

Dissolutions of the Social: On the Social Theory of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot

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Moral-theoretical categories have almost disappeared from the theoretical vocabulary of sociology. Neither perceptions of legitimacy nor perceptions of injustice, neither moral argument nor normative consensus now play a significant role in explaining the social order. Instead the object of sociological inquiry is understood either according to the pattern of anonymous self-organization processes or as the result of cooperation among strategically-oriented actors; accordingly, the disciplinary role models are biology or economics, whose conceptual models appear suited to explain such a complex process as the reproduction of societies. One may easily get the impression that current sociology wishes to finally bid farewell to the generation of its founding fathers; since from Weber and Durkheim to Talcott Parsons, it was a settled matter that an adequate basic conception of the social world could only be derived using the concepts, models, or hypotheses of moral theory – practical philosophy was, so to speak, the foundation and guiding discipline for classical sociology. After the “Theory of Communicative Action” – the last grand sketch of a complete social theory based on the sources of practical philosophy – all this seems to have been forgotten. In any event, it could until recently appear that with Habermas’ book the tradition of a normatively oriented sociology has come to an end. It is mostly due to the efforts of a small group of researchers in France – which assembled around Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot – that there continues to be a strand within social theory that employs sources of moral philosophy. Having emerged from an internal critique of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology, the works of this highly productive circle, probing ever new directions, seek to explain the integration of our societies through the interplay of different moral convictions.¹ The foundational text of this sociological school is the study *On Justification*, originally published in 1991.² This book, which has meanwhile also been published in German,³ deserves careful consideration not least because it represents the most interesting attempt of the more recent past to give sociology a basis in moral philosophy.

I.

Already in formulating the point of departure for their study, Boltanski and Thévenot adopt the perspective that the classical sociologist had assumed when they attempted to lay the foundations of social theory. As for Weber, Durkheim, or Parsons, the key problem of all sociology is the question of how to comprehend that individual actors normally coordinate their action plans so as to contribute to the production of social order. Yet in order to explain the consensus that is required to achieve such coordination, Boltanski and Thévenot do not want to employ the two strategies that have dominated the field in the past: they neither follow Durkheim in shifting the necessary consensus to a pre-existing collective consciousness that harmonically attunes subjects to one another, nor do they understand coordination as the fortunate result of interlocking individual action strategies, as mainstream economics would like to see it.⁴ Discarding these models requires the two authors to search for a third explanatory strategy that, unlike Durkheim’s, accounts for the interpretational freedom of

the individual actor, while not denying, like economic scholarship, that cultural patterns of interpretation have important effects. Boltanski and Thévenot develop the answer to this problem in three steps, which taken together already form the building block of their social theory.

The first step in their argument consists in the assumption that actors generally coordinate their action plans using their acquired competence to resort to moral conceptions that justify legitimate ways of social coexistence. One must not, like Bourdieu, who Luc Boltanski studied under for years, imagine members of society as individuals that are intransparent to themselves and that acquire their social attitudes mostly through unconsciously employing patterns of interpreting the world. Rather they should be seen as beings who have the capacity for self-determination insofar as they can, at their own initiative, resort to different conceptions of social order when coordinating their individual action plans. Hence the assumption, implied in this first step, that such models of social coexistence always exist in the plural is not just an arbitrary addition but a necessary component of the entire thesis: for the subjects to be imagined as competent, cognitively autonomous actors, they have to be able to resort to more than one model of social order, so as to choose among them according to their own criteria.

In the next step of their argument, the two authors introduce a distinction that stems from the ideas of American pragmatism and that qualifies their previously developed thesis significantly: while subjects coordinate themselves automatically and almost without reflection as long as there are no perturbations in their joint action, they only have to direct their attention toward hitherto routinely presumed cognitive and moral assumptions when such disruptions occur. Thus the participants can only gain knowledge about models of social order, which aid them in coordinating their intentions, when so called “unnatural” situations occur in which the flow of standard lifeworld practices is interrupted. Then they face, as John Dewey or George H. Mead would have formulated it, the functional requirement to reappraise their assumptions, which they had previously assumed as valid, in order to adjust them intellectually to the changed conditions. Like other theorists of this pragmatist orientation, Boltanski and Thévenot believe that scholarly observation has to use these moments of perturbation, of “glitch” and “crisis”⁵ in order to study the actual rules of social integration: we gain insight into the normative background convictions that enable the coordination of individual actions in the lifeworld from the perspective of participants who have to fix a perturbation of their interaction through a reflexive problematization of their conflicting conceptions of order.

The authors’ third step consists of the proposal to understand such “unnatural” moments of discursive scrutiny of normally presumed conceptions of order as the actual hinges of social reproduction: social life is characterized by a “necessity of justification,” which regularly forces the members of society, faced with ever recurring crises, to disclose and defend their latent conceptions of order. Such points of discursive justification represent the reflexive aspect of social reproduction through which what has previously been given implicitly by the routinized flow of interactions in the lifeworld is explicated. The communicative participants are now forced to offer arguments and reasons why they would like the aspect of the lifeworld that has become problematic to be regulated by one and not another model of order, why the coordination problem at hand can only be solved in the way they prefer.

To be sure, the authors understand that in these moments of the reflexive crumbling of the social order, the alternative of violent resolution always exists. The party that disposes of the greater power can interrupt the discursive exchange in order to impose its conception of order on the other side.⁶ Yet Boltanski and Thévenot consciously decide to discuss only peaceful means of resolving such argumentative confrontations. “Civil wars and tyranny

(in which order is based on violence and fear)”⁷ are excluded from the inquiry. Whether that is to be understood as an indication that only democratically constituted societies fall under the purview of the study as a whole does not become fully clear throughout the argument. The authors generally say very little about the type of society of which their study is supposed to apply. We only learn that they would like to concentrate on “differentiated,” “complex” societies, which are characterized by the existence of various competing conceptions of order that may assume the task of coordination in a given action sphere; and we may add that in such societies, conflicts of interpretation are in some way resolved through peaceful argument. Hence nothing speaks against the conjecture that the study *On Justification* covers essentially the democratic constitutional states of the West.

The three premises introduced so far define the theoretical frame, in which the study by Boltanski and Thévenot operates. Yet the unique achievement of the authors, their power of theoretical penetration and wealth of stimulating observations do not become fully clear until they give flesh to this skeleton of a normative theory of society. The two authors do not content themselves merely with a formal analysis of the discursive interruptions of social life; they are not so much interested in the rational conditions governing such arguments as in the moral themes and conflict scenarios that occur in the everyday life of our Western societies. The study is thus supposed to deliver nothing less than a comprehensive, empirically oriented analysis of all the moral disputes that may occur in the lifeworld of a society such as France. For this purpose, the authors have to tackle two tasks, both of which represent significant challenges: first, they have to attempt to reconstruct all the moral conceptions of order that serve as normative sources of social coordination in contemporary developed societies; and second, they have to gain an overview of the types of social conflict that arise from disagreements over the legitimacy of a currently practiced model of order. The greatness of their study consists in the wealth of empirical observations, hermeneutical speculations, and textual analyses that Boltanski and Thévenot undertake in addressing these two tasks; yet at the same time, the limitations of a sociological theory that seeks to abstain entirely from structure-theoretical stipulations come to light.

II.

Any form of coordination among individual action plans requires, so goes the authors’ thesis, a mutual understanding of the moral norms that are to regulate the legitimate expectations of the participants in the future. As we have seen, these intersubjectively presumed conceptions remain generally in the pre-reflexive background of perturbation-free interaction in the lifeworld. The actors only become aware of them in situations where the interaction fails such that a problematization of the hitherto tacitly implied convictions becomes functionally necessary. Boltanski and Thévenot now see their first task in reconstructing situations of this kind in order to understand the principles of social construction, to which normative models of order must necessarily conform. In addition to that, they would like to attempt to hermeneutically reconstruct those models that are of significant relevance for the maintenance of our social order today.

In the entire study, it remains rather unclear what exactly the method is by which the authors seek to determine the formal properties of the models of order that are practiced today. Without explicitly arguing as such, they are apparently convinced that modernity is characterized by certain normative principles, to which any conception of a legitimate social order is subject.⁸ This implicit premise becomes especially clear where the authors introduce the first basic principle of the presently influential orders of justification: according

to Boltanski and Thévenot, all models of legitimate social order with which we are familiar must comply with the principle of “common humanity” and hence prohibit egregious forms of disadvantage and exclusion.⁹ The authors do not provide any further justification for this precondition of moral universalism anywhere in their book; rather it is simply claimed to be an empirical fact about “our” societies. Here it would certainly have been necessary to say a lot more, structural-historically or social-historically, about how much such a universalist idea of human personhood is actually a normative precondition for the existence of modern societies. This applies even more to the second basic principle, which Boltanski and Thévenot ascribe to all order-conceptions that are influential today: in their view, all the prevalent models of justification of our time are defined by the idea that a higher social rank must be explained with reference to particular achievements for the “common good.”¹⁰ Even if the authors use rather confusing formulations (for instance, the “investment model”), this probably means that any model of justifiable social order is based on a principle of achievement or desert that normatively determines the place that members of society, who are in principle equal, should occupy in the hierarchy of social status: the more “sacrifices” or achievements a particular person or group of persons seems to contribute to the common good, the higher the rank that they should have in society. That this second principle should apply to all contemporary normative models of order does not only mean that different competing ideas regarding the nature of such achievements and sacrifices exist, but also, in particular that the notion of individual desert dominates the entire spectrum of justifications for the social order: in “modern” societies, all conceptions of what constitutes a legitimate social order are, without exception, determined by the principle that seemingly invaluable achievements are to be rewarded with a higher social rank or “greatness.”

In this way, the desert principle, without it being explicitly so called, is made the all-determining norm in the justification of modern social orders. Almost stealthily, the authors smuggle a premise into their study that is by no means self-evident and that would have required a significantly stronger justification. Just a glance into the empirical literature shows that members of Western societies generally tend to apply very different principles in evaluating problems of social justice: depending on which type of social relationship that is presumed to create a particular distribution problem, they resort to normative considerations of social equality, individual need, or personally invested achievement. Based on observations of this kind, the English philosopher David Miller has given his own theory of justice a pluralistic form:¹¹ in determining the moral norms that prescribe the just distribution of goods and burdens, a variety of principles shall be used, whose validity depends on the character of the social relationship in question. Now Boltanski and Thévenot do not intend to develop a normative theory of justice. As sociologists, they seek to gain insight into the normative background convictions by means of which the members of contemporary societies create worlds of practical commonality. Nevertheless, Miller’s approach cannot be entirely irrelevant for the authors, for he, too, refers to sociological studies and arrives at the conclusion that in the lifeworld today, other fundamental considerations beside the desert principle carry significance for the evaluation of the moral legitimacy of social orders. With regard to the study by Boltanski and Thévenot, this leads to the question of whether it is actually advisable to consider all currently prevalent conceptions of justified social order as shaped by a common orientation on the desert principle. The concerned actors do not seem to coordinate their actions plans by tacitly presuming a normative order under which outstanding achievement are rewarded by a higher social rank. Rather there obviously are equally as many spheres or types of relationships in which conceptions of legitimacy that have to do with considerations of individual need or legal equality are mobilized to the same end.

Here, too, probably only structural-theoretical reflections would have helped the authors in achieving greater clarity concerning their initial premises. Instead of moving directly toward a determination of the formal properties of contemporary conceptions of justice, it would have made sense to first tackle the question of whether certain types of social practices or institutions of modernity require altogether different principles of normative regulation than that of individual achievement. The fact that Boltanski and Thévenot do not even touch on such considerations can be considered a critical flaw in various other parts of the book. There the connection between institutional structure and value sphere, between social subsystems and their corresponding norms remains entirely unclear, such that one can easily gain the impression that the interpretative efforts of the actors were not subject to social-structural conditions.

After having identified moral universalism and the desert principle as the formal properties of modern conceptions of order, the authors now move on to providing an overview of their manifold concrete forms. Here one could probably expect a methodical procedure such as Charles Taylor has applied in the different context of his great study on the "Sources of the Self,"¹² in other words, a kind of historical-hermeneutical reconstruction of influential ideas about just social order in modernity. A still more obvious approach would of course be to empirically identify the currently prevalent conceptions of just coexistence, be it through panel discussions, appropriately designed interviews or questionnaires. But the two sociologists employ none of these methodological strategies; they neither strive toward a historical hermeneutics nor an empirical picture; instead they draw upon the history of political philosophy because they presume to find in its paradigmatic works the roots and prototypes of presently influential conceptions of social justice. A reason for this extraordinary approach is not actually given in the text, it only comes through rather implicitly in very few passages. One side note states that modern political philosophy has decisively shaped many societies of the present.¹³ Taking such passages together, the justification of resorting to the canon of political thought boils down to the thesis that all our conceptions of justice and social coexistence are, until today, importantly shaped by the great classics: by way of cultural tradition formation, one would have to add, certain ideas of the philosophical tradition are supposed to have shaped the everyday consciousness over centuries, such that the social justification of present cultures still essentially draw on past models of political thinking.

This thought is not without allure, even if it comes without justification and has extremely speculative traits. The authors surely do not want to say that the classical works of political philosophers as such provide the sources for the conceptions of order, through which we coordinate and justify our everyday actions today; such an assumption would cross the threshold of cultural idealism, according to which the social everyday consciousness would be nothing else but the archive of the intellectual history of times past. Rather, the thesis is probably best understood to mean that the consciousness-shaping power of certain works in the philosophical tradition was strong enough to create paradigms or archetypes, by means of which we today deliberate about possible forms of social justice through intransparent ways of cultural transmission: in such justification situations we do not, then, refer to works from Aristotle or Rousseau, but utilize argumentation patterns that have been explicitly articulated for the first time in these works and have since become common knowledge through repetition and diffusion. Yet Boltanski and Thévenot seem occasionally to waver concerning the appropriate reading of their theses: in some passages, it seems as if the quoted works in fact only illustrate certain narratives of justification,¹⁴ in other passages the tendency prevails to treat the same texts as the direct sources of our present ideas.¹⁵ For the

interpretation of the remainder of the study, only the first weaker reading is suitable, since it definitely avoids any trace of cultural idealism.

In choosing the texts that they intend to use for illustrative purposes in this sense, the two authors rely, of course, on criteria that they have previously identified while discussing the formal properties of contemporary conceptions of order. Thus, only such works of the classical tradition can be understood to be paradigm-generative, where we find a version of the desert principle on the basis of moral universalism that is capable of justifying a social hierarchy. Boltanski and Thévenot believe it is possible to distinguish many such foundational texts as there are clearly distinct measures of desert in our conceptions of justice; here they exclude neither the possibility that one could have named different classical reference works for the same ideas of “social greatness” nor that in the future, the sum of justice paradigms can be enlarged by other models.¹⁶ Given these parameters, the authors now refer to six historical texts in order to elucidate the justification culture of competing conceptions of justice: Augustine’s *City of God* founds the paradigm of charismatically inspired individual achievement; Bossuet develops in his works the idea of a domestic hierarchy, whose apex is the protector role of the household head; Hobbes introduces in his “natural law” the idea of a status hierarchy that is solely based in the degree of valuation by public opinion; Rousseau provides in his *Social Contract* the basis for the conception of a civil order, in which social greatness is grounded in the degree of representation of the common will; Saint-Simon sketches in his work the contours of an industrial stratification system that is entirely based on the individual contribution to the general satisfaction of needs; and Adam Smith finally develops in his works on economic theory the principle of a market economy value scale that gives center stage to the socially useful role of wealth.¹⁷ As stated before, none of the mentioned works is to be understood as the source of our contemporary conceptions of justice in the sense that we are somehow aware of their title or wording. Where the name of one author appears in the list might as well be the name of another if he has defended a similar principle of desert. The point of the list is solely that it contains philosophical works that have in one way or another contributed to the emergence of ideas on social hierarchy, which have not lost their normative influence until today.

Hence, it would be superfluous to criticize individual decisions about the composition of the list. To be sure, the selection of the names and works blatantly reflects the preferences of the authors who were educated in the French philosophical tradition; from an intellectual history perspective, it seems rather odd that Bossuet is quoted to illustrate the idea of a domestic hierarchy, given that in the neighboring Germany vastly more influential works that justify a patriarchal value system could have been found. Generally, the authors do not attempt to shed light on the partially obscure, partially obvious routes of influence, through which the mentioned works could develop their paradigmatic force. Not one word is said on their history of reception; not one glance is given to the attendant political conditions, just as if it sufficed for the ambitious undertaking of a genealogy of our contemporary conceptions of justice to merely present the main ideas of some classical texts. Yet the actual weakness of the list lies in a completely different limitation, not in setting aside the reception history, nor in the culturally narrow perspective, but in the absence of an entire class of works in political philosophy that are influential up to today: neither the political republicanism of Kant nor the classical liberalism of John Locke are mentioned, even though their principled egalitarianism should have at least the same significance for our contemporary conceptions of justice as the ideas of the listed authors. This gap at least should have made Boltanski and Thévenot realize how problematic their decision was to conceive all justification models of the present as anchored in a principle of desert. Beside the currently existing conceptions, according

to which our social order should have a hierarchical structure based on certain individual achievements, there also exist broad strands of a civic egalitarianism, as it is suggested in the seminal works of Locke or Kant. Setting aside the works of both these authors is therefore not due to an accident or mere carelessness, but it is the consequence of a reductionism concerning basic normative concepts, whose roots lie in a much earlier part of the study.

Now the six conceptions of justice mentioned are not just seen to contain the principles for creating different kinds of hierarchies, but they are also taken to represent the normative core of an entire conception of society, or even of an entire lifeworld. It is not by accident that the authors also call the justification order “*cités*” or “*community*,” which is supposed to express that they each refer to conceptions of an entire way of life, of a comprehensive set of norms and practices. Boltanski and Thévenot advance the bold thesis that the horizon of our everyday acting and experience is always determined by the categories of the conception of order through which we interpret the situation at hand: I see the facts of my environment in light of the normative consensus that regulates the relationship with my interaction partners in some sector of the social world. The scope of the consequences of what the authors derive from this thought only becomes fully clear if one realizes that material artifacts, too, are to be included in this morally constituted horizon: “For persons to be able to reach consensus among one another. . .” the study says, “the character of things must be determined in a way that is consistent with these principles of greatness.”¹⁸ Depending on which kind of hierarchy is pre-accepted in some situation, the artifacts of their action possess a different meaning for the participants: under a familial-domestic conception of order, so one might paraphrase an example by the authors, the table acquires the meaning of an invitation to dine together, whereas in the context of an industrial value system, it has the meaning of a work surface, or, in the context of a market system, that of a meeting place. Thus, we live as members of our societies in as many normative relations to the world as there are principles of moral consensus that we have accepted in our interactions. The actor who is reasonably familiar with the constitutive value systems of modernity is therefore permanently forced to competently move back and forth among six different lifeworlds.

It does not become clear in the study what has inspired the authors to extend their reflections on the society-constituting role of justification orders into a lifeworld analysis. The text itself sometimes refers to the works of Bruno Latour in order to make plausible why material artifacts have to be included in sociological analysis;¹⁹ but these remarks certainly do not suffice to justify why an explanation of the constitution of particular lifeworlds has to refer to underlying conceptions of justice. After all, this thesis is connected with the strong premise that the standard categories of practical philosophy suffice to explain the entire content of our relations to the world: whatever we experience, however we perceive persons, circumstances, and things, we do so through categorial schemes that are based on the collectively presumed conceptions of a legitimate social order.²⁰ This assumption is not questionable because the social environment is imagined as something that is always already given meaning through particular interests and projects. Boltanski and Thévenot will easily have been able to adopt such considerations from the works of Merleau-Ponty or the early Heidegger. What is irritating about our authors’ premise is rather that the “*readiness-to-hand*” of the world is supposed to result solely from the moral parameters that derive from mutually accepted conceptions of order. The pragmatic aspect of social existence is reduced to the dimension of the normative justification of the social order: it is not instrumental interests, not the need to control the environment or the intention of negotiating our existence, in whose horizon the world acquires meaning for us, but solely the deep-seated desire for a proof of the legitimacy of our societal institutions.

With this phenomenological or “transcendental” turn, of which one might perhaps even speak, Boltanski and Thévenot go far beyond what the classics of their discipline admitted as the degree of dependence between sociology and moral philosophy. The latter understood the philosophical categories that capture moral convictions or value orientations as challenges to search for corresponding phenomena in the structural context of societal reproduction – thus sociological concepts such as “value sphere,” “collective consciousness” or “action system” were created. In contrast, *On Justification* understands the categories of practical philosophy as direct evidence regarding the content of everyday consciousness, without making the intermediate step of translation into socially congealed structures. And these moral contents, the so called “justification orders” count then as a “transcendental” frame, within which the construction of different lifeworlds is said to take place. Ultimately, Boltanski and Thévenot thus view the social world in its different spheres as nothing other than the product of practices of moral justification. The difficulties that arise from such a one-sided privileging of moral philosophy show themselves in the permanent neglect of sociological structure categories and of alternative non-moral action orientations. Nothing is done to trace the precipitation of moral convictions in institutions and solidified action systems. It remains unexamined whether there might be other interests than moral ones, which move humans in their social reproduction. While the deficits thus outlined have so far only become manifest indirectly, they emerge more clearly as soon as the authors turn to dealing with crises and perturbations in the practice of justified interactions.

III.

The picture of social reality that we have so far gained from the study of Boltanski and Thévenot is that of a reality differentiated into many partial worlds, whose inner coherence of meaning derives in each case from the specific desert principle of the drawn upon conception of order: members of society are subject to the necessity of coordinating their actions through models of justified solidarity, they do this by resorting to an arsenal of justification orders bequeathed to them, and henceforth, they understand the thus legitimated context of interaction in the horizon of their common value conceptions. Now this picture displays, as Boltanski and Thévenot have made clear from the beginning,²¹ the rather unlikely harmonious side of societal events. Yet more frequently, we find situations that are marked by disputes and conflicts over the kind of appropriate justification for an interaction relationship. Only with the thematization of such everyday conflicts have the authors moved into the area in which the empirical research of their circle is for the most part located.²² Here we also find what they call the project of a “sociology of critique,” which, in contrast to the idea of a critical sociology, abstains from all normative judgments and is supposed to be strictly limited to the observation of actors who are capable of critical activity.²³ The entire research agenda of the circle assembled around Boltanski and Thévenot is thus founded on the idea that we always argue over the meaning and appropriateness of the justification models that we employ.

The authors make a first step toward explaining the nature of such disputes by distinguishing two interruptions of our everyday action routines. The consensus supporting our interactions may fall apart if either the conditions of application or the appropriateness of the norm system in question become problematic: in the first case, which is referred to as the “argument,”²⁴ the actors have to interrupt their routinized actions because one of the participants questions whether the jointly presumed justification order is really applied fairly and appropriately; in the second case, referred to as the “conflict,”²⁵ their interaction breaks

down because they disagree about which of the conceivable justification orders should be applied in the given situation. One can easily see that the authors transpose the philosophically familiar distinction between “internal” and “external” critique onto the level of everyday social interactions: in an “argument,” the participants mobilize internal criteria of problematization by asking for the appropriate conditions for the application of an already accepted conception of justice; whereas in a “conflict,” they apply external criteria by questioning the suitability of a previously practiced model of order for a certain situation. By means of this transposition, a theoretically very adroit move, the authors intend to make it plausible that even ordinary people in their interactions make use of the intellectual operations that are normally only expected from the philosopher or critical theorist. In our everyday practice, so Boltanski and Thévenot polemically contend, all of us are engaged in the business of normative critique even before the academic intellectual brings in his heavy artillery.

In order to show that “theoretical” critique is located on the same level as that which all of us practice in our everyday life, the authors must demonstrate that, in principle, their own knowledge is by no means superior to that of the normal actor. The project of replacing everything that sails under the flag of critical sociology by a “sociology of critique” requires a complete leveling of the difference between the two types of knowledge.²⁶ In the case of an “argument,” the first kind of dispute that Boltanski and Thévenot examine, this does not seem to require great effort: they only “observe” what happens from the perspective of the involved actors when doubts about the status hierarchy derived from within the framework of a justification order that is accepted in principle are voiced.²⁷ According to the authors, the means by which such disputes are generally resolved are discursive events, which they call “examinations.” This does not refer to the official procedures that regulate the awarding of education certificates, but the almost inconspicuous, daily reoccurring situations in which, relieved from the pressure to act, it is collectively asked whether the hitherto practiced distribution of status positions actually conforms to the underlying justification order. To each of these normatively regulated worlds corresponds a specific examination procedure that uniquely characterizes it, as the examples from the study make nicely clear.²⁸ Thus, within the civil order, the constitution of a parliamentary scrutiny committee has the function of resolving the question whether a representative, in light of rumors concerning his misconduct, has in fact the qualifications and “greatness” that he has been granted. Within the world of “opinion and fame,” the imperative of an intersubjectively verifiable experimental phase makes sure that a researcher has to prove his claim of excellence regarding his project. The specific characteristic of such examination procedures, as Boltanski and Thévenot repeatedly emphasize, is that the standard distinction between criteria of “correctness” and “justice” does not apply within them. Since the relevant testing procedures refer to material objects, as they are understood by the collectively presumed justification order, the “just” placement of a person in the status hierarchy must also depend on the degree of her “correct” manipulation of the objects at hand.²⁹

One might already demur that it would be negligent to exclude in advance the possibility of societal developments in which the participants begin to apply, either purposefully or unwittingly, normatively inappropriate criteria for the examination of social “greatness.” To be sure, we might all be equipped with a socially acquired “common sense” regarding what is the appropriate procedure for ascertaining actual ability and real achievement in a certain context;³⁰ normally, we tend to judge the politician based on the degree of his moral integrity and policy knowledge, the artist based on the force of his inspiration and the strength of his aesthetic expression, and the craftsman, finally, based on the degree of his familiarity with the material and his technical abilities. But even in these social spheres that are grasped relatively

easily, there are often enough tendencies to determine social greatness and achievement based on other criteria than those that are appropriate to the subject and normally used. Today we all know studies that discuss the growing market dependency in the evaluation of artistic creativity. Often it is observed that citizens orient their voting behavior on the media image of a politician and not his moral reliability. And again and again we encounter the claim that the determination of scholastic achievement is latently influenced by the evaluation of socio-cultural habitus. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot will not deny the possibility of such developments – the superimposition of alien criteria of excellence on a social value sphere. It is not by coincidence that they occasionally refer to Michael Walzer who has made the congruence of social spheres with appropriate internal criteria of distribution central to his theory of justice.³¹ Hence the question how the two authors seek to address such processes of transposition and superimposition is all the more significant. The study itself does not provide a clear answer. Rather it makes the problem disappear by pointing to the possibility of external critique. But in the examples just mentioned, there are no conscious processes of demanding a new principle of justification for a sphere that was previously regulated differently. Rather, we observe usually unintended developments, through which, behind the back of the participants, an inappropriate principle of social greatness acquires validity. Social analysis cannot simply be neutral toward such developments and describe their occurrence as a mere fact; for the arsenal of theoretical assumptions with which it sets out includes the thesis that every justification order, every socially differentiated value sphere, is characterized by a procedure for the evaluation of ability and achievement that is specific to it. But somehow, Boltanski and Thévenot refuse to recognize the inner normativity of their own conceptual toolbox. They seem to constantly make the assumption of a necessary correspondence between justification orders and the criteria of distribution, but then, they instantly deny it again. As if they were driven by the bad conscience that they after all do know more than the actors they study, the authors controvert what they have previously claimed indirectly: namely that every socially equiposed, intersubjectively accepted system of moral action norms possesses a specific criterion of excellence, such that a superimposition of alien and inappropriate criteria constitutes a process that a theorist would have to call an aberration or social pathology.

A different description of the problem that begins to emerge in the moral-sociological approach of Boltanski and Thévenot would be that they have the tendency to always quickly bracket the structural-theoretical assumptions that are at the same time necessary for their argument. In the present context, such assumptions include nothing more than claims that refer to the ability of intersubjectively shared norms and practices to create social structures in the form of institutions. In sociological analysis, we have to employ the concept of normatively regulated action “systems” if we want to identify the constant and temporarily constant elements in the permanent flow of change and innovation. But in *On Justification*, it seems that such crystallizations of normatively coordinated action based on convention, custom, or law do not at all exist; to be sure, the authors speak of “orders” of justification, but they do not take seriously what is contained in the sociological concept of “order.” This problem of simultaneously availing themselves of normative structures and denying their existence becomes even more serious when Boltanski and Thévenot begin to analyze “conflict” as the second form of dispute over justification orders. Here reins from the beginning a great confusion as to the question of whether such orders refer merely to mental conceptions and convictions or do, in fact, denote actual structural constructs.

As it has become clear above, by the term “conflict,” the two authors refer to societal disputes that do not concern the appropriate interpretation of a justification order, but the possible application of different justification orders to one and the same situation. The intersubjectively equiposed acting of the participants cannot only grind to a halt because one participant calls into question the hitherto practiced interpretation of the widely accepted norm system. Such an interruption might also occur if the interaction participants call into doubt the legitimacy of the justification order itself, claiming that it seems inappropriate for the given action sphere. Based on the number of pages that Boltanski and Thévenot devote to this second type of moral disagreement,³² they seem to assume that it constitutes the predominant form of social conflict in our societies. According to them, the main subject of dispute in the democratic countries of the West is over which of the culturally available desert conceptions should apply to which sphere of social action. Leaving aside that it is highly implausible to reduce the spectrum of contemporary ideas about social justice to such a foundation in the desert principle, this picture of Western societies is certainly not wrong. Many diagnoses agree that the transformation of the capitalist welfare states that is slowly becoming apparent is essentially marked by conflicts that have to do with changes in the normative grammar of certain action spheres. But even this empirical plausibilization contains more than is compatible with the descriptions of the authors, for they do not speak of a status quo in the normative constitution of social spheres. Instead, the study seems to operate with the notion that actors always carry out their moral conflicts under conditions that leave them free to decide which justification order they use to attempt to address the action problem in question. This strange voluntarism shows that Boltanski and Thévenot suffer here, more than in all other parts of the book, from not having a concept of normatively regulated action spheres.

The difficulties with this central part of the study begin with the fact that it does not become fully clear whether in moral conflicts a normative conception of society just collides with another such conception or with an institutionalized system of norms. The descriptions in the text mostly give the impression that the first possibility is correct, as if the proposal for a changed justification order just encountered the convictions of those who desire to maintain the established regime. Yet on the other hand, this cannot be the case since we have previously been informed that every established justification order constitutes an entire lifeworld and hence leads to stable habits of action and perception. The demand to change a normative arrangement hence does not just collide with mere conceptions or convictions but with habitualized practices that have become second nature for actors and whose aggregate condition is significantly more stable than that of mental states. This, in turn, contradicts the assumption, which Boltanski and Thévenot seem to make, that such conflicts may be resolved in the mode of “negotiation” or consultation. Again and again, they argue that after the phase of moral “denunciation,” both parties feel compelled to examine their arguments in order to ideally arrive at a compromise.³³ But how should such a normative attitude, which we can barely access consciously, as it has become second nature, be changed in a purely deliberative fashion? If the equiposed, tried and tested justification orders constitutes a self-evident aspect of the lifeworld for us, it will have more inertia than the notion of resolving moral conflict by mere negotiation admits. The authors entangle themselves in all these contradictions because they have from the outset neglected to sufficiently explain the concept of a “justification order,” which they have themselves introduced: if this term actually referred to regulatory conceptions, by means of which we reliably coordinate our interactions, then they would have the character of institutionalized action systems, in which role expectations, moral obligations, and social practices form a whole. To say that such constructs could be

changed like convictions by arguments alone would amount to committing a grave categorical mistake.

Yet the thus sketched inconsistency is not the only problem of the study, which comes to light in an exemplary fashion through the analysis of moral conflict. What has previously been described as a tendency to deny theory-immanent normativity returns here in a more pointed manner and creates difficulties for which a solution cannot really be seen. In the process of their analysis, the authors seem to imply that each of the six justification models can at any time and in any place be resorted to as the normative pattern for the proposal of a change in our interactive relationships. Regardless of whether the context in question is a factory, a private household, a hospital, or a political event, the participants are always supposed to be able to challenge the hitherto accepted social order by demanding a new arrangement based on some currently unpracticed ideas of social justice. In order to clarify what this would mean empirically, one only has to imagine a father who proposes to his family one day to organize the common household in the future according to the normative pattern of a market order, or a natural scientist who attempts to overthrow the work-sharing organization of the laboratory by suggesting the familial arrangement of paternal authority as the model for the coordination of the different tasks. The point here is not that such bizarre proposals and outlandish revolts do not occur in our social world. The question is whether social analysis can refer to them in a neutral way, as Boltanski and Thévenot seem to suggest. The institutionalized norm systems that were previously mentioned have not randomly formed around the core of certain functional spheres. They have emerged from practical experience that has shown over time that certain norms of recognition are sensible or appropriate for the handling of central coordination problems. Social analysis cannot simply abstract from the result of such normative learning processes. It must rather include them as a theoretical component into its own set of categories: the central functional areas of society then appear as action spheres that are not consistent with any arbitrary set of norms, but only with those that have already been proven as superior and sensible. That is, of course, not to say that any social task can only be accomplished through a particular regime of moral norms. The different action spheres that we distinguish today have shown themselves to be more plastic than the functionalism of Talcott Parsons wanted to acknowledge – today the family is subject to a transformation of its moral order, as is the world of industrial labor and public welfare assistance.³⁴ But the historical process of an iterative examination of alternatives has already limited the models of order that are available for certain action problems: within the family, we cannot anymore, without being regarded as obdurate, irrational or laughable, resort to the regime of patriarchal or charismatic leadership. In schools it would, for the same reasons, be absurd to demand a pure market order or to propose an industrial model of organization. Such limitations of the available normative options are not value judgments of the sociological observer. As normative facts, they belong to empirical conditions as much as increasing divorce rates or more individualized biographies. Hence Boltanski and Thévenot must not pretend that there are six equally available models of justice for all spheres of coordination among individual actions. Had they sufficiently acknowledged the implicit normativity of liberal-democratic societies, they would know that certain models are out of place for certain functional tasks, and that their application would even amount to a moral regression.

In some passages, however, the authors seem to wish to account for this objection. For example, in the context of the discussion of the community sense or moral sense, they say that it must belong to the competence of an actor to “recognize the nature of the situation and apply the appropriate principle of justice.”³⁵ Thus it is said exactly what has previously been claimed here, when the implicit normativity of a society was discussed: in the course

of our socialization, we have normally learned which justification orders have proven to be appropriate for certain classes of functional tasks so that we automatically exclude alternative solutions from the outset. The social theorist who describes such choices as backward or absurd only generalizes from the normative knowledge that he has acquired as a member of his society, insofar as the critique of certain undesirable developments is not formulated “over the heads” of the actors, but merely derives from the appraisal of implicit normative knowledge. Boltanski and Thévenot would certainly have arrived at this conclusion had they only taken the quoted passage to heart in the remainder of their book. But there, such a “moral sense” of the citizens is very rarely mentioned again,³⁶ and instead we are presented with the image of a normatively and completely unstructured society. The tendency toward the dissolution of the moral structures of the social is the danger that the study encounters on nearly every page. Only rarely does the justification orders assume the stable form of institutionalized norm systems, and even less frequently are particular alternatives in the moral arrangement of social situation already historically excluded.

This lack of acceptance of the normative constitution of society should not, however, seduce us into advocating for a return to the structuralism of Bourdieu or Parsons’ system of functionalism. The excess of structuration and internal moral logic that these approaches imputed to society necessitated a theoretical dismantling and resolute opening; it has been the task of the study by Boltanski and Thévenot to undertake such a decluttering and liberation, while retaining the primacy of moral integration – thus they have taught us to again perceive the fragility of normative orders and their constant disputation. But in this undertaking, the authors, one might perhaps say, have immoderately gone past the mark: where Bourdieu saw determining forces in the formation of social habitus, where Parsons only recognized morally one-dimensional action systems, not even the ruins of any normative limitations remain standing here. In this study, society appears always only as a field of social action, in which anywhere and at any time, all the different regulatory arrangements that derive from culturally transmitted justification orders are possible. Yet had the authors acknowledged the normative pre-structuration of the societies under examination, they would have realized that they cannot leave it at a mere “sociology of critique.” Driven by its own object, the analysis of society is propelled toward a critique of the forms of the social that it encounters.

NOTES

1. Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl provide a good overview of the place and role of this approach in contemporary sociology: *Sozialtheorie. Zwanzig einführende Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2004), 739–744.; See also Peter Wagner, “Soziologie der kritischen Urteilskraft und der Rechtfertigung,” Stephan Moebius and Lothar Peter, eds., *Französische Soziologie der Gegenwart* (Konstanz: UVK 2004), 417–448; Mohammed Nodi, *Introduction à la sociologie pragmatique* (Paris: Armand Colin 2006).

2. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

3. Boltanski und Thévenot, *Über die Rechtfertigung. Eine Soziologie der kritischen Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2007).

4. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 25.

5. *Ibid.*, 25.

6. *Ibid.*, 37–38.

7. *Ibid.*, 38.

8. *Ibid.*, 108 ff.

9. *Ibid.*, 74.

10. *Ibid.*, 66 f.

11. David Miller, *Grundsätze sozialer Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus 2008); See also my introduction: Axel Honneth, *Philosophie als Sozialforschung. Die Gerechtigkeitstheorie von David Miller*, *ibid.*, 7–25.
12. See Charles Taylor, *Quellen des Selbst. Die Entstehung der neuzeitlichen Identität* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1990).
13. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 72.
14. *Ibid.*, 105.
15. *Ibid.*, 107.
16. *Ibid.*, 103. In the path-breaking study *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus* (Konstanz: UVK 2003), Luc Boltanski together with Eve Chiapello attempts to show that the “spirit” of capitalism has begun to change since the 1980s, as its justification and normative safeguarding is increasingly based on a new model of order, the “*cité par projets*.” To the six conceptions of justification that were distinguished in “Über die Rechtfertigung,” a seventh is thus added, whose normative essence consists in linking desert to creativity, flexibility, and innovation.
17. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 103.
18. *Ibid.*, 193.
19. See especially Bruno Latour, *Das Parlament der Dinge. Für eine politische Ökologie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2001) and *Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007).
20. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 184 ff.
21. *Ibid.*, 36 f.
22. See for example: Luc Boltanski, Yann Darré, and Marie-Ange Schiltz, “La dénonciation,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 51 (1984): S.3–40; Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, Hg., *Justesse et justice dans le travail* (Paris: PUF 1989).
23. See Luc Boltanski, “Critique sociale et sens moral,” Tetsugi Yamamoto et al., eds., *Philosophical Designs for a Socio-Cultural Transformation* (Tokyo: EHESC 1999): 248–273; Robin Celikates, “From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique,” *Constellations*, 13, no. 1 (2006): 21–40; Peter Wagner, *Soziologie der kritischen Urteilskraft und der Rechtfertigung*, l.c.
24. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 187.
25. *Ibid.*, 188.
26. See the detailed and informative discussion in Robin Celikates, *Gesellschaftskritik als soziale Praxis. Kritische Theorie nach der pragmatischen Wende*, unpublished dissertation, Bremen, 2008.
27. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 188 ff.
28. *Ibid.*, 191 ff.
29. *Ibid.*, 56, 66, 183.
30. *Ibid.*, 201 ff.
31. Michael Walzer, *Sphären der Gerechtigkeit. Ein Plädoyer für Pluralität und Gleichheit* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus 1983).
32. See Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, Part Four, 213–275.
33. *Ibid.*, 337 ff.
34. See for example, Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family. Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press 1996); Robert Castel, *Die Metamorphosen der sozialen Frage. Eine Chronik der Lohnarbeit* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2005); Stephen Lessenich, *Die Neuerfindung des Sozialen. Der Sozialstaat im flexiblen Kapitalismus*, Bielefeld, transcript 2008.
35. Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 146.
36. *Ibid.*, 290, 305.

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What is the relevance of Luc Boltanski's 'pragmatic sociology of critique' to central issues in contemporary social and political analysis? In seeking to respond to this question, this book contains critical commentaries from prominent social theorists attempting to map out the influence and broad scope of Boltanski's oeuvre. Aa. Aa.Â 4 - The Moral Idealism of Ordinary People as a Sociological Challenge: Reflections on the French Reception of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's On Justification. pp 153-170. By Cyril Lemieux, Marcel Mauss Institute. After the "Theory of Communicative Action" the last grand sketch of a complete social theory based on the sources of practical philosophy " all this seems to have been forgotten. In any event, it could until recently appear that with Habermas's book the tradition of a normatively oriented sociology has come to an end. It is mostly due to the efforts of a small group of researchers in France " which assembled around Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot " that there continues to be a strand within social theory that employs sources of moral philosophy.