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Boudon Reexamined. Nuts and Bolts for Contemporary Sociological Science

Gianluca Manzo

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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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Boudon Reexamined

Full book

Gianluca Manzo (Ed.)

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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.)

Boudon Reexamined

Nuts and Bolts
for Contemporary Sociological Science

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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: <i>L'inégalité des chances</i> Fifty Years Later	
Richard Breen.....	121
CHAPTER VIII: Inequality of Social Opportunity: <i>L'inégalité des chances</i> 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
METHODODOLOGICAL 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

TEACHING SOCIOLOGY AND THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY

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General sociology and the history of sociology – sometimes called sociological theory – are two subjects that are useful as an introduction to the discipline for both new students and curious minds. In the context of this paper, the term *general sociology* refers to the fundamental concepts, methodologies, and approaches that define the discipline as a whole, without specifically touching on any particular thematic area. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that any such discussion will touch upon a range of themes, whether explicitly referenced in Boudon’s work or not. The term *history of sociology* encompasses both the works of authors who preceded and were contemporaneous with the institutionalisation of the discipline, as well as the ongoing evolution of their theories.

Raymond Boudon made significant contributions to both areas, explicitly and implicitly. In the case of general sociology, Boudon’s approach challenged the deterministic paradigms that dominated mid-twentieth-century sociology. He emphasised the significance of the perceptions, decisions, and rationalities of individual actors, arguing that these micro-level phenomena could explain macro-social patterns and structures. This perspective diverged from the more structuralist and collectivist orientations of his contemporaries, providing a unique viewpoint from which to examine social dynamics. His contributions

The authors would like to dedicate this work to the memory of Prf. Angeles Lizón who introduce Boudon’s works into Spanish Sociology Studies. This work has benefited from a project grant awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (ref.: PID2019-107589GB-I00, “DOACSA”). Àlex Giménez, Pedro Cordero and Gianluca Manzo read a preliminary version of this paper, and the authors greatly benefited from their comments.

are key to understanding the use of individualistic proposals in sociology, ranging from perspectives linked to Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to Analytical Sociology (AS). Moreover, he was one of the most prominent theorists on generative social processes. Today, generative explanation theory in sociology is widespread, particularly in connection with computational social sciences. Although Boudon did not use such methods in his writing, relying more on mathematical models, the conceptual development of the idea of generative explanation is found throughout his work.

332 As far as the history of sociology is concerned, Boudon's studies on classical authors were not so much historical in nature, but rather recognised good practices comparable to those of contemporary sociology. Boudon often revisited empirical studies and theoretical proposals by classic authors such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber to exemplify how a social phenomenon should be described. As will be seen later, he did not approach these studies to produce a history of sociology but as a way to exemplify explanatory correctness. In fact, references to the classics abound in Boudon's texts, which focus on methodological, epistemological, and theoretical issues.

The chapter is divided into two sections that highlight Boudon's contributions to both fields. The first section focuses on the teaching of general sociology, whereas the second section discusses the teaching of the history of sociology.

TEACHING SOCIOLOGY

In sociology, there are a variety of approaches to the discipline, including introductory texts, manuals, dictionaries, and treatises. In the initial and intermediate stages of his career, Boudon contributed to the publication of a methodology text in three volumes entitled *Methods of Sociology* (Boudon and Lazarsfeld 1966, 1971; Boudon, Lazarsfeld, and Chazel 1970), *Critical Dictionary of Sociology* (Boudon and Bourricaud 1989), *Traité de sociologie (Treatise on Sociology)* (Boudon 1992), and numerous works on conceptual analysis, including an introductory text (Boudon 1979) and a critical assessment of the state of the art of the discipline (Boudon 1971). Some of Boudon's texts remain valid in the context of teaching sociology. Conversely, others have become somewhat outdated, particularly in light of developments in the field over recent decades. For instance, Boudon's text on the notion of structure (Boudon 1968) was highly pertinent in the discussions about French sociology in the 1960s, but is now a much less-used term.

An examination of the evolution of sociological concepts reveals the value of analysing the *Critical Dictionary*, published with François Bourricaud. The production of such materials requires a standpoint that is not necessarily shared by the entire sociology community. Thus, a certain bias is noticeable in favour of themes such as beliefs and ideologies, political power, rationalist epistemology, and classical authors, which are recurrent in the work of Boudon and Bourricaud. Comprehensively updating the concepts would require a more substantial reference to the vocabulary of areas such as social networks, mechanisms, and contemporary causal analysis. It is remarkable that the way of expressing relationships already resembles current developments in network theory, although there is a notable absence of counterfactual thinking. In the domain of social networks, the entry on diffusion predates the development of models of social contagion and the impact of reticular structures on diffusion processes.

It is worth noting that, in the English edition published seven years later, the publisher removed several of the original concepts. The justification is that some of the concepts had already become obsolete, while others were addressed in greater detail in other sections of the text. Additionally, some terms were omitted due to discretionary decisions, such as the exclusion of the term “models”. This was apparently due to excessive mathematical rigor deemed incompatible with the requirements of a conceptual introduction. Nevertheless, the practice of modelling in sociology has become a hallmark of rigorous approaches and is an integral part of the daily work of social scientists from all disciplines. Indeed, the development of models represents a key aspect of scientific knowledge production.

Regarding the significance of the *Critical Dictionary* as an introductory text to the sociology of the twenty-first century, it can be argued that sociology has undergone significant changes over the past four decades. Thus, concepts such as *structure*, *functionalism*, or *teleology*, which were fundamental in an initial introduction to the discipline forty years ago, are now not so important.

Another conceptual approach in Boudon’s work is the *Traité*, which brings together the contributions of several authors who analyse a series of notions central to sociological knowledge, including *action*, *conflict*, *power*, and *social mobility*. The texts that comprise the work provide concise historical overviews of eleven key concepts. Nevertheless, the publication date is 1992, which makes it more suitable for the study of the recent history of the discipline than for a contemporary introduction to it. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of the three volumes on social science methodology (Boudon

and Lazarsfeld 1966, 1971; Boudon Lazarsfeld and Chazel 1970). These volumes bring together contributions by leading researchers in fields such as the construction of indicators and indices, the application of quantitative methods, and the analysis of causality. They also include texts that are now considered classics, such as the study by Coleman and Katz on innovation in medicine. Once more, the update of methodologies locates these volumes within the domain of historical rather than contemporary introductory works.

LA LOGIQUE DU SOCIAL AS AN INTRODUCTION
TO CONTEMPORARY RIGOROUS SOCIOLOGY

334

The text that is perhaps most interesting as a contemporary example of sociological teaching is *La Logique du social* (Boudon 1979). This text presents “the principles, postulates and objectives of sociological analysis” from an individualist and rationalist perspective. Consequently, it opens with the rejection of sociology as a science of deterministic and irrational behaviour, instead presenting it as the study of the social phenomena that emerge from human systems of interaction. This definition aligns with the current proposals embraced under the label Sociological Science (see, in particular, Gërkhani et al. [2022] *Handbook of Sociological Science: Contributions to Rigorous Sociology*, hereafter HBSS), where the primary objective is to elucidate the way human actions and interactions lead to aggregate phenomena.

However, the most interesting point of *La Logique du social* is its review of the different systems of interaction and their potential effects, illustrated with classic and modern examples. It confirms and exemplifies the objective of the discipline presented in the introduction. The non-expert reader of sociological literature will find in the text a detailed account of how a sociologist might proceed from the observation of a social phenomenon to its elucidation. Lizón (2007, p. 307) identified this workflow as a core tenet of sociological practice. The text makes extensive use of generative models, which are designed to capture the rational processes of social actors, their decision-making, actions, and interaction with the broader environment – which ultimately leads to the explanation of social facts.

A review of the research programmes presented in the updated HBSS reveals that Boudon’s approaches in *La Logique du social* can be seamlessly integrated into some of these programmes. Specifically, the book is an ideal point of departure to introduce sociological knowledge from any of these perspectives. The programmes in question are detailed in Table 1.

It could be argued that the proposal of Stochastic Network Actor-Oriented models (SAOM) (Sneijders 1996) is least related to *La Logique du social*’s

approach, particularly given that it is based on a network-centric approach, a field in which Boudon did not work. Initially proposed by Snijders, stochastic actor-oriented models are a family of models that aim to elucidate the patterns of evolution of a reticular structure by resorting to dyadic-level processes. Boudon did not use Agent-Based Computational Modeling (ABCM)¹ models, and *La Logique du social* precedes its popularisation within the social sciences. However, the book itself references Schelling's model of residential segregation as an example of the amplification effect (Boudon 1979, pp. 126-127), and some of Boudon's models have since been translated into ABCMs (Manzo 2009, 2011; Linares 2014). This is also the case for computational social sciences concerned with the collection of data via online sources. However, both SAOM and ABCM techniques share a fundamental objective with *La Logique du social*, namely, generative explanation (Linares 2014, p. 555).

Table 1: Scientific Programs and the Authors of the Chapters Describing Them in HBSS

Programme	Author/s
Population science	Michelle Jackson
AS	Gianluca Manzo
Rational choice sociology	Andreas Diekmann
ABCM	Andreas Flache, Michael Mäs and Marijn A Keijzer
SAOM	Christian E. G. Steglich and Tom A. B. Snijders

Boudon postulates in *La Logique du social* that the sociology of social change is dedicated to explaining an emerging phenomenon situated at the level of a system of interaction or interdependence, resulting from the behaviour of agents – but not based on their will, despite the fact that this exists – whose representation depends on a complex theory of action (Boudon 1981, p. 91). The logic underlying SAOM and ABCM is precisely that of a system of interdependence, whereby a series of rules applied to connected agents generate an aggregate result.

RCT, as exemplified by *La Logique du social*, seeks to elucidate macro-level phenomena through the analysis of the aggregation of purpose-oriented behaviour. It is acknowledged that Boudon was critical of RCT as a general theory, proposing an “ordinary rationality theory” which subsumes it. In *La Logique du social*, he presents concrete models that include the presuppositions of RCT, including the relative frustration model, which was itself mentioned by

1 ABCM aims to identify whether, and if so, how and under which conditions precisely, the theoretical assumptions a researcher makes about the interactions between interdependent individuals allow one to generate a social outcome (Epstein 2006).

Diekmann (2022). The elements of interest that connect *La Logique du social* with rational choice sociology are as follows: first, that rational decisions are dependent on the context of interaction; second, that the relative frustration model demonstrates this; and third, that the results of rational actions do not always coincide with the will of the actors. In a second case, an example from *La Logique du social* links the activity of American trade unionism with increased productivity in companies (Boudon 1981, p. 65). Given the bargaining conditions between companies and unions in the United States, unions tend to focus their activities on the most dynamic companies. From the perspective of these companies, the only rational strategy is to accept wage increases. The objective of the union is then to target the least dynamic companies. To achieve this, the unions must implement processes to improve the companies' performance. This results in greater productivity and enables the companies to remain competitive. It can be observed that an increase in union activity is correlated with an increase in productivity, despite the fact that the objective of this activity is wage increases.

In his eponymous work, John Goldthorpe (2017) popularised the concept of "sociology as a population science". This text contains numerous references to Boudon, particularly in the context of justifying methodological individualism as a research strategy. In the corresponding chapter of the HBSS, it is established that the three fundamental principles of sociology as a population science are its commitment to scientific rigour, its attention to regularities at the population level (macro-level phenomena), and the great significance placed on the descriptions of phenomena prior to their explanation, which is the main objective. As with the other programmes presented, sociology, as a population science, employs mechanisms at the micro level to explain macro-social regularities, thereby sharing the objective set out almost 40 years before in *La Logique du social*. Furthermore, Boudon's general work serves as a source of inspiration for sociology as a population science, as Goldthorpe argued in his recent *Pioneers of Sociological Science* (Goldthorpe 2021).

Finally, the connections between AS and Boudon's work are perhaps the most pronounced, as evidenced by the author's contribution to its foundational text, *Social Mechanisms* (Hedström and Swedberg 1998), and his subsequent recognition as a precursor to the programme in other works (Hedström 2005). *La Logique du social* reflects and exemplifies the principles of AS in its pre-computational stage, with an extensive use of micro-social models to explain macro-social phenomena.

This concise review showed the clear alignment between Boudon's sociological approach, as presented in *La Logique du social* (Boudon 1981), and various contemporary forms of scientific and rigorous sociology. The book

serves as an introductory text for those teaching this subject, as it also contains pertinent references to seminal works in sociology. In *La Logique du social*, the novice student will encounter the foundational principles of a scientific sociology with cumulative ambitions, as well as the primary goal of sociologists as constructors of models and explanatory theories. These foundations have served in recent years to configure a series of programmes that, despite their specificities, share both a common objective and epistemological language. This unifying language is explicitly present in *La Logique du social*, thereby justifying its relevance today as an introductory text to the field of sociology.

TEACHING THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY

Boudon's entire body of work is full of references to the foundational texts of sociology and other social sciences. Quotations from Adam Smith, Tocqueville, and Weber are frequently cited by Boudon in his defence of the individualistic programme and cognitive sociology (for instance, Boudon 1998b). Indeed, Boudon uses the acronym TWD (for Tocqueville, Weber, Durkheim) to designate his theoretical framework as *the sociology that really matters* (Boudon, 2002). However, his most significant contribution to the study of the classics is possibly the *Études sur les sociologues classiques* compendium (Boudon 1998a, 2000). This two-volume work is interesting for two reasons. First, the fourteen studies dedicated to nine classical sociologists could form the basis of a course on classical sociological theory. Second, the two introductory essays to the volumes and the concluding essay provide an excellent reflection on the different ways to present the history of the discipline.

Boudon's presentation of the history of sociology is rooted in a rationalist perspective, as he explicitly states (Boudon 1998a). A comparison with other celebrated works of classical sociology reveals a distinct divergence in approach. In contrast to the approaches used by Aron (1967) or Randall Collins (1994), for example, Boudon rejects the doxographic and unifying perspective of social science. For Boudon, the doxographic method is flawed because it prioritizes understanding what authors really thought over evaluating whether their claims are true or false (Boudon 2000, p. 64).² As a result, doxography tends to treat authors as particular cases within established schools of thought or intellectual systems.

2 For a detailed discussion on the use of the term *doxography*, see Mansfeld and Runia (2004) in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/doxography-ancient/>, accessed on July 7, 2025.

Despite its limitations, the doxographic method offers certain advantages, including the ability to highlight the distinctive characteristics of a tradition or the discipline as a whole, to propose a certain evolution in the sciences, and to establish a canon. In sociology, there is a canon of established works, including those of Aron, Collins, and others, such as Ritzer's (1992). This canon includes several *pioneers*,³ typically French and British figures from the Enlightenment, including Condorcet, Montesquieu, Ferguson, and Smith. In certain instances, however, the canon extends back to figures such as Ibn Khaldun or Machiavelli. The *founders* of the discipline are post-Enlightenment figures, including: Comte, widely regarded as the inventor of the term sociology; Tocqueville, whom Elster regards as the first social scientist (Elster 2009); and Marx, who is recognised as a versatile figure and can also be included in the following generation. The most well-known among the *institutionalisers* are Weber and Durkheim, who are typically accompanied by Pareto, Tönnies, Simmel, and Mead (if American sociology is mentioned). If we consider traditions instead of generations, we will probably find the following: The *positivist-functional*, the *conflictivist-dialectical*, the *rational-utilitarian*, and the *interactionist/micro*.

However, the decision to adopt a doxographic approach causes certain difficulties, particularly regarding the need to include all canonical sociologists in some of the generations and traditions. This is highlighted by Boudon (1998a, pp. 7-16), who adopts a Popperian viewpoint. His intention is to identify the enduring aspects of the classics when subjected to theoretical and empirical scrutiny, although in a less rigorous manner than that employed in the natural sciences. This allows for the creation of a catalogue of classics, focusing on the parts of his work that remain relevant, rather than his entire body of work. In any case, it is not reasonable to view the *Études* list as a definitive or exhaustive account of the sociological classics, given that it only encompasses a select set of fields and themes. Moreover, it does not claim to represent the overall scope of sociological knowledge, either in the past or in the present.

The most significant aspect of the *Boudonian* approach is the methodology used to convey the historical evolution of the discipline to the reader. A historical reassessment, similar to that conducted by Boudon in *The Crisis of Sociology* (1971), reveals that the current state of the discipline is not significantly different from its condition at that time. It also exhibits that there is still a set of scientific programmes that appear to be in a state of mutual

3 The distinction between pioneers, founders and institutionalisers is present in Lamo de Espinosa (2001) which is something that neither the pioneers of the 18th century nor the great creators of the 19th century (from Comte to Spencer, without forgetting Tocqueville or Marx).

incomprehension. From this position, Boudon's decision to adopt a rationalist perspective remained consistent over time. In line with this perspective, our goal is to demonstrate that an effective approach to teaching the history of a discipline involves selecting established pieces of knowledge and tracing their genealogy within a historical context. This approach largely informed Boudon's work in *Études* and other publications.

AN EVALUATION OF *ÉTUDES*

A close examination of the fourteen⁴ texts that comprise the two volumes of *Études* reveals several points of particular interest. The initial observation is a tendency towards the prevailing themes in Boudon's body of work, namely the sociology of beliefs and values. Eight of the fourteen texts address beliefs as a central theme, specifically 1.6, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4, while the remaining texts also touch upon beliefs as a recurring issue. Similarly, values are a recurring theme in the texts, with references to them in 1.2, 2.2, 2.5 and 2.8. Likewise, *Études* includes a substantial number of chapters dedicated to methodological and epistemological approaches, with up to five chapters (1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.7 and 2.6). The history of sociology is full of disputes and clarifications between and within traditions. An exemplary case is that of methodological individualism, which Boudon extensively defended, and which remains a subject of significant debate in the field today. Tocqueville's examination of social power, at the beginning of the book, does not exclusively focus on the aforementioned themes but rather revolves around the concept of collective beliefs and opinions.

Regarding the authors present in the work, a recurring element in the book is the Durkheim-Weber binomial, which appears both separately and in a chapter that appears to compare the two. One of Boudon's obsessions in working with the classics was to emphasise the relevance of both authors. In the case of Durkheim, Boudon highlighted the explanatory power of his empirical studies – even though Durkheim's theoretical and methodological guidelines did not always align with the way he conducted his own research (Boudon 1998a, pp. 93-136). Smith and Tocqueville appear as authors with great intuition, although they wrote at a time before the institutionalisation of the social sciences. The other authors, with the exception of Lazarsfeld, wrote between the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth century; the appearance of Tarde and Scheler is of note because they do not usually appear in the canonical histories of classical sociology.

4 Omitting the introductions and conclusions, and the appendix with the inaugural speech of Émile Durkheim Street in Paris.

Table 2: Index of Chapters in *Études: Volumes I and II*

Volume 1		Volume 2	
Avertissement		Introduction. Convergences entre les sociologues classiques	
1	Le pouvoir social : variations sur un thème de Tocqueville	1	Adam Smith : Le « spectateur impartial » et l'acteur partial
2	<i>L'Éthique protestante</i> de Max Weber : le bilan de la discussion	2	Émile Durkheim : L'explication des croyances religieuses
3	Durkheim et Weber : convergences de méthode	3	Georg Simmel : Facteurs sociaux de la connaissance
4	<i>Should one still read Durkheim's Rules after one hundred years?</i>	4	Vilfredo Pareto : Rationalité ou irrationalité des croyances ?
5	<i>Les problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire de Simmel</i> : l'explication dans les sciences sociales	5	Max Weber : La « rationalité axiologique » et la rationalisation de la vie morale
6	Le phénomène idéologique : en marge d'une lecture de Pareto	6	Gabriel Tarde : La connexion micro-macro
7	« L'analyse empirique de l'action » de Lazarsfeld et la tradition de la sociologie compréhensive	7	Max Scheler : Contextualité et universalité des valeurs
8	Appendice : Discours à l'occasion de l'inauguration de la rue Durkheim à Paris, 7 décembre 1996	8	Comment écrire l'histoire des sciences sociales ?

The case of Lazarsfeld deserves special attention. First, it should be remembered that he was one of the masters and co-authors in the first stages of Boudon's career. At the same time, he was involved in significant publications with James Coleman and Robert K. Merton. However, Lazarsfeld is usually absent from the sociological history canon. This is partly explained by his lack of *a system*, an element that prevails in the doxographic approach to the history of sociology. Nevertheless, as Boudon points out, he published significant reflections on epistemological issues (see e.g. Lazarsfeld 1966). A popularised view of Lazarsfeld as a defender of atheoretical empiricism – first propagated by some *Frankfurtians*, then by Wright-Mills, and later by authors such as Bourdieu – partly clouds Lazarsfeld's contributions and his consideration as a classic author in sociology.

The list of authors and themes present in *Études* is far from exhaustive. Some notable absences are Comte, Marx, and Spencer. The reason given by Boudon (1998a, pp. 7-16) is that their work is characterised by production with totalising pretensions, a theory capable of explaining all phenomena, in which the concern for internal coherence ends up burdening some of the interpretations and explanations provided. In contrast, authors such as Weber and Durkheim based their empirical work on the description of specific phenomena, sometimes even overriding the rules they had previously developed in theoretical and methodological texts. Indeed, in terms of generations, Marx

and Comte are closer to Tocqueville and Smith than to the institutionalists of the late nineteenth century.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE GENEALOGICAL APPROACH
IN BOUDON'S WORK: ON RELATIVE FRUSTRATION

The relationship between frustration and opportunity was analysed by Tocqueville (2011 [1856]) in his study of the Ancien Régime. *Tocqueville's paradox* applies to the situation in which an environment of growing opportunities tends to correlate – counterintuitively – with higher rates of frustration in the population. What Tocqueville proposed as a prolegomenon to the French Revolution has become one of the best-founded theories of sociological knowledge in the form of Boudon's model of relative frustration. De Tocqueville's (2012 [1840]) original description referred to the phenomenon where an increase in the probability of social advancement and enrichment correlated with higher levels of general dissatisfaction.⁵ Durkheim followed a similar process in his theory of anomie, but it was not until the publication of *The American Soldier* (Stouffer 1949) that the structure of frustration was more rigorously contrasted using quantitative data.

The finding that soldiers in US Army units with fewer opportunities for promotion had higher rates of satisfaction than those in units with greater opportunities raised a sociological question of the first order. One of the first answers to the question of frustration was given in connection with the idea of the “reference group” (Lazarsfeld 1949; Runciman 1961). The basic connection between the two is expressed through the idea that frustration is not absolute, but is limited to the fact that the possession of a good x by a member of A produces certain feelings in a subject i because he belongs to A . Something that would not happen if i belonged to B or if the owner of x belonged to B .⁶

But it was Boudon who completed this argument, first by arguing that the phenomenon described by Tocqueville, although following a similar pattern to that of *The American Soldier*, occurred in a context where the “reference

5 “No inequality, however great, offends the eye when all conditions are unequal; while the smallest dissimilarity seems shocking amid general uniformity; the sight of it becomes more unbearable as uniformity is more complete. So, it is natural that love of equality grows constantly with equality itself; by satisfying it, you develop it” (Tocqueville 2012 [1840], p. 1203).

6 “The notion of relative deprivation implies that people do not suffer in an ‘absolute’ way; they compare their lot with that of other people of their kind” (Lazarsfeld 1949, p. 388).

groups” were diffuse or as large as a social class. Second, by developing an insightful model in which the structure of competition is more decisive than the effect of the group (Boudon 1981, pp. 116-127). The model in question, in its simplest version, takes the form of a lottery where there are n prizes less than the number N of group members, in which one can participate at a cost c or not participate. If each prize has a value b ($>c$), then the expected utility of not participating is 0, and the expected utility of participating is defined as follows:

$$U(\text{participate IF } n < x) = \frac{n(b-c) + (x-n)(-c)}{x}$$

$$U(\text{participate IF } n \geq x) = b - c$$

Where x is the number of participants. All other factors being equal, the value of x represents the variable relative to opportunities, and the expected utility of participation grows with it. So, why does a factor that increases expectations of improvement as it grows correlate with an increase in frustration? The key is how the increase in opportunities leads to an increase in individual expected utility. The greater the number of prizes, the greater the chances of obtaining $b-c$, which leads to an increase in participation because of a higher expected benefit.

Once the lottery is over, the level of frustration depends on the relationship between the *winners* (those who bet and got $B-C$) and the *losers* (those who bet and got $-c$). For the losers, the winners become members of their reference group to the extent that they have made the same investment. The perception of injustice is palpable, because in a lottery it is luck that determines who occupies each position, so seeing oneself as a loser leads to a state of frustration. Since the specification of Boudon’s relative frustration model, its basic hypothesis has been experimentally tested in its canonical form (Berger and Diekmann 2015; Otten 2023; Berger, Diekmann and Wehrli 2024) and formalized into simulation models (Manzo 2009, 2011). Additionally, the model has been formalized into simulation frameworks (Manzo 2009, 2011), reflecting the present-day relevance of the topic and Boudon’s model.

Analysing the path taken by relative frustration theory from de Tocqueville’s initial approach to the present, the process has progressed through the following stages: description; intuitive explanation; modelling; and finally, successive empirical verification. The first stage is common to both the phenomenon of frustration described by Tocqueville and that described by Stouffer: a puzzling social phenomenon is discovered, and its explanation is presented as mysterious. Later, tentative explanations are proposed for the phenomenon in question, drawing on existing theories or generating new ones.

At the same time, other similar phenomena are discovered, and their study follows a similar pattern. Subsequently, several phenomena are found to share a similar process, despite differences in context. At this point, an attempt is made to unify the explanation for all of them by pointing to common mechanisms or by generating a model that allows us to understand several phenomena with a similar causal pattern. Once such a model has been specified, it is tested in other situations to check its explanatory potential and to specify its components. This scientific procedure frequently occurs in Boudon's texts on methodology and epistemology, as well as in his evaluations of the classics as inspiring useful contemporary theories.

Thus, from a rationalist perspective, the genealogical approach is the most suitable one for teaching the history of sociology. On the one hand, it complies with the maxim of presenting the accumulation of knowledge through the explanation of enigmatic phenomena as the objective of the discipline. On the other hand, it fits into the mechanistic approach to explanation. Within this approach, the generation of middle-range theories helps to produce new explanations, and also helps to unify a causal language under which the efforts of researchers can be combined. It also highlights the contributions of the classics as precursors of both contemporary theories and a style of theorisation based on the principles of cognitive sociology (Boudon 2002).

Added value is provided through the fact that sociology, or at least part of it, is presented as a science unified by objectives and a common language. It is also in dialogue with other related disciplines, such as cognitive science, economics, political science, and demography. Researchers from these and other sciences work under the premises of scientific rationality, methodological rigor, and the accumulation of knowledge, thus awarding meaning to the historical development of the social sciences from a rationalist and genealogical position.

WHAT ABOUT EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL DISPUTES?

The history of sociology is not just a history of key findings. This is mainly due to two facts. On the one hand, many activities carried out under the label of "sociology" are not motivated by scientific goals. On the other hand, disputes over methods, objects, and approaches have occupied pages and pages of sociological heritage. Boudon's rationalist proposal – and the genealogical proposal – also includes the teaching of certain practices that have made sociology what it is today. In the *Études* themselves, we find analyses such as Simmel's philosophy of history or Lazarsfeld's theory of action, which do not have an empirical aspect, although they have contributed in various ways to guiding empirical work. In this second example, the influence of Lazarsfeld's

concept of “action” is manifest in his own work, as it is in the Columbia School, in which methodological individualism and empirical analysis of action were signs of its identity.

Boudon’s characterisation of sociology in *The Crisis of Sociology* is that of a discipline without a general agreement on key issues: from the absence of a common language, to the inability to determine whether the discipline’s aim is to discover truths, to produce descriptions, or to serve as a political tool. Years later, when he outlined his ideal type of sociology in the *Études*, little seemed to have changed. Despite the fact that sociology is a multi-paradigmatic discipline, some of its formulations have come close to the rationalist goal of creating a common language and, above all, of generating established and useful knowledge.

344

To illustrate this, we can consider the explanatory syntax proposed by AS (e.g. Hedström 2005, Manzo 2014, León-Medina 2017). Scholars agree that the process begins with identifying a pattern at the population level, designated the “explanandum”. This pattern must then be elucidated based on the entities, relationships, and activities that constitute it at a microsocial level through the utilisation of a generative model. A multitude of assumptions are placed within this concise delineation, many of which have been the subject of considerable debate at an epistemological level. These include the notions of causality, methodological individualism, explanation by generative mechanisms, and micro-macro transition.

In this case, we may choose to follow a genealogical strategy to delineate the historical path that has constituted one of these elements as a fundamental element of the analytical approach, for example, explanation using mechanistic models. We may begin with the classics, since it has been demonstrated that authors such as Tocqueville and Weber employed mechanistic explanatory models in their empirical research. They did so despite the fact that this was not an explicit methodological principle. Subsequently, Robert K. Merton employed analogous concepts in his delineation between medium-range theories and his empirical studies. In doing so, he anticipated what Fararo (1969) and Boudon (1979) would later formalise at a theoretical level. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the term *explanatory mechanisms* was employed in a variety of fields within the social sciences, as well as in the fields of biology and the philosophy of science.

The fundamental work prior to the widespread integration of the theoretical concept into empirical research is the publication of the compendium of essays *Social Mechanisms* (Hedström and Swedberg 1998). Discussions about the relevance of mechanism-based explanations in sociology have taken place in the 25 years since its publication, but a contemporary assessment shows

that their application has been successful (Manzo 2021 is useful. As in the previous examples, learning about the history of sociology is marked more by contemporary practice than by the doxographic interest that the discussions may have had when they first occurred.

CONCLUSION

Boudon, one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, has left a profound impact on both general sociology and its historical evaluation. His individualistic approach and contributions to generative explanations have been crucial in understanding the logic of the social and the enduring relevance of classical sociological studies. Rather than focusing on social structures or their functions, Boudon places an emphasis on individuals and their actions. From his perspective, understanding social phenomena necessitates an analysis of individual decisions and behaviours, which aggregate to produce a broader social impact.

This approach has facilitated a more detailed and nuanced understanding of phenomena such as social mobility, inequality, and collective beliefs. One of the most innovative aspects of Boudon's work is his emphasis on generative explanations. Unlike traditional causal explanations that seek to identify direct determining factors, generative explanations focus on the processes through which social phenomena are generated. This type of explanation enables a comprehension of how individual actions can lead to complex and emergent social patterns.

La Logique du social is one of the most significant works in this regard, where Boudon articulates his individualistic and generative approach in a comprehensive manner. This work has been fundamental to contemporary sociology, as it offers a robust theoretical framework for analysing how individual micro-processes translate into macro-social outcomes. *La Logique du social* not only provides detailed and convincing explanations of various phenomena, but also challenges sociologists to reconsider their methods and approaches, promoting a more rigorous and detailed analysis of individual action. Notably, we suggest that *La Logique du social* be used as an appropriate starting point for engaging with contemporary proposals such as those expressed in Historical Social Science.

In addition to his theoretical contributions, Boudon has made significant contributions to the history of sociology. His studies on classical sociologists, such as Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Alexis de Tocqueville, are not confined to a historical analysis of their works, but aim to highlight the ongoing relevance of their approaches and theories. Boudon argues that many of these

thinkers' ideas remain pertinent and useful for understanding contemporary social phenomena. Boudon does not aim to historicise the works of these sociologists; instead, he seeks to demonstrate how their approaches can be applied and adapted to contemporary contexts. This perspective has been crucial in keeping the sociological tradition alive, bringing together historical analysis and theoretical insight, and demonstrating the continuity and evolution of sociological thought.

Boudon's oeuvre continues to be an indispensable point of reference for contemporary sociologists, offering theoretical and methodological tools to analyse the complexity of social life. His work exemplifies the incorporation of rigorous individual-level analysis into broader social theory, thus providing a comprehensive framework that remains highly relevant in the field of sociology today.

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