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An Interview with Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre on *Enrichment*: A Critique of Commodity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs**Rainer Diaz-Bone** 

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Abstract

In this interview, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre introduce their book *Enrichment* and core concepts for the analysis of new developments in contemporary capitalism. The study focuses the analysis of the enrichment economy, which is grasped as a new form to explore and exploit ‘the past’ as a source for capitalist profits. The interview presents forms of valuation, which are more general principles of how value and prices can be ascribed to goods. The approach of Boltanski and Esquerre assumes an organized plurality of such forms of valuation. Also, the two sociologists stress the importance of discourses of valuation, which bring these forms of valuation into operation. As the interview makes evident, one major aim is to present a new perspective on the relationship between values, prices, and practices how prices are legitimized or criticized on the basis of discourses of valuation. The interview situates *Enrichment* in the context of other contemporary sociological works, which focus on the economic core issue of value and valuation. The book can also be recognized as a proposal to reconcile structuralism and pragmatism in sociology. At the end of the interview, the more recent outcomes of the continuing collaborative work of Boltanski and Esquerre after *Enrichment* are discussed.

Keywords

critique of prices, discourse of valuation, enrichment economy, forms of valuation, metaprices, new French pragmatist sociology, pragmatic structuralism

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As a reaction to deindustrialization, capitalism is in search of new sources for profit in many Western countries, such as France. The book *Enrichment* presents an analysis of such a contemporary transformation of capitalism. Boltanski and Esquerre elaborate a new theory of value and price, and one must also recognize this comprehensive investigation as a contribution to different fields in sociology such as sociology of culture, economic sociology and sociological theory. *Enrichment* continues a series of internationally recognized books that Boltanski began with *On Justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and then continued with *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). As will be emphasized in the interview, the book is not about single phenomena, but claims to offer an integrating and more general approach to contemporary relationships between economy and society.¹

Rainer Diaz-Bone: Could you outline the concept of enrichment?

Luc Boltanski/Arnaud Esquerre: The object of our study *Enrichment* is an economic change that, since the last quarter of the 20th century, has profoundly modified the way wealth is created in the countries of Western Europe. These countries have been marked both by deindustrialization and by an increased exploitation of certain resources that, without being entirely new, have taken on unprecedented importance. In our view, the scope of the change becomes apparent only when domains generally considered separate are brought together: most notably the arts – especially the plastic arts – and other cultural manifestations: trade in ancient objects, the creation of foundations and museums, the luxury industry, fashion, heritage creation, and tourism. We shall try to show that the constant interactions among these different domains make it possible to understand the way each one produces profits. Our argument will be based on their common exploitation of an underlying stratum that is *the past*.

We use the term ‘enrichment economy’ to designate this type of economy, playing on the ambiguity of the word ‘enrichment’. On the one hand, we use the word in the sense in which one speaks of enriching a metal, enhancing a lifestyle or a cultural asset, showcasing an article of clothing, or bringing together a set of objects in a collection, to emphasize the fact that this economy is based less on the production of new things than on an effort to *enrich* things that already exist, especially by associating them with narratives.

On the other hand, the term ‘enrichment’ refers to one of the specific characteristics of this economy, namely, that it draws upon trade in things that are intended above all for the wealthy and that thus also constitute a supplementary source of enrichment for the wealthy people who deal in them. It seems to us that this enrichment economy and its effects have to be taken into account in order to grasp the transformations of contemporary society and some of the tensions that permeate it.

RD-B: How does your collaborative work for *Enrichment* relate to Luc Boltanski’s previous work?

LB/AE: We can consider that enrichment follows from two other previous works by Luc, describing the transformations of capitalism since the 1920s. It is therefore a century of changes in capitalism that is analyzed at three different times, *The Making of a Class*:

Cadres in French Society, of 1982 (Boltanski, 1987), *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, with Eve Chiapello, of 1999 (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), and *Enrichment*, with Arnaud Esquerre, of 2017 (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020). *The Making of a Class* focused on an intense development of the standard form, as it served as a pivot for the formation of a social group, ‘cadres’, and the organization of a society, where the welfare state was directly attached to this production. *The New Spirit of Capitalism* analyzes the decline of this standard form and the reorganization of companies and modes of production, relying on the network form, which is less hierarchical than the industrial form. In *Enrichment*, we focus on a more recent development, especially at work in some European countries, which produces wealth by enriching objects and exploiting a resource that is the past.

The Making of a Class: *Cadres in French Society* describes an entire society’s extension of an industrial order, centered on the standard form and on a patriarchal hierarchical order. *The Making of a Class* and *The New Spirit of Capitalism* relate to production and its mode of organization of work, while *Enrichment* relates to a new mode of wealth creation, which sets aside industry, to which it owes little, for the benefit of things already there, or created in an artisanal way. This change goes hand in hand with a deindustrialization, from the mid-1970s, and a very important transformation of work organizations.

RD-B: What could be the scope of this concept for the analysis of contemporary capitalism and its dynamics?

LB/AE: It is now generally recognized that in Europe, the dynamic born of the alliance of capitalism and market democracy, which had succeeded the depression of the 1930s and the war, has reached its limits since the 1970s. This period developed a productivity crisis associated with a crisis of authority in companies. This situation results in an increase in worker demands, the success of which modifies the distribution of added value in favor of employees. We can see in many of the changes which have manifested themselves since the 1980s, and which have continued to increase until today, operations intended to restore vigor to capitalism and to revive a dynamic of profit. Among these operations, some were oriented towards the reorganization of the productive fabric: re-engineering, robotization, selection among workers, refocusing of the company on its main business, reduction of stocks, enhancement of autonomy at work in order to replace direct control with self-control, etc., as Eve Chiapello and Luc have shown in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. A second set of operations and, in particular financial deregulation allowing direct investment abroad, has helped to modify the economic space of European democracies. These processes had the effect of relocating a large part of industrial production to low-wage countries (even if the most profitable part of the value chain remained located in Europe, particularly in France and Italy), slower growth and increased unemployment. We can see in the movements of capitalism towards new areas a third movement towards an economy that we call an economy of enrichment, based on the exploitation of the past, and which is not, however, reducible to a post-industrial economy of singularities thesis defended by Reckwitz (2020).

This displacement of capitalism results in an extension of the market sphere and an increase in the number of people engaged in commerce. The consumer society, whose

denunciation characterized the 1960s, of strong economic growth has given way to a commercial society of weak economic growth, where the share of income is no longer obtained only by salaried work but also by market activities and recourse to the real estate rent. To understand this great transformation which modifies the modes of wealth creation and thus also the geographical distribution of goods and the social structure, we had to build a framework allowing to extend the economic analysis to a diversification of the structure of commodities, a framework which leads to the hypothesis of an integral capitalism, that is to say of a capitalism taking advantage of a plurality of modes of valuation. Our analysis of the economy of enrichment is indeed based on the identification of 'commodity structures', and for this we have proposed to rethink the relationship between price and value.

RD-B: What are the theoretical consequences for sociology's understanding of goods, economic value and the relation to economics as a discipline?

LB/AE: In economics, which is no more unified than sociology and which encompasses quite diverse tendencies, our readings have led us to works of the economics of convention, as well as economists like Chamberlain or network economists. For us, the most striking difference separating the 'orthodox' from the 'heterodox' outlooks has to do in particular with the relation that these varying styles of economics maintain with sociology. The former defends the autonomy of economics, an autonomy marked most notably by the space given to translating models into one or another of the languages stemming from mathematics, while the latter does not hesitate to draw upon data produced by the other social sciences. We went towards economic work in dialogue with other social sciences, in particular sociology.

Our primary concern has been to disentangle ourselves from the often difficult relations maintained between sociology on the one hand and economics on the other hand. Thus, at times, sociologists are led to neglect economics. At other times, they tend to seize hastily upon models originating in economics and apply them to their own objects and thereby to justify decisions on economic policy concerning those objects. In still other instances, they are inclined to develop a critical attitude toward economics in general, as if sociology alone had access to some truth about human relations that the science of economics, tainted by inhumanity, could not grasp. Our intention has thus been to extend the efforts of scholars who have worked toward unifying the social sciences, contesting all forms of disciplinary orthodoxy. Today, in our view, this effort must entail moving beyond the tensions that opposed approaches inherited chiefly from positivism, which are frequent in economics, to approaches that stem principally from constructionism, more frequent in sociology. We have sought to move forward along this path by developing a 'pragmatic structuralism'.

From this perspective, too, we worked with a mathematician, using 'category theory', to develop a mathematical model for our theory of commodity structures. But one difficulty we have been confronted with is that there is a lack of statistical data to characterize 'the economy of enrichment'. Indeed, the statistical data remain manufactured according to an industrial economy, which does not distinguish, for example, shoes manufactured in a standard way and luxury handcrafted shoes: all the shoes are in the same category

'shoes'. However, economists often wait until they have statistics before opening the discussion.

RD-B: You mentioned your theoretical position of pragmatic structuralism in the context of your discussion of how sociology relates to economics. Your work has been recognized as an alternative of French structuralism in sociology (especially as worked out by Pierre Bourdieu) and as a core contribution to pragmatic sociology, which is nowadays one of the most important contemporary strands in sociology and sociological theorizing. Is it a 're-appreciation' of structuralism after the pragmatist turn in French sociology, or should one consider this as a new way to reintegrate this two 'megaparadigms'?

LB/AE: We were both between the two sociological approaches mentioned, each in our own way and with a few years apart. Luc worked with Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s, before developing, notably with Laurent Thévenot, the elements of a so-called 'pragmatic' sociology, and in discussion, too, with Bruno Latour. Arnaud, when he was a student at EHESS (Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales), followed the teachings of Pierre Bourdieu at the end of the 1990s, before writing his PhD under the supervision of Luc Boltanski. The two orientations, structuralist and pragmatic, are therefore very important for both of us.

Pragmatic approaches have often been seen as an alternative to structuralism, which has sometimes found itself in a situation of being accused. It was criticized in particular for relying on largely unconscious social processes, while underestimating the reflexivity of the actors; or to give oneself a social reality whose robustness would exclude uncertainty and even the very possibility of events; or to deposit the power to act in supra-individual entities, which could be interpreted as the pursuit of a holistic determinism; or even to be in affinity with a technical project for the management of practices in order to foreclose critical potentialities.

At the level of fieldwork, the opposition between rather pragmatist approaches and rather structural approaches has often been brought down to the distinction between two types of research associated with two modes of totalization. On the one hand, research focusing more on local situations in which people interact and which the sociologist, taking a model from the ethnologist, studies by observing them, or even by inserting himself into them. And, on the other hand, research that is projected onto a much larger spatial or temporal framework, so that the work of totalization is separated from the work in the field.

We distinguish, however, two ideal types of structuralism: cognitive structuralism and systemic structuralism. We can bring together, under the term cognitive structuralism, approaches that first developed in anthropology, from linguistics, especially under the leadership of Claude Lévi-Strauss. We then consider singular individuals and, consequently, different individuals, immersed in singular and, consequently, different situations, while endowing them with the possibility of having access to devices favoring the convergence of judgments, whether it be an act for them as well to move towards agreement or towards disagreement and criticism. The actors activate these devices from their generic cognitive capacities. Systemic structuralism designates social constructions which call upon configurations of constraints whose interaction, in a global space and over long periods, generates a field of forces.

In *Enrichment*, we articulated these two forms of structuralism with a pragmatic approach, which we therefore called ‘pragmatic structuralism’. The apparent incompatibility between a structural approach and a pragmatic approach, often treated as irreducible, is largely due to the persistence of a theoretical heritage that led to the conception of structure as a prerequisite, and even as a condition of all experience, which amounts to placing it in a transcendental position in relation to experience. However, this priority of structure over experience is in no way necessary, or even probable.

RD-B: Your book proposes a new perspective on the theory of price and its critique. What is the difference to existing concepts of prices in economics and sociology?

LB/AE: We have considered that, when selling and buying a commodity, the reference to value only enters the discussion when those who engage in it try to criticize the price or to justify it in order to answer to criticism. We can therefore consider value as a device for justifying or criticizing the price.

Linking value to the price of something can allow us to solve what we can call the mystery of value that sociology has been confronted with since Emile Durkheim (1964, 1974) tackled the question. Indeed, Durkheim himself was astonished at the ‘value’ of luxury items, which cost the most not only because they are often the rarest; it is because they are also the most esteemed. While Durkheim understood that value did not reside in things themselves, he attributed the fixation on things to ‘collective ideals’, so that a value judgment expresses the relation of a thing to an ideal. But Durkheim posits the link between the value of a thing and the collective ideal without explaining it, and he confuses two meanings of the word ‘value’. This confusion leads to a moralization of economics and its critique, linking ‘value’ to ‘values’, and considers that all really interesting questions about economic value are always linked to questions of moral economy.

However, criticism and justification are operations which are always based on an argumentative device and which require recourse to discourse. This is the reason why we will speak, to clarify the way in which these structures operate, of forms of valuation. These forms of valuation make it possible to connect things and the perspectives under which they must be seen in order to be properly appreciated.

To function, the field of discourses must be both pluralized and unified and be based on categories whose structure is maintained even if they are the subject of regulated transformations. If there were only one discourse of valuation serving everything (for example an exclamation of the type ‘it is good’), the comparison between the things would not have a sufficient point of support to criticize or justify the price of everything. Everything would be comparable to everything, which would tend to reduce the cosmos of commodities to a chaotic state. But, on the other hand, if the forms of valuation were made up of independent categories, the commodity cosmos would tend to dissociate and burst into a multiplicity of isolates between which there would be no relation to compare things as goods. This is the reason why the distribution of discourse on things within a transformation group, in the sense given to this notion by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), constitutes, in the present case, an optimal figure. One of the interests of this type of modeling is, as Lévi-Strauss has shown, that it can be translated into a mathematical language.

RD-B: You mentioned the field of discourses and its distribution. Could you explain how the structure and properties of discourses impact and enable the possibilities for critique and valuation of prices?

LB/AE: The forms of valuation have in common that they grasp things under two main aspects of possibilities of discourse genres. A first aspect of the speeches concerns the way in which the thing (giving rise to a transaction) is described in such a way as to bring out the differences which (given a certain price) can be advantageous in relation to other things likely to be substituted for it. We can oppose, on this axis, very differentiated things to little differentiated things. A second aspect of the discourse concerns the estimation of how the price of this thing is likely to change over time, that is, what we can call its *commercial potential*. On this axis, we can oppose the short term to the long term. Each of these aspects can in turn be specified under two distinct modalities. The differences can be highlighted by presenting them in the form of a limited number of characteristics, possibly using digital data, in a way that evokes codification. We will speak in this case of *analytic presentation*. Or, conversely, they can be enhanced by associating a story with the thing that gives rise to the transaction. We will then speak of *narrative presentation*. If we now consider the estimate of the commercial potential with which the thing is invested, we see that it can also be distributed between two modalities. This estimate can take into account the fact that the price of the object has every chance of decreasing as time passes, as is the case with most objects of industrial origin whose price, maximum in new condition, will necessarily decrease when they are traded on the second-hand market. Or it can lead, on the contrary, to consider that the price at which the item will be negotiated has every chance of increasing, more or less strongly, or even simply of being maintained, over time.

By combining these possibilities, four forms of valuation are obtained. We designate the first by the term ‘standard form’. Its determination has accompanied the development of industrial mass production. The standard form gives prevalence to an analytic presentation of things that will decrease in price as they go from new to used, before becoming rubbish, which is inexorably their fate. We can draw a second form, which prevails in the economy of luxury, heritage, arts or culture, currently in full expansion, activities that we will group together, by associating tourism, under the expression of economy of enrichment, as we said. In this case, the valuation of the thing will be based on a narrative, generally anchored in the past, and will raise the possibility that the price of the object enriched by this narration will be likely to increase over time. We will call it the ‘collection form’, to emphasize that it generalizes a way of appreciating things that initially formed in the practice of collectors.

Two other forms combine differently the mode of presentation and commercial potential. The ‘trend form’, which prevails, for example, in the economy of fashion, which, just like the collection form, is a valuation of things by associating them with a story, although it is most often, in this case, a story that does not concern people of the past but current personalities, for example stars. But, unlike collectibles, the commercial potential of objects whose development is established by reference to fashion is very limited. These things are destined to see their price drop quickly, so this area is, par excellence, one of obsolescence, which contributes to the accumulation of waste. A fourth form of

valuation completes the transformation group. This is what we have called the ‘asset form’. Transactions are based on this form when the exchange is motivated mainly by the chances of profit which promise, in the more or less long term, the resale of the thing negotiated. In this case, the intrinsic properties of the thing – for example a piece of art that can be auctioned off – disappear behind its financial determinations, such as for example its liquidity, which are the subject of an analytic presentation. We can probably find a digital extension of this form in ‘cryptocurrencies’ like Bitcoin. As explained by Aglietta and Valla (2021), in ‘Le future de la monnaie’ [‘The Future of Money’], a ‘cryptocurrency’ like Bitcoin is not a currency but an asset. An important difference is that the guarantee of pieces of art as assets is provided by state institutions, such as museums and art historians, while there is no such institutional guarantee for a cryptocurrency, hence the very wide variations in prices. At the border between the two, we can locate ‘non-fungible tokens’ (NFT) as pieces of art, and the question of their entry into collections by institutions, and therefore of their price guarantee, is central to their future.

RD-B: In your answer you referred to the ‘distribution of discourse on things within a transformation group’. But in the appendix of *Enrichment* you present a structural modelling of the circulation of things. How could it be related to a structural modelling of discourses?

LB/AE: If the discourses are structured, it seemed possible to us to translate this structure into a mathematical language. We see ‘category theory’ as a potentially useful tool for developing a substantively less rigid form of structuralism that is capable of following the lineaments of action, a form that we called ‘pragmatic structuralism’. As pointed out by the mathematician Guillaume Couffignal, with whom we worked, recourse to the language of category theory seems appropriate, then, for several reasons.² First, the language of categories has an abstract, generalizing character that does not close off interpretation prematurely, while an overly rigid formal language, though it might appear more precise, tends to impose limits on meaning. Second, category theory is a natural formal framework for the problems that arise when objects and mathematical theories are compared. The four forms of commodity valuations are modeled in four different types of categories. Each form of valuation is based on its own type of structure, which is formally reflected in the fact that the modeling categories have different structures. It is by way of the forms of valuation that we must think of the relation between the structural modelling of discourses and the structural modelling of the circulation of things. Based on these different forms of valuation, different spaces of transaction are set up, within which the price of things can be criticized or justified by calling upon different ranges of arguments. Of course, mathematical modeling by category theory presents pure forms of valuation, which are always overwhelmed by the descriptions of sociological inquiries. But this modeling is very useful to think about the limits, and what are called the co-limits between the categories, and the displacements between the forms of valuation. We hope in the future to be able to work in other fields with the same method so as to develop a resumption of structuralism centered on transformations, and likely thereby to take charge of temporality and the notion of event. It seems to us that a formalization with the category theory is relevant for the theoretical approach of economics of convention which integrates notions such as uncertainty.

RD-B: *Enrichment* invents the notion of metaprices as benchmarks for price formation. How does this concept relate to discourses, discourse strategies and discourse structures?

LB/AE: If we admit, as we have proposed, that the reference to value is essential above all in relation to exchange and when it is a question of criticizing the price of a thing or of justifying it, we see that critique and justification mainly concern the determination of the margin, that is to say the relation between a price and other possible prices, which we call ‘metaprice’. What is important here is to understand that a price is never isolated but that it is always associated with one or more metaprices. A price taken in isolation is meaningless in itself. In the absence of metaprices, knowledge of prices would not suffice to submit the exchanges to an ordering principle, and competition would be haphazard. We consider that there are always at least two prices, one belonging both to the event and to the test constituted by the change in ownership of a thing, and at least one other, with which the first is compared but which is not, generally speaking, the price paid. By metaprice we therefore mean the prices referred to, in evaluations or negotiations, to distinguish them from the realized price which falls to a thing at the time of the change. A metaprice refers to the operations during which prices are set. They are attributed to things under the heading of estimates, which can be based on very diverse and unequally realistic foundations. In the case of controlled prices of standardized objects, as is the case for books in France, the metaprice is often the same as the real price. Nevertheless, the market for new books coexists with a market for used books, and on this secondary market, books presented as new, provided by press services, for example, or books in like-new condition can be sold at lower real prices, in which case the price of the new books becomes a metaprice. We can add, if we describe a general picture of commercial transactions that, since a price cannot be dealt with in isolation, the social construction of reality depends on the structure of relative prices, that is, on the relation between the prices of the various things, that is thus paralleled by a structure of relative metaprices.

RD-B: Besides discourses, what is the role of other objects and devices for the valuation of objects? How are objects interrelated in processes of valuation?

LB/AE: Objects are valued by their differences to other objects. In the standard form, these differences are carried by the prototype, and all copies must have as few differences as possible, which is why it is necessary to control their quality, that is to say the reduction of the differences. But, in the standard form, each prototype must be clearly differentiated from other prototypes of market objects that claim to perform the same functions, in order to try to limit substitution effects. One of the objectives of the holder of property rights over a prototype is thus, as Edward Chamberlin (1933) clearly saw as early as 1933 in *The Theory of Monopolistic Competition*, to place themselves in a position of quasi-monopoly. In the collection form, each object is evaluated against a set of collectable objects within which it is included. But the most important to understand is the possibility of the same object to have several valuations. By taking different forms of valuation into account, one can interpret the way objects circulate during their ‘economic life’ as a matter of shifting from one form to another. This is the case, for example, when an object first produced and exchanged as a standard commodity is revalorized through

reference to the collection form after a period during which it has had the status of trash. The forms of valuation function in such a way as to permit displacements of things from one form to another, thus making it possible to sell at high margins, according to the logic of one form, things that, identified with reference to a different form, would have been impossible to sell except perhaps by liquidation at very low prices. Among the various forms of valuation, virtually all displacements are possible, but on one condition, which concerns the return toward the standard form of objects initially evaluated according to one of the other three forms. This condition holds that any object whatsoever that is pertinent in a different form can be displaced toward the standard form only if it occupies the position of prototype in that form. The possibility of such a displacement is rare for objects that find themselves in the collection form. Generally speaking, the prohibition on reproduction in effect prevents a collector's item from becoming a standard object, although that possibility does exist; for example, a museum may offer for sale, as 'derivative' products, standard reproductions said to be 'identical' to masterpieces on display. By contrast, the trend form, owing to its cyclical character, can more readily bring outmoded objects to which a designer adds a slight difference back into the standard form, thus allowing the objects to serve as prototypes for a new generation of specimens.

RD-B: The important notion of authenticity in *Enrichment* as well as the collection form (as one of the four forms of valuation) seems to be close to concepts and perspectives invented in Bessy's and Chateauraynaud's (2014) book *Experts et faussaires*, in which the valuation strategies of falsifiers have been studied who have to evoke the effect of authenticity to (falsified) art works and collections. How do you relate your work to *Experts et faussaires* and how does *Enrichment* continue Bessy's and Chateauraynaud's perspective?

LB/AE: *Experts et faussaires* is a remarkable work that, as soon as Luc became aware of it, I hastened to contribute to making it known by proposing its publication to the Métailié publishing house where I directed a collection of social sciences, in which this book was first published in 1995. However, the point of view developed by Francis Chateauraynaud and Christian Bessy was different from the one we adopted in *Enrichment*. In relation to the debates of that time around cognitivism, this book intended to develop a sociology of judgement applied to objects by drawing on the one hand on phenomenology, particularly Merleau-Ponty, and on the other hand on Deleuzian approaches. One of the objectives was to renew the sociology of expertise, then in full expansion, by revealing the role that the body plays as well in the course of the operations aiming at deceiving, in the case of the forgers, as in the operations aiming at guaranteeing that the object, as a thing, is well in conformity with the term by which one designates it in a language or a code. With a large part devoted to the question of proof, it followed the work on the dispute processes to which Francis Chateauraynaud had devoted his dissertation on 'professional misconduct' a short time earlier, and which was part of a vast program of analysis of disputes in different contexts that Laurent Thévenot and Luc had set up with some of our graduate students in the wake of *On Justification*.

Distinguishing four forms of valuation made us think about the two pairs of oppositions: 'original vs. copy' and 'real vs. false'. The 'original vs. copy' and 'real vs. fake'

oppositions are often confused, especially with reference to art, but it is a mistake to treat them as if they were equivalent. This is easy to understand if we think in terms of two cases that, moreover, do not enter into the forms we are establishing: movies and relics. One does not say about a film that it is 'fake', even though there may be countless copies of it, legal or illegal. Conversely, 'real' and 'fake' relics are deemed to exist, but the problem of 'copies' of a relic never arises. In the accusation that something is a copy, the copy is presumed to have come after the original. In the accusation that something is a fake, the fake object is presumed to be situated with respect to a 'real' one, but this may take place before, during, or after the production of the real thing. The 'original vs. copy' opposition creates great differences in prices and metaprices within the collection form. The 'real vs. fake' opposition does the same within the asset form. The 'prototype vs. specimen' opposition is at the root of the standard form, and the 'model vs. imitation' opposition is the basis for the organization of things in the trend form.

RD-B: For the enrichment economy, the role of regions, of regional and global economies is examined. This includes the issues of gentrification, the suburbs, and possibly also the increasing urban/rural divide, including the desertification of rural regions, as can be observed in France. What exactly are the new relations and mechanisms created by the enrichment economy with regard to different spaces?

LB/AE: As we lack statistics to quantify the economics of enrichment, it is difficult for us to give a measure of its importance. This is why some have criticized us for giving too much importance to the economy of enrichment, compared to finance, like Nancy Fraser (2017) in an article published in the *New Left Review*, or compared to the digital economy. But it is very interesting to see how the enrichment economy is completely transforming certain places, and it shows its importance. As we might speak of an industrial basin, we can speak of an enrichment basin, a space that is often established by drawing on a concentration of religious buildings. These 'enrichment basins' can be small towns, like Arles, in the south of France, or districts in large cities, like the High Line district in New York, or rural areas. We took the example of the Aubrac region, to show this economic transformation. The opposition between urban and rural is therefore irrelevant for the economy of enrichment. The problem is whether there is the possibility of exploiting a past, and in particular of having a narrative of the past.

But it should be added here that the structures of the commodity that we have analyzed with regard to objects could extend to immovable goods, and therefore also to the places of these immovable goods. It can thus be shown that, depending on the way in which an immovable good is determined, such a good can be appraised as a standard immovable good (the individual house), as a collectable immovable good (one of the exceptional residences), as a trendy immovable good (as in the case of gentrification), or as an asset (an apartment on Park Avenue in Manhattan, New York, or in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London).

RD-B: How do you evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mechanisms of enrichment and the enrichment economy?

LB/AE: The enrichment economy is very fragile: it supposes very strong conditions of social stability and security. We have already seen its fragility with terrorist attacks, which call into question an economy of enrichment for short periods, and in a localized way, while the epidemic of COVID-19 extends over a long period and globally. This epidemic of COVID-19 profoundly modifies the economic functioning, but therefore penalizes the economy of enrichment more strongly: tourists can no longer move, the manufacture of luxury products is stopped and will only resume slowly, museums are closed for several months, and if they are reopened the number of visitors will be limited, etc. However, the enrichment economy has already changed, and it will continue to change. It has, at its heart, a solid point of support which is the exploitation of the narrative of the past. The COVID-19 crisis is a crisis of the mobility of people, but not of the movement of goods. Goods that are valued by the 'collection form' can be increasingly sold and purchased online, as is already the case on auction websites or second-hand goods websites: art galleries and luxury brands can also maintain clients over the internet.

It seems to be that the COVID-19 crisis is accentuating inequalities in the enrichment economy. On the one hand, precarious workers in culture are even more precarious. On the other hand, international firms in the luxury industry continue to make profits by playing on the differences between states, taking advantage of growth in China in particular.

RD-B: The book *Enrichment* presents a diagnosis of contemporary capitalism, as Reckwitz (2020) does. Reckwitz is mainly focusing on the effect of singularization on lifestyle, work, consumption, etc., but also on the emerging new middle class and new inequalities. You also discuss social inequalities, when pointing to the 'losers and servants' who will not profit from an enrichment economy. Please could you clarify some main shared positions with Reckwitz's analysis and some main differences to his perspective on society and inequalities.

LB/AE: What Reckwitz's work, which is very interesting, and ours have in common is that they identify a significant transformation of economics, from standard industrial economics into a movement that began in the 1980s. However, first of all, we do not reason according to a logic of the opposition between general and singular, but according to a logic of difference. Because, in the standard industrial economy, there are also singular things: these are the prototypes, from which the objects are manufactured in a standardized way. If we look at the problem at the level of prototypes, the question is that of the protection by intellectual property law of 'singularities', that is, of the differences specific to the prototypes. Second, in Reckwitz's analysis there is a shift of things towards protests, events and digitization, and it is an important and interesting contribution of his work to consider these heterogeneous activities together at first glance, by proposing a relationship between them. In our analysis, however, we have chosen to focus on material things. Of course, there is a development of the digital economy. But we have never produced so many material things! So you have to do an analysis of the commercial transformation of these things, and that's what we do with commodity structures. It's not just a problem of singularity: you have to organize the differences, and we consider that these differences are organized very differently according to the collection form, or according to the trend form. The economics of enrichment makes it possible to explain a

specific aspect of growing inequalities: it is an economy turned towards the richest, exploiting the past.

RD-B: In Reckwitz's (2020) analysis, the concept of class and the identification of a new middle-class fraction, which emerge in relation to the valuation principle of singularity, are important. Richard Florida (2002) has coined the notion of the creative class. In general, notions of class have experienced a revitalization in sociology. What about the notion of class and its relevance in your analysis?

LB/AE: Florida's position is based on several presuppositions that do not square with our approach. First, it does not take into account the specificity of the objects on which the activity of these actors bears, and consequently it does not make it possible to study the way industrial economies differ from what we have called enrichment economies. Second, it presumes that the 'creative class' constitutes a homogeneous totality that is simply added to the accumulated divisions already present in industrial societies. But 'creators' are distributed among very unequal situations.

The term 'class' can take on very different meanings depending on whether it is used in a Marxist perspective, with reference to the 'class struggle', or whether it has a chiefly descriptive orientation. In relation to the enrichment economy, it is only in a very vague sense that we can call on social class. Partial communities of interests and equally partial affinities of lifestyles no doubt exist within the various clusters we have sought to identify, starting from stereotypical examples of 'losers', 'servants', 'rentiers', and 'creators'. But, as we said, we need statistics to go beyond the description of these categories that we have sketched.

RD-B: What have been the main critical points raised after the publication of *Enrichment* and how did you respond to them?

LB/AE: Four main types of critical remarks were addressed to *Enrichment*. These are not only critical remarks that were made after the publication of the book but also while we were writing it, because we made many presentations in universities and museums before the book was published.³ These are therefore critical remarks that we recognize as limits of our work. The first set of critical remarks concerns the areas of the economy that are left out of the economy of enrichment: the digital, and finance. Our work does not deal with all of capitalism, but only part of the evolution of capitalism, and of course the development of the economy of enrichment does not detract from the importance of digital finance and economics.

Second, and this is a critical point that was also a problem for us, is the absence of global statistics on the enrichment economy. But it was impossible to resolve. Of course, we have some statistics, but there are no statistics specific to the economy of enrichment because we need the making of new categories capable of capturing the specificity of the enrichment economy to make the measurements. We could outline such categories but we don't have the power to impose them at the level of the national accounts.

The third type of critical comment relates to the fact that we are centered on France, and beyond, on Europe – therefore that we are European-centered, and that this is only

a small local economic development. The first time we heard this critical comment was well before the publication of the book, in New York, when in the audience someone said: 'It's so European – here in New York we don't have that, it's finance.' It was really surprising for us, because we had gone to the High Line, which is a very good example of the economy of enrichment: valuation of heritage, luxury shops, tourists, the most famous art galleries, etc. But it is in such plain sight that our university colleagues in New York City can't see it. When Karl Marx described the Industrial Revolution, he was studying England. And yet his analyses have relevance far beyond 19th-century England.

The fourth type of critical remark concerns the lack of analysis of gender and race in the economics of enrichment. This is a very accurate critical point, and we hope that others can study economics by showing gender and race inequalities.

RD-B: What have been the next steps of your collaborative work after *Enrichment* was published?

LB/AE: After the economy of enrichment, which was centered on material things, we wanted to focus our attention on other recent developments, but which this time concern the digital. We are interested in how commercial media companies in representative democracies have opened up the possibility of posting online comments on news. We have taken the comments on current events seriously by considering them both as an expression of singularity and as attempts to increase in generality, testifying to the way in which different actors, immersed in the temporality of their lived world, try to adjust to current events, that is to say to what they know, at the same time as others, only by 'hearsay'.

The analysis of such material presents a new challenge for the social sciences. It is, first of all, an object which, for the little that it has been seen, was generally approached in a critical mode, and of which it is necessary to think the problematization, that is to say – to find and adjust concepts allowing its comprehension. The treatment to which this object has led us has forced us to reflect on a construction, at least implicitly included in most sociological approaches, consisting in distinguishing a superficial stratum, made up of facts, succeeding one another in time, which are those of the topicality, more or less ignored or treated as if they were contingent and thereby escaping scientific analysis, and a deep layer, atemporal or included in a period such that it resists change. This deep stratum can be formulated in terms of structures, which, as we explained previously in *Enrichment*, can themselves be distinguished into a social structuralism, in which the deep stratum is deposited in social organizations, and a cognitive structuralism, in which the invariant structures of human interiority serve as a fixed point. We believe that one of the challenges facing sociology is to dissolve this opposition between strata, in order to focus on the flow of social and political life at different scales. To meet this challenge, it is necessary to break down the way in which people coexist and interact at one point in time, who, being born and dying at different times, must deal with a plurality of periods, those of their lived world, of the lived world of others, current events and history, in order, thereby, to achieve a temporalized sociology.

RD-B: Finally, out of your collaborative work after *Enrichment*, your new book entitled *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique? Événements et opinions au XXIe siècle* [What Is Actuality in Politics? Events and Opinions in the 21st Century] resulted, which was released recently in France (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2022). Could you describe how it is related to *Enrichment* and what are the main research questions and results?

LB/AE: After having published *Enrichment*, we continued to discuss together in particular what sociology could not analyze, including by having recourse to a pragmatic structuralism, that is to say, already making a synthesis of existing methods. And what sociology finds most difficult to analyze are the events, and in particular the political events, that happen to us. It's weird, because sociology is supposed to be a science that deals with the social relations of the present, and yet it fails to analyze political events. Sociology always acts as if the social relations of the present were inscribed in a stable way in a period, and not as if they participated in the constitution of a political event. So, we started thinking about the relationship between history, sociology, and news, and about the passage between the micro and the macro.


As already mentioned, we were also interested in the digital and the internet, which was absent from *Enrichment*. Finally, we were worried about the political situation and the danger faced by democratic states in Europe and the United States. Trump's presidency, the assault on the Capitol, the way in which Hungary and Poland have endangered the pluralism of opinion and of the media, all of this has led us to want to write a book about our democracy which is under threat, and in particular freedom of expression. This was before the start of the war in Ukraine, and this war further heightens our concern for our democracy.

We are interested in the way it is conducted and the importance of the discussion on political news in the digital public space. This is a novelty for our democracies, and often it is very criticized, questioning that discussions on social networks, conversations on public websites are not 'reasonable', as in the ideal of the Enlightenment. But we take these conversations in the digital space as a component of our democracies of the 2020s, and they must be studied for this reason. We therefore studied two corpuses, one of readers of the newspaper *Le Monde* who comment on articles online (a total of 120,000 online comments in September and October 2019) and the other of internet users on YouTube channels of the National Audiovisual Institute (about 8000 comments online).

Politics is talking about politics. A state in which you cannot talk about politics is not a democratic state. However, to say that everything is political does not allow us to understand the meaning of politics. We consider that everything is in principle politicizable. Politicization supposes a difference between what politics deals with and what is outside politics.

In our new book, we explore from online comments, and having developed a theory of the event, how we discuss political news today, and their importance for each of us. An important result is the way in which everyone uses their critical capacity to vary the interpretation of a fact, without questioning the truth of the fact. This result is completely opposed to the widespread idea in the humanities and social sciences that the media fabricate opinion and therefore fabricate consent during voting, which would mean that we would be in 'false democracies'.

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Notes

1. The interview was conducted as an email exchange in English from May 2021 to April 2022.
2. See the appendix in *Enrichment* (Couffignal, 2020).
3. See also the early publication of articles, for example Boltanski and Esquerre (2016).

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