Review Essay

Luc Boltanski and the paranoid style

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Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies
Luc Boltanski
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In his still untranslated memoir *Rendre la réalité inacceptable*, Luc Boltanski includes an autobiographical history of the journal *Actes de la recherché en sciences sociales*, which he helped found in the mid-1970s alongside his mentor, the late Pierre Bourdieu. Explaining why they would ever think to establish such a journal at such a time, with many still reeling from the anticlimax of the '68 revolts, interest in sociology on the wane in France and nearly everywhere else, Boltanski ends with a closing flourish:

> All of a sudden, we no longer understood why the world had to be selective, that is to say, 'meritocratic' – why selections were always prejudicial toward some and favorable toward others, why this should be a sign of good taste, talent, morals, progress. We understood nothing of 'reality'; we felt it lied about our world … And that was why we practiced sociology.
>
> (Boltanski, 2008, p. 13)

The meaning of 'reality' here, and the role that sociology plays in its construction and its critique, have been consistent themes in Boltanski's work since at least the publication of his first book on the emergence of the French

cadres. But if there ever was a sense in which the Boltanskian project – broad, ambitious and increasingly diversified as it is – is more a fruitful outgrowth from, and less an Oedipal revolt against, the work of Bourdieu (a.k.a. 'la patron'), it is here. Bourdieu's work, if nothing else, counts as a deliberate affront against the meritocratic representations of reality that took hold in advanced industrial societies after World War II. Boltanski offers in many respects a more direct, critical engagement with those approved representations, going as far in his latest works (Boltanski, 2011) to define what, in fact, 'reality' is, distinguishing it from REALITY and 'world' in the same breath, and anchoring a new critical project of emancipation in a flood of new terminology ('hermeneutic contradiction', 'the whatness of what is', 'metapragmatic register') that speaks to the contrast.

Mysteries and Conspiracies marks a continuation of that effort, perhaps the most user-friendly entry in Boltanski's oeuvre to date, but saying that does not do the book justice. The stated goal of *Mysteries* is to examine the social and political conjuncture in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that corresponded to the emergence of detective stories, spy fictions and sociology as new symbolic forms. Boltanski's concern is with drawing links between these fledgling representations of reality and the distinct way in which 'reality itself was instituted' (p. xv) during this time, as state institutions consolidated their hold not only over territory but also over minds, defining for the first time what social reality officially consisted in ('economies', 'classes', 'races', 'governments'), thus constructing reality as an 'instituted reality' produced by the state *for* the state. According to Boltanski, once it was so defined, instituted reality invited contrasts with the primal ground experienced by actors in the living flesh – what he calls 'apparent reality' or 'world' in his other work. Detective fictions, spy fictions and sociology originate in the mismatch between the instituted and the apparent, the gap between them being the site of rumor and suspicion, as if the instituted reality were nothing but a hologram. Perhaps things 'are not what they seem', perhaps underneath and behind (instituted) reality something more real and hidden, possibly sinister, and certainly less prosaic, happens to lurk.

Anxieties like these fueled interest in stories first of detectives and then of spies. Sociology too, featuring its own brand of intrigue, drew from the same fire. Uniting this popular fervor was *paranoia*. The German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin first clinically defined the paranoid personality type in the 1890s, but for Boltanski, Kraepelin's efforts were less medical than they were purely descriptive. To be paranoid is to pathologically question what has been instituted as reality. This, of course, requires that a reality has actually been 'instituted' in order for one to be paranoid *against* it. Hence, paranoia itself describes a *social* pathology that first appeared among Europeans during this time. The distribution of the trait was not random, but tended (and arguably still tends) to cluster among individuals consumed by feelings of *ressentiment*. For Boltanski, *déclassé*

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intellectuals located at the fringes of the academic world were the ones most predisposed to paranoia during the 1880s–1920s period, and they became the carrier group for conspiracy theories and readership for detective fictions. Historians have used an 'excess of educated men' before to explain the emergence of revolutionary transformations (the 1848 revolts and the Paris Commune for starters), and here Boltanski is no different, drawing from a similar 'excess' trope to explain why Europe provided such rich soil for conspiracies at this time, serving as a prelude to the (Nazified) revolutionary transformations to come. Such famous and well-traveled conspiracies as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* provide ample evidence, and we are invited to wonder distressfully about the implications of any number of present-day conspiracy theories.

At this point of his discussion, however, Boltanski veers in a more reflexive direction. To label any theory a '*conspiracy* theory' assumes that one speaks from a position of legitimacy. Is not the crackpot idea merely the dark silhouette against the bright light of real science? The question is not why people believe in conspiracies. The question here is when and how educated elites reprimand 'the masses' for being paranoid, their minds muddled by conspiracy. Richard Hofstadter's Cold War analysis of 'The Paranoid Style' in American politics serves as a prime example and a catalyst here. More broadly, the presence of 'senseless beliefs' of any kind among the masses proves to be a democratic challenge for enlightened elites otherwise committed to the liberal prospect that everyone is entitled to have his or her *own* opinion. For Boltanski, conspiracy theories are, in this sense, more telling of social relations, ultimately, than they are of anomalous world images that couldn't *possibly* be believed (but are).

If this all seems a bit jumbled together, it should: Boltanski covers a lot of ground rapidly in the opening chapters of the book, leaving many loose ends. Ever the gadfly, however, he is supremely effective at making important points when they count the most. Example? Try this one: Like detective stories and spy fictions, paranoia is a constitutive part of sociology too. It is deeply ingrained in the discipline's heritage and practice, growing out of the rich soil it shared with the fictional exploits of detectives and spies – low-grade paranoiacs all of them – and in some sense defined in its public reception by a willingness, on the part of readers, to be paranoid themselves (at least until they finish reading the article). Explaining seen events by unseen entities – the ruling class, network centrality, institutional logics, neoliberalism – is at least *slightly* paranoiac, conspiratorial even, because 'the motives actors give for their action are not the true reasons for their action' when these entities provide the real causes (p. 225). Boltanski calls this Popper's Curse, resurrecting the philosopher's dismissal of sociology (Marxism in particular) as being engaged in prophesy instead of falsifiable science, more likely to invent a real entity than discover one. Instead of taking what seems to be an obligatory path at this point, and engaging current questions about realism and methodology, Boltanski emphasizes instead the *grammatical* form implicit to all of this.

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In an engaging analysis found in the last chapter of the book, Boltanski compares how sociologists account for events with how police officers and journalists account for the same events. Accounting here means explaining causes. Police officers are interested in explaining causes in order to assign blame. Journalists, meanwhile, are guided by the golden rule that, whatever happens, their job is to familiarize the event; explanations should be kept as intuitive as possible. Sociologists, meanwhile, are faced not only with Popper's Curse in this scenario but with a much larger problem concerning their very *raison d'etre* and the value added of their sociological accounts. If their explanations rely on already recognized entities, sociologists lose their disciplinary distinction not only from journalists but also from the quasi-sociologists found in business and law schools, not to mention the wonks at work in corporate research firms and think tanks. If their explanations rely on new or counterintuitive entities, sociologists can only trust in the benefit of the doubt that what they argue isn't *merely* paranoia or conspiracy. Unfortunately, however, there isn't an experimental test (contra critical realists) that can decide whether contrived sociological entities are real social ontology. For Boltanski, there is only the question of our credibility, infinitely more delicate.

Of course, this is supposing that the audience for sociology isn't merely other sociologists, who, presumably, are easier to please. But even then Boltanski's discussion has implications. Those unseen entities that sociologists so often hang their explanatory hats on (social class for example) are deeply wedded to the project of the nation-state and important mainly for their ability to coordinate action by the state as a 'supraindividual form'. The 'quasi-objectal' entity of, say, a class, a race or a gender renders action by the state possible because it constitutes a collective thing that can not only act (and suffer) but can also be acted upon. If we accept this as the genealogy of so many tried-and-true sociological concepts, does it mean that even our best accounts of the social world must remain functionally limited?

Boltanski answers yes – a disconcerting *yes* – and he calls on sociologists to free themselves from the cumbersome 'nation-state form'. He implores the discipline to contribute once again to the correct side of the modern conflict between the two realities. In their usage of nation-state categories, sociologists unwittingly erase the difference between instituted and apparent reality – removing the words from their interview subjects' mouths and filling them with their own words instead, on behalf of the nation-state. To follow Boltanski's narrative completely through, speaking to the gap between the instituted and the apparent is the point of origin for sociological inquiry, the source of its truth, fueling its growth and driving its appeal. It remains the discipline's critical lifeblood. And yet to argue that an event ('student protest') has sociological causes ('racial inequality', 'political opportunity structure', 'diagnostic framing') falls on deaf ears should the world increasingly *feel* different from the reality generated by those categories. What sociology needs are new realities animated

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by new categories removed of the nation-state's defining imprint. Only then may it recover its youthful edge and heed the warning *not* to become conservative with age.

While these points are certainly provocative, I find Boltanski's arguments weakest here. First, his claim that sociology no longer reveals gaps between what he calls 'instituted' and 'apparent' reality is shortsighted, even if the broad disciplinary commitment to value freedom often makes the contributions here seem dormant. Abbott's (2016) recent argument that 'injustice' is the most accurate translation of how sociologists use the term 'inequality' (without sacrificing any empirical substance) is quite revealing in this respect. Second, Boltanski, ever the good pragmatist, finds strong commonalities between sociological inquiry and 'ordinary' inquiry, even despite the former's paranoiac tendencies. He rather briskly leaves the epistemological implications of this behind, however, never returning to explain what, in fact, a sociological concept does when it *explains*. Boltanski's singular focus on the grammatical constraints that dictate the production of (credible) sociological statements narrowly restricts his most important insights to how a discourse justifies certain statements as scientific and dismisses others as conspiracy. More ambitiously stated, however, his argument really lies with the ever-present problem of the purposes of theory and its relationship to the world, surely a different can of worms entirely. How else are we to understand his pivotal claim that reality increasingly appears 'to free itself from the arrangements that are supposed to frame it' and that this should trouble sociologists – *all* sociologists – whose concepts are tied to the nation-state and its various projects? Boltanski's weakness on these points is perhaps the principal weakness of French neopragmatism as a whole: the presumption that concepts are, ultimately, simply tools for the coordination of action.

However, concepts are surely more than this: they are also tools for *generating meaning*. Exactly how they do that is disputable, of course, but it is quite possible that there is an argument to be made here for distinguishing sociology from paranoia, not to mention from its rival representations, including journalism, that Boltanski misses. Isaac Reed's work on maximal interpretation could provide the much-needed antidote. Boltanski's emphasis on the state-structured institution of reality, meanwhile, seems most original for the credit he gives to sociology. Maybe this is a French bias; maybe Saint-Simon and his sociological priests are (still) to blame. In any case, it seems likely that what Boltanski understands by 'instituted reality' is a moral order as much as it is a vaguely sociological one, with normative beliefs like meritocracy and equal opportunity doing at least as much to officially *institute* reality as class, race and gender. Elsewhere, particularly in the still untranslated essay 'La Production de l'idéologie dominante' (1976; an *Actes* classic), Boltanski recognizes this much more than he does in *Mysteries*. And as the quotation given at the start of this review suggests, at some point in his life, it seems, Boltanski chose to 'practice sociology'

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rather than, say, become a journalist or a novelist (something that his writerly skillset, on display in this book as in his others, surely did nothing to preclude) precisely because sociology could generate a contrast against hegemonic representations like these. First rule of sociology: things are not what they seem. Second rule of sociology: the emperor has no clothes. If you want to *rendre la réalité* truly *inacceptable*, become a sociologist.

Beyond these epistemological points, which serve as the red thread tying together a rather choppy book, *Mysteries* also makes arguments that will be of interest specifically to culture scholars. Much of the book is devoted to a comparison of Sherlock Holmes stories and stories written by the French author Georges Simenon that feature Jules Maigret – lead detective in the fictional 'Brigade Criminelle' of the Paris police. Holmes and Maigret are cognate characters in these stories, yet Boltanski finds that differences between the novels can be traced to national differences in state–society relations. The late-Victorian/early-Edwardian nation-state that provides the context for the exploits of Sherlock Holmes was weakly independent of society, with a weak public/private distinction. Hence, Detective Holmes demonstrates his investigative mastery by revealing the mysterious private lives of prominent public citizens. Meanwhile, the nation-state of Third Republic France that provides the context for the quizzical Maigret was strongly independent of society, with a strong public/private distinction. Hence, commissaire Maigret applies his practiced policeman's eye to conspiracies involving the personal use of state power.

In each case, a different nation-state form instituted reality differently. In each case, these differences led to differences in how the two detectives (professional paranoids) interrogated the instituted reality, their efforts making apparent the mysteries and conspiracies hidden behind the official veil. Spy novels, meanwhile, correspond to states that only weakly constrain the institution of reality, states in a state of war, states not able to manage their internal affairs because of global forces beyond their control. The Cold War is a prime example, terrorism another. The anxieties provoked by the façade of state in these contexts are evident in the double agent and the global conspiracy. Nothing can be trusted to be what it officially *appears* to be. Instead of the briar-piped, mustachioed Sherlock Holmes, a nickelslick James Bond armed with multinational paranoia is the hero.

Boltanski's claims here resemble a kind of quasi-materialist literary criticism. He takes content seriously, but he takes the *form* of that content even more seriously, echoing what the literary theorist Jameson (1971) (see also White, 1987) calls the 'content of the form'. Some might find Boltanski's book too absent of conventional sociological factors (production process, cultural fields, reader response) in this respect to mark a contribution to the sociology of culture, but I tend to disagree. The overarching emphasis here, as Boltanski alludes to in various places, is with historicizing symbolic forms. Sociology is one of these forms; detective stories and spy novels are others. Historicizing means identifying a history whose content gives these forms *their* content. *Mysteries* is reminiscent

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in this sense of Cassirer's (1957 [1929]) best work on symbolic forms and how they structure intuitive meanings and representations, not by standing alone, but by standing in relation to a context and thus drawing two contexts together.

So, bottomline: does sociology require paranoia? If sociology provides the state's 'instituted reality', then the answer would be no, but, according to Boltanski, it should be yes. If, on the other hand, the instituted reality comes from somewhere else, then *yes*, it is *good* to be paranoid as a sociologist, to interrogate 'reality' for its own sake, to ask vexed questions about settled topics, hopefully in the process illuminating what is only 'apparent' but actually more *real*. How does sociology accomplish the latter? Boltanski doesn't really say, and this surely hurts the programmatic argument outlined in the book. And yet *Mysteries* is original and important if for no other reason than that Boltanski attempts to treat sociology as something like a symbolic form, meaning that he doesn't ignore the competitive sphere in which sociology exists, the difference that sociology does or does *not* make for the representation and critique of reality, as poised against other symbolic forms (novels, journalism, police reports) not to mention other disciplines. This is a deeply reflexive book, one which Boltanski is uniquely suited to write. No one is better at distancing themselves from Bourdieu by taking his project further.

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