Arnaud Esquerre, translated here, he and his collaborators have produced an extraordinary, analytically innovative chronicle of the relentless changes in contemporary capitalism. Reading the present work together with its immediate predecessor may serve to convey the promise, yet also some potential limits of this approach as the continuing transformation of capitalism verges on crisis.

The *New Spirit of Capitalism* looked ahead to the dissolution of the bureaucratic rigidity of Fordist, mass production, then well underway. The firm has been replaced as the unit of organization by the project group: a team assembled, ad hoc, under the guidance and inspiration of a manager-leader, to respond to the needs of a customer. As markets shift teams are recombined; careers are made by acquiring in each team enough expertise and experience to be recruited to the next. Together the shifting collaborations of teams and the circulation of workers yields a networked economy with open boundaries. Those who don't qualify for entrance or promotion have no function or place in this reticular capitalism. They are excluded.

But these emergent structures are deeply ambivalent judged from the vantage point of the "projective city," as Boltanski and Chiapello (adapting the general term developed in Boltanski's earlier collaboration with Thévenot) call the model of justice particular to the "neo-management" of flexibility. The variant, like all such models, links criteria for judging the fairness of individual transactions that we reflexively invoke in deciding to make an exchange and judgments about compatibility of the actions of the powerful with the foundations of our social and political order. The capitalism of projects disarms the first kind critique, not least because it responds to familiar objections to wage labor. Thus the spontaneous creativity of the project team and the prospect of a career of ceaseless exploration offer possibilities for self-actualization excluded by the routines of Fordist hierarchies—possibilities previously best embodied in the artist's flamboyant, disdainful rejection of capitalist regimentation. Questions about the fairness of hourly compensation are moot because project-team members manage their own time. If they are exploited it is through self-exploitation. For such reasons, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, parts of the labor movement and the Socialist government of Mitterrand championed the new developments instead of rallying against the precariousness they create. In celebrating talent, energy and daring as the conditions of success networked capitalism damps criticism most insidiously in insinuating that the excluded, by their want of endowments and initiative, if not by their vices, have all but marginalized themselves.

But the powerful in the projective city are not only obligated to respect fair terms of trade. They must as well use the influence and authority derived from trading to sustain the public goods or commons on which the whole political and social community depends; to use their power selfishly, only to augment it, is a breach of the social contract that constitutes a moral order. From this perspective the neglect of the excluded is not a regrettable oversight or a resigned acknowledgment of the incorrigible inequities of life but a breach of fundamental obligations. It is here that the critique of structure finds a handhold, but no more and just barely. Boltanski and Chiapello are rightly circumspect about the form and strategy of opposition. They remind us that the work of criticism, like the labor of Sisyphus, no sooner done must be done again.

The picture, cheerless enough, changes abruptly and for the grimmer in *Enrichment*. The rise of new competitors, beginning with China, has blocked the renewal of industrial capitalism in its historic heartlands. Some countries, above all France, with its primitive accumulation of cultural objects from the time of the Revolution and its continuing association with good taste, respond by abandoning Fordist manufacturing. Instead they turn to production of luxury and artisanal goods, enriched (in one sense of the book's polysemous title) by narratives establishing their authenticity through connection to a past, or by pointing to some other exceptional feature that distinguishes them from standard specimens of their type. Again progressive reforms help undermine the solidarities they were intended to reinforce. In the period of the projective city the Lois Auroux, designed to buttress traditional collective bargaining, helped legitimate precarious employment by recognizing the (initially) exceptional cases in which it would be allowed. In the same way the "cultural democracy" of Jack Lang, Minister of Culture under Mitterrand, was supposed to favor celebration of creatively outside the museums and opera houses. Now, combined, with more expressly self-interested legal changes, such as new protections in intellectual property law for forms of production variously associated with particular places, they help make the nation's own history for France today what coal once was for Great Britain: fuel for capitalism.

The analytic focus of the book shifts accordingly. In the projective city value was created in production. The morally inflected language of exchange was therefore shared among different categories of producers—social classes broadly conceived—and embedded in a model of justice including them in a single community. In the capitalism of enrichment, value is created through narratives that link only buyers and sellers. The rich tourists who come to France to consume its cultural and culinary patrimony *in situ* and the foreign elites who buy LVMH products at home (all enriched, in another of the title's meanings, by the inequalities of financialization and globalization) share a language of evaluation with the maker of artisanal knives or the owner of a gallery offering collectible art. They can scarcely be said to constitute a community even among themselves, and still less with others in their respective home countries, from whom they are more and more distanced by their enrichment. The concept of the city has no place here; and in its absence critique loses even the tenuous handhold it had before. It is evoked only fleetingly. The state, having been complicit in the emergence of new forms of production, might be held to account for their consequences; the history of France belongs to all the French. Yet the authors suggest that they themselves find this insufficient. The book closes with a carefully qualified reflection on the potential for great disruptions—"when reality is confronted with major changes that put experience in direct contact with the world"—to call into question the master narratives that link our judgments of exchange and structure.

What has happened?

The first and most conspicuous explanation is simply that the facts have changed, foreclosing even the scant possibilities for critique and protest that remained until now. If Boltanski and

Esquerre are silent on these subjects it is because there is nothing to say. This would bring their work into proximity with Wolfgang Streeck's recent writing on the defeat of the Left by a renascent capitalism that, having freed itself of the constraints of the post-war pact with social democracy, is running the table.

But there is despair and despair. However much Streeck may be personally outraged by this outcome, it costs him nothing theoretically to acknowledge it. In his kind of social science the relation among productive groups or social class was always a strategic game, usually resulting in one equilibrium or another. If there is an unexpected, decisive victory the scientist-observer declares the game over. Sooner or later the players come to the same realization and retire with their payoffs.

Boltanski and his collaborators are not traveling so light. Enmeshed in the structures of their day social actors play by the prevailing rules of the game and judge whether, in the large and in the small, they are fairly applied; the observer sees the interplay of rule following and revision, and the changing motives for it. But the participants can't simply turn off their faculties of judgement when judgment tells them outcomes are unacceptable. Those faculties are rooted in and expressive of our very humanity. To abandon them would be to sacrifice ourselves utterly, and for an unknown and unintelligible purpose. There is not a word in *Enrichment* to suggest that adversity will, or could, drive us to that. It is never game over with our honor, our dignity, our indignation and our hope and imagination, even when we know we have lost.

Perhaps then it is the focus on commercial relations—the shared language of buyers and sellers—that explains the continuing commitment to the actors' moral agency and yet the absence of extended discussion of the potential resistance to the new form of capitalism. Attention to the relation between buyers and sellers might thus improve our understanding of novel sources of value and kinds of evaluation while diverting our gaze from the dissatisfaction of the broader population excluded from enriched exchange.

This observation points in turn to the risks of assuming, generally, a close relation between the immediate experience of evaluation and the generation of criticism of capitalist structures and, conversely, assuming that absent such a relation criticism is not possible. Under relatively stable conditions, such as the first post-war decades, there is good reason for these assumptions. For stability brings a shared understanding of the public goods needed to maintain the productive and social order, and of roughly who is owed what in exchange. But as capitalism, under the pressure of competition and protest, changes direction, these relations break down. Public goods are ill-defined and their provision contentious, as are the terms of exchange. It becomes difficult even to discern, as we see in the arc of Boltanski's work, who is participating in the economy and what it means to participate. The terms of exchange are too ambiguous and incomplete to suggest clues about the nature of the emerging structures, and the structures too fluid to point to reliable terms of exchange.

Under these circumstances an analytic response—the one pursued in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* and *Enrichment*—is to identify those terms and structures in each new configuration that are mutually supportive, and on the basis of this accord to define new types of capitalism. The risk is that understandings based on emerging agreements will ignore, like the agreements themselves, the embryonic disaccord from which indignation and protest spring.

But facing the same ambiguity of terms and fluidity of structure the actors' practical response is to look to allies outside the sphere of exchange to articulate new understandings that make sense—including moral sense—of the confusion. In a word, the actors turn to politics: the

marketplace politics of politicians and parties but also to the backstage politics of institutional and legal reforms, successful and botched, and to the fumbling adjustment of established policies and programs to new conditions. It is a mistake, or rather an artifact of many kinds of retrospective analysis, to conclude that this jumble of initiatives and accommodations simply clears the way for and helps support new capitalisms. The same pile of discordant bric-a-brac can be the source of renewed conceptions of markets, public powers and public goods that make exchange among individuals and groups morally intelligible and therefore legitimate again. Politics is always also a fight about which usage will prevail and in moments of general breakdown, like the present, these stakes are sensed by all. When moral protest disappears from the sphere of exchange, or seems excluded from it, it is often on the way to such political fights.

Let me put this point generally, as my own reading of the thrust of Boltanski's reading of the last decades of capitalist development and critique of it: In times of crisis and confusion the only way to understand structures is to see them as mutable and in motion—that is, not as structures at all; and the only way to grasp the potential of these mobile and mutable structures is to see them in the light of possible political alternatives, each associating a distinct group of allies with a bundle of institutional reforms in a constellation prefiguring new terms of exchange. This perspective, venturing further, is at once analytic and practical, or, if you like, cognitive and moral. It is the vantage point from which the observer can best understand what matters and why, and the moral agent can find and help create the rudiments of order amidst tumult. In the terms Boltanski develops in *On Critique*, the turn to politics allows the actors to escape the necessarily local limits of their practical judgements without yet requiring they have access to the “overarching” or “totalizing” understanding of structures that some kinds of sociology and social criticism claim to possess.

But while a preface is perhaps a place to formulate such questions and speculations, it is certainly not the place to pretend to conclusions. Besides, you likely have this book before you because you already have these sorts of questions, and many others, in mind, along with provisional answers. You already sense how little the critiques we have speak to the problems we face, and yet how we struggle to fashion even those. So you knew too that criticism is a labor of Sisyphus. As encouragement and consolation, therefore, it may help to recall Camus' observation (from an essay published in 1942, the very darkest of times) that in the hour of returning down the slope to push the boulder up again, Sisyphus was fully conscious of the task before him, most human in his consciousness and, yes, happy in his humanity.

Charles Sabel