

Raymond Boudon: An analytical social theorist

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My own ideal was [...]: to say complicated things
as simply and clearly as possible.

Raymond Boudon.

1. Raymond Boudon, a giant of the social sciences

On 10 April 2014, Raymond Boudon – one of the most prominent social theorists in the second half of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st – died in Paris. His death marked an enormous loss for the social sciences in general and for sociology in particular.

With many of his works already authentic classics of the social sciences, Boudon's *oeuvre* is immense, covering fields as diverse as the sociology of education and social mobility, social theory, methodology, the analysis of classics of these disciplines, ideologies, beliefs and moral values, political theory, rationality, and a long etcetera. Obviously, this introduction is not the place to discuss his work as a whole, or even superficially, so I will focus on a few contributions which, from my point of view, are among his most important and share a thread which I will refer to later.

2. Methodological individualism and social mechanisms

First of all, one of Raymond Boudon's most important contributions to social sciences was his defence of *methodological individualism* and of causal explanations based on *social mechanisms* (also called *causal* or *generative mechanisms*). That is to say, the principle according to which any macro-social phenomena must be explained as a result of individuals' behaviour, which in turn is the result of these individuals' reasons and motivations. Also in turn, these reasons and motivations can only be understood in reference to the initial social situation of these individuals.

Despite that, as the author himself stated (see his paper in this issue), this is an old idea, Raymond Boudon (together with other very prominent social theorists such as Thomas Fararo, James Coleman or Jon Elster) made a decisive contribution to making this principle the basis of what constitutes an appropriate explanatory strategy in social science. Boudon developed this strategy in opposition to *pseudo-explanations*, both *functionalist* or *structuralist* ones as well as exclusively statistical ones, whose paradigmatic example was *positivism* (see Cherkaoui in this issue).

It is necessary to clarify this point somewhat in order to avoid misunderstandings. Boudon was always a promoter of empirical sociology and a staunch defender of using statistical tools and formal models. However, he was critical to the same extent of what has been called *variable sociology* (Esser, 1996), that is to say, the approach by which a phenomenon is explained when we identify a set of independent variables that predict the variance of dependent variables.

3. The scientific nature of social sciences and the study of educational inequalities

For Raymond Boudon, the purpose of sociology (and of social science in general) should not be to move the reader or to make him/her enjoy (as literature can do), nor to transform society through political activism, or even to produce data and analyses aimed at making decisions. As he masterly maintained in his "Sociology that really matters" (2001), the main purpose of sociology must be causal explanation of enigmatic social phenomena. From this point of view, sociology has a scientific nature and must be ruled by the same principles of formal and methodological accuracy like in any other discipline.

L'inégalité des chances (1973) constituted the first of Raymond Boudon's major work and what finally placed him in the foreground of the international scene. In this work, which today is an unavoidable starting point for the best contemporary research on social and educational inequalities, the Frenchman put into practice the principles of his social science to show how agents' decisions at the micro level, given their different starting points, result in differentiated scholarly careers and reproduce existing inequalities. In this way, Boudon was successful in showing how actions and interactions at the micro-level can produce aggregated outcomes at the macro-level that nobody expects or wishes (*perverse effects*) without resorting to obscure *teleological arguments* or employing mere descriptive labels such as "socialization" with explanatory aims (see León in this issue).

The explanation offered by Boudon contrasted with the *pseudo-explanation* in fashion at the time (and still today) of Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), for whom school is, in reality, a tool for the reproduction of social inequalities. Boudon himself described Bourdieu and Passeron's work as rhetorical, pedantic and nebulous (see his paper in this issue) because the fact is that Boudon's work is at the other extreme of the *bullshit*, so sadly habitual in some contemporary intellectual circles.¹ As Jean Cazeneuve stated in the speech he gave upon Boudon's election to the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* (see Boudon in this issue), Boudon's style was the opposite: to say complicated things as simply and clearly as possible.

4. Ordinary rationality vs. rational choice theory and explanations with black boxes

Another of Raymond Boudon's major contributions was his *ordinary rationality theory* (also known as *cognitive* or *subjective*). The Frenchman showed himself to be lucidly critical of *rational choice theory* and, among other things, pointed out that human beings do not always act in an instrumental way, so this theory can only explain a more or less restricted part of human behaviour (especially if the *universal self-interest* principle is assumed). In spite of its limited explanatory power, however, Boudon still recognized the methodological goodness of *rational choice theory*. Explanations based on this theory are *final*, without *black boxes*. When we can show that somebody has done something because it was in his/her interest, this person's behaviour becomes understandable for us, we do not have additional questions.

In this sense, explanations based on *rational choice theory* are better than employing (so habitual in the social sciences) mere descriptive labels such as "socialization", "enculturation", "habitus", etc. with explanatory aims. According to the Frenchman, when we say that somebody has done X because he/she has been socialized to do X, in reality we are not explaining his/her behaviour, we are just using a technical label to name a phenomenon whose workings we ignore.

1. On the concept of *bullshit*, see Cohen (2002).

So, according to Boudon, we need a theory with the methodological power of rational choice theory (which avoids black boxes in the explanations) but which increases its explanatory capacity. This theory is, according to Boudon, ordinary rationality theory. Boudon argued that, in principle, we must assume that, in a specific cognitive context, individuals always have good reasons to do what they do or to believe what they believe. These reasons can be instrumental as well as cognitive or axiological. In this way, Boudon solved, for example, the well-known problem (for rational choice theory) of why most people vote in elections when going to vote has costs for individuals and they know that the effect of their vote on the outcome will be almost null. According to the Frenchman, people vote when they believe that democracy is something valuable (cognitive reason), that they must contribute to preserve it (axiological reason), and that one party is better than the others to govern (cognitive reason). Again, Boudon solved the problem without having to turn to black-box pseudo-explanations such as people vote because they have been socialized to vote.

5. Anti-relativism

Finally, the last of Raymond Boudon's contributions to the social sciences I would like to refer to in this introduction is his critique against *constructivism* or *relativism*, not only against *epistemic relativism*, but also against *moral* or *political relativism*, though here I will exclusively focus on the first one. In spite of the fact that this topic is clearly implicit in what I have dealt with above, Boudon dedicated some major works (i.e. *The poverty of relativism*) to discuss it in detail. The Frenchman denounced the thesis of the *avant-garde* of the sociology of science according to which social-scientific knowledge, like any other form of knowledge or discourse, is relative to its social, cultural or historical context of production (Berger), is the product of some kind of interests of power (Foucault), or constitutes an exercise of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu), so that the objective knowledge pursued by social sciences with a scientific vocation is impossible. Among many other problems, this kind of arguments are inconsistent and self-nullifying. Note that when somebody argues that any discourse constitutes, for example, a discourse of power and that for this reason its validity claims cannot be accepted, we can immediately ask why we should accept the validity claims of his/her argument if it is just a discourse of power whose validity claims cannot be accepted. That is to say, our interlocutor asks us to accept his/her reasons of why there are no reasons, just power exercises (Noguera, 2006a).

6. Raymond Boudon, an inspirer of analytical sociological theory

The contributions and characteristics of Raymond Boudon's social science to which I have made reference (as well as many others discussed in the papers of this issue) constitute some of the central components of what has been called *analytical sociological* (or *social*) *theory* (AST).

AST should not be understood as the thousandth school or “paradigm” in social sciences. It constitutes, rather, an attempt, where several theories, methodologies, positions and social research traditions converge, to establish reasonable “rules of the game” in social sciences: to reorder and clarify the nature of the contributions of sociology with the aim of making it a rigorous scientific discipline that provides empirically grounded explanations of relevant social phenomena² (Noguera and Tena-Sánchez, 2013). Clearly, Raymond Boudon, together with many other social scientists and philosophers, has been one of the main inspirers of this movement.

7. Short comment of the papers in this issue

“Why I became a sociologist” is an autobiographic text published in 2009 where Raymond Boudon reviews his career, from his beginnings as a student at the *École Normale Supérieure* to the last phase of his trajectory. Boudon describes what were his main intellectual influences and interests throughout his life and how these were embodied in his works. The text has the virtue of offering a summary of Boudon’s work written by the author himself.

Mohamed Cherkaoui’s paper sets Boudon’s proposal against empiricist approaches, whose most prominent expression was *positivism*. Cherkaoui makes clear the weak spots of this approach, as well as how the Boudonian strategy of *generative mechanisms* contributes to overcoming them. In this way, the paper contributes to answering the usual criticism which brands authors such as Raymond Boudon (and AST in general) as *positivists* (as if this accusation – were it true – would automatically disqualify an entire approach).

Ángeles Lizón, on the other hand, offers a retrospective of Boudon’s academic contribution through the three major stages of his academic career (path regression models, game theoretical mechanisms and ordinary rationality). In this sense, like Cherkaoui, Lizón’s paper also helps to understand how the *generative mechanisms* approach constituted, among other things, an overcoming of the previous atheoretical empiricist approaches and to refute the hasty criticism of positivism against Raymond Boudon’s approach (and AST in general).

In the last part of the paper, Lizón criticizes Boudon’s conception of *methodological individualism* because, according to her, he is not clear enough about the ontological assumptions underlying this explanatory principle.

Karl-Dieter Opp criticizes what he considers a major problem of Raymond Boudon’s rationality theory: its relatively low explanatory power (given that Boudon does not establish a criteria to select the causally relevant reasons for an *explanandum*). Opp inquires into the validity of the theory, that is, if it is plausible that a single theory can explain the wide range of phenomena Boudon focuses on.

On the other hand, Opp criticizes the fact that Boudon rejects the *utility maximization* principle and makes a powerful defence of it as well as of *rational*

2. For a deeper explanation of AST, see Demeulenaere (2011), Hedström (2005), Hedström & Bearman (2009), Manzo (2010, 2014) or Noguera (2006b, 2010).

choice theory, arguing that, in fact, Boudon's theory is compatible with a *wide* version of rational choice theory and can be understood in this way.

Pierre Demeulenaere's paper focuses on Boudon's *ordinary rationality theory*. First of all, he presents the general theories of rationality that currently exist in social sciences. According to the author, rationality has been understood historically as 1) *intentionality* (in the weak sense that people have reasons to do what they do), 2) *preference consistency*, 3) adequacy of the choice of the means to reach an end, and 4) *self-interest*. Demeulenaere argues that, in spite of the fact that, in practice, these four criteria (or some of them) are usually found together in the concepts of rationality that social scientists use in their work, they are in fact four analytically distinguishable concepts of rationality. According to the author, Boudon's ordinary rationality theory has some major advantages with respect to previous theories, but Demeulenaere states that it can be enhanced and completed in several dimensions in order to achieve a sound theory of the interpretation of human actions in the social world. In this regard, he points to the need to find a general basis for defining something as rational.

Gianluca Manzo's paper deals with several topics related to Boudon's work. First of all, Manzo argues that because Bourdon's *ordinary rationality theory* broadens the concept of rationality of rational choice theory, it loses its predictive capacity.

In this sense, he points out that, to recuperate it, it is necessary to identify reason trigger factors, that is to say, mechanisms that systematically tend to trigger certain sets of reasons. In this way, we would have access to a set of regularities that enable us to formulate *ex-ante facto* clear expectations on what micro- and macro-level outcomes are more likely to be observed. Next, Manzo discusses three kinds of factors which, according to him, are good candidates to progress in that direction: social-identity, emotions and heuristics.³

In the second part of the paper, Manzo discusses Boudon's point of view on AST.⁴ Manzo shows that AST places the methodological principles defended by Boudon explicitly, consciously and programmatically at the core of the approach. In fact, it could not be any other way given that, as said previously, Boudon is one of the main inspiring intellectual sources of the analytical sociology movement. Finally, Gianluca Manzo discusses the potential of an innovative type of formal models for AST: agent-based models (ABM).

Precisely, Francisco Linares' paper shows one of the main utilities of ABM, its potential as a formal tool to test the plausibility of the assumptions of a theory. Linares builds a model where he explores the role of homophily and social contagion in the search for a partner. Linares argues that his exercise illustrates, in practice, Boudon's proposals, as he formulated them in works such as *La logique du social*. Besides its intrinsic quality, the exercise is interest-

3. Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts adopted by actors when they have to decide and solve problems. Specifically, Manzo make reference to Gigerenzer's *fast and frugal heuristics theory* (2008).

4. See Boudon (2012b).

ing because Boudon (2012b) referred indirectly to ABM as “secondary technical details”. In this sense, Manzo and Linares’ papers complement one another in showing that ABM is not a secondary detail but a fundamental tool for the advance of AST as well as a good instrument to put in practice the methodological principles defended by Raymond Boudon himself.

Fernando Aguiar starts by asking about the possible reasons Boudon did not develop a theory on social identity or pay special attention to the concept. Boudon himself answered this question in part when, as Aguiar states, he explicitly rejected the concept of identity which he saw as a product of a hyper-socialized portrayal of the actor. However, as Aguiar argues, it does not necessarily derive from Boudon’s criticism that social identity is not an important factor for explaining social behaviour, but that, again, it is usually employed as a mere label without explanatory value. In his paper, Fernando Aguiar offers an interesting avenue to overcome this problem, that is, by employing Boudon’s *ordinary rationality theory* to build a concept of social identity consisting of a set of positive and normative beliefs about ourselves that give us reasons to act.

Finally, Francisco León discusses Boudon’s well-known argument that psychological or biological concepts should not play a role in the explanation of social phenomena given that – exactly as what happened with concepts such as “socialization” – these concepts reintroduce black boxes into explanations. Again, according to Boudon, in order to offer an explanation without black boxes, it is necessary to identify the reasons that drive individuals’ behaviour.

As León states, it now seems impossible to maintain that argument and the vast amount of evidence coming from the different behavioural sciences (neuroscience, primatology, experimental economics, behavioural genetics, evolutionary psychology, etc.) in recent years cannot be ignored without further ado. Of course, accepting the role of “biological causes” does not entail that there are two kinds of phenomena, those that should be explained with reasons and those that should be explained with “biological causes”, nor (at least for the moment) that reasons should not play a key role in explanations. The question is rather, as Manzo also points out in his paper (referring specifically to *fast and frugal heuristics*), that both kinds of phenomena work in some kind of complex interrelation that is still to be unravelled. In conclusion, as León states, social science nowadays needs a new analytical turn: in the future, the explanatory strategy based on social mechanisms will have to be founded on contributions from the behavioural sciences.

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6. A long list of Raymond Boudon's obituaries can be found on this same link.