

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Luc Boltanski. 2013. *The foetal condition: a sociology of engendering and abortion.* Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, UK : Polity. 448 pp. \$32.95 Paperback (978-0-7456-4731-9), \$87.95 Hardcover (978-0-7456-4730-2), \$26.99 E-book (978-0-7456-8349-2)

As I write this review in April 2014, pro-choice activists in New Brunswick are pressing the province to fund abortions performed in private clinics, while in the US numerous states continue to enact restrictions that reduce the availability of legal abortions. Why, more than four decades after its legalization, is abortion still a contentious issue in Canada and elsewhere? Luc Boltanski's 2004 book *La condition fœtale*, now available to English readers in a superb translation by Catherine Porter, seeks to provide answers.

The Foetal Condition belongs to the pragmatist sociology that Boltanski has pursued for several decades, developing "a moral sociology, in Durkheim's sense: that is, not a sociology impregnated with moralism but a sociology which takes 'moral phenomena' [«faits moraux»] seriously" (234). Boltanski's main objective is theoretical, to construct abortion as a sociological object from a position of value neutrality. His method combines grammatical, historical and phenomenological approaches to social life with interviews and observations of pre-abortion consultations in clinical settings (most of the observations and interviews were performed by female research assistants). The grammatical approach is key, for it is by constructing a model of "grammatical constraints" that normative contradictions and tensions are identified, pragmatic social arrangements and understandings that people have created to manage those contradictions explained, and pregnant women's embodied experiences interpreted.

Boltanski's key innovation is to situate abortion in the general conditions for engendering human beings. In all societies (not just individualized Western ones), fully human beings are "singular" in the sense of each being given a unique personal identity. This singular identity is socially bestowed by another singular being, typically the mother, who "adopts" the foetus growing inside her. A first grammatical constraint follows: for abortion (or infanticide) to be considered, a distinction must be made

between being tangibly human “in flesh” and consequently replaceable, and being symbolically confirmed as human “in speech”, and thus singular and irreplaceable. Yet all that distinguishes a foetus confirmed by speech from one that is human only in flesh is that confirmation itself, so the “constraint of distinction” is contradicted by the “constraint of non-discrimination”. Consequently abortion can be “neither decisively prevented, nor really legitimized” (57) because it involves treating what are tangibly the same objects differently.

How has the contradiction been pragmatically managed by social actors? Boltanski outlines a typology of arrangements that in Western societies have organized the relation between sexuality and engendering, so that if the expected conditions are followed, “every being engendered by flesh is reputed to have been confirmed by speech” (61) in their humanity and singularized. Reinterpreting Bourdieu’s distinction between the official and the unofficial, Boltanski reveals a tension between the official subordination of pregnant women to an external institutional authority, and what goes on unofficially, tacitly known but not publicly acknowledged, to deal with the failures of the official arrangements. Pre-confirmation by a religious authority, by legitimate kinship relations, and by industrial nation-states managing populations have existed in the past, and are still present to a greater or lesser extent. Coincident with the development of the “project polity” portrayed in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), the last third of the twentieth century saw the appearance of a fourth arrangement, the parental project. As “the project” by which a couple enter an accord to make a child, the parental project dissociates sexuality and engendering: contraception liberates sexuality, and assisted reproduction enables engendering. Since its legalization, the official role of abortion is to compensate for failures of contraception, but for many of the women interviewed, it was justified by the failure of a parental project, such as the father’s refusal to assume paternity, or his inaptitude for the task.

The contradictory constraints on engendering appear in the parental project as two distinct foetal categories. The foetus integrated into a project is a priceless “authentic foetus” to which extraordinary medical interventions (such as foetal surgery) may be devoted to bring it to term, while the foetus outside a parental project is a worthless “tumoral foetus” to be destroyed. The difference between the two was observed in the social and material arrangement of ultrasounds: arranged in the former case so that the mother or couple recognized the foetus as a “baby”, in the latter case referred to as “nothing” and kept from view. But the distance between the categories has been disrupted by technological changes, such as surplus “techno foetuses” produced by *in vitro* fertiliza-

tion, controversial photographic representations, and medical advances that make ever-earlier premature births viable — all of which serve to make visible that the same tangible object is being subjected to very different, irreversible treatments. As a consequence the previously virtually unknown foetus has “entered society” in Latour’s sense, as an object of collective dispute over its status.

Interviews are used to show the consequences of current arrangements for women’s embodied experiences of pregnancy and abortion. The categorical oppositions of the liberal rights-bearing, subject-object relations of pro-choice and pro-life discourse are absent from women’s stories of pregnancy and of abortion. Instead of a division between themselves and the being inside them, they experience continuity. Instead of an opposition between a happy, desired pregnancy and a distressing, unwanted pregnancy, the women interviewed describe alternating states of “plenitude” and “anxiety”. Instead of emotions of either guilt or matter of factness after aborting, they express feelings of mourning, void, loss and malaise. To account for these stories, Boltanski develops a phenomenological model of three conflicting desires or wills. The “will of the flesh” is a passive, present-oriented “self” that experiences no separation from the foetus she bears; the “will to control” is an active, future-oriented “I”, an autonomous subject to whom the foetus is an exterior object whose status depends on its integration into a project; the “will to legitimation” provides justifications to a “third”, whether Mead’s generalized other, a flesh and blood interlocutor, or often, the foetus itself. If the foetus is aborted, justifications aiming at full generality of the sort that were modeled in *On Justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) hardly appear in the life stories gathered in this research. Instead of a logic of common good, a logic of the lesser evil appears, emphasizing particular circumstances and serving as apologies to the being that was not born, explaining that it would not have been able to develop its full humanity, have a “normal” development, or attain happiness if raised without a father, and with the expectation that an equivalent being could be created in the future. Most of the women interviewed were reluctant to view abortion as *simply* a choice; external reasons meant there was no other choice. “Women who have abortions may never have been so alone” (124): they rarely spoke of it, only sometimes confiding in their mother, more often in a sister or close female friend. Boltanski refuses to presume to tell the women interviewed what they were “really” saying; instead long quotes from the interviews show the women grappling with their uncertain, shifting and ambivalent experiences.

Curiously omitted in this translation is the provocative last sentence of *La condition fœtale* (2004, 332): “Car la condition foetale, c’est la

condition humaine”. “The foetal condition is the human condition” is not a “pro-life” statement: Boltanski means that a liberal discourse of rights is sociologically misplaced, because human beings are always attached to other human beings. Like a foetus, we are all balanced precariously between being replaceable so that social life can go on, and having our singular identities socially confirmed.

The Foetal Condition is an impressive demonstration of the power of French pragmatist sociology for analysing a difficult and persistent dispute. Technologies in particular have made the foetus a visible part of society, and the issue of abortion is not likely to go away. This complex, challenging book will profoundly shape future sociological research on abortion and related issues of bio-politics. This review has only scratched the surface of the many issues raised by this important book that invite debate and cry out for comparative research.

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Jim Conley is engaged in a study of the pragmatic sociology of critique developed by Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and other members of the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale, and its use in understanding disputes over street spaces, public political “affairs”, and other controversies.

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