

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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Foreword

Gianluca Manzo

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L'intelligence
du social

**Book series directed
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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Gianluca Manzo.....	7
---------------------	---

PART I

SCIENTIFIC PATH AND STYLE

CHAPTER I: A Short Journey Through Boudon's Work

Pierre-Michel Menger	17
----------------------------	----

CHAPTER II: The Transatlantic Circulation of a Sociological Scientific Ethos: The Correspondence of Raymond Boudon

Michel Dubois and Sylvie Mesure	25
---------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III: Types of Sociology

Filippo Barbera.....	45
----------------------	----

PART II

THINKING BY SOCIAL MECHANISMS

CHAPTER IV: Generative Models, Action Theories, and Analytical Sociology

Peter Hedström.....	65
---------------------	----

CHAPTER V: Middle Range Theorizing

Hartmut Esser	81
---------------------	----

CHAPTER VI: Formal Models in Raymond Boudon's Work

Lucas Sage.....	103
-----------------	-----

Part III

SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

CHAPTER VII: Inequality of Educational Opportunity:

L'inégalité des chances Fifty Years Later

Richard Breen.....	121
--------------------	-----

CHAPTER VIII: Inequality of Social Opportunity:

L'inégalité des chances Fifty Years Later

Gunn Elisabeth Birkelund	135
--------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX: On the Relationship Between Inequality of Educational Opportunity and Inequality of Social Opportunity

Louis-André Vallet.....	155
-------------------------	-----

PART IV
RELATIVE DEPRIVATION, GAME THEORY
AND SOCIAL INTERDEPENDENCY

CHAPTER X: Coleman's Problem and Boudon's Solution: Rational Choice Theory as a Tool for Sociology Werner Raub.....	175
CHAPTER XI: The Logic of Relative Frustration. Experimental Tests of Raymond Boudon's Mobility Model Joël Berger, Andreas Diekmann and Stefan Wehrli	193
CHAPTER XII: Boudon and the Extraterrestrials. A Generative Model of the Emergence of a Religion Jörg Stolz	219

PART V
METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM AND RATIONALITY

6

CHAPTER XIII: Methodological Individualism: Key Insights From Boudon and a Critical Discussion Nathalie Bulle.....	251
CHAPTER XIV: Dissecting the "Good Reasons" and Their Link to Rationality Pierre Demeulenaere	269
CHAPTER XV: Boudon on Tocqueville Stephen Turner	289

PART VI
TRAINING THE NEW GENERATION

CHAPTER XVI: Complexity from Chaos: Theorizing Social Change Emily Erikson	319
CHAPTER XVII: Teaching Sociology and the History of Sociology Fernando Sanantonio and Francisco J. Miguel.....	331
CHAPTER XVIII: Boudon's Legacy From a Teaching Perspective Gianluca Manzo.....	351
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	371

FOREWORD

Gianluca Manzo
Sorbonne University, France

It seems fair to say that Raymond Boudon (1934-2013) is among the most influential French sociologists of the second half of the twentieth century.

Although imperfect, citations are one possible indicator of this fact. A study of the reception of 188 French sociologists between 1970 and 2012 in the United States has shown that Boudon is part of the very small minority of French authors whose work has been cited at least once in the most selective American sociological journals. He is even part of the top fraction of this minority that includes the nine French sociologists who have collected more than 100 citations in those journals (in particular, in a decreasing order of citations received, Boudon ranks below Durkheim, Bourdieu, Latour, Tocqueville, and Callon but above Crozier, Touraine and Mauss) (Ollion and Abbott 2016, Table 3, p. 342). A more extensive study considering citations received by 346 sociologists of any national affiliation between 1970 and 2010 in top-ranked American and European journals in sociology but also in a selection of sociological textbooks, handbooks, and encyclopedias found that Boudon was, in 2010, part of the worldwide sociology's "prestige elite" constituted of the 50 most cited authors. He was the fifth, behind Bourdieu, Durkheim, Foucault and Latour, if one considers only the French authors appearing within this "elite" (Korom 2020, Figure 1, p. 138). The fact that 83 sociologists, philosophers, economists, and political scientists from across the world agreed to contribute to *Raymond Boudon: A Life in Sociology* (see Cherkaoui and Hamilton 2009) can be seen as a more qualitative indicator of the academic visibility that Raymond Boudon was able to secure during his academic career.

Quantitative data and content analyses presented in these three pieces of work suggest that Raymond Boudon's worldwide visibility arose from the fact that his scientific production was multifaceted, being at the same time theoretical, substantive, and methodological. On the theoretical level, Boudon progressively elaborated a theory of rational action whose goal was

to go beyond the theory of expected utility inspired by microeconomics; on the substantive level, he applied this conception of the actor to propose clear explanations of macroscopic phenomena in a number of research fields, such as the sociology of education, the sociology of social mobility, the sociology of values and beliefs, and the sociology of social change. From a methodological point of view, he was one of the pioneers in sociology, from the 1970s onwards, of the perspective based on generative models and the use of mathematical methods and numerical simulations to study these models (see Hedström and Manzo 2017). Boudon's constant dialogue with the classics of the discipline – Tocqueville, Durkheim and Weber, in particular, but also Simmel, Pareto and Tarde – enabled him to contribute to the history of sociological thought, too.

8 But Boudon's impact can also be approached from the point of view of his activities as an academic entrepreneur. He indeed constantly operated on an institutional level with the goal of designing intellectual places where his understanding of sociology could have a chance to incubate and diffuse. In 1971, for instance, he created, and directed until 1998, the Groupe d'Étude des Méthodes de l'Analyse Sociologique (GEMAS; renamed "de la Sorbonne", thus GEMASS, in 2009), a research unit of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), associated with Sorbonne University, which still is one of the central research units in French sociology. At the international level, he contributed to founding the European Academy of Sociology in 2000, of which he was the first president (see Lindenberg 2002); since 2016, the Academy awards the Raymond Boudon Award for Early Career Achievement to recognize excellence in the work of young researchers affiliated to European academic institutions. His election as fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1977), Academia Europea (1988), the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (1990), the British Academy (1997) or the Royal Society of Canada (2001) are also signs of the lasting traces that Boudon succeeded to leave in major institutions of the discipline in France and abroad. The creation in 2012 of the "Raymond Boudon Collection", composed of 81 boxes, occupying 27 linear meters, now stored in the French National Archives, a service of the French Ministry of Culture ensuring the conservation of documents regarded as of national relevance, can be seen as the latest tangible sign of the recognition Boudon received during his life (Zerilli 2020).

In line with this achievement, Boudon's passing on the 10 April 2013 was widely covered by *In memoriam* that quickly multiplied in academic journals of various countries (including the *Revue Française de Sociologie*, *L'Année Sociologique*, *Sociologie*, *Sociologie du Travail*, *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, *Revista Española de Sociología*, *Revista internacional de sociología*, *The*

Tocqueville Review), in major French national newspapers (like *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* or *Libération*), media (like *France Culture*) or popular social magazines (for instance, *Sciences Humaines*) as well as in professional association's newsletters (including American Sociological Association).¹ A series of journal articles in French (see the issues 56-2 and 57-1 of *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales* between 2018 and 2019), a monograph in French (Leroux 2022) and an edited book in English (Robitaille and Leroux 2024) were also published by some of Boudon's closest and longstanding French-speaking interlocutors investigating a selection of Boudon's oeuvre's aspects.

At more than ten years after Boudon's decease, however, a systematic assessment of his scientific legacy is still missing. A first attempt was made by Joël Berger and Andreas Diekmann who organized on 29 and 30 May 2014 an international conference (meaningfully titled "Conference on the Legacy of Raymond Boudon") at ETH Zürich. Unfortunately, the event did not materialize into a publication. In the fall of 2022, GEMASS decided to pursue the German project by orchestrating a new International Symposium with the goal of providing a systematic review of all aspects of Boudon's oeuvre. Under the title of "Engaging with Boudon: Insights for Contemporary Sociological Science", the symposium finally brought to Sorbonne University in June 2024 scholars from different generations; each of them was invited to engage a conversation with a specific set of Boudon's pieces of writing in order to assess the importance of the chosen dimensions for theoretical and empirical research in contemporary sociology as well as for teaching sociology to the new generations. The book that the readers have in their hands results from a selection of papers initially drafted for that conference².

These are organized into six parts. Part I ("Scientific Path and Style") begins with a chapter by Pierre-Michel Menger that provides an overview of how Boudon's scientific trajectory evolved from his early works on educational inequality and social mobility, through the elaboration of a general theory of rationality, until his late analyses of false beliefs and moral values. Then, Michel Dubois and Sylvie Mesure zoom in on various points of this trajectory by exploiting a portion of Boudon's correspondence, namely that which concerns his regular intellectual exchanges with Paul Lazarsfeld and

1 A selection of these pieces can be found on the GEMASS website: GEMASS, "Raymond Boudon – Member Profile", <https://www.gemass.fr/member/boudon-raymond>, accessed on June 29, 2025.

2 More details on the event can be found here: GEMASS, "27-29 June 2024, Engaging with Boudon: Insights for Contemporary Sociological Science", <https://www.gemass.fr/activity/engaging-with-boudon-insights-for-contemporary-sociological-science/?lang=en>, accessed on June 29, 2025.

Robert Merton, and show how this “intellectual friendship” was key in the construction of the distinctive “scientific ethos” characterizing Boudon’s entire work. Finally, Filippo Barbera focuses on Boudon’s articles where this “ethos” was programmatically elaborated and discusses the extent to which Boudon’s “style” is compatible with the project of a “public” sociology.

10 Part II (“Thinking by Social Mechanisms”) deepens the analysis of Boudon’s general perspective on how sociological inquiry should be framed. In particular, Peter Hedström focuses on Boudon’s pieces of work where he elaborated on the distinction between describing and explaining, and he forged the strategy of explaining by detailing the mechanisms behind the emergence of a given social regularity. Hartmut Esser reconstructs Boudon’s contribution to the development of the notion of “middle-range theory”, the distinctive type of theorizing within which mechanisms-based explanations are typically still designed within contemporary analytical sociology. Lucas Sage brings the discussion to the methodological level and show how Boudon actually implemented slightly different variants of formal models when, in three different early works, he had to study hypotheses about the mechanisms behind specific social phenomena, in particular how judges decide to drop a case (actually, an important but rarely considered piece of Boudon’s work), how family decides to invest in education, and how individuals decide to participate or not to social lotteries.

Part III (“Sociology of Social Stratification”) zooms in on the second of these substantive works, namely *L’Inégalité des chances*. Given the complexity of this book, three different specialists of the quantitative analysis of social inequalities dissect it, separately dealing with its first part on educational inequality (Richard Breen’s chapter VII), the second part on intergenerational social mobility (Gunn Birkelund’s chapter VIII), and the relationship between the two (Louis-André Vallet’s chapter IX). While they agree that *L’Inégalité des chances* is “a by now landmark book on the inequality of educational attainment and social status”, in Birkelund’s words, they also provide a balanced assessment of what it can now be regarded as wrong or outdated, given the most advanced methods and recent data in the field.

Part IV (“Relative Deprivation, Game Theory, and Social Interdependency”) shifts the focus to Boudon’s less well-known substantive analysis of relative deprivation (i.e. the third case analyzed from a methodological point of view in Sage’s chapter VI). In particular, Werner Raub explains how Boudon’s model illustrates the heuristic power of simple game theory to deal with the problem of the transition from the micro- to the macro-level of analysis, in particular when actors are embedded in complex structures of interdependencies that make it difficult to anticipate the consequences of one’s choices. Joël Berger,

Andreas Diekmann and Stefan Wehrli provide an overview of the studies that have elaborated Boudon's model of relative deprivation through various formal tools, and emphasize how the model gave rise to a lively field of experimental research systematically testing both the basic version of the model and more advanced versions of it. Inspired by Boudon's strategy of using simple game theory to design mechanism-based explanations, Jörg Stolz proposes to apply this strategy to formulate a possible explanation of ethnographic observations concerning the emergence of false beliefs ("ideologies", in Boudon's terminology) and rituals within small groups of individuals experiencing repeated interactions.

Part V ("Methodological Individualism and Rationality") goes back to Boudon's meta-theoretical perspective to deal with its most general backbone, i.e. methodological individualism, as well as with rationality, the topic to which Boudon devoted more and more singular attention during the last three decades or so of his career (Boudon 1989) being a possible starting point of this stage of his intellectual path). In particular, chapter XIII by Nathalie Bulle focuses on methodological individualism, systematically reconstructs how Boudon defined this notion over the years, and identifies (and explains the origin of) a turning point in this series of definitions around the year 2000. Pierre Demeulenaere addresses Boudon's theory of rationality; he shows how Boudon progressively conflated this notion with that of "reasons", and discusses the problems that Boudon had to face in his quest for a general understanding of rationality that would be able to capture not only how actors choose the means of their actions but also the genesis of the goals they want to pursue. By scrutinizing Boudon's reading of Tocqueville, Stephen Turner also formulates a warning against Boudon's ambition to explain every action through reasons, points out aspects of human experiences (like "tacit knowledge") that seems to resist to an interpretation in terms of actors' reasons, and emphasizes the centrality of interaction-based social learning as a mechanism of social life.

Part VI ("Training the New Generation") closes the book with the goal of delivering messages on how Boudon could be useful when teaching sociology. In particular, Emily Erikson re-reads Boudon's *Theories of Social Change* (1986), and advises the next generation to rely on existing computational tools to model systems of interdependency, and the unintended consequences of social actions rooted therein, that Boudon instead regarded as responsible for making it hard, if not impossible, to predict social changes at the macroscopic level. Fernando Sanantonio and Francisco Miguel consider a variety of Boudon's writings that Boudon himself regarded as resources for teaching sociology, and investigate the extent to which those pieces of work left a trace within recent books and handbooks in the field of sociological theory and quantitative methodology.

Finally, my own chapter offers a reasoned selection of Boudon's articles and book chapters that may be used to design a syllabus for a first-year, Master-level introductory course to sociology focusing on how to identify good research questions, on how to answer these questions through a set of well-defined research heuristics, and on how to understand sociology's diversity.

When considered as a whole, the eighteen chapters are clearly sympathetic toward Boudon. They show great intellectual respect to him; they are not condescending, however. This leads to an inedited assessment of Boudon's oeuvre where successes and failures are pondered in a non-apologetic manner. To the question of what Boudon's legacy is for today's sociology, the eighteen chapters seem to point to three main conclusions.

12

First, the Boudon of the late sixties and seventies, that is, the Boudon working on specific empirical macroscopic phenomena, creatively contributed to devise a distinctive sociological research style focused on the construction of theoretical models clarifying how interdependent actions can lead to unexpected consequences; this research style also includes the use of formal models that are not limited to statistical ones. This is an important contribution that seems durable in that it is now part of well-established research programs in contemporary sociology.

Second, the Boudon from the mid-eighties onwards, that is, the Boudon seeking to develop a general theory of human behavior, convincingly contributed to identifying major limitations of a narrow understanding of rational action, and delivered an important research heuristic for those interested in micro-founding sociological analysis (i.e. "Always think of possible reasons behind actors' positive and normative beliefs, no matter how strange these beliefs may seem to an external observer"). He failed, however, to design sharp research designs documenting that reasons are the actual main drivers of every sort of choice and belief. This remains an important task for a future generation of scholars interested in theories of action.

Third, the progressive emphasis that the "mature" Boudon put on the "actor" should not lead to overlook that the "young" Boudon was a champion of the analysis of the interdependency among actors; at the same time, even this "young" Boudon tended to see others in these systems of interdependent actions as "abstract" others. The interdependency of actions nestled within concrete structures of dyadic as well as higher-order interactions, i.e., social networks, was not central to Boudon's ways of thinking. This is another research direction that Boudon left to the next generation for further exploration.³

3 Interestingly enough, Boudon (2012, p. 18) lately seems to admit this himself: "Networks are today a popular topic of sociological research. But they are often

Needless to say, different readers are likely to read the book differently. Whether they agree or not with this assessment, the present book will reach its goal if, after picking this or that chapter, the reader feels motivated to go back to Boudon's original writings, to read more, and to develop their own view. After all, the present book was ultimately thought of as an invitation to read Boudon, and engage in an intellectual conversation with him.

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treated in a mere descriptive or mechanical fashion, while a connection with the Theory of ordinary rationality would make network research more fruitful, as many classical and modern sociological works suggest."

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: <http://www.gemass.fr/member/manzo-gianluca/>.

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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