

Book Review

Luc Boltanski (2011) *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*. Polity Press: London.

May '68 continues to cast a long shadow over radical social movements. Then was a time, those who say they were there persistently lament, during which the radical imagination held optimistic sway, where the impossible could still be demanded, when the beach beneath the streets wasn't posited and pursued by Pied Pipers alone. Those days of hope are now long gone, dentured mouths lament, giving way to the pessimism of Generation X, the pragmatism of Generation Y, and the cynicism of what might eventually come to be known as Generation JJB. Emancipatory critique can no longer emerge, it seems, given what reality has gradually but irreversibly become. All that is left for us to do now, it seems, is to have a pint and a whinge and be done with the whole lot. A nice new pair of Nikes probably wouldn't go amiss while we're at it though.

Luc Boltanski knows only all too well how that once great populist spirit of social critique became progressively and eventually defanged. His co-authored *New Spirit of Capitalism* demonstrated in exhaustively depressing detail how the impassioned pursuit of alternatives to capital became the very basis for capitalist re-constitution, post-'68. Whereas that book took the evolution in business and management thinking and practice as the basis for a predominantly empirical narration of how critique has been co-opted by the representatives of capital, his most recently translated offering challenges critique's co-optation by capital along undoubtedly polemical lines. The book seeks to provoke action on the part of its audience – social theorists – to renew their links with the inherently critical nature of their vocation, on the one hand, and to renew the links of their vocation to broader social movements, on the other. Its argument carries weight beyond sociology, of course: herein exists an argument which Critical Management Studies (CMS), as well management and organisation studies more generally, cannot afford to ignore.

Summarily, *On Critique* offers a quasi-biographical account of a prominent tradition of French critical social theory, undergirded by the biographical significance of the events of May '68 upon that tradition's leading contemporary proponent. Against the romanticising nostalgia which serves to make frustrated epigones out of us all, and against the poisoned chalice of fatalism offered to us by *The New Spirit*, this is a book which re-affirms the possibility of critique as well as underlining the renewed need for it. Contextually, the book is based upon a series of lectures Boltanski gave at Humboldt University (on the invitation of the Centre Marc Bloch) and the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (on the invitation of Axel Honneth) towards the end of 2008. Politically, the backdrops of Thesis 11 and Critical Theory are entirely reliable scene setters since, over the six incrementally related chapters collected here, Boltanski demonstrates how he and his colleagues continue to inherit the legacy of social theory as social critique laid down within classical Marxist and post-Marxist philosophy.

Critique, Boltanski argues, *renders reality unacceptable* – it unhinges reality, disrupts it, challenging the very make up of what we take it to be. Critique, for Boltanski, is entirely indispensable to any emancipatory project – if there is to be emancipation then critique will have helped give rise to it. Critique is not the privilege of the intellectual, however, it is rather a term characterising worldly disorientation – a sense in which the world must be otherwise, accompanied by the development of a set of practices which strive to bring that new world into being. This understanding of critique is initially traced back to the application of the

Hegelian concept of totality into the realm of social theory, as pioneered within Max Horkheimer's celebrated distinction between Traditional and Critical Theory. In affirming Hegelian philosophy as a crucial resource for contemporary critical social theory, Boltanski situates himself squarely on the side of the interpretation of Hegel offered by the Left Hegelians and Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, and in stark opposition to those who would read Hegel as sociologically and/or politically counter-productive. Louis Althusser's name springs to mind as the most likely antagonist in the latter regard though it isn't once mentioned in the book. Nevertheless, the way in which Boltanski's understanding of critical social theory evidently breaks with Althusser's is not too subtly *implied* in the positive citation of Jacques Rancière's *The Philosopher and his Poor* (p. 23), as well as within his intentionally playful refusal to attach names to the conceptual schemas reviewed early in the book (p. 10-15 & p. 164). Either way, Boltanski is no Althusserian.

Neither, however, is he an unqualified Hegelian, nor even a dogmatic inheritor of the original Critical Theory project as laid out by Horkheimer. The specificity of what Boltanski has in mind when he speaks of critique hinges on how he believes the concept of totality is mediated by that most characteristically un-Hegelian of phenomena - the empirical existing outside of thought. And it is here that a familiarity with Boltanski's relationship to his former collaborator and greatest influence, Pierre Bourdieu, becomes indispensable. On the one hand, Boltanski situates his work as a continuation of Bourdieu's project of critical sociology. Boltanski, following Bourdieu, happily shares the sense that sociologists are responsible for the alleviation of social domination, and, moreover, that this responsibility is best addressed by developing analytically precise and empirically assured sociological descriptions. Where Boltanski departs from Bourdieu, however, is in his sense that Bourdieu was never very clear about what domination actually meant, the result being that he tended to fall back on a 'cultural dupes' understanding of social actors which accorded an unjustifiable degree of interpretive sovereignty to the sociologist. Rancière's argument against theoreticist self-importance hence applies to Bourdieu just as much as it does to Althusser: it's not only theorists that can think - it's not only intellectuals that can critique.

Denying to himself the sociological vanguard argument and refusing to abandon sociology outright, Boltanski's research programme homes in on the fact that individuals and groups can and do attach meaning to their actions, and that they do so in demonstrably divergent fashions. Consequentially, sociology should seek to understand the various ways in which individuals and groups operationalize critique - it should study how people put critique to work as a matter of everyday concern. Sociology hence becomes the name given to the concerted attempt to make socially prevalent logics of prescriptive justification and normative contestation descriptively transparent. The co-authored *On Justification* is the clearest demonstration of how such a project is to be undertaken, it bears the post-Bourdieuian 'pragmatic sociology of critique' banner with pride. *On Critique*, for its part, goes even further by making the emancipatory possibilities inherent within the pragmatic sociology of critique the very objects of its attention.

If emancipation is required it is only because domination continues to exist. Boltanski further departs from Bourdieu by distinguishing between two structures of domination: simple and complex. Under conditions of simple domination *oppression* rules the roost. Here, reality does not readily enter into critical contestation, rather, everything conspires to confirm the incontestable reality of things as they are already understood. Simple domination therefore functions through *the refusal of change*, often times through the application of arbitrary power. Complex domination, on the other hand, is characteristic of democratic-capitalist

societies and is defined by its *advocacy of change*. This is the world of benchmarking, evidence based-policy initiatives, audit and rankings – the world where everything is up for grabs and can be put to use. This, for Boltanski, is the world of management – the world where the dream of emancipatory change seems ever so quaint and dated. What, after all, is the point of emancipatory critique when everybody is always in pursuit of new realities anyway? What would a renewed call for emancipation even mean in a context when we have given up on everything other than the certainty of change and uncertainty? A contemporary sociology of emancipation must develop a critique of complex domination. Boltanski writes:

For the idea of domination to make sense, it must be possible to show that there exists a factor of convergence between actors dispersed in space, performing different activities, occupying very different positions as regards the institutional authorities, equipped with unequal power when assessed in terms of property and capital, but who nevertheless contribute through their action to the pursuit of domination (p. 143)

In other words, contemporary critical social theory must resuscitate the dominant social class construct in light of the prevalence of the mechanics of complex domination. The question of the dominant social class, on Boltanski's analysis, can no longer be reduced to questions surrounding the ownership of the means of production, as orthodox Marxism would have it, nor even to a question of *habitus* and cultural re-production, as Bourdieu's critical sociology had more recently said. Today's dominant class, for Boltanski, is the class of people who can pass out rules *and* transcend them. Under conditions of complex domination, the dominant class is the class which entitles itself to a double-relationship towards rules which it prohibits to the majority. On the one hand, rules are there to be obeyed – they are necessary. On the other hand, rules must be occasionally disobeyed, but only by a certain few – this too is necessary. The people that make these very calls, the people who rule over the rule-ness of the rules, the people for whom rules are both binding and unbound; these are the dominant class under conditions of complex domination. And for Boltanski, it is *leaders* and *managers* who are the bearers of this very privilege – they are the ones for whom the maintenance of structures of complex domination contains all the hallmarks of a vested interest.

And so management, the heroic innovator of the *New Spirit of Capitalism*, becomes the demonic villain of *On Critique*. CMS features in neither book, but there can be little doubt of the pragmatic sociology of critique's relevance to the ongoing critical study of management and organisation. Here we find a normative base for CMS, which has had no need to refer to CMS, as well as the demarcation of an empirical realm of CMS, similarly without any overt credence paid. This is a book which we should be reading, not because it is marked by 1968 but because it is shaped by 2008. Boltanski encourages social scientists to harness critique against contemporary structures of complex domination – CMS should continue to do so, only now, thanks to this book and the programme that it re-introduces, it can do so better armed.

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