The Sociology of Critical Capacity

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot

ÉCOLE DES HAUTES ÉTUDES EN SCIENCES SOCIALES, PARIS

Abstract
This article argues that many situations in social life can be analyzed by their requirement for the justification of action. It is in particular in situations of dispute that a need arises to explicate the grounds on which responsibility for errors is distributed and on which new agreement can be reached. Since a plurality of mutually incompatible modes of justification exists, disputes can be understood as disagreements either about whether the accepted rule of justification has not been violated or about which mode of justification to apply at all. The article develops a grammar of such modes of justification, called orders of worth (*grandeur*), and argues that the human capacity for criticism becomes visible in the daily occurrence of disputes over criteria for justification. At the same time, it is underlined that not all social situations can be interpreted with the help of such a sense of justice, which resides on a notion of equivalence. Regimes of love, of violence or of familiarity are systematically distinct from regimes of justification.

Keywords
■ action ■ coordination ■ criticism ■ dispute ■ justification

The Critical Moment

This text will focus on the analysis of a particular type of moment which plays an important role in social life.[1] To label those kinds of moments, we will use the phrase *moments critiques* (critical moments) which makes reference, at the same time, to the critical activity of the persons and to the unusualness of a moment of crisis. What is pertinent for the argument is the reflexivity of this critical moment. The starting situation is something like the following: People, involved in ordinary relationships, who are doing things together – let us say, in politics, work, unionism – and who have to coordinate their actions, realize that something is going wrong; that they cannot get along any more; that something has to change.

To realize has a twin meaning. The word points at the same time to an inward

reflexive move and to a performance in the outward world. In the process of real-
izing that something is going wrong one has to take a distance from the present
moment and to turn backwards towards the past. Old things, forgotten words,
accomplished acts, come back to one's mind, through a selective process which
links them to one another in order to produce a story which makes sense. This
retrospective turn stops the course of action.

But this break in the course of action has also another cause. The person who
realizes that something does not work rarely remains silent. He (or she) does not
keep his feelings to himself. The moment when he realizes that something does
not work is, most of the time, the moment when he realizes that he cannot bear
this state of things any more. The person must, therefore, express discontent to
the other persons with whom he is performing, until then, a joint action.

The demonstration of this discontent might end up in a 'scene'. The scene
itself takes different shapes. It can easily turn into violence, but we will not
investigate this possibility further.

More frequently, the scene turns into a discussion in which criticisms, blames
and grievances are exchanged. The scene develops into a dispute. The word 'scene'
suggests domestic quarrels, and the word 'dispute' judicial litigation. The first are
seen as informal, whereas the second are managed by the judiciary system. But
there are plenty of intermediate cases, like, for instance, disputes on the shop-
floor or the office, between customers and employees, or disputes in the street,
between drivers. We have investigated the common features of those very differ-
ent situations and, thus, tried to outline a general framework for the analysis of
the disputing process in a complex society.

A first characteristic of these situations is that persons involved are subjected
to an imperative of justification. The one who criticizes other persons must
produce justifications in order to support their criticisms just as the person who
is the target of the criticisms must justify his or her actions in order to defend his
or her own cause. These justifications have to follow rules of acceptability. We
cannot say, for instance: 'I don't agree with you because I don't like your face.'
There are no reasons to think that these rules of acceptability would be different
for the one who criticizes and for the one who must respond to criticisms. Thus,
a frame of analysis of the disputing activity must be able to tackle with the same
tools the criticisms of any social or situational order as well as the justification of
the current one.

Moreover, those situations are necessarily transitory because they break the
ordinary course of action. Nobody can live constantly in a state of crisis. One of
the ways to get out of a crisis is to return to an agreement. The frame of analy-
sis must therefore be able to tackle agreement and disagreement with the same
tools.

Finally, these disputes are not merely a matter of language. Disputes involve
not only human persons but, also, a large number of objects: in the course of a
professional dispute, for example, a computer whose data have been erased; in
the course of a dispute between heirs, a house or a land; or, in the course of a
domestic scene, plates which have to be washed up, and so on. The frame must

be designed to deal with disputes in the real world, that is, it must be able to describe the way disputes link together persons and things.

The Establishment of Equivalence

Let us focus on the moment when persons enter into dispute. An important feature of this moment deals with the establishment of equivalence. In order to criticize and to explain to somebody else what is going wrong, one has to bring together different sets of people and objects and to make connections between them. One has, for instance, to connect stories and details sampled from the past in order to display the pertinent characteristics they share. The operation of bringing together different items or different facts must be justified with reference to a principle of equivalence which clarifies what they have in common.[2]

But agreement itself is based on the same kind of operations. To make an agreement possible, particular persons must divest themselves of their singularity and converge towards a form of generality transcending persons and the situations in which they interrelate. Persons seeking agreement have therefore to focus on a convention of equivalence external to themselves.

Let us consider, for example, a dispute between two drivers after a collision. The furious indignation of the first can stem from a series of heterogeneous vexations he suffered the same day: his wife fell ill; his son had very bad grades at school; his boss humiliated him; he is anxious about a pain in his throat (maybe cancer) and, in addition to that, this stupid guy bumps into his new, beautiful car. That's too much! But the second driver can also have a series of personal reasons to complain against a nasty world: his mother just died the day before; his taxes have increased; his last book has been refused by the publisher and, moreover, there is this idiot, in the middle of the road. That's too much! If they want to escape violence they must be able to eliminate most of these motives of discontent as 'private' and to converge towards a common definition of the relevant objects in the situations – such as highway codes, state of tires, etc. But in order to converge in sorting out relevant and irrelevant items they must share a common capacity to see what fits the situation and under which relation. They need, hence, a common definition of the form of generality which allows to connect this situation with other ones identified as similar.

The possibility of making reference to a principle of equivalence is also a prerequisite for minimal calculation. In order to blame or to criticize in a consistent way, one must, therefore, be endowed with a certain ability to calculate. If you want, for example, to say in an angry voice, to the colleague with whom you are writing a book: 'It is always me who does the xeroxing and all the chores, while you read exciting books sitting comfortably in your armchair', you have to bring together and put under equivalence a number of quite scattered and heterogeneous operations. We will say that the necessity of laying stress on equivalence is a main feature of the mode or the regime which persons will set up when they have to manage a dispute. And we will call this regime of justification a regime of justice.

In the ordinary course of common action, in contrast, equivalencies are not subjected to deliberate reflection. Instead equivalencies which maintain the coordination of actions may be, for example, encapsulated in objects or by objectified rules. The most often quoted example probably is the standardization of time and schedules.

In another mode or regime of coordination, which we will call an affective regime (*régime d'agapè*) (Boltanski, 1990), persons actively cooperate in the process of shoving the equivalencies aside in order to render difficult the cumulating and calculation operations which are required to blame and criticize. The emotionally intense scene, in which people connected by an affective link are involved, is precisely set at the border between a regime of action which aims at dismissing the measuring of equivalence and, on the other hand, a regime of action in which people bring back such measures of equivalence and lay stress on them. This kind of scene has frequently been presented in literary works. But, in most cases, the writers place this scene in the description of amorous relationships. But, as fieldwork shows, this kind of scene is also very frequent among people who are involved in professional relationships. The person who goes on shifting from one regime to the other looks back over past events in a disillusioned way: 'How was it possible to be such a fool: so naïve of me; fancy being "had" that way! For the last twenty years I have been making the xeroxes or (in another context) I have been washing the dishes, etc. without receiving anything in return. Now, I realize . . .' But this disquieting moment is not, as often claimed by those who experienced it, a moment of truth. The regime in which one makes calculations is no more true, no more real, than the regime in which people inhibit their calculation abilities. It is the reshuffle in the perception of the world stemming from a quick shift from one regime to another which gives the illusion of a glaring truth.

The regime of justification, which requires collective conventions of equivalence, is only needed when more local regimes of coordination based on either 'personal convenience' or 'conventional utilization' are not sufficient to deal with the misfortune of the situation and determine what is convenient or appropriate (Thévenot, 1990b). In the 'regime of familiarity' (Thévenot, 1994) a person is intimately engaged with a familiar surrounding, either at home or at the workplace. The dynamics of engagement are highly dependent on personal and local clues that are clearly not available to any unfamiliar observer. All the mannerisms will appear bizarre to any observer who is lacking the intimate knowledge that constitutes the personality through the path of a long and partially mutual accommodation with the entourage. Now imagine that the person has to leave the place to an unfamiliar newcomer. There is a need to tidy the place up in order to put it in a condition which is appropriate for a quite different regime of engagement based on a regular planned action based on plans and functionalities. This involves destroying a fair amount of the familiar capacity of the complex web of a habitat. Highly 'customized' equipment does not fit the format of regular anonymous plans with functional artifacts. One needs to anticipate normal plans and restore to their normal state the things that were heavily used. Ordinary use

of language, with its loose denomination of actions and objects, is sufficient to monitor this regime of engagement. This is in marked contrast with both personal convenience (where language is highly indexical and corporeal) and collective conventions (where language is strictly conventionalized). Should things go wrong and a dispute grow, the discussants would go beyond the implicit assumptions of a normal intention of action, or of an object in good condition. They now refer to general principles of efficiency, or security, for instance, to justify their claim. They ground their arguments on broad conventional requirements that human or non-human entities need to satisfy in order to be qualified. They put the qualifications to a conventional test.

During the course of a dispute, the reference to a principle of equivalence is also a basic operation necessarily implemented in order to set up a claim, unveil an injustice and ask for an atonement. In order to keep violence away from the situation, the discontented person must display his motives by associating them with proofs and justifications and in such a way that they can be redressed.

One can make a link between very different stories if one accepts the idea that justified disputes are always grounded on a disagreement whose object is the relative size or worth (*la grandeur*) of the different beings present in the situation.

Let us take up a very common problem: how, in the course of a meal, to distribute the food among the guests. When the table is large the guests cannot help themselves, as they do in a buffet meal. During such a meal the question of the serving order cannot be avoided. And this question must be settled publicly. One can, of course, try to escape the problem by choosing to model the temporal order on a spatial one that neutralizes the social meaning of being served first. This is the case when, abandoning any concept of serving some people before others, the host sends the dishes around the table without any fuss. But in all the other cases, the temporal order of service is susceptible to being interpreted as an order of precedence according to the relative importance or worth of the guests.

But the implementation of this order can be difficult, particularly when the possibility of a simultaneous existence of different orders of worth arises. Is it better to present the dishes first to the grandmother or to the host's boss? The possibility of protest stems from the presence, in the same situation, of different possible orders. Tacit agreement among the participants on the kind of qualities that must be emphasized by the service order is the condition of a harmonious, smooth-running scene. But the pre-condition of this agreement is a common recognition of a conventional equivalence that can support a judgment on the relative size or worth of the persons concerned. Even if the reference to this convention is not explicit, it must be clear enough to yield a situation which seems to be grounded on a natural order.

The Possibility of a Legitimate Agreement

One of the main characteristics of the kind of agreement we have in mind is its exposure to, and confrontation with, actually or potentially, criticism. This is the

reason why it must be justified in order to be able to oppose a resistance if attacked. Our object is not, therefore, a mutual and circumstantial agreement between individuals (which can be called indefensible and, thus, may well be logically not consistent), but a justified agreement which is aiming at facing criticism, and whose compatibility with a constraint of generalization can be perceived.

By emphasizing the justification process, we want to take seriously the question of the legitimacy of the agreement, rather than set it aside in favor of an explanation exclusively styled in terms of contingency, deceit or force. We certainly do not underestimate the importance in social life of domination, force, interests and even of deceit, delusion and self-deception. But a representation of the social world which would be completely grounded on deception and delusion would no longer be able to give an account of the experience of the social actors themselves.

The main problem of critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors. A sociology which wants to study the critical operations performed by actors – a sociology of criticism taken as a specific object – must therefore give up (if only temporarily) the critical stance, in order to recognize the normative principles which underlie the critical activity of ordinary persons. If we want to take seriously the claims of actors when they denounce social injustice, criticize power relationships or unveil their foes' hidden motives, we must conceive of them as endowed with an ability to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate ways of rendering criticisms and justifications. It is, more precisely, this competence which characterizes the ordinary sense of justice which people implement in their disputes. We will try to outline now the analysis of this competence. Our aim is to describe the actors' sense of justice – or, more precisely, their sense of injustice – and to build models of the competence with which actors have to be endowed in order to face ordinary critical situations. This approach thus departs from the task of moral philosophy, which is to discover some normative rules and procedures leading to justice, although one can build a normative model of justice on the actor's sense of justice which we made explicit.[3]

It is possible to convey the legitimacy constraint in a very practical statement: a criticism or a justification can be said to be legitimate in a concrete situation when the speaker can stand by it whatever the social characteristics of a newcomer may be. The effect of the legitimacy constraint is, therefore, to set in motion a process of generalization.

The Modeling of the Sense of Justice

In situations under a constraint of justification, people have to ground their stances on a legitimate worth. But, such a statement does not imply that all the forms of behavior must be gathered under a single principle of equivalence. Our work aims to build a research strategy in the sociological field – as Michael Walzer

has done in philosophy of justice – that might enable us to escape having to choose between a formal universalism and the kind of unlimited pluralism which has often been the response of empirical disciplines like history or sociology to transcendental stances.

For classical sociology the plurality of values is an outcome of the plurality of social groups. But in this framework, the question of the agreement between people belonging to different groups is difficult to answer without having recourse to an explanation grounded mainly on domination, power or force. Moral theories devoted to the analysis of the pre-conditions of a just society are, in contrast, most of the time oriented towards the search of a universal procedure capable of supporting the foundation of a general convention. The usefulness of these constructions for sociological work depends mainly on their being systematic and consistent. But they can be seen as utopias when confronted with the diversity of the situations in which the members of a complex society are involved.

We can escape from the alternative between formal universalism and unlimited pluralism by considering the possibility of a limited plurality of principles of equivalence which can be used in order to support criticisms and agreements (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). The reference to different kinds of common good makes it possible to sort out different ways of deciding on a person's state of worth. In this model, then, the different forms of equivalence are not related to different groups – as they are in classical sociology – but to different situations. It follows that a person must – in order to act in a normal way – be able to shift, during the space of one day or even one hour, between situations which are relevant in relation to different forms of equivalence. The different principles of equivalence are formally incompatible with one another, since each of them is recognized in the situation in which its validity is established as universal. It follows that the persons must have the ability to ignore or to forget, when they are in a given situation, the principles on which they have grounded their justifications in the other situations in which they have been involved.

In order to find out the legitimate worth available to the persons in ordinary situations, when they have to make their grounds explicit and to yield justifications, our strategy has been as follows. We started from two different places, apparently very far away from each other, between which we went back and forth. More precisely, we used three bodies of data. Empirical data gathered in our fieldwork on the process of disputation made up the first corpus. This line of research (carried out with a group of graduate students and coordinated in a seminar) provided us with a large set of arguments and situational devices from which we could distil justifications often used in daily life. Let us call to mind a situation very familiar in our own milieu, for instance, a controversial discussion about the worth of a book recently published by a colleague. One can argue that this book is very well known or that it sells very well. But one can counteract these praises by arguing, for example, that such a book is not the result of really systematic work or, from another stance, that it is not really creative. The worths or sizes

attributed to persons or objects become especially salient when the situation turns into a dispute, so that the study of such situations is a very good occasion to detect them.

The second corpus we used was made up of a set of classical texts stemming from the field of political philosophy. This choice was motivated by the fact that, during the course of empirically observed disputes, people do not necessarily develop systematic accounts from which the analyst might derive the principles of equivalence which support the evaluation and qualification process. Such requirements of systematicity leading up to a clarification of the principles, in contrast, are at the very core of political philosophies which must, in order to be convincing, demonstrate that the common good on which they are based is well founded. Then, comparing different philosophical constructions of a political nature, we identified different principles of equivalence and built a model of the way they can support justifiable claims.

We then used this roundabout path through political philosophy to improve our understanding of the competences which actors implement when they have to justify their actions or criticisms. The disputing process can be reduced neither to a direct expression of selfish interests nor to an anarchic and endless confrontation of heterogeneous world-views. Observing the course of disputes, or, more precisely, of disputes in which violence is excluded, one cannot fail to observe the common constraints which shape the behavior of the people involved. For example, they must base their arguments on strong evidence, expressing in this way their will to converge towards a resolution of their disagreement. Political constructions can be used as powerful tools to clarify these constraints and make explicit the grounds of reasoning, which are most of the time encapsulated in an implicit form in the arguments exchanged during the course of action. Our use of these canonical texts has, therefore, been instrumental and, hence, sharply deviates from the philosophical tradition. We studied these texts neither for themselves, nor as stemming from a social or historical context, but as general grammars of the political bond.

We of course do not suggest that the ordinary members of our society have actually read the works we used in order to outline models of the competence people implement when they are involved in disputes. But the orders of worth that are clarified and formalized in these political philosophies are also embodied in the objectified devices that make up daily situations. They are now encapsulated in the core of a large number of ordinary institutions and social devices such as polling stations, shop-floors, media, artistic shows and family ceremonies.

Focusing on the operation of justification and criticism, our interest has been drawn less towards the political philosophies which lay stress on power or force than towards those which are devoted to understanding a political and social equilibrium. These constructions have in common that they imagine a world in which human beings are sharply separated from other beings and are brought together by virtue of a fundamental equality. These political philosophies can hence be characterized by the stress they lay on a common humanity. In the different constructions we used as resources in order to clarify the ordinary sense

of justice, persons are equal with regard to their common belonging to human-
ity. But as the comparison of texts from different traditions shows, each of these
constructions proposes a specific principle of order or equivalence, which can be
implemented with a view to specifying what the worth or 'size' of the 'great ones'
(*les grands*) consists in, and, hence, on what to base a justifiable order between
persons.

A person involved in criticism must be endowed with the ability to shift from
one form of justification to another one with those same requirements. The
attempt to make explicit these requirements, common to different orders, led us
to make explicit a common model (*modèle de cité*) shared by all orders of worth
and which explains the possibility of shifting from one to the other or of build-
ing compromises. The presence, in the core of the model, of two different basic
constraints – first, a constraint of common humanity and, second, a constraint
of order – yields a tension, since persons are equal with regard to their belong-
ing to humanity while being placed within a hierarchy according to a specific
principle of order. It follows that, in this model, the distinction between persons,
which points to the human beings in their states prior to any form of qualifi-
cation, and states of persons, which refers to the qualification process, is crucial.
A conception in which the states of persons – their worth or 'size' – are defini-
tive would, therefore, be at variance with the principle of common humanity.[4]
The critical moment is precisely the moment when a disagreement about the state
of worth of the persons becomes manifest. Somebody will, for example, make
the following kind of criticism: 'The best computer has been allocated to a
programmer who is not the best one'. Or, in another situation: 'The eldest son,
who is the heir to the estate, is not the one who really has the moral qualities
required to manage it'. The manifestation of this disagreement creates an uncer-
tainty about the relative worth of the beings involved, which yields anxiety. In
order to resolve this uncertainty, a judgment, rooted in the situation, is necessary.
To understand how this judgment is passed, we have to pay attention to the prag-
matic conditions of attribution of worth to a person. We will then meet the ques-
tion of the objects and of the relation between human beings and things. In order
to analyze the case of the programmer whose professional competency has been
challenged, or that of the elder son whose moral qualities are denied, we have to
investigate the connections between the persons and a plurality of objects,
material or not, such as machines, computer programs, regulations, credentials,
rules of inheritance, soil qualities, etc. We do not want to deal with these objects
as pure carriers of symbolic meanings, as sociologists often do. We want, on the
contrary, to show the way persons, in order to cope with uncertainty, rely on
things, objects, devices which are used as stable referents, on which reality tests
or trials can be based. These reality tests enable judgments to reach a grounded
and legitimate agreement and, hence, provide the possibility of ending the
disputes.

In order to display the worlds of objects on which the making of a reality test
relies, we have examined a third corpus consisting of some contemporary works
purporting to serve as handbooks or 'how-to' guides to correct behavior in

Table 1 Orders of worth

	Inspired	*Domestic*	*Civic*	*Opinion*	*Market*	*Industrial*
Mode of evaluation (worth)	Grace, nonconformity, creativeness	Esteem, reputation	Collective interest	Renown	Price	Productivity, efficiency
Format of relevant information	Emotional	Oral, exemplary, anecdotal	Formal, official	Semiotic	Monetary	Measurable: criteria, statistics
Elementary relation	Passion	Trust	Solidarity	Recognition	Exchange	Functional link
Human qualification	Creativity, ingenuity	Authority	Equality	Celebrity	Desire, purchasing power	Professional competency, expertise

modern companies. These guides are written for laypersons and claim a peda-
gogical function. Given that they are designed to teach people the right way of
arranging new situations and coping with existing ones, they contain references
to a large number of casual objects which are, of course, absent from the philo-
sophical treatises on politics. It was important for us to choose different guides,
each one of them devoted to the display of a particular way of defining worth,
but all intended to be used in the same social space which, in this case, is the
space of the modern company. The reason is as follows. As we said before, we
made the hypothesis that the same persons have, on the same day and in the same
social space, to use different devices for assessment, including the reference to
different types of worth, when they shift from one situation to another.
Companies are, nowadays, a very good field to test this hypothesis. The co-pres-
ence in the modern company of heterogeneous resources, leading to different
forms of consistency and based on different principles of justice, is particularly
striking. Situations close to one another in space and time are justified according
to different principles. And the same persons have to move through those situ-
ations. Let us take up the case, for example, of an aeronautical engineer who
during the same day can have to design an experimental laboratory test of a new
prototype, then carry out a discussion with commercial managers about the best
technical arguments which can be used to sell a new machine, then go to a lunch
where a senator is invited (i.e. as a public relations device), and, at the end of the
day, take off his tie and attend the union meeting of the local CFDT executives.
The same individual can later come back home, be taken to task by his wife for
being late and, after that, attend a concert of a newly discovered, inspired, young
pianist.

   We chose contemporary guides for everyday practices that could be matched
with classical political texts from which we extracted the principles of order that
are implemented in different daily situations. We then performed this very dis-
respectful operation of processing these mundane guides for practical action
together with the immortal works of political philosophers.

The Common Worlds

We shall now give a short description of these common worlds, pointing out for
each of them: first, the diverse underlying principles of order as extracted from
the classical texts; and second, the beings (persons or things) which inhabit these
worlds as they are depicted in the corresponding practical guides. In *De la justifi-
cation* (1991) we focused on six worlds (see Table 1). We suppose that these six
worlds are sufficient to describe justifications performed in the majority of ordi-
nary situations. But this number is not, of course, a magical one. These worlds
are historical constructions and some of them are less and less able to ground
people's justifications whereas other ones are emerging. One can wonder, for
example, whether a green worth, or a communicative worth is not being set up
at the moment.

The World of Inspiration

The construction of this world is based on St Augustine's *City of God* and on the treatise Augustine devoted to the problem of grace. In this world, worth is viewed as an immediate relationship to an external source from which all possible worth flows. This worth rests upon the attainment of a state of grace and is, therefore, completely independent of recognition by others. It arises, particularly, in the personal body when prepared by asceticism, and especially through emotions. Its expressions are diverse and many-sided: holiness, creativity, artistic sensibility, imagination, etc. Reference to this world is made, nonetheless, each time people attain worth without bothering about opinions of others. It is, for example, the case of artists. Artists do not necessarily reject public marks of reputation or financial recognition, but they must, in order to be allowed to accept them, make a compromise, which is always difficult to reach, with another kind of worth, say, for example, with that of renown or of the market. Even when they attain recognition, they never see in their success the very bases of their work's value or of their own.

   In order to display the objects of the inspired world we used a practical guide devoted to the development of executives' creativity written by a 'creativity consultant', whose title is *La créativité en pratique*. As with the other guides we shall mention later, one can draw from this work a list of terms referring to persons, objects, qualities and typical ways of making relations. Without going into details, one can show that, in the world of inspiration, the relevant beings are, for example, spirits, crazy people, artists, children. These beings are worthy and great when they are odd, wonderful, emotional. Their typical way of acting is to dream, to imagine, to rebel, or to have living experiences.

The Domestic World

The domestic world was extracted from a commentary of Bossuet's work, *La politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture sainte*. In a domestic world, people's worth depends on a hierarchy of trust based on a chain of personal dependencies. The political link between beings is seen as a generalization of kinship and is based on face-to-face relationships and on the respect for tradition. The person, cannot, in this world, be separated from his/her belonging to a body, a family, a lineage, an estate. In Bossuet's political construction, the king, who is the greatest being, is comparable with a father, who sacrifices himself for his subjects. In this model one must, to evaluate someone's worth, know his place in the network of dependencies from which this person draws his own authority.

   In order to describe the objects of the domestic world of the present, we used a practical guide teaching good manners and human relations within the company, intended for socially mobile workers who had been promoted to more responsible positions (entitled *Savoir vivre et promotion*). In this book, important and worthy persons are chiefs, bosses, or even relatives. Their main qualities are to be distinguished, straightforward, faithful and to have character. The typical

objects are, for instance, visiting cards, gifts, estates, houses, titles. Among the relevant ways to make relationships we note the act of recommending somebody, giving birth, breeding, reproducing or presenting an invitation.

The World of Renown

The world of renown was drawn from Hobbes's *Leviathan*, particularly the chapter devoted to honor. If, in a domestic world, worth has value only in a hierarchical chain of beings, worth is nothing but the result of other people's opinion in the world of renown. The measurement of people's worth depends on conventional signs of public esteem. This kind of worth is based on nothing other than the number of individuals who grant their recognition. It is hence entirely unrelated to the realm of personal dependencies and it is not linked to the person's self-esteem. For this reason, disputes may arise when a gap between self-esteem and recognition by others comes to light: in this world, other people's recognition is reality.

As a guide we used a training book in public relations, *Principes et techniques des relations publiques*. In this world, relevant persons are well-known personalities, stars, opinion leaders, journalists. They are worthy and great when they are famous, recognized, successful, or convincing. The current objects in this world are trademarks, badges, message transmitters and receivers, press releases and booklets. The right way of making relations is, then, to influence, to identify oneself to somebody, to appeal to or to speak about somebody, or to gossip and spread rumors.

The Civic World

Probably no work presents a better account of what a civic world, at least in its French version, must be, than Rousseau's *Contrat social*. In the civic polity, as in the domestic polity according to Bossuet, civil peace depends on the authority of a sovereign whose position, above the selfish lusts of individuals, secures the common good. But Rousseau's sovereign is disembodied. In the civic world, a sovereign is formed by the convergence of human wills, as citizens give up their particular interests and direct themselves exclusively towards the common good. This civic worth counteracts the personal dependencies on which domestic worth is based, as well as the opinions of others which constitute the worth of renown. In the civic world, persons are small if seen as particulars, following the dictates of a selfish will, and, in contrast, relevant and worthy if seen as members of the disembodied sovereign, exclusively concerned with the general interest. In order to list the main objects, persons and devices of a civic world, and to describe companies' situations set up according to this logic, we used two union guides, published by the CFDT, which complement each other, *Pour élire ou désigner les délégués* (How to elect or designate the delegates) and *La section syndicale* (The union section). The way the labor force is organized in the field of work is regulated by social laws which are themselves the outcome of the nineteenth-century effort to implement a civic principle of equivalence.

The peculiarity of the civic world is to lay stress on beings who are not individual beings but collective ones. Individual human beings can be seen as relevant and worthy only as they belong to a group or as they are the representatives of a collective person. In this world, important persons are, therefore, federations, public communities, representatives or delegates. Their qualities are to be official or statutory. The relevant objects are either immaterial as, for example, rules, codes, procedures, or material, as union premises or ballot boxes. Praiseworthy relationships are those which involve or mobilize people for a collective action.

The Market World

Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (primarily the first chapters describing how a market works) yields arguments basing a harmonious polity on the market. The market link coordinates individuals through the mediation of scarce goods, the acquisition of which is pursued by everyone. This competition among the individuals' lusts subordinates to the desires of others the price attached to the possession of a commodity. 'The calm desire for wealth', as Albert Hirschman writes in *The Passions and the Interest* (Hirschman, 1981), quoting Francis Hutcheson, allows the construction of a harmonious order which transcends the confusion of individual interests.

The market world must not be mixed up with the sphere of economic relations. We try to show, on the contrary, that economic actions are based on, at least, two main forms of coordination, one by the market, the other by an industrial order, each of them being the support of a different reality test.

We did not succeed in finding a contemporary French guide that could be used to describe the objects which are relevant in the mercantile world of today. We therefore resorted to a French translation of an American book teaching the art of business to a large audience, *What they don't teach you at Harvard Business School*. For our purpose, this book is of particular interest because it bases business success on an experience which is conspicuously unconnected to industrial production: the author made a fortune selling the names of famous people to advertising agencies.

In a market world, important persons are buyers and sellers. They are worthy when they are rich. Their main qualities are to be opportunistic in spotting and seizing the opportunities of the market, to be unhampered by any personal link and to be emotionally under control. They connect with one another through competitive relationships.

The Industrial World

The industrial principle of equivalence was distilled from the work of Saint Simon, founder of French sociology. In this world, worth is based on efficiency. It can be measured on a scale of professional capabilities. Connected to the production of material goods, industrial worth is upheld by way of organizational devices directed towards future planning and investment.

To describe the objects of the industrial world we used a productivity guide, *Productivité et conditions de travail.* In an industrial world the great persons are the experts. The words used to describe their personal qualities can also be used to qualify things. They are said to be worthy when they are efficient, productive, operational. They implement tools, methods, criteria, plans, figures, graphs, etc. Their relationships can be said to be harmonious when organized, measurable, functional, standardized.

Criticisms and Compromises

Criticism can be internal to a world when flaws or faults are noticed, and beings are re-qualified or discovered as relevant. Or criticism can be more radical and based on an exteriority. Then, the critique stands outside and relies on an alternative world. It is precisely because persons, unlike things, can exist in a plurality of worlds that they always have the possibility of denouncing a situation as unjust (even if criticism is unequally easy according to the current constraints they have to deal with). In the model we outlined, a critical capability can then be seen as a characteristically anthropological stance.

One can demonstrate empirically that most of what are today ordinary criticisms are made possible by connecting two (or more) of the different worlds we have schematically described. But the aim of the criticism can be more or less radical. We can therefore make a distinction between two forms of criticism based on an exteriority.

A first form of criticism consists in denouncing a reality test that is relevant in a certain world by unveiling the presence inside the testing device itself of extraneous beings (or outsiders), relevant in another world. Let us think, for example, of a school examination aimed at measuring a pupil's capabilities, and which therefore can be said to be mainly industrial. One can denounce the pupil for having displayed, during the test, his family's status and wealth, through his clothes, manners, distinguished accent, elegant jacket, and so on. One can, at the same time, denounce the teacher by accusing him or her of having, consciously or unconsciously, taken into account in the judgment these signs of opulence which should not be relevant in the school evaluation. The situation is then criticized as unfair because a kind of worth relevant inside one world has been carried into another. We will call this figure a shift of worth. The underlying principle on which the test is based is not challenged. In this case, the denunciation is exclusively focused on unveiling the worth belonging to another world that persons are accused of having introduced into the test situation. The reparation process would then consist in carrying out a new and purer test.

But criticism can be much more radical. We shall outline now a second figure in which the target of the criticism is the very principle of equivalence on which the reality test is based. In this case, the aim of the criticism is to substitute for the current test another one relevant in another world. Then the dispute is no longer turned towards the way the test must be designed so as to be fair, but

towards the question of knowing what kind of test, relevant in a certain world, would really fit the situation. Let us again imagine a school examination situation. But this time the test takes place on a day when students are protesting outside for civil rights. The police have been brought in. There is shouting in the street outside the windows. A teacher might denounce the way his colleagues are continuing to administer the test while, outside, students are being beaten up by the police. He can say something like: 'What really matters just now is not that the examination goes on, but that we demonstrate our solidarity with the students.'

As this last example suggests, the less pure a situation is (in the sense that it contains objects relevant in different worlds), the easier it is to denounce it. That is to say, in this story, on one side, teachers, blackboards, schedules, etc., and on the other side, protest, rights, posters with political slogans, solidarity claims, etc. We will call such situations ambiguous situations (*situations troubles*). These kinds of situations, which contain objects from several worlds, are particularly amenable to criticism. It is probably the reason why the situations in which important reality tests are performed are usually contrived so as to be as pure as possible. The objects from other worlds are removed in order to discourage criticism and to make the challenging of the test difficult. By intercrossing the six worlds mentioned above, we have drawn up a matrix from which we have charted the most frequent legitimate criticisms in our society. Thus, for instance, one can rely on a civic principle of equivalence to denounce the personal links of the domestic world. It is the case, for example, when unionists denounce paternalism in the workshop. But one can also, inversely, criticize from the point of view of the domestic world the civic way of linking people and, say, denounce the totalitarian effect of the juridical relationships, which wreck genuine, humane, and warm relationships among individuals.

The empirical exploration of this matrix can also reveal which cells are the most overloaded. In France, for instance, the unveiling, from a civic point of view, of hidden domestic links is extremely frequent. This figure upholds, for example, the numerous denunciations of scandals. It is the case, for instance, when somebody unveils the kinship or friendship link which secretly connects the mayor, wearing the insignia of his office, to the property developer to whom the town council allocated the construction of the new playground.

When a radical criticism challenges the very principle on which the situation is based, the dispute transforms itself into a competition between two different reality tests. If they want to close it, the people involved must try to come back to one and only one test.

But one can consider another way of ending a dispute and reaching an agreement; this is to set up a compromise between two worlds. In a compromise, people maintain an intentional proclivity towards the common good by cooperating to keep present beings relevant in different worlds, without trying to clarify the principle upon which their agreement is grounded.[5]

But compromises are easy to denounce. When people compromise they act as if they could rely upon a higher-level principle on which equivalence between

objects from different worlds could be based. The reference, for example, to workers' rights is a compromise between the civic world (where citizens have rights) and the industrial one (where the workers are relevant and worthy as opposed to the idle ones). The rights of persons as citizens in a civic world are specified in relation to their participation in the industrial one. These weak argumentative constructions (since their putting together will not survive a consistency test) can be strengthened by their objectification into objects or institutions which are made up of things relevant within the different worlds that are associated through the compromise (as in France, for instance, the *Conseil économique et social*, which links together in an objectified institution elements from the civic, the industrial and, even, the domestic worlds).

Ending the Dispute

The two possibilities we have just mentioned – the reality test and the compromise – are not the only paths which can be followed in order to leave the critical moment and come back to the ordinary course of action. Frequently, people just drop the dispute without making a new agreement confirmed by a reality test. If we want to understand these puzzling endings, we probably must leave the realm of justice, which depends on a principle of equivalence, in order to shift towards other logics of action which, as in the case of affective relations, put aside the reference to an equivalence. It is on such logics that forgiving is based (Boltanski, 1990). To mention forgetting and forgiveness is not to escape from the social sciences. The kinds of relationship which are woven without any reference to equivalence can also, for sure, be clarified through a sociological analysis and even an empirical one, for lack of criticism is not merely negative, not merely the result of domination and alienation. It often requires an active participation of the persons and a special capacity so as not to see or, at least not to unveil, what is going wrong. Without this capacity ordinary human relationships would simply be impossible.

Notes

1 A first version of this text was a lecture given by Luc Boltanski at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and benefited from Terry Nardin's attentive reading, comments and assistance. The argument presented here in a summarized form has been developed in Boltanski and Thévenot (1987; 1991) and Boltanski (1990).
2 On this establishment of equivalence, see in English Boltanski (1987), Boltanski and Thévenot (1983), Thévenot (1984).
3 For a comparison of this sense of justice with John Rawls's and Michael Walzer's theories of justice, see Thévenot (1992) and the article 'Justification et Compromis' in the *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale* (Canto-Sperber, 1996, pp. 789–94). Paul Ricoeur compared Walzer's and our models of justice in relation to the place provided for politics (Ricoeur, 1995).

4 See, in this perspective, Alexis Carrel's attempt to build a '*cité eugénique*' and its conse-
   quences in the history of demography and statistics (Thévenot, 1990a).

5 In this perspective, we can view organizations as organizing relatively durable compro-
   mises between different worlds. Organizations differ with respect to the kind of worlds
   they mostly rely on, and the kind of compromises which support them.

References

Boltanski, Luc (1987) *The Making of a Class. Cadres in French Society*. Cambridge:
    Cambridge University Press/Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.
—— (1990) *L'amour et la justice comme compétences*. Paris: Éd. Métailié.
—— (1993) *La souffrance à distance. Morale humanitaire, médias et politique*. Paris: Éd.
    Métailié.
Boltanski, Luc and Thévenot, Laurent (1983) 'Finding one's way in social space: a study
    based on games', *Social Science Information* 22 (4/5): 631–79.
—— (1987) *Les économies de la grandeur*. Paris: PUF (Cahiers du Centre d'Études de
    l'Emploi).
—— (1991) *De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur.* Paris: Gallimard.
Canto-Sperber, Monique, ed. (1996) *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale*. Paris:
    PUF.
Hirschman, Albert (1981) *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capital-
    ism before its Triumph*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Ricoeur, Paul (1995) 'La place du politique dans une conception pluraliste des principes
    de justice,' in Joëlle Affichard and Jean-Baptiste de Foucauld (eds) *Pluralisme et équité:
    penser la justice dans la démocratie*. Paris: Éd. Esprit.
Thévenot, Laurent (1984) 'Rules and Implements: Investment in Forms', *Social Science
    Information* 23(1): 1–45.
—— (1990a) 'La politique des statistiques: les origines sociales des enquêtes de mobilité
    sociale', *Annales Économie Société Culture* No. 6: 1275–300.
—— (1990b) 'L'action qui convient', in Patrick Pharo and Louis Quéré (eds) *Les formes
    de l'action*, pp. 39–69. Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS (Raisons pratiques 1).
—— (1992) 'Un pluralisme sans relativisme? Théories et pratiques du sens de la justice',
    in Joëlle Affichard and Jean-Baptiste de Foucauld (eds) *Justice sociale et inégalités*, pp.
    221–53. Paris: Éd. Esprit.
—— (1994) 'Le regime de familiarité: des choses en personnes', *Genèses* No. 17: 72–101.
—— (1995) 'L'action en plan', *Sociologie du Travail* 27(3): 411–34.
—— (1999), 'Which road to follow? The moral complexity of an "equipped" humanity'
    in John Law and Annemarie Mol *Complexities in Science, Technology and Medicine*
    (forthcoming).

■ **Luc Boltanski**   is Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales
and Director of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale, Paris. His recent
publications include *L'Amour et la justice comme compétence* (1990) and *La souf-
france à distance* (1993). He is currently completing a book co-authored with Eve
Chiapello on changing forms of justification in the recent transformations of

capitalism. *Address*: EHESS, Groupe de sociologie politique et morale, 54, bd Raspail, F-75006 Paris. [email: boltanski@ehess.fr]

■ **Laurent Thévenot** is Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Director of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale, and senior researcher at the Centre d'Etudes de l'Emploi, Paris. His recent publications include *Les objets dans l'action* (with Bernard Conein and Nicolas Dodier); *Cognition et information en société* (with Bernard Conein). A co-edited book with Michèle Lamont presenting the results of four years' comparative research is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press: *Comparing Cultures and Polities: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*. *Address*: EHESS, Groupe de sociologie politique et morale, 54, bd Raspail, F-75006 Paris. [email: thevenot@ehess.fr]