

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.

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Chapter 3

Types of Sociology

Filippo Barbera

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L'intelligence
du social

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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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TYPES OF SOCIOLOGY

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Raymond Boudon, as Wikipedia notes, was a “French liberal sociologist”.¹ Concise as it is, this definition captures the essence of Boudon’s sociological profile – deeply in debt as much to the term *liberal* as to the term *French*. Boudon’s stance was more than simply analytical; it represented a political and moral commitment to the liberal tradition of thought, dedicated to protecting individual freedom of choice from external interferences. In the classical liberal tradition of thought, freedom means having the ability to do what one wants without interference and avoiding being compelled to do what one does not want to do. Accordingly, freedom is the absence of interference in one’s choices and will. Isaiah Berlin notably argued that in order to enjoy freedom of choice, each option has to be an “open door” that the agent can choose to enter or not according to her own wishes.² Boudon was arguably the least French of the great French sociologists. We might say he was an American in Paris. In his homeland, he always had to row against the tide. He was considered not abstract enough for the grand social theorists, too abstractly theoretical for quantitatively minded sociologists, not paying enough attention to the thick meaning of action for the qualitative ones, too focused on rational choice for micro-sociologists, insufficiently aligned with the weakest and subalterns in the eyes of critical thinkers.

This uncomfortable position is rooted in Boudon’s intellectual biography, as he himself acknowledged. Fascinated by the book by methodologist Paul Lazarsfeld, *The Language of Social Research*, which happened to fall into his

I am grateful to John Goldthorpe for his valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft.

- 1 “Raymond Boudon,” *Wikimedia*, last modified April 13, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Boudon.
- 2 “What Is Republicanism? A Conversation With Philip Pettit,” *Groupe d’Études Géopolitiques*, June 20, 2024, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2024/06/20/what-is-republicanism-a-conversation-with-philip-pettit/>, accessed on July 7, 2025.

hands in the *Rue d'Ulm* library in Paris, Boudon decided to do an internship at Columbia University (Boudon 2001). There, he absorbed from Lazarsfeld a commitment to rigorous, empirical research on social issues, while Robert K. Merton instilled in him a theoretical orientation toward middle-range theories. Merton encouraged an analytical approach that bridged empirical data with theoretical insight. At Columbia, Boudon embraced a scientific ethos that remained with him throughout his career: theory and research should evolve in tandem, and the sociologist's principal role is to offer robust explanations and precise descriptions of social phenomena. A conception of sociology well mirrored in his own words: "C'est pourquoi sans doute, une fois devenu sociologue, je me suis arrimé *au principe que la sociologie n'est faite ni pour séduire ni pour influencer, mais pour éclairer*" (Boudon 2001, p. 28).³

MAKING SOCIOLOGY MATTER

The explanatory aim of sociology is the focus of Boudon's succinct paper "Sociology that really matters". It is essential to recall the context of this article, specifically the *European Academy of Sociology's* (EAS) First Annual Lecture (Boudon 2002). To clarify its meaning, it is crucial to recall the EAS mission:

[...] the discipline's status has declined as well as its ability to attract talented students and faculty. To turn the tide, the sociological community must develop rigorous self-regulating standards that help the general public, policy makers, and prospective students to identify research and teaching programs of a high quality.⁴

"Sociology that Really Matters" is not just a paper; it serves as a cultural manifesto for the mission of the EAS, of which Boudon was the first President.⁵ The paper counts only 168 citations,⁶ while the Bent Flyvbjerg book – to which

3 Ironically, the critical orientation has increasingly dominated American sociology, aligning it more closely with the perspective from which Boudon sought to emancipate the discipline. Consequently, Boudon found himself both alienated from his own intellectual landscape and situated in a context abroad that gradually came to resemble the environment he originally aimed to transcend.

4 "European Academy of Sociology: Mission Statement", *European Academy of Sociology*, <http://www.european-academy-sociology.eu/mission-statement.html>, accessed on May 30, 2025.

5 Boudon's paper would be followed by John Goldthorpe's paper, "Sociology as Social Science and Cameral Sociology: Some Further Thoughts" (2004).

6 Checked on October 30, 2024 (Google Scholar), as for the other quotes and citation counts that follow this one.

Boudon critically responds from the very title of his lecture – has 10,006 (Flyvbjerg 2001). This is a recurring feature of Boudon's work: the analytical rigour of his scholarship has not been matched by a corresponding level of academic dissemination. In absolute terms, while being one of the most cited among European sociologists, Boudon is cited less than Bourdieu or Latour (see Ollion and Abbott 2016, fig. 3, p. 342).

Why such a gap? A tentative answer would be that, throughout his career, Boudon focused more on the theoretical foundations of the discipline, setting aside empirically oriented work. In doing so, he perhaps selected the wrong arena, or a dome with an unfit quality profile. The grand vocation of social theory is clearly at odds with Boudon's preferred analytical style (Van den Berg 1998). His relative marginality in the social theory debates is further evidenced by the stronger impact of his empirical work. For example, his key empirical research *Education, opportunity, and social inequality: Changing prospects in western society* has 5,768 citations, while his theoretical review paper on the so-called "cognitive rationality" model *Beyond rational choice theory* has 752 citations (Boudon 1974, 2003). A striking fact is the surprisingly low number of citations that Boudon's reply to Robert H. Hauser collects: 112 quotations for a piece that is – quite rightly – considered foundational in the mechanisms-based sociology approach (Boudon 1976; Hedström 2005; see also Manzo, in the Foreword of this book, § 2).

Substantively, the distinctive hallmark of Boudon's sociology refers to the development of explanatory, middle-range models connecting the micro and macro levels of social life. This is crystal clear in the fourfold classification that Boudon outlines in his paper, "Sociology that really matters" (Boudon 2002, pp. 371–378):

- Expressive or aesthetic sociology: a style that brings about emotions in the reader and mobilises an empathic understanding that resonates with her subjective experience. This is a sociological style that adopts the canon of literary works, certainly inspiring and useful in many ways, as Boudon himself recognises, but not a scientific way to explain the social world.
- Critical or committed sociology: a style that judges social arrangements focusing on power relations, domination, and exploitation. The Marxist tradition, the Frankfurt school, and the critical theory in its many forms are the most representative streams of this type. Its success depends on specific political conjunctures and resonates with the agenda of social movements, parties, and mass media. A militant sociological approach, driven by political objectives that steer sociology toward achieving social justice goals.
- Cameral or descriptive sociology: service sociology with descriptive or policy purposes. Its key aim is to inform public policy and provide

knowledge to decision-makers, while delivering robust descriptions of various phenomena of public interest, such as inequalities, poverty, and health determinants.

- Cognitive or scientific sociology: aims to explain different kinds of puzzling phenomena with the aid of explicit micro-founded theoretical models. This is the style that Boudon favours over the other three, and he places it at a considerable distance from the first two styles, which he considers as unscientific.

The four types share “fuzzy” boundaries, a point that Boudon notes *en passant* without going into the details: “The genres I have distinguished are ideal types and the borderlines between them are in reality sometimes fuzzy” (2002, p. 376). Walking on fuzzy boundaries is risky, and it should be done with great caution. To begin with, we should avoid over-emphasising fuzziness as an excuse for imprecision; rather, we must recognise that fuzziness does not necessarily obstruct the pursuit of precision, a guiding principle of Boudon’s work. As Amartya Sen remarked:

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I believe that boundary questions are sometimes taken to be more important than they are. Intellectual interest in these issues may distract attention from the fact that imprecision of boundaries can still leave vast regions without ambiguity. It is indeed possible to say a good deal about China and India without asserting that there are no ambiguities as to where the boundary between the two countries lies (Sen 1980).

At the same time, it would be misguided to obscure the problem of ambiguity with a precision that, instead of clarifying problems, only serves to get rid of the ambiguity. As Sen again states: “if an underlying idea has an essential ambiguity, a precise formulation of that idea must try to capture that ambiguity rather than attempt to lose it” (Sen 1992, p. 75).⁷ This is the narrow path that must be carefully followed to avoid fuzzy borders.

In what follows, I will contend that Boudon’s scientific or cognitive sociology holds a significant advantage over the other three types when addressing the questions of *why* sociology and *how* to conduct sociology. However, it appears less robust concerning the *what about* sociology questions, specifically regarding the rationale behind the problem of interest. I will first maintain – in the same line as John Goldthorpe’s argument – that while this

7 As in “On Rigor in Science”, where Jorge Luis Borges disclosed a project that was both ridiculous and useless, the concept of overly precise scientific maps, often interpreted as a commentary on the limits of representation (Borges 1975).

issue finds a compelling solution in the complementary relationships between scientific sociology and cameral/descriptive sociology, the resulting proposal still overlooks some important aspects related to the “problem finding” issue.

WHY, HOW, WHAT SOCIOLOGY?

About *why* sociology and *how* to conduct sociology Boudon’s position is straightforward. The *why* of sociology lies in the goal of explaining puzzling phenomena. Accordingly, the *how* of sociology refers to the micro-founded explanations of macro-level phenomena, namely to the theoretical design of explanatory models able to make sense of macro-micro-macro processes and outcomes. The *how* of sociology relies on the postulate of methodological individualism, which interprets social phenomena as generated by a combination of individual actions in a macro-micro-macro multilevel schema. This can be formalized in the following way:⁸

Let us assume the existence of any social or economic phenomenon M , for which an explanation is sought. M is interpreted as a function $M(m_i)$ of a range of individual actions m_i , which themselves are [...] functions $m_i(S_i)$ of structure S_i of the situation including the social agents or actors. [...] As for structure S_i , it is a function $S_i(M'')$ of a range M'' of defined data at a macrosocial level [...]. Explaining M_i means, in brief and in terms of the general paradigm, saying exactly what the terms of $M = M\{m[S[M'']]\}$ are (we can express it more simply as $MmSM''$) (Boudon 1986, p. 194).

How does the third issue relate to the *what about* of sociology? Namely, on what basis do sociologists select their topic of interest? The answer – that sociology studies society – is not acceptable in Boudon’s view, since society is a concept without an empirical referent, and a general theory of social order is a misplaced ambition. In his view, sociology addresses macro-level occurrences of various kinds, such as inequality of educational opportunities, patterns of social mobility, the persistence of magical thinking, the American religious exception, the tendency of democracies to evolve into oligarchies, the secularisation of religious beliefs, the gradual disappearance of moral taboos, and the establishment of the cult of human rights. As it emerges from the

8 This is the backbone of the analytical sociology research program (see Manzo 2021; Hedström 2005). I will not recall here the strengths and weaknesses of the macro-micro-macro canonical view that analytical sociology brings about (see Barbera and Negri 2015, 2021; Barbera 2021).

previous list, Boudon considers as legitimate macro-level *explananda* not just population-like phenomena, namely social phenomena made of entities with variable properties that exhibit aggregate-level regularities of a probabilistic kind. In this latter perspective, *why* questions such as “Why did President Chirac call early elections in 1997, only to lose his majority in parliament?” would not constitute suitable *explananda* for sociology (Goldthorpe 2016). On the contrary, according to Boudon’s view, non-probabilistic phenomena such as the triggering of the fall of the Soviet Empire, the dynamic of revolutions, the topic of regime changes, the mechanisms of scientific discoveries, and so on, are perfectly legitimate macro-level problems to explain.

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The question of “What about?” to study is tackled through a Weberian lens that emphasises the relationship to values and their significance in socio-historical research. For Weber (1949), the selection of the research problem is conditioned by values, but this does not hinder the possibility of objective knowledge. While the *selection* of the research problem is guided by the researcher’s criteria of value relevance, the answer to the research question must follow the rules of the scientific method and must be value-free. The researcher’s values make it possible to select that part of empirical reality that deserves, in the researcher’s subjective judgment, to be considered as relevant. This is the solution advocated by the neo-Kantian German philosopher Heinrich Rickert, whose methodological writings inspired Weber. In contrast to Rickert, however, Weber recognised the fundamental irreconcilability of different value spheres and the impossibility of building a “rank-order” science of values (Bruun 2001). Weber in “Science as a Vocation” reflects on the inherent conflicts between values and the “polytheism” of modernity, discussing how certain values may be revered not for their beauty or goodness but precisely due to the complex, sometimes contradictory nature of what society holds as sacred, beautiful, or truthful (Weber 1946, pp. 382–394). Polytheism does not imply relativism, however. The rational clarification of these values and their implications is possible: “Weber [...] argued that any value judgement can be rationally appraised in terms of whether it has been logically derived from a coherent set of fundamental values and whether the factual assumptions on which it relies are sound (Hammersley 2024, p. 90). Boudon’s view on the matter is fundamentally Weberian or, at least, in line with this interpretation of Weber’s position (Boudon 2014, 2017, 2000).

The so-called Weber’s “Nervi fragment”⁹ offers some novel insights in this line, which may help to shed a different light on this thorny issue. In a world

9 The so-called “Nervi fragment” was published for the first time by Hans Henrik Bruun (2001). See also Massimilla (2011). The fragment dates to the 1903, when Max

inhabited by dissonant polytheism, Weber asks, how do we know what is “worth knowing about” (*Wissenwerth*)? How can we establish the foundations for the *what* of sociology? Weber’s answer looks at those criteria of value that have cultural meaning and general significance for the historical time we are living in. This cultural meaning does not depend only on individual relevance criteria, nor on the puzzling character of the problem matter at hand. The “Nervi fragment” offers some key arguments precisely in this connection (Bruun 2001). The selection of the problems “worth knowing”¹⁰ – Weber goes on in the “Fragment” – must satisfy the interests of the historian’s public, which in their turn may have a near infinity of causes. “Value” (*Wert*), Weber makes it clear, does not mean anything more than “worth knowing” (*Wissenswerth*). Given that establishing a rank-order of criteria regarding what constitutes “worth knowing” is an untenable metaphysical assertion, the choice of *more or less* pressing elements or problems of interest must rely on a “principle of economy” (Bruun 2001). This principle entails prioritising the most urgent needs of the public in relation to the most compelling research interests of historians. In other words, the selection process is neither shaped by a hierarchy of knowledge nor grounded on normative foundations, but rather depends on the immediate concerns of the “public” while *remaining aligned with scholarly pursuits*. To sum up: “In Weber’s eyes, what ‘history’, in Rickert’s broad sense, should select as its subject matter depends on the interests of the historian’s public – and of those of the historian himself. These interests *vary* greatly over time and between individuals” (Bruun 2001, p. 149).

In light of the “Nervi fragment”, the relevance of the problem matter should not be addressed only in connection with the researcher’s individual relevance criteria or the puzzling nature of the phenomena to be analysed. This would not consider the role of the audience(s) (“the publics”, in Weber’s parlance) and that of the *general significance* of the *historical time* that, through multiple causes, shapes the urgency and graduation of the “what is worth knowing”. To address this issue, I will first argue that the “What about?” question is best examined at the intersection of cognitive and cameral sociology. Second, I will revisit a lesser-known contribution by Boudon, which offers a perspective distinct from that presented in his EAS lecture.

Weber was recovering in Nervi (Riviera ligure, Italy) from a nervous breakdown. The fragment discusses the notion of “value” and that of “value relation” employed by Rickert.

¹⁰ Socio-historical disciplines are in Weber not neatly separable, so when he writes “historians” we can safely read “sociologists”.

TO WHOM DO SOCIOLOGISTS SPEAK?

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The distinction between scientific sociology and cameral sociology in the third EAS lecture,¹¹ where he compares the relative merits of cameral sociology against those of cognitive sociology (Goldthorpe 2004). The key passage is: “While all sociological problems will entail puzzlement, the mere fact that you or I, individually, may find some social phenomenon to be puzzling is not in itself sufficient grounds for claiming that a serious sociological problem exists” (Goldthorpe 2004, p. 100). Goldthorpe, following R. K. Merton (1959), goes on to maintain that the justification for a problem may be connected to either knowledge or practice. In other words, this refers to the intrinsic worth of knowledge, as well as its potential to serve purposes beyond itself – the application of knowledge can make meaningful contributions. While Merton recognises that the existing equilibrium between fundamental and applied research within any discipline may generate concerns, he primarily emphasises their essential *interdependence*. He argues that, particularly in sociology, a well-defined problem typically embodies what he refers to as a “double rationale”. In his work, at the same time, Merton warns that the urgency or magnitude of a practical social problem does not ensure its immediate solution: “necessity is only mother of invention; socially accumulated knowledge is its father” (Merton 1968, p. 50). This notion highlights that in advancing the field sociological inquiries need to *simultaneously* address theoretical questions of middle-range *and* practical issues.

To this end, Goldthorpe emphasises that the descriptive power of cameral sociology serves as a crucial tool. First, the primarily descriptive role of cameral sociology offers scientific sociology a substantial reservoir of systematic data to help define the phenomenon to be explained (Merton 1987). This reveals the existence of the more or less complex social regularities that it is the task of scientific sociology to explain. Furthermore, description can itself foster the development of theory when grounded in advanced empirical observation and research methods. This is in the spirit of middle-range sociology, where

11 The EAS statement reads as follows: “The European Academy of Sociology is a fellowship of respected scholars with expertise in many different areas of sociology, united around the common concern to promote rigorous standards in sociology. The European integration necessitates the development of common standards of excellence, via various bodies of private and governmental evaluation and accreditation. The Academy provides a forum for the formulation of minimum requirements and its fellows are willing to offer their services for international bodies of accreditation and evaluation”: “European Academy of Sociology: Mission Statement”, *European Academy of Sociology*, <http://www.european-academy-sociology.eu/mission-statement.html>, accessed May 30, 2025.

theory, method, and research build on each other's advancement rather than following separate paths. Goldthorpe, drawing on Karl Popper (1957), points out that cameral/policy sociology provides valuable resources for theoretically informed gradualist, rather than "utopian," approaches to social engineering. This is because "application" serves as an important experiment or "quasi-experiment" contributing to the advancement of social scientific understanding through an empirical test of the theory. This supports the idea that sociologists who advocate for a scientific approach *à la* Boudon should be willing to engage directly with social engineering efforts,¹² even if it means confronting the technical and political complexities of real-world applications. This is a key point, which I will return to at the end of this essay.

The relationship between cognitive sociology and cameral sociology thus helps the search for a better balance between the *social* and the *sociological* relevance of the problem. This is key, Goldthorpe goes on, in light of the idea that a kind of social contract exists between the social sciences and society, where society provides resources for the production of sociological knowledge and research provides usable knowledge of some sort. Besides teaching and research, the two main pillars, the social contract between the social sciences and society, asks for the design and application of "solutions". This model, known as "use-inspired research", is in the so-called "Pasteur quadrant" (Stokes 2011). The Pasteur quadrant is named in honour of Louis Pasteur, whose scientific work simultaneously laid the foundations for modern microbiology and helped address important application problems in agriculture and animal husbandry. If research produces only an advance in basic knowledge, we are in the quadrant known as the "Bohr quadrant," in honor of Niels Bohr, a theoretical physicist considered the founder of quantum theory.¹³ The purely applicative model or "Edison model" is named in honour of Thomas Edison and involves an engineered solution to a problem (for example, using an incandescent lamp to provide lighting), without also advancing basic knowledge (electromagnetism).

In summary, in his EAS lecture, Boudon leaves the *what* to the researcher's individual relevance criteria and to the puzzling nature of the phenomena of interest. Cameral sociology partly corrects this by introducing a productive tension between the *social* and the *sociological* relevance of the problem

¹² To make it clear, I am thinking here of a "solutions-oriented" sociology well beyond public policies or "service sociology". I will briefly address this point in the final remarks.

¹³ Of course, basic research has indirect consequences for possible applications (in the case of quantum physics: lasers and magnetic resonance imaging), but it is not designed from the outset to produce these practical outcomes.

matter. In doing so, in an entirely unintentional way, I would add, it opens up to another proposal about the different “types of sociology”, that of Michael Burawoy (2005).¹⁴ This proposal identifies two dimensions and four types:

1. Professional sociology (academic public, instrumental knowledge).
2. Policy sociology (external public, instrumental knowledge).
3. Public sociology (external public, reflexive knowledge. Sub-type: organic public sociology, when the sociologist works closely with a visible, “dense,” local, and often antagonistic public).
4. Critical sociology (academic public, reflexive knowledge).

Burawoy asks: To whom does sociology speak? What kind of knowledge does it produce? (Burawoy 2005), pp. 4-28). Regarding the first question,¹⁵ both Burawoy and Boudon appear to recognise different audiences. This point is clearly addressed by Boudon (1981) in an older contribution where he distinguishes three audiences or “publics” to whom the intellectuals can address themselves. Type I public is based on “peer judgment” and it consists of the scientific community. Type II public is characterised by an “appeal to a broader audience,” composed of groups beyond the scholarly knowledge of the specific domain. Type III public is that of the “diffuse market.” Here, the intellectual no longer addresses the peers or some key specific groups but rather the “broader public opinion” (Boudon 1981). For both Burawoy and Boudon, therefore, sociology talks to several possible audiences beyond academia, such as social movements, unions, political parties, civic organisations, territorial communities, professional associations, complex organisations, and firms. It also addresses the expert knowledge of journalists, media professionals, and technologists, as well as talking to ordinary individuals in their daily lives.

The position Boudon endorses in his 1981 paper is quite different from the one he defends in his EAS lecture, where he seems more sceptical about the integration of the different sociological styles in relation to different kinds of audiences. In the 1981 paper, he cites Michel Crozier, who wrote some books for Public I, the global academic community, and others for Public II, consisting of the French political, economic, and cultural spheres. He even cites Michel Foucault, who, in some of his works, simultaneously engaged Public I, while addressing Public II’s professionals of the prison and asylum

¹⁴ Without going into the details of Burawoy’s well-known typology, I emphasise only two points. The fundamenta of the typology are more defined and the paper from which it originated had a much wider circulation than Boudon’s (3977 quotations, Google Scholar).

¹⁵ I shall consider the second dimension (instrumental vs. reflexive knowledge) in the final remarks.

systems, and even Public III, as public opinion became inflamed by the issue of “confinement”. His judgement of Foucault is much more trenchant in his EAS lecture (Boudon 2002, p. 377).

In the EAS lecture, Boudon is much more sceptical. For instance, expressive sociology, he states, successfully speaks to outside audiences because it adopts an *essayistic style* that resonates with everyday life and that feeds the need for meaning of lay members of society. One of Boudon’s examples is the work of Erving Goffman: “His appeal seemed to lie, *not in his scientific merit* but in his literary powers. He won his audience through his powerful descriptions of the hypocrisy of social life, and his books sold in numbers more typical of literary *than scientific work*” (Boudon 2002, p. 372, emphasis added). I consider this as a misplaced case-in-point. Some of Goffman’s contributions might actually fall into this category (notably *Asylum* and *Stigma*), but many others – I would say the majority – do not. I wonder how one would ever feel any kind of emphatic understanding while reading *Frame Analysis*. Similarly, I fail to see any kind of literary and expressive canon in Goffman’s *Interaction Ritual*.

As Boudon himself acknowledged in his 1981 paper, *essayism* has two rather different faces. The first face is a footloose or “unconstrained” type, built just on literary style and expressive – if not seductive – evocations and storytelling. Novelists have far greater success than sociologists in this regard, especially when daily life is concerned (as readers of Rachel Cusk know well). The second is what we might refer to as “constrained essayism”, which *binds* itself to the insights of social research and translates them for a plurality of audiences beyond scholars and policymakers. I am thinking here of the public success that economists have had with this kind of constrained essayism, from Thomas Piketty, to Mariana Mazzucato, to Angus Deaton, to Joseph Stiglitz, to Amartya Sen, to Tony Atkinson, to Kate Raworth.¹⁶ Not to mention anthropologists (David Graeber), urban planners (Carlos Moreno), and psychologists (Jonathan Haidt). Public essayism has certainly a world-making quality (Savage 2024), but – as aptly noted by John Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe, forthcoming) – only if supported by rock-solid descriptions and sound explanations. Constrained essayism of this kind enhances the public value of the discipline and helps to fight the pernicious Gresham’s law of public communication, whereby in the media unconstrained essayism drives out the constrained one. We should never underestimate the power of a bad idea. Not all kinds of sociological research lend themselves to constrained essayism,

¹⁶ A further implication is that “sociological correspondents”, comparable to the “economics correspondents” in the media, are rarer, especially if well-trained in the discipline.

however. Only those researchers that have addressed – as in the case of cameral sociology – topics equipped with *social* and not just *sociological* relevance might attempt to pursue this aim.

The kind of constrained essays of social sciences *other than sociology* seems to have this point much clearer. Economists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, and historians do rigorous research on “wicked problems” or “societal challenges”, namely those problems that resist solutions and that involve complex, multidimensional societal challenges on different scales and levels.¹⁷ They then translate their findings into cultural products for a wider audience and a variety of publics. It is entirely possible, and indeed urgent, for analytically-oriented sociologists to adopt this approach: namely, to work with middle-range theories, models, and mechanisms on wicked problems and societal challenges of *general concerns* for a *variety of publics* and audiences.¹⁸

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This stance should not be confused with the most radical form of public sociology from Burawoy’s typology, which aligns with Boudon’s critical sociology – namely, organic public sociology. I do not defend the idea that the selection of the research problem should be done on the basis of a *political positioning* of the discipline in privileged, if not exclusive, contact with a visible, dense, local, and often antagonistic public of a leftist kind. This answer would radically wipe out the *sociological* dimension in favour of the *social* one. This is a weak response and one that harms both the scientific and public vocation of sociology. How many sociologists have been drawn away from the world of politics due to a committed call of organic public sociology? And with what consequences for the quality of the political class? And how many promising, budding sociologists have been driven away by the discipline’s overly normative stance, only to end up in the fields of economics or demography? I thus concur with Turner, who wrote that if opting for organic public sociology: “Sociology will no longer be considered a science worthy of much attention inside and outside of academia, except by students hungry for a critical approach to the study of society” (Turner 2019). Turner warns that if sociology positions itself primarily as a political project rather than a scientific endeavor, it risks forfeiting its ability to apply its rich body of knowledge to address the practical challenges faced by various organizations (Turner 2019). Moreover, to complement this

17 Solving these problems is not conceivable through a technocratic, top-down approach, but calls for consensus-building mechanisms, trust and legitimacy to innovate in conditions of radical uncertainty: see Alford and Head (2017).

18 For example, nearly three decades ago, Gramling and Freudenberg (1996) urged that greater attention be given to middle-range efforts in environmental sociology. However, environmental sociology’s contributions have often been overlooked in favor of the ongoing quest for overarching, grand theories (Hannigan 2024).

point, whoever defends the organic public sociology posture has to be ready to accept that the politicisation of sociology could be taken over by rightwing scholars. Leftist scholars should not delude themselves into thinking they can effortlessly maintain a monopoly over a politicised field.

CONCLUSIONS

I argued that a journey at the fuzzy intersections of Boudon's types of sociology might help to make sense of the double rationale of social research, as illustrated by Goldthorpe in his third EAS lecture. I then maintained that this highlights the relevance of multiple audiences in selecting the research problem to address, as in Weber's "Nervi's fragment" and in connection to Burawoy's typology. I emphasised a difference between Boudon's EAS lecture and his earlier work. This difference should not be overstated, however, for in both papers Boudon argues that the diversity of sociology audiences lies fundamentally in the demand for different kinds of sociology. Accordingly, my educated guess is that, in the '80s, he still believed that this demand was balanced, and allowed the co-existence and perhaps synergy of these different sociologies. In the final pages of his EAS lecture, a different tone or feeling seems to emerge – perhaps, justifiably so, for what Boudon might call "good reasons", invoking one of his preferred analytical categories that refers to the rational grounds individuals may have for their beliefs or actions, even when these do not align with objective truth. Although I believe that the posture taken in the EAS lecture is not the most useful for "making sociology matter", I have argued that *organic* public sociology is not the approach to follow either.

To conclude, if we are to enhance the public value of sociology, I see no reason – unlike Burawoy – to equate policy sociology with instrumental knowledge for policymakers, and public sociology with reflexive knowledge for ordinary people and social movements. Sociology can provide both instrumental *and* reflexive knowledge on public problems *and* policy issues. I would therefore defend the idea that sociologists can provide applied solutions¹⁹ or "piecemeal social engineering" of various kinds that reflexively enhance the public value of the discipline while being engaged in *solving real-world wicked problems* (Goldthorpe 2004, p. 99). For instance, Manzo and de Rijt (2020) show how targeting "hubs" robustly improves containment of SARS-CoV-2, while Sabel

19 A solutions-oriented sociology has key analytical consequences also for professional sociology. As Watts (2017) argued, one possible way out from the theoretical incoherency problem of sociology is to reject the traditional distinction between basic and applied science.

and Victor illustrate that an experimentalist approach can effectively meet the challenge of climate change. I would argue that pursuing this approach would strengthen the public legitimacy of the discipline far more effectively than relying solely on narratives shaped by the *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the times. Providing means-end solutions – while reflexively eliciting different reactions to current problems to generate novel possibilities of action – is a rather different endeavour than narratively buffering meaning that resonates with mundane experience and collective concerns. Again, this kind of solutions-oriented social science falls into Pasteur’s quadrant: use-inspired research that advances fundamental understanding and is distinct from Bohr’s quadrant (traditional basic research) and Edison’s quadrant (traditional applied research). A solutions-oriented sociology of this kind would help social science to be more visibly useful to the world, thereby improving its status with an increasingly sceptical public (Watts 2017).

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In parallel, I would defend the idea that policy sociology greatly benefits from promoting reflexivity in public policies and, more broadly, in the operational design and management of applied solutions. This approach broadens – both analytically operationally – the perimeter, scope, actors, viewpoints, interests and quality conventions at stake in the policy domain or the substantive process or outcome of interest. As Sandro Busso (2023, p. 260; see also Barbera, 2025) notes, this is a task that concerns “the perimeter of actors involved and with their public role, and consists in creating the conditions for the recognition of a *plurality of voices*, including that of the poor” (emphasis added). Reflexive and instrumental knowledge are tightly intertwined here, as deliberate attempts may be made to subvert or counter the intervention by individuals who see it as being contrary to their interests and objectives (Goldthorpe, forthcoming). Resistance to applied interventions can gradually manifest as organised dissent and conflict at the political level concerning priorities and goals, thus questioning what is worthwhile and eventually nurturing visions and aspirations of marginal groups while squeezing those belonging to vested interests. Sociology is crucial in analysing the potential for such developments and understanding the limitations that may affect applied knowledge, whether in public policies or other settings. From this standpoint, sociology can provide insights into the interplay between piecemeal solutions, theoretical advancements and broader political discourse.

I have argued that a discussion of the different kinds of sociology forces us to consider the importance of middle-range theories applied to research problems of public relevance, the selection and identification of which calls into question the public value of sociology. Such middle-range theories must deal with a multiplicity of target audiences and with *their* relevance principles.

This orientation requires a multiplicity of criteria to assess the merits of different types of sociology. These criteria may not be commensurable with each other and, therefore, may impede a hierarchical ordering of the different types of sociology in terms of their distance from some benchmark, as Boudon seemed to do in this EAS lecture and quite differently from his 1981 paper. That is, the relevance criteria for different types of sociology are heterarchical and do not adhere to a single metric (Stark 2011). Appreciating the *Mona Lisa* in a particular way does not help one choose between a Dalí or a Picasso. This requires the professional habit of thinking with criteria that can only partially order the world. The ambiguity that follows should not be frightening and push for misplaced precision. To describe the operational situation of a hunter running after a rabbit, a blurred picture of a rabbit in motion is more realistic than a picture in focus, but with the rabbit stationary.

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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.

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