

Boudon Reexamined

Nuts and Bolts for Contemporary Sociological Science

Gianluca Manzo (Ed.)



Boudon Reexamined presents a selection of short essays by leading scholars from several generations who critically engage and enter into dialogue with the work of Raymond Boudon. Each chapter focuses on a specific topic from his extensive writings. Readers will follow this intellectual trajectory through analyses of early correspondence with Lazarsfeld and Merton, his typology of sociological styles, and his contributions to contemporary analytical sociology, including the notion of middle-range theory. In addition to already well-discussed aspects of Boudon's work, namely his understanding of methodological individualism and the theory of ordinary rationality, the book also explores less frequently discussed topics, including his early interest in formal modeling in sociology and his understanding of the link between interdependence structures and social change. Included in the following pages are new assessments of Boudon's well-known analyses of the inequality of educational opportunity and intergenerational social mobility, as well as his lesser-known substantive contributions to the study of relative deprivation and his early dialogue with game theory. The book also outlines Boudon's study of classical authors, especially Tocqueville, before two final chapters conclude by examining how Boudon's works can be used to teach sociology at the undergraduate and master's levels. Our hope is that *Boudon Reexamined* provides readers with a fresh assessment of his legacy – how his work can be applied to conduct theoretical and empirical research in contemporary sociology, as well as to promote high-quality scientific standards for new generations.

Gianluca Manzo is Professor of Sociology at Sorbonne University and a Fellow of the European Academy of Sociology. His research applies computational models and social network analysis to the study of social stratification and diffusion dynamics. He is the author of *La Spirale des inégalités* (PUPS, 2009) and of *Agent-based Models and Causal Inference* (Wiley, 2022). He also edited *Analytical Sociology: Actions and Networks* (Wiley, 2014) and the *Research Handbook on Analytical Sociology* (Edward Elgar, 2021). More information is available on his webpage: www.gemass.fr/member/manzo-gianluca/.



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Chapter 1

A Short Journey Through Boudon's Work

Pierre-Michel Menger

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L'intelligence
du social

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by Pierre Demeulenaere**

The great books of the sociological tradition are either works of theory and epistemology or empirical studies structured by a profound theoretical or epistemological reflection. Émile Durkheim's first three books, *The Division of Labour in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide*, each fall into one of these three categories. This heritage represents an impressive growing legacy of authors and works that foster an understanding of social life through the formation of new concepts, models, and interpretations, thereby providing a pathway to deciphering the thickness and chaotic nature of human societies.

Gianluca Manzo (Ed.)

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A SHORT JOURNEY THROUGH BOUDON'S WORK

*Pierre-Michel Menger**Collège de France**Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, France*

In 1990, Raymond Boudon was appointed to a Chair previously held by Jean Stoetzel at the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques. At the time, the Chair was located in the Philosophy section, as was the Chair held by Raymond Aron in 1963. In 1999, Boudon joined the Morale et Sociologie section of the Academy where Tocqueville was one of his most famous predecessors. I was pleased to accept the opportunity to join the Academy last year, although I unfortunately arrived far too late to continue the vibrant discussions I had had with Boudon over the years.

During his time at the Academy, Boudon organized the conference “*Durkheim aujourd’hui*” to commemorate Durkheim’s birth 150 years earlier, where he presented the lecture, “The nature of religion according to Durkheim”. He gave two further public lectures at the Academy. One was on the issue of representative democracy, entitled “What does it mean to give power to the people?”, a burning question for our current political situation in France. Finally, in 2011, he offered his “Reflections on sociology”, by opposing two major orientations, methodological singularism and the holistic conception of society. He acknowledged the influence of structuralism, but he rejected any of its ties with the “false consciousness” assumption – in his words, “the idea that the reasons individuals give themselves for their actions are in principle illusory, which justifies ignoring them and attributing social phenomena to the action of social structures alone”. He also contrasted a dominant sociology based on descriptive surveys with a scientifically robust, but minority sociology based on quantitative work, a contrast that may still hold today:

Today, French sociology has largely abandoned the global visions of structuralism. Above all, it is highly diverse. Indeed, what characterizes all contemporary French sociological production is mainly descriptive surveys. They are sometimes instructive, but their scale is usually modest, so that they

are hardly distinguishable from those spontaneously carried out by journalists in the field.

Finally, the most interesting – if not the most visible – dimension of contemporary French sociology, the one that represents a distinctive contribution to sociology and frankly distinguishes it from history or journalism, is, in my view, represented by the quantitative surveys on which I have focused. They are of descriptive interest, but above all, they are of critical interest. They make it possible to correct the clichés marketed by *holistic* sociology, which attracts media attention as soon as it demonstrates a certain talent for writing. These quantitative surveys provide the same kind of service to the analysis of societies as CT scans do to medicine: they enable us to see what we cannot see with the naked eye (Boudon 2011, my translation).

In the 1970s and 1980s, book after book, Boudon developed a well-argued alternative to the deterministic sociological theory that had become dominant in France.

One of his influential contributions was a theory of social processes, elaborated in his trilogy *The Logic of Social Action* (1981), *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action* (1982) and *Theories of Social Change* (1986b).

These three books offered a completely new toolbox in sociology, including:

- a sociology of action and interaction systems, with game theory playing an essential role
- a sociology of change and its mechanisms, in which the reproduction of social order is a special case rather than a general law, and in which uncertainty and chance have their part to play
- the modeling of micro/macro relationships based on composition effects and emerging social phenomena that arise from the aggregation of individual actions and decisions
- the extensive use of quantitative methods and simulations, based on his previous *Analyse mathématique des faits sociaux*
- the formulation of paradoxes as a favorite heuristic device
- and to conclude this short list, the opening up of sociology to economics, political theory and cognitive psychology.

I should add his ethics of scientific discussion. More than any theorist in French sociology in the 1970s, Boudon would review the various existing models and paradigms when trying to solve a new sociological enigma. To this end, Boudon constantly refers to the founding fathers as well as contemporary leading theorists in social sciences: Tocqueville, Marx, Weber,

Simmel, Lazarsfeld, Merton, Schumpeter, Stouffer, Davis and Moore, Parsons, Schelling, Hirschman, Olson, Coser, Coleman, and Elster, among others.

What a pedagogical feast it was for me, in my student years, to learn how Boudon modeled various social processes from a wide range of aptly summarized case studies. Rightly so, his book *The Logic of Social Action* (1981) has been hailed by Siegwart Lindenberg (2013) as a perfect introduction to sociology.

The issue of education and social mobility was the subject of his famous monograph, *L'Inégalité des chances (Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality)* (Boudon 1973), which is by far the most cited in his entire body of work and remains actively discussed today. At a time when Bourdieu's theory made school the instrument for legitimizing the reproduction of inequalities and the social structure, Boudon built a completely different actionist and interactionist framework. His sociology endows the actors (students and students' families) with rationality under constraints, with unequally distributed resources, and with the capacity to choose and compute the educational decisions and investments to be made. Students' educational careers are sequenced and punctuated by tests and points of bifurcation, leading to cumulative and exponential inequalities of opportunity. Above all, Boudon highlights the aggregation effects of individual family decisions when growing demand for schooling doesn't match the volume and structure of jobs created by the economy.

As a result, even if inequalities in schooling opportunity are slowly but steadily decreasing, and even if credentials are playing a growing role in status attainment, the impact on social mobility is weak, as Max Weber prophesied as early as 1920.

This enigma is presented with impressive vigor, and its resolution is as simple as the paradox is powerful. The quantity and quality of jobs increase far less rapidly than the number of graduates: hence the defensive nature of individual educational investment, as noted at the same time by Lester Thurow, to whom Boudon often refers. This impressive argument is still valid, as I have shown in my spring 2024 lecture on education at the Collège de France, where I cited Thurow:

From the job competition point of view, however, education may become a defensive necessity. As the supply of educated labor increases, individuals find that they must improve their educational level simply to defend their current income positions. If they don't, others will, and they will find their current job no longer open to them. Education becomes a good investment, not because it would raise people's incomes above what they would have been if no one had

increased his education, but rather because it raises their income above what it will be if others acquire an education and they do not. *In effect, education becomes a defensive expenditure necessary to protect one's "market share."* The larger the class of educated labor and the more rapidly it grows, the more such defensive expenditures become imperative (Menger 2024, citing Thurow 1972).

Boudon also refers to a paper by Anderson published earlier, in 1961, that might have provided the first impulse to his view, insisting on paradoxical effects of micro-decisions in the context of educational investments rising faster than labor market "openings". Anderson's argument is that:

[A]s schools enroll progressively larger proportions of children and retain them longer, the correlation between schooling and later occupations can diminish over time. The influence of schooling upon mobility depends partly upon changes in the number of "openings": here we focus upon openings at the top. If children born in upper strata are distinctively capable inherently or receive superior training, there will be fewer vacated openings into which children of lower origins can penetrate. In dynamic economies, multiplication of tertiary and shrinkage of primary occupations plays a major part in alteration of opportunities (Anderson 1961).

Let me also quote Boudon's own words, taken from his reply to a critical discussion of his book by Alain Darbel (a statistician who worked closely with Bourdieu):

... the increase in the demand of schooling has to be analyzed as the paradoxical result of the aggregation of defensive strategies creating a prisoner's dilemma structure. Each individual seeks to protect himself against the effects of other people's demand on his own social expectations; but in so doing, each individual contributes to increasing the amount of schooling that everyone must obtain in order to reach a given social status, whatever that status may be (Boudon 1975, my translation).

A far-reaching consequence emerges: according to the Anderson paradox, social mobility remains stable or evolves *far less* than what the substantial impact of education on acquired status would promise.

To sum up Boudon's explanation, there is a persistent *mismatch between the schooling investment structure and the job supply structure*.

One could object that such a mismatch isn't static. Boudon finds that inequality of educational opportunity is slowly but steadily declining – nominally decreasing, I would add. Indeed, we also know that grade

inflation in a credential society is accompanied by an increasing horizontal differentiation in the returns on college education by field of study and a strong stratification of universities based on their selective admission policies.

Boudon said he was mainly interested in a minimalist approach to theorizing social stratification. To him, the paradox of a credential-competition generating social immobility was, at least at that time, of greater interest than a fine-grained exploration of trends in education or the changes in the structure of jobs. Replying to Robert Hauser's criticism of *L'Inégalité des chances* (Boudon 1973), Boudon lists the series of paradoxes he has been able to resolve, justifying in passing why theoretical work took precedence over the empirical foundation and potential re-elaboration of his theory. Here is the excerpt:

... my aim was to answer a set of questions not of the how much type, but of the why type [...] Given my objective [...], I came to the idea of building a model roughly describing the basic mechanisms responsible for educational and social inequality, to see whether it generated the "paradoxical" outcomes some of which are listed above. At one point, I thought of building a model fitted to French data, but abandoned the idea – available was only the partial observation of a single cohort, some aggregate data on the composition of the student body at some levels for some points in time, and some other partial aggregate and survey data (Boudon 1976).

Hence, Boudon's primary interest lies in explanatory rather than descriptive models, and his main quest is for simplicity in demonstrations.

He finds himself in good company. As he notes:

[D]escriptive models have to be fitted to data. Explanatory models may ultimately fit no data at all! and nevertheless increase our understanding of the phenomena they consider. A good example of this extreme case can be found, for instance, in Thomas Schelling's *Dynamic Models of Segregation* (1971), which Schelling has never made any effort to fit to any particular context but which increases powerfully our understanding of segregation (Boudon 1976, pp. 1178-1179).

Here, I would also like to highlight another facet of Boudon's work: his editorial role. Several of the sociologists and social scientists on whom Boudon relied were translated and presented to the French public in the famous book series *Sociologies* (sociology being in the plural), which he and François Bourricaud founded and directed. Any student who was trained in the last quarter of the twentieth century will happily recall the magnificent diversity of research thus made available. In so doing, Boudon was faithful to the early

stages of his career, which had taken him to New York to work with Lazarsfeld and become acquainted with North American quantitative social science.

I am less familiar with the second part of Boudon's work, which starts in the mid-1980s with his book *L'Idéologie* (1986a) and culminates in *Le Juste et le Vrai* (1995) and *Le Sens des valeurs* (1999). Previously, Boudon considered the rationality of individual action to be embedded in complex systems of interaction. Now, in his quest for a cognitive microfoundation of individual behavior, Boudon assumes that people, regardless of their actions, have good reasons for wanting and doing something. Interaction structures, feedback loops, adaptation processes, and unintended macro-effects seem to play a lesser role.

Boudon's challenge is to turn reasonability into a general force, in order to oppose theories that invoke unconscious or irrational motivations, beliefs, and preferences. His work then becomes increasingly philosophical, epistemological, and confidently rationalist in a broader sense.

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Boudon's new ambition was certainly to extend his theoretical research to political, aesthetic, moral, or religious phenomena, using the simple, unifying framework of an axiological and analytical cognitive sociology. This approach leads him to address, for example, the social justice dilemmas in Rawls's theory, or the issue of relativism and objectivity in science.

I note that in Boudon's cognitive sociology program, beliefs and reasons are ordinary guides to action, yet subject to multiple effects that can tip them over into what the observer would consider irrational, erroneous, etc. A list of these effects is drawn up in his book on *Ideology*: effects of communication, of position, of perspective, of disposition, of situation, of authority, to name but a few.

While reasons for action are affected by individual and contextual parameters, they are not, for all that, subjective, Boudon (1993) asserts. Given the variability of factors influencing individual reasons, Boudon must also find a way to explain the formation of collective beliefs, and do this without invoking unconscious mechanisms. He then argues that the reasons held by so-called *ideal-typical* individuals help define collective beliefs within a group.¹ This rather enigmatic argument highlights the difficulty of applying

1 The ideal-typical individual seems close to those abstract actors to whom economics refers to model the behavior of actors such as producers or consumers. The argument makes it possible to aggregate individuals and their reasons for acting to explain collective beliefs and behaviors. As Raymond Boudon writes in his book *Raison, bonnes raisons*: "Tocqueville always treats the collective beliefs he sets out to explain as the aggregate effect of individual beliefs, or more precisely: beliefs that the sociologist can legitimately attribute to ideal-typical individuals. Then, he

the paradigm of individualistic rationality, taken in a broader sense, to social groups – without sketching simple mechanisms for aggregating beliefs. This contrasts with his previous work on processes, which refers to composition effects. In short, good reasons for action are affected by contingencies that are difficult to parameterize, when their core rationality must be preserved.

At some point, Boudon (1993) admits that he does not in any way conclude that all beliefs must be explained by reasons. This may make his cognitive sociology more speculative than prone to the falsifiability test.

One constant remained in Boudon's work right up to the end of his highly productive career: his passion for what the best of social sciences, past and present, had to offer for his quest to solve enigmas. In his Pantheon, one sociologist stands out as his supreme hero, and even more so in the last part of his career: Max Weber. We have indeed many good reasons to place Raymond Boudon's inventiveness under Weber's aegis.

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postulates that restoring the meaning of these beliefs amounts to reconstructing the reasons that an ideal-typical actor has for adhering to them. In short, he places himself within the MRG [« Modèle Rationnel Général »] framework: his approach consists in showing that collective beliefs derive from an argumentation that none of the real actors may have ever literally developed, but which can in all likelihood be imputed to an ideal-typical actor" (1993, p. 67, my translation).

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ACCLAIMS

This remarkably well-structured volume accomplishes two feats at once. It offers a critical engagement with the multiple facets and contributions of Raymond Boudon's sociological oeuvre, for example: the modeling of relative deprivation, the generative approach to social stratification, the plea for methodological individualism, the analysis of unintended consequences and social change, the epistemology of sociological investigations, and the reflection on rationality and belief formation. Through this critical engagement – here is the second feat – this volume tackles substantive and methodological issues central to contemporary developments in the discipline of sociology, whether the focus is on formal models, simulation work, counterfactual reasoning, social mobility and its measurements, the significance of Rational Choice, or our understanding of processual dynamics.

Ivan Ermakoff, Professor of Sociology,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Without indulging in praise, this collective volume – bringing together 18 substantial chapters – aims to shed light on the enduring legacy of Raymond Boudon's sociology. It addresses a notable gap: the lack of a detailed, multifaceted examination of the work of one of the foremost figures in both French and international sociology. The reader will find not only an assessment of Boudon's intellectual contributions but also a critical appraisal of their limitations and the avenues they open for further research into contemporary issues. The book will appeal both to specialists familiar with the evolution of Boudon's thought over time and to those wishing to discover it, explore it in greater depth, or draw upon it for teaching purposes.

Gérald Gaglio, Professor of Sociology,
Université Côte d'Azur

This book is a splendid tribute to Raymond Boudon, one of the most important sociologists of the second half of the 20th century. The contributions, in their appreciative and critical aspects alike, clearly bring out the intellectual depth and challenging nature of Boudon's work and its continuing relevance in the study of modern societies.

John H. Goldthorpe, Emeritus Fellow,
Nuffield College, University of Oxford

This collection of papers, expertly curated by Gianluca Manzo, is as wide-ranging and thought-provoking as Raymond Boudon himself. It is sure to stimulate interest in a now-sometimes-forgotten giant of French sociology.

Neil Gross, Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology,
Colby College (Maine)

This Memorial Festschrift honors Raymond Boudon (1934–2013) by considering his contributions to conceptualization, theory, and empirics, as well as their associated methods, across foundational topical domains in sociology and guided by expert commentators. It is not only a superb assessment, and its value will grow in three main ways. First, like most Festschriften, it provides a portrait of the growth and trajectory of Boudon's ideas, embedded in his relations with other scholars, both teachers, peers, and students. This portrait will grow over time. Second, as the historian David Knowles wrote about the *quaestiones quodlibetales* of the medieval university (especially the University of Paris) and the debates held during Advent and Lent when anyone could ask any question of any master, Festschrift discussions are a valuable index to what is “in the air” – in this case both when Boudon was working and now. Third, Boudon believed in the promise of mathematics, and it will be possible to trace over time the progress of the $X \rightarrow Y$ relations in the book, as they travel from general functions to specific functions.

Guillermina Jasso, Professor of Sociology,
Silver Professor of Arts and Science, New York University

This book is not a hagiography. Unusually, its title truly reflects its content. Twenty-two sociologists from different countries and different generations take a fresh look at the work of Raymond Boudon. In keeping with his approach but without complacency, they highlight the theoretical and methodological contributions of his sociology, its limitations, its errors, its relevance for teaching sociology to the new generations, and the perspectives that remain open in several thematic areas.

Dominique Vidal, Professor of Sociology,
Université Paris Cité