RAYMOND BOUDON’S FORMAL MODELLING AND ORDINARY RATIONALITY

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ABSTRACT. With the departure of Raymond Boudon on the 10th of April 2013, sociology lost an outstanding and unusual character. Explaining social phenomena entails understanding individual reasons; such is the main idea reintroduced in sociology by Boudon through the notion of methodological individualism. From his initial work on formal modelling of social phenomena to the theoretical elaboration of ordinary rationality, he kept on delivering a message of optimism tinged with voluntarism: sociology can under certain circumstances be a science like any other.

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With the departure of Raymond Boudon on the 10th of April 2013, sociology lost an outstanding and unusual character. A theoretician of “intellectual markets” (Boudon, 1981), he was alert to the consequences of this diversity for sociological production. A fervent supporter of the conception of “sociology as science” (Boudon, 2010), Raymond Boudon would constantly privilege the academic community at the expense of the general public.

The recognition of his peers came with the debates sparked by the publication of L’Inégalité des chances [Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality] in 1973. At the time, the work was unanimously considered innovative, in particular for employing the method of formal modelling. The formulation and development of the theoretical framework underlying L’inégalité des chances would only serve to amplify this initial recognition. A member of numerous foreign Academies (American Academy of Arts and Science, British Academy, Société Royale du Canada, etc.) and prestigious editorial boards (American Journal of Sociology, European Sociological Review, Revue Française de Sociologie, l’Année Sociologique, etc.), Boudon was elected in March 1990 at the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, taking the seat left vacant with the death of his former mentor, Jean Stœtzel.

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To his "intellectual family", reunited for the presentation of the Prix Tocqueville in 2008 or, a year later, of the massive four-volume Festschrift coordinated by Mohamed Cherkaoui and Peter Hamilton, he delivered a single message of optimism tinged with voluntarism. Sociology, he affirmed, can under certain circumstances be a science like any other. The classic and contemporary authors on whom he liked to freely comment and whom he helped to make known in France have long ago demonstrated, according to him, the capacity that sociology has to generate solid knowledge comparable to that coming from natural sciences. And therefore it was left for the young generations of researchers to abandon the scepticism manifested by some of their elder colleagues. His reading of Henri Mendras' work *Comment devenir sociologue?* [*How to become a sociologist?*], at once friendly and ironic, is illustrative. In order to convincingly answer this question, he remarked, it would be helpful if the author gave to his reader the impression of believing in the reality of sociology as a discipline: "Now, if the book does not answer the question it is because it is steeped in scepticism. (...) What is the use of explaining how to become a sociologist if sociology is such an elusive discipline?" (Boudon, 1996: 53).

This criticism of the ordinary scepticism of sociologists allows us to grasp Boudon's atypical dimension in relation to the French academic environment. This "empêcheur de penser en rond" [intellectual nonconformist] (to adopt the expression used by Jean Cazeneuve for his admission to the Institute) loved to swim against the tide. In 1964 he collaborated with André Davidovitch to continue the analysis of the criminal justice system initiated by Gabriel Tarde, the former magistrate from Sarlat eclipsed in France by the Durkheimian school at the end of the XIX-eth century. He laid the foundation for a simulation model meant to explain the rates of non-prosecution. A little later on, in 1968, at the moment of triumphant structuralism, he openly called into question the usefulness of the concept of structure. In his second thesis supervised by Raymond Aron, he asserted that the notion of structure only has a precise meaning in a few very strictly circumscribed areas of the humanities.

In the series of interviews given on the occasion of the creation of his archival fund, Boudon (2012) evokes how much Aron had influenced his career. It was through the *Centre de sociologie européenne*, directed by Aron, that he became initiated in field research, in particular during a survey on the miners in the North of France. It was again Aron that convinced the young *normalien*² to choose sociology, rather than economy: "I followed his advice, he remembered, and when it came to defining a subject for the thesis, I turned to Paul Lazarsfeld." It was once again Aron who obtained for him a scholarship to spend the academic year 1961-1962 at the Bureau of Applied Social Science at the University of Columbia.

² Student attending the École Normale Supérieure.
The time spent there will strongly influence his general conception of sociology, as well as, more generally, his scientific ethos. Sociological activity amounts to nothing, he would later persistently teach his students, unless it helps solve enigmas with regard to certain social phenomena. The force of the Paul Lazarsfeld - Robert King Merton duo, who animated the Bureau at Columbia, lies in focusing the methodological inspiration of the former and the theoretical inclination of the latter on social phenomena at once carefully circumscribed and little investigated so far, in order to unravel their mysteries. From Lazarsfeld he kept the idea that methodology, viewed as the thoughtful implementation of a critical mode of analysis, constitutes an essential task for the sociologist. The research group he created in 1971, once in the CNRS and before quickly leaving it for the University, is named precisely the Groupe d'Etude des Méthodes de l'Analyse Sociologique. From Merton he kept the notion of "middle range theory" developed to define the proper level of analysis for sociology. It appeared to him as an efficient remedy against the pitfalls of the great intellectual systems of the time, which by wanting to encompass too much ended up not explaining anything at all. In his intellectual autobiography, Boudon readily underlines a posteriori that "in effect, there is no difference between the middle range theory and the methodological individualism paradigm, in the non-utilitarian sense which I had to adopt" (2010: 13).

Methodological individualism... The unique situation of Boudon in French sociology has to do in part with the long-lasting ambiguities associated with this notion. Those who are developing today the fertile field of analytical sociology have with good reason learnt some lessons from this. However, they haven't forgotten what they owe to the man who from the beginning of the 70s suggested replacing the statistical study of relations between "variables" with the building of formal models which could explain such complex phenomena as the result of individuals' actions (Hedström, 2013).

The reflection on the sociological importance of formal models can be found in Raymond Boudon's work ever since 1964, with the occasion of his collaboration with Davidovitch, but also in the last chapter of his main thesis devoted to the L'analyse mathématique des faits sociaux [Mathematical analysis of social facts]; in the severe opinion of his advisor, Jean Stœtzel, this was the only chapter really worthy of any interest (Boudon, 2010, 2012). However, it only really reaches its full scope with L'inégalité des chances. As expected, the work begins by identifying a number of enigmas: Why is the inequality of educational chances so resistant to political treatment? Why does the reduction of the inequality of educational chances seem to have such a small impact on social mobility? Raymond Boudon admitted the plurality of factors that affect social mobility, but he emphasized the dominant influence of individual choices, and more specifically of the positional parameters connected to these choices.
If everyone is able to understand that a family of superior cadres and a family of manual workers do not conceive of social achievement in the same terms, the general consequences of the choices derived from these different conceptions of social achievement still need to be demonstrated. Drawing inspiration from the theory of reference groups, he elaborated a deductive model that allowed him not only to reconstruct a great amount of statistical data, but also to explain the inertia in the relationship between social origin, educational level and social status.

Explaining social phenomena entails understanding individual reasons; such is the main idea reintroduced in sociology by Boudon through the notion of *methodological individualism*. We cannot say anything about complex social phenomena without going back to the agency in human actions and we cannot say anything about these actions without inquiring into the reasons and parameters connected to them. For him, as Héran (2013) rightly emphasizes, “at the heart of behaviours there is always a reason, an interest, a conviction, a value system, the development of which needs to be grasped within the reach of man — exactly the opposite of an action of occult forces supposedly governing our destinies”. Even forty years later it is easy to sense what could make this idea seem heterodox in the age when the different varieties of Marxism and structuralism still reigned over the social sciences.


It was achieved again through his teaching and supervision activity as Professor of sociology, first at the René Descartes University (Paris V) and from 1978 at Paris IV Sorbonne, in the philosophy department. Finally, it was achieved through his involvement, with the profoundly liberal spirit that was his own, on the editorial boards of numerous national and international journals and in managing his collection at the Presses Universitaires de France (with François Bourricaud). Launched in 1977, the “blue” collection represents a significant part of the history of French publishing in the social sciences. His colleagues and students still remember the many books and covers exhibited in the hallway at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme that lead to his secretariat, overseen with firmness and graciousness by Jacqueline Lécuyer.
Claiming a form of “thematic nomadism” (Boudon, 1996), Raymond Boudon would put his general conception regarding sociology to the test by regularly confronting it with new objects of study. Among these “nomadic” works we should especially mention *L’idéologie ou l’origine des idées reçues (1986)* [The Analysis of ideology, Londres, Polity Press, 1989], *L’art de se persuader des idées douteuses fragiles ou fausses (1990)* [The art of self-persuasion, Londres, Polity Press, 1994], *Le juste et le vrai: études sur l’objectivité des valeurs et de la connaissance (1995)*, *Le sens moral (1999)*, *Déclin de la morale, déclin des valeurs? (2002)*, *Pourquoi les intellectuels n’aient pas le libéralisme? (2004)*. All of these works develop on the same interrogation with regard to the nature of the mechanisms at play in the individual and collective commitment to ideological, cognitive and moral beliefs. Their shared originality has to do with the fact that they imagine the process which gives rise to these beliefs as largely independent from their nature or content. Supporter of a symmetrical approach to beliefs, Boudon calls upon the sociologist to investigate the reasons on which the support for valid beliefs is based, but also, and especially those reasons — “subjective or inter-subjective” — which lead individuals or social groups to adhere to non-valid or normative beliefs.

These sociological studies on ideological, cognitive and moral beliefs would constitute just as many occasions to enact the critical analysis of contemporary forms of relativism (in particular in the highly productive field, at that time, of sociology of science), but also and above all, just as many stages toward elaborating a general theory of rationality. It is to this theory that Raymond Boudon chose to devote his latter works, most notably *Raison, bonnes raisons* (2003), *Essais sur la théorie générale de la rationalité* (2007) or *La rationalité* (2009). Once again indifferent to a French intellectual tradition marked by the Bachelardien idea of a radical discontinuity between scientific thought and ordinary thought, he named his theory a *theory of ordinary rationality*. He did this to remind that both are part of the same finiteness, of the same general principle of humanity. Another way of pointing out how important it is, in order to be true to his scientific ethos, that the sociologist remain within the reach of man

*(translated from French by Gabriela Boldor)*
REFERENCES


