

Lisa Knoll

Luc Boltanski. *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011. 200 pp. ISBN 978-0-7456-4963-4.

Lisa Knoll. Address for correspondence: Universität Hamburg, WISO / SoWi, Allende-Platz 1, D-20146 Hamburg, Germany. lisa.knoll@wiso.uni-hamburg.de.

On Critique is an interesting piece of work, wherein Luc Boltanski demonstrates his intellectual versatility and his urge to resolve the puzzle of social action (reflexivity and routine, critique and domination) and gives this permanent challenge in sociology a fresh impulse. The book chapters emerged from lectures in Frankfurt and Berlin. In these lectures Boltanski defended the theses of a pragmatic sociology of critique, developed together with Laurent Thévenot and Ève Chiapello—against Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology. One of the main puzzles to resolve is the discrepancy between a claim for everyday critical capacity described in *On Justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot [1991] 2006) versus the obvious historical decline in critique since the 1980s investigated in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] 2005). The challenge for Boltanski is to explain this astonishing absence of critique without falling back on over-socialized explanations, where people are dominated without even knowing or sensing it (125). His aim is to develop a sociology that may capture cycles of domination and critique, where the institutional order and its critique exist upon their reciprocal weakness (57). In Boltanski’s sociology people experience both the convenience and the inconvenience of the institutional order. Hence, the institutional order needs to constantly reify itself and declare its reality—or even its “truth”—against the unorganized flux of life and the challenges of critique.

The theoretical framework outlined in *On Critique* draws on the analytical figure of a permanent change between modes of action, first developed in *Love and Justice as Competences* (Boltanski [1990] 2012). It establishes four modes of action between peace and conflict and between regimes of equivalence (justice and fairness) and non-equivalence (love and violence). The focus in *On Critique* is on “three kinds of tests” (103): the reality test introduced in *On Justification*, the truth test, and the existential test, while the test of strength, introduced in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, has not been further elaborated. The following table integrates the four modes of testing.

Table 1. Four modes of testing

	Peace	Conflict
Reality (transcendence)	Confirmation Truth test (ritual)	Critique Reality test
World (immanence)	Love Existential test	Violence Test of strength

Sources: *On Critique*, *Love and Justice as Competences*, and *The New Spirit of Capitalism*

In *On Critique*, Boltanski distinguishes “reality” from “world.” Reality emanates from the requirements of institutions and institutionalization. In order to find common ground, people draw on something external, abstract, and “bodyless”—an institution (74–78). To fix this abstract common ground, the institution needs to be “realized” in formats of equivalence (e.g., the economies of worth introduced in *On Justification*). Reality, in Boltanski’s work, stands for the orderly structure of institutionalized arrangements, which allows classification and evaluation. The world, on the other hand, resists the control and the authority of reality; it is incalculable and confronts a rigid institutionalized reality. The experience of the world has an immediate, intuitive, and living character. In other terms, the concept of “world” introduced in *On Critique* helps to avoid the tautological picture of a reality that reifies itself in objectified formats (Knoll 2013) and thereby reestablishes the notion of uncertainty that got lost in *On Justification*.

The four modes of testing represent distinct ways of approaching the institutional order. Each of them reduces uncertainty in a way that causes “unease” (the term is from Thévenot) in another regime of action/testing. The test of truth operates as a self-confirmation of reality. Establishing truth against the possibility of critique is an enormous task that takes the ideal form of the ritual (81). The ritual establishes a self-reifying assemblage that proves itself to be true through mechanisms of tautology and through symbolic and material investments that defend the institutional order against inquiries from critique.

The reality test is much more disruptive. It opens up space for incremental or radical reforms by confronting reality with its own (incremental change) or with alternative (radical change) principles of equivalence. Still, the reality test, which was introduced in *On Justification* as an instrument of critique, in *On Critique* appears instead to be an instrument of domination (37). Here, the reality test is a bureaucratic and rationalizing procedure unfolding its domination via mechanisms of the economies of worth. Those who are “small” according to established testing formats (the shy, the poor, the unstructured, the boring, the rootless, and the unknown) will recognize very well that they are downgraded by reality more frequently than the “big.” This opens up a potential for critique, which may demand better/alternative formats of equivalence (reality tests).

In *On Critique*, the potential for critical inquiry emanates from existential tests based on experience. They hint at what remains unseen by narrow reality testing formats. Existential tests express themselves in feelings (e.g., shame, joy) and can be experienced collectively, but they lack the certainty of the metapragmatic register. They “have an aberrant character” (108) and can be rejected by accusing the ones who bring them forward of being “subjective,” “sensitive,” or even “paranoid” (108).

Finally, the test of strength was introduced in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* as a displacement that subverts critique and metapragmatic reflection. It is based on force, ignorance, and—in extreme cases—violence. The trial of strength reveals how far one can go without being accused of injustice. It is an aggressive

type of action that ignores the human existence and integrity of others. In extreme cases, such as war, force is set against force, and the “institutional order” but also “existential” lives are eliminated. Nobody knows what kind of reality testing formats will be established afterwards.

The puzzle that Boltanski wishes to solve is the permanence of the institutional order that survives critical inquiries. To answer his question, Boltanski discusses two power-defending reactions. An institutional order that manifests itself in truth and self-reification: historical examples are Stalinism and the Catholic Church, and “the managerial mode of domination” manifesting itself in permanent change (143). In my view, both modalities of domination are dependent on—at least—sporadic trials of strength. While this seems to be obvious in the case of Stalinism, it is less obvious for the managerial mode of domination. However, the dominating institutional order of the West is based on a rhetoric of necessity and change that does not suppose any alternative (“there is no alternative,” as Margaret Thatcher declared). Boltanski argues that the managing elites in Western democracies operate in a situation that turns down the demand for justification (129–149). The reality test, under these conditions, remains the domain of “ordinary people,” who are not exposed to the cruelty of the world market, which at the same time reveals their unimportance. Only “unimportant” people have the time to justify. The consequence is a situation of “anomie” (136), where only the fittest survive. Managerial elites solve uncertainty via trials of strength alone.

Boltanski, who is not willing to question the “lucidity” of ordinary people (125), has to explain the absence of critique in the light of this managerial mode of domination. His argument is grounded in the realism of ordinary people. They experience the consequences of the imperative of austerity; they know what “tightening their belts” and being “short of cash” means. The logic of austerity can therefore reify itself through the experience of daily life. This experienced reality leaves them unsatisfied but convinced, which, for Boltanski, explains the astonishing absence of critique. It may be asked if some additional sociological elucidation wouldn’t help to question the “nature” of the market and its inevitable facticity in order to nudge the manifold existential tests out of their miserable position. It would be indeed much easier to alter the institutional *construction* of the market than the *nature* of the market (Knoll, forthcoming).

From Boltanski’s work, I take that “healthy” societies (a normative claim) need a balance between four modes of testing. Sometimes, we even need aggressive trials of strength in order to get things done, and we sometimes need tests of truth in order to defend the institutional order against criticism. We need existential trials in order to live a holistic life against the rigidity of the institutional order and the aggression of trials of strength. And we need to rearrange the institutional order via progressive evaluation through reality tests, against conservative attempts at confirmation and against trials of strength. If one of the modes of testing becomes dominant over the others, societies may run into severe crisis. This implies bearing with uncertainty and recognizing its beauty. To me, this lies at the heart of Boltanski’s sociology of emancipation.

REFERENCES

- Boltanski, Luc. [1990] 2012. *Love and Justice as Competences: Three Essays on the Sociology of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello. [1999] 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot. [1991] 2006. *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Knoll, Lisa. 2013. "Die Bewältigung wirtschaftlicher Unsicherheit: Zum Pragmatismus der Soziologie der Konventionen." *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 23(4):367–387.
- Knoll, Lisa. Forthcoming. "The Hidden Regulation of Carbon Markets." *Historical Social Research* 40(1).