

## Pierre Bourdieu and the problem of reflexivity: recent answers to some old questions

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## **Bourdieu and the problem of reflexivity: recent answers to some old questions**

### **Books reviewed**

Will Atkinson, *Class, Individualization and Late Modernity: In Search of the Reflexive Worker*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 272 pp. £64.00 ISBN 9780230242005 (hbk).

Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, trans. Gregory Elliott. Cambridge: Polity, 2011. 191 pp. £17.99/€21.60 ISBN 9780745649641 (pbk).

Bernard Lahire, *The Plural Actor*, trans. David Fernbach. Cambridge: Polity, 2011. 271 pp. £18.99/€22.80 ISBN 9780745646855 (pbk).

The question of the individual's capacity for agency and, connected to this, to reflexivity, is one that has haunted Pierre Bourdieu's sociological model. Not infrequently, Bourdieu claimed that he wished to create a model which to some extent reconciled those hoariest of sociological concepts, structure and agency (see, for instance, Bourdieu, 1990b). In a recently translated article, he made the claim that the role of sociology is to bring together objective social structures with agents' own attempts to make sense of, and to practically deal with, those structures:

Without ever relapsing into an 'account of accounts,' [social science] must integrate within the (scholarly) knowledge of the object the (practical) knowledge that agents (the objects) have of the object. Put differently, it must

bring into the (scholarly) knowledge of scarcity and of the competition for scarce goods the practical knowledge that agents acquire of this competition by producing individual or collective divisions that are no less objective than the distributions established by the balance sheets of social physics. (Bourdieu, 2013: 293)

Bourdieu's work has nonetheless been repeatedly criticised for its reluctance to acknowledge the role of agential reflection in social life (see Lovell, 2000). In the article from which the above quotation was taken, for instance, Bourdieu makes an argument for the importance of subjective reflection, but only as a crucial mediator for the *consolidation* of privilege: that is, for the 'misrecognition' of privilege's arbitrary character and its acceptance as nature (298). Bourdieu's claimed reconciliation of subjective and objective structures, in this instance and elsewhere, is merely the observation that objective inequality receives backing through subjective acceptance of that inequality. For many critics, sociology's dealings with subjective structures should, in addition, take seriously individuals' observable potential for insight into the reality of inequality, as well as for agency when it comes to seeking to change those structures: in short, the capacity for reflexivity.

Although this criticism of Bourdieu is nothing new, interrogations of the role of reflexivity in his work have, if anything, experienced a renaissance in recent years. This

paper examines three recent, more or less critical, interventions in these debates: Will Atkinson's *Class, Individualization and Late Modernity* (2010), Bernard Lahire's *The Plural Actor* (2001; translated to English 2011) and Luc Boltanski's *On Critique* (2009; translated to English 2011). Although each book is wide-ranging and will be used by sociologists working in a range of sub-disciplines, here I am concerned to compare the authors' explicit engagements with Bourdieu's work, especially as they seek to nuance or challenge his conception of reflexivity. Throughout each book, this Bourdieusian conception of reflexivity serves as a background against which the authors seek to position themselves. Each of the monographs, firstly, offers a critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Bourdieu's formulations of agency (and more specifically of reflexivity); secondly, stresses processes of *meaning-making* as central to the operation of agency; and, thirdly, insists on the importance of the individual case study for a fuller understanding of these issues.

All three books conceptualise the problem of reflexivity for Bourdieu as hinging on a tension which must be negotiated. On the one hand, sociology must account for the effects of class on identity-formation: if domination reduces an individual's life chances and control over their life, then an observable effect of this is a subjective *sense* of reduced life chances. On the other, the Bourdieusian schema, faithfully applied, tends to see such subjective effects as (almost) ubiquitous: the subjective sense of the world is determined by objective conditions. If there is no scope whatsoever for reflexivity

amongst the dominated then either there is no hope for social change, or it is up to the benevolent sociologist to *reveal* the nature of their domination to the deluded masses.

The three books reviewed here offer new negotiations of this tension. Atkinson's findings demonstrate that the universalising tendencies of theories of reflexive modernity are largely unjustified: in this, then, he tends to stress an attention to social context when dealing with reflexivity. In broad agreement with Bourdieu, Atkinson forwards some very useful insights about the study of reflexivity. In particular, in order to ascertain where reflexivity is going on and where it is not, we need to look at *subjective processes* themselves, rather than static social categories or social mobility as an *objective* process. Meanwhile, Lahire's broad point is that Bourdieu constructs a straw man of reflexivity by conflating it with the cynical and successful life-project. Such a view of reflexivity focuses on those rare cases, probably only existent amongst the privileged, where calculations are continually made about the most advantageous course of action, in a set of actions which only ever lead to the desired result. To take such experiences to be all we mean when we talk about reflexivity is, says Lahire, to ignore a whole set of very common, everyday experiences when individuals think, calculate and plan – in short, when they reflect. Finally, for Boltanski, we must negotiate the problems of reflexivity by being attendant to both the reflexive capacities of the dominated *and* the limitations placed on that reflexivity by social constraints. Although the sociologist must resist the tendency in Bourdieu to stress the pre-reflexive

and thus docile nature of subjects, we must likewise avoid making too universal the capacity for reflexivity, which would cause us to ignore the specific sociological conditions which produce the possibility for dissent.

Ultimately, I argue that Boltanski's dealings with reflexivity are the more useful of the three, in as much as he stresses a broader understanding of reflexivity, making it more available for emancipatory purposes than its construction as a scarce resource tends to do, but simultaneously insists on reflexivity's social contextualisation in order to determine where, precisely, it holds this potential and where it does not. Nonetheless, all three monographs posit useful contributions to debates on agency, reflexivity and Bourdieu.

### **Will Atkinson: classing reflexivity**

Of the three sociologists discussed in this review, Atkinson (2010a) is the least critical of the Bourdieusian model, and the most critical of attempts to portray Bourdieu's thoughts on reflexivity as thinly veiled social determinism. His *Class, Individualization and Reflexive Modernity* is in some senses a defence of Bourdieu against what is often framed as his political and theoretical opposite: the reflexive modernity thesis. This theory, espoused by Anthony Giddens amongst others, argues that sweeping changes to the nature of industry, employment, family and society in late modernity have brought about a relative redundancy of *class* as a useful tool for social analysis. As class loses its

currency as a social descriptor, individuals are confronted with a myriad of social and cultural options, and face a constant injunction to make *individual* choices in the domains of education, work and lifestyle. Atkinson seeks to investigate empirically whether or not individuals do in fact exhibit this kind of individual reflexivity, and if so which particular individuals do so at which particular moments of their lives. Through analysis of extensive interviews with 55 participants from a range of social backgrounds, Atkinson seeks to confirm or refute a set of hypotheses he constructs to represent the reflexivity thesis, such as the contention that increased educational opportunity, and in particular improved access to higher education, has resulted in greater levels of reflection (and choice) about career progression, across the classes.

Methodologically and epistemologically, if not necessarily through his empirical findings, Atkinson offers mild critiques of aspects of Bourdieu's work. In particular, he notes that Bourdieu tends to miss the specificity (and fullness) of individual lives by focusing on generalities, or using individual quotations as illustrations only, rather than placing them within the context of a complete life-course (a criticism which we will examine in more detail below, as it has been discussed by Bernard Lahire). Further, Atkinson claims that Bourdieu has 'inadequately theorized' (13) the role of *conscious* deliberation, and the importance of subjective processes of meaning-making. As a corrective to that tendency, Atkinson supplements the Bourdieusian model with the phenomenological work of Alfred Schutz (see also Atkinson, 2010b).

For Atkinson, the addition of phenomenology allows him to correct a misunderstanding on the part of both Bourdieu *and* the reflexivity theorists about what, precisely, the sociologist should take into account when trying to ascertain the prevalence (or not) of individual reflexivity:

the kind of reflexivity described by Beck and the others would be impossible to capture through quantitative techniques deploying closed, fixed-choice questions or tracing ‘origins and destinations’ because the actual *process* through which the patterning of trajectories or lifestyle practices takes place – constant negotiation of multiple options, or conversely restriction by recognized constraints or tacit pursuance of ingrained possibilities – would remain largely opaque. (Atkinson, 2010a: 11, original emphasis)

In order to confirm, refute or nuance the hypotheses of reflexive modernity we need to identify, not classes understood as static categories, nor social mobility as an objective process understood through the recording of starting points and destinations, but rather the individual *subjective* processes themselves. To work out whether and where reflexivity is in fact going on, we must listen to the actual reflections of individuals: the extent to which they recall conscious processes feeding into their previous decisions or conversely struggle to explain why such ‘decisions’ were made; the capacity to make

meaning from events and to connect personal experiences to broader social structures, or otherwise.

Despite his insistence on a close reading of actual subjective processes, however, Atkinson tends to stress the (sometimes extremely) limiting effects of what he calls, echoing Bourdieu, 'the subjective field of possibles' (2010a: 54). This is the reasonable (which is not to say explicitly *reasoned*) circumscription of ambitions and desires within the realms of what is in fact likely, given the actual social circumstances of the individual's life. Acknowledgement of the fairly evident sociological barriers to absolute agency is clearly crucial to any workable social theory, but Atkinson's sometimes relentless concentration on these concerns at times puts him within the recognisably Bourdieusian realm of, as Jacques Rancière has termed it, the 'Sociologist King' (2004: 165). In other words, a sociology which places such emphasis on the subjugation of individuals through social structures and, in particular, to the ways that such domination is made manifest in a lack of *agency*, tends to produce a privileged position for the sociologist which is potentially at odds with the commitment to a critical or emancipatory sociology to which Bourdieusians generally subscribe. Atkinson makes the claim, in notably Bourdieusian language, that 'people act consciously without being conscious of the principle of their conscious acts' (2010a: 55), an assertion which reinforces a separation between the thinking sociologist and the unthinking 'people', and which tends to stress an acute lack of reflexivity, especially

when it comes to the relatively dominated. Nonetheless, it is possible to work closely with Bourdieu's ideas, and to think in a carefully nuanced way about the tension between reflexivity and constraint, whilst remaining open to the possibility of finding reflexivity in (for a Bourdieusian) surprising places. In an account such as Bernard Lahire's, to which we now turn, an important modification to the way in which we register reflexivity as such results in a broader definition of the term, and so to an increase in its observable existence.

### **Bernard Lahire: everyday reflexivity**

Like Atkinson, Lahire (2011) is keen to bring the individual case back in to discussions of reflexivity. For him, the way to bring structure into view is not through macrosociology but rather by taking account, as fully as possible and for as extended a period as possible, of individual lives. Such a concentration on the individual case (which Lahire terms 'folded' sociology (205), that is, an account of the ways in which the social is folded down in complex ways in any particular case) will allow us to see structure where it becomes manifest: in its observable effects on individuals. He argues against the assumption that such a focus on individuals necessarily results in sociological individualism, instead making the case that,

Far from being the most basic unit of sociology, the actor is undoubtedly the most complex of social realities to grasp. ... Actors have passed and continue to pass through multiple social contexts (worlds, institutions, groups, situations, etc.); they are the fruit (and the bearers) of all the experiences (not always compatible, not always cumulative, and sometimes highly contradictory) that they have undergone in various contexts. (204)

The concentration on individuals, then, far from leading to an atomistic account of social life, instead makes the sociological account more complex by showing the messiness and intricacy of structure in context.

For Lahire, reflexivity is a vexed term for Bourdieu and others not least because it is taken to refer only to reflexivity in its purest form. By contrast, Lahire wishes to broaden the concept out, in a way which stresses the small, apparently insignificant ways in which all individuals reflect on a day-to-day basis. In doing so he is, in part, attempting to counter what he takes to be Bourdieu's elevation of reflexivity to the grand, all-encompassing (and subsequently impeccably realised) life-plan – ultimately the move which allows Bourdieu to claim that reflexivity is, in general, something of a myth put about by rational action theorists and other individualist ne'er-do-wells (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Taking up a passing reference of Bourdieu's to the linguist Antoine Meillet, Lahire claims that we must distinguish between Bourdieu's

formulation of reflexivity as very long-term calculation, and the many other, small ways in which individuals reflect on and in their lives:

And to demonstrate this, it is enough to imagine an actor who shows great foresight in her domestic organization, rationally managing the family organization, accounts and timetables, making shopping lists and lists of things to do, etc. Who would want to qualify her behaviour as ‘cynical and calculating utilitarianism’? Just as it is hard to argue that Meillet was already preparing his ‘stroke’ at primary school, because this involves a very complex series of actions, extending over a very long period of time (almost a whole life), so it is not at all awkward to maintain that someone foresaw, calculated and planned – with all possible cynicism! – to go to the bank at such and such a time, then go to the chemist, etc. (Lahire, 2011: 156)

By portraying reflexivity almost exclusively in terms of a life-time of cynical planning (so that Meillet intentionally set in motion the chain of decisions and events that would eventually lead to him becoming a highly esteemed linguist, whilst still at primary school), Bourdieu is able effectively to reduce the concept to absurdity.

What Lahire stresses here is the importance of the *present situation* in the operation of reflexivity. For Bourdieu, what is key is an individual’s past experiences

(the primacy of class in early identity formation and educational experiences, in particular), and it is this set of previous experiences which fundamentally conditions the response to the present; while for Lahire, *reflections* on that past in the present, and the novelty of the present case (both of which can potentially lead to a different course of action), are themselves fundamentally important. Suspicious of this notion of endless repetition of the past in every new situation (shorthand by Bourdieu and his followers to 'habitus', understood in its crudest form), Lahire instead stresses the *necessity* for individuals (in highly differentiated societies) to reflect and to make innumerable small decisions, given the complexity and changeability of the situations in which they find themselves.

He extends Bourdieu's much-used metaphor of the unreflexive athlete, kicking or batting the ball with fundamentally unthinking and instantaneous precision: the athlete for Bourdieu has come to embody their past experiences as a *feel for the game*, such that while playing the game (in terms of the metaphor, living through the present situation), they do not consciously weigh up different options but instead follow some instinctual sense (see, for instance, Bourdieu, 1990a). Lahire, conversely, draws out some rather different aspects of the athlete metaphor: certainly some small amount of the athlete's time is caught up in the immediacy and irreversibility of the big game, but much more of it is spent practising, discussing, adjusting and improving: that is, reflecting. The athlete's relation to their current situation is not always, or even most of

the time, characterised by an unthinking repetition of the past, but is a complex mixture of long- and short-term strategy, mistakes, adjustments and spontaneity. By extension, the social actor themselves is often in just such a relation to their present situation, which frequently does not call for instantaneous decisions, and which decisions can often subsequently be reversed or adjusted. In many everyday situations the actor does not simply repeat the past, but has the time to weigh up past courses of action against alternatives, and to devise some sort of plan, however small: 'You don't do shopping in the same way as you descend the rapids, you don't build a house like you hit a football, you don't prepare an international scientific conference like you box in a ring' (Lahire, 2011: 149).

By stressing the everydayness of reflexivity (its prevalence throughout social classes, its existence on mundane as well as elevated levels, and the relative rarity of situations requiring instantaneous decisions), Lahire convincingly counters Bourdieu's attempts to portray reflexivity as both rare, on an individual level, and only accessible to the relatively privileged. He changes the terms of the debate, often in humorous and telling ways. Nonetheless, what tends to disappear in this understanding of reflexivity is its potentially *political* content: that is, reflexivity as concerned with structures of inequality and the possibility of change. One of the main reasons that sociologists have been so interested in the idea of reflexivity is precisely this political potential. By focusing on the more mundane aspects of reflexivity, Lahire tends to elide the crucial

political difference between reflexivity as a general ‘thinking about’, and reflexivity as a marker of the capacity for dissent. In Luc Boltanski’s recent monograph, to which we now turn, this (by no means universal) connection between reflexivity and dissent is given centre stage.

### **Luc Boltanski: reflexivity and dissent**

Like Lahire, Boltanski (2011) wishes to counter the Bourdieusian model’s determinism by recognising the role of uncertainty and deliberation in social life. As against Bourdieu’s focus on social stability (and indeed inertia), Boltanski stresses the constant potential threats against which social orders may need to defend themselves. These threats are connected to the everyday reflections of individuals (as in Lahire’s account of the more quotidian aspects of reflexivity), but such reflections are by no means universally politically charged. Like Atkinson, Boltanski is concerned to provide a *context* for reflexivity: rather than simply asserting its prevalence, a move with potentially de-politicising consequences, he wishes to assess the social conditions which cause it to take particular *forms*. For Boltanski, what is central is the difference between an everyday (or pragmatic) register, in which individuals are focused on completing particular tasks and so tend to suppress, for practical reasons, any critical tendencies or potential conflicts between individuals, and a metapragmatic register, distinguished by

heightened reflexivity, critique and dissent. This distinction ensures that the political character of particular forms of reflexivity is maintained.

Boltanski's ambition is to find some middle ground or theoretical balance between what he terms critical sociology (the chief proponent of which is here Bourdieu) and the pragmatic sociology of critique. Both approaches correspond to programmes of research with which Boltanski has been, at different stages of his career, associated (most prominently, with the pragmatic sociology of critique, in Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) and with Bourdieu in their collaborations, such as Bourdieu et al. (1996)). The pragmatic sociology of critique is a sociology seeking to reflect and consolidate the critique which is imminent to social life as it already exists: that is, basing its critical theory upon the articulated dissent (the *disputes*) of the individuals embroiled in the situation. That 'organic' criticism emerges because there are different principles of valuation governing different spheres of social life. Disputes arise when a principle of valuation is perceived to have been applied to a sphere to which it should not be brought to bear: in arguments relating to educational reform, for example, it is often contended that principles of valuation which may be quite suitable for the domestic sphere (concerning personal character, manners and taste) are inappropriately applied to the educational setting. Thus apparent tests of academic aptitude become instead tests of social origin. In disputes of this kind, individuals do not criticise the concept of the test itself but rather its fitness for purpose: 'a just test is primarily a test

*of something ... that is to say, a test where the strength put to the test is specified*  
(Boltanski, 2011: 29, original emphasis).

In contrast to the pragmatic sociology of critique's attention to dissent as an everyday experience, Boltanski understands Bourdieusian and other critical sociologies to be characterised by a desire to *unmask domination*: that is, beginning from the position that the workings of domination are largely concealed from (and thus, as in the quotation at the very beginning of this review, misrecognised by) the individuals subjected to them. Critical sociology is hence required to uncover domination and so inspire critique in otherwise largely docile subjects (as in Bourdieu's remark that 'it is clear that any social experience ... can be converted from a handicap into capital, *so long as it is mastered through analysis*' (2004: 114, emphasis added)). For Boltanski, the operations of this critical sociology tend both to maintain a privileged place for the critical sociologist (a privilege which, he argues, it is difficult to maintain given the capacity for critique observable in many everyday situations), and to reinforce domination by continually stressing its ubiquity.

Jeremy Lane (2012) notes this aspect of present-day Bourdieusians (a tendency to stress the unreflexive and fundamentally uncritical nature of dominated subjects, and concomitantly to downplay reflexivity whenever it is found in unexpected places) in his critical essay on the memoir of the Bourdieu-inspired philosopher Didier Eribon. In his *Returning to Reims* (2013), Eribon recounts his upbringing in a working-class family

and the effect this had on his personal and intellectual trajectory, in particular his coming out and subsequent scholarship on gay identity. Eribon connects this trajectory to his vehement *rejection* of a class background characterised, he says, by intolerance, anger and hyper-masculinity, as embodied in his father. He connects that intolerance, in turn, to a Bourdieusian theorisation of working-class identity: the dominated internalise their domination, are resigned to and even love their fate, and reproduce the beliefs and prejudices of previous generations: in short, they are characterised by *social inertia*. Yet Lane draws attention to the ways in which, in Eribon's own account of the apparent acceptance and internalisation of domination amongst the dominated, working-class actors are, in fact, not infrequently characterised by discontent with their current conditions and by attempts to change them (by attending evening classes, for instance – however likely it seems that such attempts at transformation will be thwarted). For Lane, as for Boltanski, we do not have to look far to see the tensions, frustrations and aspirations which in fact animate the dominated's relation to the status quo.

Despite his critical take on critical sociology, however, Boltanski's aim is not to demonstrate the fundamental superiority of the pragmatic sociology of critique, but rather to find some theoretical balance between the two. In particular, he argues that the pragmatic sociology of critique on its own, unlike critical sociology, will not necessarily progress to a systematic, *metacritical* position, given the piecemeal and single-issue character of the disputes of everyday life. The pragmatic sociology of critique is

fundamentally concerned with disputes as they arise from actors embroiled in a situation, but such actors are *realistic*, and as such base their disputes upon partial, local and practical concerns. If sociology merely records such piecemeal disputes, however important those single issues, it does not take the next step in piecing together disparate issues into a coherent whole as a system of domination. It is precisely this metacritical move which critical sociology supplies.

How, then, to produce a sociology capable of metacritique – that is, of rising to a higher register than that of everyday criticism and formulating a theory of domination – but also attendant to the meaningful political reflexivity of ordinary actors? The role of sociology, for Boltanski, is not to *reveal* domination to the docile masses, as for the critical sociologists, but conversely to demonstrate that contradictions, and with them the possibility of critique, are immanent to social life as it actually exists. The point is not, in that case, to resolve conflicts, but precisely to maintain the sense that the conflicts are *not* resolved. The impetus for the critical sociologist's overarching theory is in the end similar to that for the mainstream politician's insistence that radical demands are hopelessly idealistic: *making the conflict go away*. Conversely, Boltanski insists that it is by staying *within* the messiness and indeterminacy of the dispute that sociology demonstrates that what happens to be real now is not all that could be imagined. The role of sociology is to consistently confront, and dislodge, the apparent inevitability of current reality.

The point, then, is to provide a *wider context* within which actors might place their own disputes. By recording and providing links between apparently different types of everyday critique, sociology can make the prospect of a different sort of social reality more *real*. If everyday disputes are characterised by both realism and pragmatism, then the extension of what may be considered a realistic and practical political aim is central to raising these disputes to a more general level. The kind of sociology then produced will not be fundamentalist, in the sense of insisting on a unified explanation for domination along the lines of everywhere-and-always class, but conversely will be attendant to the pluralistic and multifaceted concerns of actors themselves, and to the fractured and contradictory nature of social life. In this way, Boltanski reformulates reflexivity as central both to everyday life and to a sociology concerned with critique.

## **Conclusion**

Although Lahire and Boltanski, and to some extent Atkinson as well, take their distance from Bourdieu's work in various ways (the back cover of Boltanski and Thévenot's *On Justification* describes the book as a 'foundational work of post-Bourdieu sociology'), their writings remain, in important respects, intimately tied up with the Bourdieusian tradition. The sheer amount of time that each sociologist gives over to detailed discussion of Bourdieu's work suggests that, at the very least, the epoch of 'post-Bourdieu sociology' must still contend seriously with his formulations of the

foundational questions (and answers) for sociology. What Atkinson, in particular, demonstrates extremely well is the enduring importance of the Bourdieusian approach, not least in countering recent attempts to gloss over the significance of class through a focus on 'lifestyle'. As we can see, for example, in the recent heated debates over the Great British Class Survey (see articles in *Sociology* 48(3), 2014), not only are such questions far from settled, but Bourdieu remains central in the disputes, even if only as a figure against which to position oneself.

I have argued here that of the three it is Boltanski who offers the most useful reassessment of reflexivity in Bourdieu. Atkinson provides an empirically strong and impassioned counter to recent generalisations about the universality of reflexivity in late modernity: he convincingly demonstrates the intimate link between reflexivity – active processes of cogitation and decision-making; indeed *control* over one's life – and privilege. In order to make meaningful, reflexive decisions about their lives, there must be a range of options from which actors can genuinely choose. In positions of subordination and constraint, such options are severely limited, and we should be suspicious of attempts to apply a celebratory or universalised lens of reflexivity here. This is one of the crucial lessons Bourdieu has to teach us.

Nevertheless, without detracting from his empirical findings and notwithstanding his modifications to the Bourdieusian orthodoxy, Atkinson's use of sometimes unreconstructed Bourdieusian language, in particular, can end up

reproducing some of the more problematic aspects of Bourdieu's approach. As both Lahire and Boltanski note, any rigid adoption of the Bourdieusian model is likely to result in the disregarding of quite observable reflexivity amongst the relatively dominated. To talk of a universal reflexivity as if class did not condition actors' subjectivities in profound ways is demonstrably problematic. But Lahire shows how a narrowing of the definition of reflexivity ignores the ways in which all actors do, in fact, reflect. His distinction between reflexivity as a profound, even life-long process of calculation, and reflexivity as an everyday activity made necessary by the sheer complexity of negotiating contemporary life, is deeply useful in nuancing theories of reflexive modernity. Lahire simultaneously makes the case for reflexivity as a widespread phenomenon in late modernity, and for a different conception of what reflexivity is. Nonetheless, this focus on the second, more mundane form of reflexivity has the potential to empty the concept of its political content. Critical sociologists, Bourdieusian or otherwise, are generally interested in reflexivity in part because it offers a way of thinking about the agency of the dominated when it comes to social change.

It is for this reason that I have argued that Boltanski offers the most useful conception of reflexivity here. On the one hand, like Lahire, he wishes to wrest the idea of reflexivity away from its position as the preserve of the privileged. And yet, like Atkinson, he is deeply mindful of the need to place reflexivity within a social context.

Discussion of reflexivity is hardly radical if it merely constitutes a celebration of some universal attribute. Rather, reflexivity is meaningful for sociology in as much as we can show where, when and how it has the potential to aid change. Through his focus on reflexivity as the basis for disputes, Boltanski demonstrates clearly its political potential, as well as the role of the sociologist in capitalising upon it.

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