

Raymond Boudon, a classical sociologist

Journal of Classical Sociology

2015, Vol. 15(3) 286–292

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DOI: 10.1177/1468795X14558769

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Abstract

This homage to the prominent French sociologist Raymond Boudon (1934–2013), one of the most notable scholars of our day, who can be said to stand within the classical tradition of sociology in emphasising individual social action, along with the rationality of action and choice, gives a comprehensive representation of his work and achievements.

Keywords

Raymond Boudon, methodological individualism

Raymond Boudon was born in Paris in 1934, the city where he died in April 2013 at the age of 79. His academic career was a model of its kind in the French university milieu, from his formative graduate studies at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (Ulm) to his election to the *Institut de France*, where he took his seat in the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* like his great intellectual hero, Alexis de Tocqueville. His international renown saw him become a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences in America, the British Academy, Royal Society of Canada, and the *Accademia Europea*, not to mention stays in the prestigious American universities, Columbia University (1960–1961), and Stanford University (1972–1973; 1974–1975). Boudon taught at the Sorbonne, founded his own research group (the *Groupe d'Etude des Méthodes de l'Analyse Sociologique* – GEMAS), and by his death had written more than 25 books and 200 articles.

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Boudon's work was developed around a main axis that involved explaining individual social actions and their unintended consequences on the basis of a central methodological principle, the rationality of social actors. With such ends in view, his method combines the flexibility of empathy which a comprehensive approach demands, with the rectitude imposed by formal scientific analysis, in studying the composition effects of individual actions. Analysis of these effects is at the heart of this sociology aimed at developing the paradigm of *methodological individualism*.

The individualist in sociology methodically asserts the role of consciousness in social action and even develops a sociology of consciousness, which opposes all approaches linking individual motivations to forces acting without the individual's knowledge, where these forces are attributed to social structures, past experiences determining the actor's behavior, biological inheritance, and so on. In other words, the reason is not held to be a simple instrumental tool serving the achievement of aims that impose themselves upon the individual and contain the real motivations for social action. Doubtless because of the obscurity surrounding the process of individual motivation and decision, the individualist method has often been misunderstood. But if methodological individualism in sociology is interested in what takes place at the social actors' level of consciousness, it is anything but an atomism, for the reasons social actors act as they do can only be explained by the contexts in which they think and make decisions, taking into consideration the means of analysis they have at their disposal.

The debates opposing holism and individualism, which took place among those who were most passionate about social science philosophy during the 1950s, formed the crucible from which Boudon's sociology emerged at a time when major thought systems such as neo-Marxism, structuralism, and so on dominated the French intellectual landscape. They prefigure not so much the later false readings of the individualist method as the readings inspired by a subjacent naturalist and determinist form of psychology, which is irreconcilable with the consideration of the level of individual consciousness. Had there not been this socio-political fault line running through social science, it would be mundane, ridiculous, even, to recall once again that the individualist does not deny that an individual's behavior is constrained and influenced by social factors "provided that we can explain such constraints and influences as results of choices of other individuals. Only when the holist attributes these social constraints and influences to the aim of the social group does the individualist disagree with him" (Agassi, 1960: 245). It follows that for the individualist, institutions are only causes to the extent that they form part of the actors' situation (Jarvie, 1972: 124).

Current progress made in sociological knowledge is marked, in most fields of study, by the success of explanations that reveal social actors' reasons in relation to interpretations employing "black boxes" such as socialization, culture, structural logics, and so on. Moreover, it is in relation to fields of social action where reason seems to be less present that this progress is most striking – fields such as beliefs, values, and moral, religious, or esthetic feelings. These evolutions reinforce the idea that our understanding of social phenomena is increased once it departs from the reasons that guide individuals in their action and not from sociological constructs based on the results of these actions. Hence, the method advocated and developed by Boudon for analyzing social issues can be summarized as a basic statement of two points: Any social phenomenon can be analyzed

as being the emerging effect of individual actions and beliefs, and these actions or ideas themselves result from the individuals' own reasons for behaving or thinking in that way in their personal context.

Within this framework, Boudon prefers explanations in terms of the *rationality* of decisions and behavior which might be considered irrational or illogical at first view, in cases where for instance the means do not appear to match the ends, or the pursued ends do not appear to match observed effects at a collective level. The program defined in this way is immense, spanning such things as the explanation of rainmakers' magical practices, the apparent inadequacies of political programs, and the analysis of ideology. Typical examples of the creation of adverse effects in social life include non-interventionism through the dilution of responsibilities, the processes that amplify the effects of micro-decisions and also the compositional effects of certain structures of interdependence studied in game theory (such as that of the prisoner's dilemma). Boudon was largely responsible for studying these effects in writings which have become classics of sociology. A brilliant illustration of this was *L'inégalité des chances*, which was widely perceived after its publication to be one of the most important works in scientific sociology since Durkheim's *Le Suicide*, and brought him worldwide recognition.

Boudon's works consistently link theory with empirical dimensions of analysis, and test the epistemological bases of the validity of his premises with facts and data. In so doing, they lend clear methodological concepts and strong principles to social analysis. But Boudon does not build *ex nihilo*. He constantly refers to the classics of sociology, using and developing the most solid and valuable elements from them. As Gérald Bronner (2013) writes so perceptively,

Boudon, who inherited a long and prestigious intellectual tradition along with, notably, Max Weber, of whom he claimed to be an intellectual descendant, attributed a lot to those great predecessors, and perhaps rather too much at times. A certain academic elegance led him to honour Durkheim or Simmel with new ideas that he could have claimed for himself. A man of tradition, he knew the importance of support from the great thinkers of the past. And although he liked to say that he was only "standing on the shoulders of giants," we all knew he was already one of their number.

In the first major period of his scientific life, Boudon was interested in the use of mathematical methods in sociology and the presentation of major theoretical principles. The latter were first applied to the dynamics of social action and then to the rational processes likely to create false or doubtful beliefs. More recently, Boudon worked on the critique of contemporary cultural relativism and the analysis of the rationality of values. All things considered, Boudon created an exemplary body of scientific work that combined rigorous method with strong, creative thinking, conscious as he was that true rigor lies more in elucidating logical premises and finding ideological prejudices than in manipulating tools – as useful as they might be.

Let us now recall, following Jean-Michel Morin's (2006) book on Boudon's life and thought, some of the important milestones in his work. To do so, we have chosen 15 or so of his research-based books which sit alongside the many textbooks and dictionaries that have a more didactic purpose. We will mention one or two key ideas per work without feeling obliged to respect their chronology.

In research carried out under the supervision of Raymond Aron: *A quoi sert la notion de structure?* (1968), Boudon distinguishes between two types of contexts in which the notion of structure appears. In the first type of context, the word structure is used in the traditional way to indicate that we are dealing with a set of interdependent characteristics. However, in the second type of context, the notion of structure, which is destined to account for the systematic nature of an object, is interpreted in a realistic way, to the extent that the “system object” is reified as if it forms a concrete part of reality. *La crise de la sociologie* (1971) extended this theoretical approach by applying it to the analysis of the role of formal thought in the understanding of social issues and revealing its excesses when it reifies the concepts it elaborates (such as structure, function, organism, etc.) or the relationships it establishes. In it, Boudon holds that sociological explanation seeks to bring to light the social processes underpinning observed statistical trends, with the analysis of systems proving, in this regard, to be a privileged instrument of research. In the field of social mobility research, Boudon provided an exemplary application of these conceptions. In his book, *L'inégalité des chances* (1973), Boudon develops a systemic analysis model that has two main stages. The first simulates achieved educational levels according to social origins and relative academic success levels. The second simulates attained social statuses according to social origins and levels of educational achievement. He shows that generative mechanisms of inequality of opportunity exist in a context of decision discrepancies according to social backgrounds. The cumulative effects of such discrepancies are of a multiplicative nature and appear to surpass those of relative academic success. Moreover, in a general context of no congruence between educational and social structures, the model shows that an increase of educational opportunity has no noticeable effect on relative social opportunity.

The book cast doubt on other sociological interpretations, such as that of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's thesis in *La Reproduction*, that identified school culture as responsible for the transmission of social status. In order to diminish inequality of educational opportunity, it is more effective to throw light on choices and not to limit, as is too often the case, the cognitive and cultural functions of schooling. Moreover, the loosening of academic standards may ease educational expansion, but this has no noticeable direct effect on social opportunities. In fact, the endogenous rise of educational demand underlies the rise of educational level requests for access to the job market. It may constrain schooling decisions with no benefit in terms of individual opportunities if, at the same time, educational policies weaken the cognitive role of school. These are what are called in Boudon's terms *unintended effects*, *emergent effects*, *composition effects*, and *aggregation effects*. These effects are the subject of *Effets pervers et ordre social* (1977).

They apply to unexpected, but not necessary undesirable consequences of intentional individual actions. Examples are numerous, from Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis, Tocqueville's analysis of the increase in the standards of living which triggered the French Revolution, to more recent studies which explain the feeble participation in trade unions in democratic countries where employee involvement is encouraged.

Then came a manifesto book, *La logique du social* (1979), which is an introduction to sociological analysis, followed by *La place du désordre* (1984) which circumvents its scope. Sociological explanation starts by a question, a kind of mystery that has to be

solved: Why is there no socialism in the United States? Facts are recorded as in History and phenomena are represented by models as in economy. Action is more open than in economy and context can be applied more generally than in history. Nevertheless, against tendencies to look for rules or to see only series of specific events, Boudon chooses the third path, that of Simmel and Weber. There are events, but they are outcomes of more or less general sequences of action; there are powerful tendencies but one has to measure their validity and application limits.

The *Etudes sur les sociologues classiques* (1998, 2000), and also *Tocqueville aujourd'hui* (2005), aim to present a series of analyses by key figures in the sociological tradition, from Tocqueville to Scheler, not as thinkers who were trying to create systems, visions of society, or doctrines, but as thinkers attempting to build scientific work whose aim was to offer convincing explanations of enigmatic phenomena. In *Pourquoi les intellectuels n'aiment pas le libéralisme?* (2004), Boudon proposes a sociological analysis which satisfies this model by focusing on the question of why liberal ideas are – especially in France, though his analysis applies more widely – so opposed by intellectuals, chiefly those concerned with social and political studies. The function of the intellectual is to criticize his environment, and this criticism is all the more striking considering it is based on conceptions of human nature which are valued by those Boudon referred to as the “masters of suspicion” (Marx, Freud, etc.). Such conceptions oppose those of liberal thinkers, but such an exercise is allowed only in the liberal societies that are the outcomes of their ideas.

In *L'idéologie* (1986), Boudon opposes irrationalist interpretations of ideology defined as a doctrine lying on scientific argumentation and endowed with an excessive or non-founded credibility. Boudon's theory of ideology distinguishes between situational effects (position and dispositions), communication effects (at the basis of public adhesion to ideas when they have no means to verify them), and epistemological effects (scientific premises with overvalued validity). Boudon pursues his analysis of false or doubtful ideas in *L'art de se persuader* (1990). The main argument is inspired by the Simmelian model, even though the German sociologist referred to it only by allusion; thought processes are founded on implicit premises which drive their conclusions in such a way that some logically deduced propositions are more or less dependent on underlying assumptions. For instance, the skeptical conclusions of a theoretician like David Bloor, who asserts that scientific truth does not exist, are founded on the implicit premise that if it existed, it would take on a unique form.

With *Le juste et le vrai* (1995), Boudon switched from the analysis of positive beliefs to those of normative beliefs. If value judgments are interpreted in terms of their objectivity, it is because they are founded on good reasons. Between nature and culture, there is human reason. Referring to human reason makes it possible to understand the origin of values. For instance, in Jean Piaget's example of a game of marbles, there is no need to refer to a natural program or to cultural conditioning to explain why the child reproves others for breaching the rules of the game. As soon as he or she takes part in the game, the child is justified in his/her indignation at cheating by the others. *Le sens des valeurs* (1999) develops these conceptions while proposing a typology of theories. This typology is founded on the different functions attributed to the first principles which underlie individual accredited values. The circularity of explanations does not stop us

reaching moral convictions if we admit that our knowledge has to be conceived as a complex network of argumentations. *Déclin de la morale, déclin des valeurs?* (2002) is based on an analysis of international survey results (1998). This survey was conducted in more than 40 countries representing 70 percent of the world's population. Boudon argues that value judgments appear first to be founded on cognitive rationality, the search for fair and true beliefs, and not on utilitarian reasons which would primarily take into account direct consequences for the individual. Boudon observes that individuals have strong and convergent convictions.

Finally, in *Raisons, bonnes raisons* (2003) as well as in several works published later, *Essais sur la théorie générale de la rationalité* (2007), *La rationalité* (2009), *La sociologie comme science* (2010; recently translated in 2013 as *Sociology as science. An intellectual Autobiography*), and *Croire et savoir. Penser le politique, le moral et le religieux* (2012), Boudon sets out the principles of the method and clarifies, in particular, the theory of rationality that is proper to methodological individualism and places it in relation to classical conceptions, which range from the theory of rational choice to the different forms of holism.

To complete this tribute, let us cite the comments of a sociologist and friend addressed to his entourage a few days after Boudon had passed away: "in the end, let us remember three key points of Raymond Boudon's work and style. Firstly, that simple but imperious demand that nothing can be said about people's behavior without asking oneself what it is that really affects them. At the heart of behavior, there is always reasoning, interest, conviction and a system of values the thought process of which must be found within man's reach, quite the contrary of an interplay of hidden powers governing our destinies. Even in fields connected to sociology, demography or social statistics, every time individual data are exploited, whether they relate to facts or values, the analyst is methodologically individualist from the moment he or she restricts himself to reconstituting this mechanism step by step. Beyond this principle, there is no explanation of any worth in social science.

Next, this rule of method is at the same time, if we understand it rightly, a principle of research ethics, grounded in the democratic idea to which Boudon was passionately attached. From the quantitative modeling of social behaviors and the theorization of methodological individualism, to the analysis of values, the path he followed was strongly coherent. It confirmed that the analysis of behavior, when we take methodological individualism seriously, inevitably acquires a practical and moral value.

What we remember in the end is the man's style the means he employed in his writings were always extremely understated, and he made no intellectual compromise. He employed no clever rhetoric to compel the reader to join his side. He did not play the role of prophet. Even in later life, he never sought to appear as a hero in his biography. He rejected the idea (refuted by the entire history of sociology) that certain social paths predispose to a particular lucidity in the social world. The lucidity of a man of science was not, to his eyes, a sign of being chosen but a mundane question of well-conducted method and reasoning. His intention was not to dazzle but to light the way. At the time, Boudon paid the price for this intellectual modesty. But if we observe developments in social sciences, which are in touch with sociology as well as economics and international demography, it is striking to see the extent to which Boudon's leading ideas on analytical

method and the importance of values already form the common basis for many research works.”¹

Boudon’s ideas have spread more in an open and liberal way, through their persuasive arguments and the increasing influence of individual works, rather than in a closed way, because of their belonging to a school of thought. That is surely what he always wanted. As he reminds us, from the beginning and right up to the present (Boudon, 2013), sociology is a *science*. We might almost add like any other. It is a question of providing solid responses or results to questions and riddles, backed up by proof. So, there are not and will not be any “Boudonians” in sociology than we find “Newtonians” or “Einsteinians” in physics, or than there are “Tocquevillians,” but simply inquiring, stubborn researchers, who would be well advised to take inspiration from the approaches and results of the best of their predecessors.²

Finally, Boudon was an optimistic and open man of science; he had faith in the future and in the role of the enlightened guide played by reason over the long term. This faith was no pious vow; it represented the fruit of all his work. We hope that social science the world over, by constantly discovering the breadth of this work and the lessons to be drawn from it, will contribute toward proving him right.

Acknowledgements

We thank William Pickering and Stein Ringen for their constructive suggestions and sympathetic criticism of a first version of the text, and Peter Hamilton for his amical advice.

Notes

1. Message from François Héran addressed to Raymond Boudon’s close relatives, 13 April 2013, reproduced with the author’s permission.
2. See, for instance, the collective tribute to Boudon’s work edited by Mohamed Cherkaoui and Peter Hamilton in 2009.

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