

COMPTE-RENDU

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J.M.Morin, *Boudon, un sociologue classique*. By Jean-Michel Morin. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006.

***Boudon, un sociologue classique.* By Jean-Michel Morin. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006.**

Boudon, un sociologue classique provides an insightful introduction to the readings of the French sociologist Raymond Boudon. Sociologists will benefit from a privileged access to the entire works of one of the leading contemporary theoreticians of methodological individualism. It will permit the noninitiated reader to have a vision of these works which is rich in detail and wide in scope. It also represents an important source of information and a precious tool for those who already know it well. The author, Jean-Michel Morin, situates these works within the richness of their context of production and explains their internal logic. In so doing, he proposes excellent syntheses of the principal books without interfering with an interpretative approach. He could be wrongly blamed, as an author, for being so sober. He allows the reader to possess a material which is at once intelligibly conceived and very respectful of the works it presents, ready to be appropriated by the reader as one sets about this first hand reading to which one is invited.

The book, focuses on the Boudon's works, in its four parts, the life (41 p.), the works (152 p.), the method (54 p.) the impact (58 p.) and proposes a bibliography which selectively reconstruct its intellectual context through its main references and also the works it directly inspired.

Boudon's academic career is a model of its kind in French university milieu, from *l'Ecole Normale Supérieure* (Ulm) to *l'Institut de France* (but also American Academy of Arts and Sciences and Academia Europea), not to mention stays in prestigious American universities (Columbia University (1960-61), Stanford (1972-73), (1974-75), or teaching in *Sorbonne*, the creation of his own laboratory (the *Groupe des Méthodes de l'Analyse Sociologique*), and continuous production of works. These are developed around a main axis, i.e. explanation of social action and its unintended consequences, on the basis of a no less essential methodological principle, rationality of social actor.

Rightly Morin portrays a personality with « strong mind and soft heart » which Boudon's works reflects. It associates flexibility of empathy, requested by comprehensive approach, with rectitude imposed by use of formal analysis methods in studying composition effects of individual actions. Analysis of such effects is at the heart of this sociology aimed at developing the methodological individualism paradigm. Boudon gave a masterful illustration of this in *L'inégalité des chances* (Trad. *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*) by which he quickly gained an international audience. Boudon's works constantly associate theory with empirical dimensions of analysis, epistemological thought relative to validity of its premises with confrontation to facts and data. In so doing it lends to social analysis clear methodological concepts and strong principles. But Boudon does not build *ex nihilo*. He constantly refers to classics of sociology to use and develop very solid elements from them. His first concern touched the use of mathematical methods in sociology and explanation of main theoretical principles. Initially these applied to social action dynamics, and in the period following to those rationality processes which are susceptible to generate false or doubtful beliefs. More recently they have been applied to values rationality and to anti-relativism defence. As pointed out by Morin,

these works cope quasi-fully with scientific analysis, based on a method adapted to social sciences. Morin specifies that the sociologist quickly realised that true rigour lies more in elucidating logical premises and finding out ideological prejudices than in manipulation of tools, as useful as tools may be. Let us add to this short intellectual picture the pedagogical view of the sociologist which goes through his works and makes him say « a good book is a book which permits one to do several hours of interesting lessons and applied works ».

Let us quickly follow the framework of the book, starting by the method within which the main account can be written on in less than two points: 1. Every social phenomena can be analysed as the emergent effect of individual actions and beliefs; 2. these actions or ideas are themselves the results of the reasons individuals have to act or think in their own context. Following this framework, Boudon shows a personal predilection for explanation, in terms of individual rationality of ideas and actions apparently lacking logic. Such irrationality may lie on objective inadequacy between means and ends or between individual ends and observed effects at the collective level. This program is quite extensive. For instance it applies to magical practices, apparently inadequate political programs or strategies, without forgetting ideology analysis. Non-interventionism of social actors by responsibilities dilution and segregation by amplification effects of residential microdecisions (T. Schelling) represent paradigmatic models of unintended effects generation in social life. The author could have also underlined the interest, for the analysis of interdependence structures, of game theory models, as prisoner dilemma.

Let us move on to an account of Boudon's works. Morin chose to present fifteen books which, beside Treatises and Dictionaries mostly orientated towards teaching, represent research books. Let us retain one or two main ideas by book, not necessarily respecting their exact chronological succession.

In *A quoi sert la notion de structure ?* (1968) (Trad. *Uses of Structuralism*) Boudon distinguishes two contexts where the notion of structure can appear. In the first given context, the use of the word structure indicates that we are dealing with a set of features. In a second type of context the notion of structure aimed to account for the systematic nature of an object, the "system object", its vocation being to be compared to natural sciences objects. Scientific thought is going downhill when it interprets it realistically. *La crise de la sociologie* (1971) (Trad. *The Crisis in Sociology : Problems in Sociological Epistemology*) comes within the scope of this theoretical approach which aims to analyse the constructive function of formal thought in social phenomena analysis and to reveal its errors when it reifies its theoretical concept (structure, function, organism, etc.) or relations. Boudon conceives sociological explanation as the bringing to light of social processes which underlie statistical tendencies that are observed. In particular, system analysis helps explain the results of analysis in terms of factorial causalities.

In the social mobility field, Boudon has given an exemplary application of these conceptions. In his book, *L'inégalité des chances* (1973) (Trad. *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality*), Boudon develops a systemic analysis model including two main stages. The first one simulates achieved

educational levels according to social origins and relative success levels. The second one simulates achieved social statuses according to social origins and achieved educational levels. He shows that generative mechanisms of opportunity inequality lie in context of decision discrepancies according to social backgrounds. The cumulative effects of these discrepancies are of multiplicative nature and reveal to be far more important than those of relative success. Moreover, in the general context of no congruence between educational and social structures, the simulation shows that an increase of educational opportunities has no sensitive effect on relative social opportunities. The book *set the cat among the pigeons* of neo-marxist interpretations, the leader of which was Pierre Bourdieu in France, as these interpretations imputed the biggest charge to scholarship culture in intergenerational transmission of social statuses. In order to diminish educational opportunity inequality the point is to throw light on choices and not to diminish, as it is too often the case, the cognitive and cultural function of schooling. Moreover, schooling expansion has no sensitive effect on social opportunities. Actually, endogenous rise of schooling demands underlies the rise of educational level requests for access to job market. It may constrain schooling decisions without any benefit in term of individual opportunities. It is what is called *unintended effects* in the Boudonian vocabulary, or also *emergent effects*, *composition effects* and *aggregation effects*. These effects are the subject of *Effets pervers et ordre social* (1977) (Trad. *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action*). They apply to unexpected, but not necessary undesirable consequences of intentional individual actions. Examples are numerous, from Tocqueville's analysis of the increase in the standards of living which triggered the French Revolution, to more recent studies which explain the feeble participation in trade unions in democratic countries where employee expression is incited. A manifesto book has succeeded, *La logique du social* (1979) (Trad. *Logic of social Action : An introduction to sociological Analysis*) which is an introduction to sociological analysis and then *La place du désordre* (1984) (Trad. *Logic of Sociological Explanation*) which circumvents the scope of such an analysis. Sociological explanation starts by a question, a kind of mystery to elucidate: Why is there no socialism in the US (Sombart). Facts are taken as in History and phenomena are represented by models as in Economy. "Action is more opened than in Economy and context can be applied more generally than in History. Nevertheless, against tendencies to look for rules or to see only series of specific events, Boudon chooses the third path, that of Simmel and Weber. There are events, but they are outcomes of more or less general sequences of action; there are heavy tendencies but one has to measure their validity and application limits". The *Etudes sur les sociologues classiques* (1998) and (2000), but also *Tocqueville aujourd'hui* (2005), aim to present several analysis from authors of the sociological tradition, from Tocqueville to Scheler « non like thinkers who would have tried to product a system, a vision of society or a doctrine, but like scientific works aiming to propose convincing explanations of enigmatic phenomena". In *Pourquoi les intellectuels n'aiment pas le libéralisme ?* (2004) Boudon proposes a sociological analysis which satisfies this model, by focusing on this question. The function of the intellectual to criticise his environment, and this criticism is all the more striking considering that it lies on conceptions of human

nature which are valued by masters of suspicion (Marx, Freud etc.) Such conceptions oppose those of liberal thinkers, such an exercise being authorized only in liberal societies.

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

With *Le juste et le vrai* (1995) (Trad. *The Origin of Values : Sociology and Philosophy of beliefs*) Boudon switched from positive beliefs analysis to normative beliefs. If value judgment is interpreted on the objectivity mode, it is because it is founded on good reasons. Between nature and culture, there is human reason. Referring to human reason allows one to explain more realistically origin of values. For instance, in Jean Piaget's example of game of marbles, one needs not to refer to a natural program, nor to a cultural conditioning to explain that the child reprove others for breaching the rules of game. As soon as he or she enters the game, the child is justified in his/her indignation caused by the others' cheating. *Le sens des valeurs* (1999) develops these conceptions while proposing a typology of theories. This typology is founded on the different functions attributed to first principles which underlie individual accredited values. Circularity nature of explanations does not forbid reaching moral convictions if one admits that our knowledge has to be conceived as a complex network of argumentations. *Déclin de la morale, déclin des valeurs ?* (2002) is based on an analysis of an international survey results (1998). This survey was conducted in more than forty countries representing 70% of the world population. Value judgments appear first to be founded on cognitive rationality, seeking fair and true beliefs and not on utilitarian reasons which would primarily take into account direct consequences for the individual. Boudon observes that individuals have strong and convergent convictions. Finally, in *Raisons, bonnes raisons* (2003) Boudon clarifies appropriate rationality theory for methodological individualism principles and situates it relatively to classical conceptions from rational choice theory to different kinds of holism.

We must now mention Morin's precious analysis relative to different parts of the works' reception within the international scientific community, media and Parisian intellectuals. References to critical analysis and works it inspired may represent a unique basis of information for further researches or lessons supports.

Morin, the reader will have guessed, adheres to Raymond's theoretical principles, without considering them as unique or ultimate truth, accordingly to the sociologist's epistemology. In this way the author suggests that the motives animating human beings as people could be more resolutely considered in all their dimensions, however it would be at the risk of the scope of sociological analysis.