

**SOCIOLOGY OF RELATIVISM ACCORDING TO  
RAYMOND BOUDON**

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“It is not consensus that creates truth,  
but truth that creates consensus.”  
(Boudon, 2008: 64)

Relativism raises major issues for scientific knowledge and for the planning of life in contemporary societies characterized by the diversity of populations and lifestyles. It casts doubts on scientific research and grounded knowledge, impeding the quest for truth. Similarly, it makes it difficult to assess what is good in terms of social norms, and what is beautiful in the artistic sphere, by fostering the idea that “anything goes.” Relativism also has important social and political implications, not least because it “encourages the loss of reference points and justifies the representation of social and political life as a matter of power relations” (Boudon 2008: 5 my translation<sup>1</sup>). Raymond Boudon’s thinking helps us to see things more clearly.

Relativism is widespread because it takes three different forms—cognitive, aesthetic and normative—all of which follow the same well-defined logic in Boudon’s work. What are the contours and characteristics of these three forms? How can we explain them? These are important questions, but just as essential is understanding the widespread acceptance of relativistic ideas, visions and ideas in developed societies. How can we explain the attraction of dubious ideas that compete with grounded knowledge? Raymond Boudon has provided stimulating answers to these questions, and much contemporary work in sociology and other disciplines confirms the accuracy of his analysis of relativism.

I will look at the intellectual and social mechanisms behind relativism. Then I'll recall how the scientificity of the social sciences manages, according to R. Boudon, but also other authors, to counter the impression of relativism that often characterizes the social sciences. This is followed by a discussion of the important role played by affectivity and the pursuit of interest in the appeal of relativism. I then turn to the important question of normative relativism. Finally, I will consider the difficult issue of the relationship between the particular and the universal, a question already addressed by Émile Durkheim over a century ago when he examined the social attachment of individuals to groups and to Humanity.

#### INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL MECHANISMS AT WORK IN RELATIVISM

Raymond Boudon drew a distinction between *good* and *bad* relativism. Good relativism refers to the fact that norms, values and ways of life vary according to social milieu, culture and time. It acknowledges differences in mores, ideas, behavior and human achievements. Already evoked long ago by Montaigne, good relativism is distinct from sociocentrism and fosters respect for the Other, an idea well captured by Pascal: "Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other."<sup>2</sup> Good relativism has, however, encouraged the spread of bad relativism, namely, the idea that norms or values have no objective foundation and are inspired by the spirit of the times, passions or interests. This is the dark side of relativism, which posits that all cultures are equal, that all opinions deserve to be considered worthy, and that norms are arbitrary cultural conventions. Bad relativism has given rise to the emergence of untruths and dubious knowledge, and has even spread to the world of science, to the point where some doubt the possibility of attaining truth or producing grounded knowledge.

Boudon (2008) has identified three intellectual and social mechanisms that are at the root of relativism in all its forms: first, the existence of what he calls "rational cores" (*noyaux argumentatifs*); second, a hyperbolization effect, which occurs when one of these cores is reinforced by cognitive mechanisms such as the principle of the excluded middle; and, finally, a reinforcement effect due to congruence with interests. I propose to explain these mechanisms by analyzing a number of contemporary examples that have gained prominence in contemporary societies since Boudon first addressed this issue.

First, let's look at the idea of rational cores. Scientific explanations in the social sciences are based on first principles (instrumental rationality in economics, or the selection of mutations for their adaptive advantages in biology, for example), which subsequently encounter questions raised by other principles (extended rationality in sociology, etc.). These principles or axioms ("*propositions premières*", as Boudon calls them) are based on argumentation and are not demonstrable. This is the case for the pursuit of interest, the estimation of costs associated with decision-making, or the internalization of objective probabilities, to take examples from sociology.

How can we separate the first principles or axioms from the fruits of their application to sociological analysis? To answer this question, Boudon argues that we need to focus on the "solid reasons" for preferring one scientific explanation to another, by examining the unprovable principles on which all theories are based and comparing them with empirical observations made in accordance with accepted standards. In Durkheim's words, "we must ask [theory] for its credentials before granting it our credence" (Durkheim [1912] 1979: 624 my translation). Take, for example, the paradigm of rational choice, which is based on the idea of instrumental rationality. Interest in our own safety leads us to obey the ban on crossing the street when the light is red, and this is enough to account for the behavior of individuals at street corners. But can the pursuit of self-interest explain the educational choices of students or the consumption of cultural goods? Nothing is less certain. Certain principles are powerless to deliver explanations that can withstand comparison with other principles. This much was clear to Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. "But in addition to material interests, man still has ideas and feelings" (Tocqueville 1835, chap. 8, xxiii). Durkheim formulates the same three principles in the Second Preface to *The Division of Social Labor* (1912):

From the moment that, within a political society, a certain number of individuals are found to have in common ideas, interests, feelings and professions that the rest of the population does not share with them, it is inevitable that, under the influence of these similarities, they will be attracted to one another, that they will seek one another out, that they will enter into relationships, associate with one another, and that thus a restricted group, with its own special physiognomy, will gradually form within the general society (Durkheim, 1912 : p. xvi my translation).

These two authors (to whom Boudon often refers) formulated the three types of rationality that he spelled out—instrumental rationality, cognitive rationality and axiological rationality—in his effort to establish *homo sociologicus* and overcome the limits of *homo economicus*. “We cannot demonstrate that any principle is good, but some are better than others” (Boudon, 2008: 17).

How can we justify the criterion of examining strong reasons in the face of the diversity of first principles? Boudon draws a parallel between the reasons that govern the evaluation of scientific knowledge and what he calls “diffuse rationalization,” which guides the evaluation and assessment of all human actions. Thus, it should be possible to give “strong reasons” for valuing a body of knowledge, just as it is possible to evaluate the basis of a good life in society. Diffuse rationalization has always, and in all eras, led human beings to prioritize equal human dignity, attachment to individual freedom and the pursuit of well-being. This concept refers to the universality of the human condition and has the same epistemological status as those of impartial spectator (A. Smith), general will (J. -J. Rousseau), veil of ignorance (J. Rawls) or equitable spectator (M. Forsé and M. Parodi). “All these notions express a rational model of the human being” (Boudon 2008: 119). They have no moral or political connotations. But the notion of the dignity of the individual is vague, he points out, as shown by the slowness with which human rights have been recognized throughout history, and even in our own time. What’s more, the process of diffuse rationalization is subject to the vagaries of conjuncture and context. It is vulnerable to “jolts and setbacks” (Boudon, 2006: 886), giving the impression of a crisis of values and thus encouraging relativism in all its forms. The same applies to the process of evaluating scientificity, which involves examining the reasons behind a scientific program, but these are subject to hazards, as is the case with the diffuse rationalization that guides the assessment of human activities.

Economics is no exception when it comes to challenges to its rational core. In his highly critical book on the current state of the discipline, Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton (2024) refers to David Card and Alan Krueger’s (1995) convincing empirical analysis showing that raising the minimum wage did not lead to job losses, in research based on a natural experiment (a comparison between New Jersey and Pennsylvania). Deaton notes, however, that many economist colleagues remained dubious, arguing (wrongly, in his view) that the prevailing

theory of the link between the minimum wage and unemployment should be maintained pending further investigation. “Replications by themselves are never enough, because you never know whether the next one might be different; remember when it was thought that all swans were white?” (Deaton, 2024: 16). In Deaton’s view, these skeptical colleagues clung to what they took to be the rational core of their discipline for ideological reasons. Defending the empirical analysis of his two colleagues, he argued instead that it is important to examine the place and context—the monopsony economic system, which he describes well in his book—in which raising the minimum wage can lead to unemployment. “Instead of dismissing a finding because it contradicts what we think should happen, we need to check whether the contradiction happens elsewhere and then get back to work to think about why it his might happen, not necessarily universally, but under what circumstances” (Deaton, 2024: 15). Angus Deaton, like Raymond Boudon, thus relied on “strong reasons” associated with specific circumstances (and context, to use Boudon’s word) to evaluate a theoretical framework in the social sciences. This approach counters relativism, which appears to be a conflict of interpretation of empirical observations.

In support of R. Boudon’s argument regarding rational cores, I would add that scientific explanations also reflect an author’s intentions or starting point. In the 19th century, the rapid industrialization of Western societies was the source of major social problems (exploitation of the working proletariat, urban poverty, etc.). Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim were both aware of the social issues of their time, but their scientific intentions differed. Marx elaborated a (well-known) theory on the logic of the capitalist system, emphasizing the capture of surplus value from labor by the owners of the means of production and the exploitation of workers at the time of the Industrial Revolution. Émile Durkheim approached the same period with a different intention. As a young sociologist writing his doctoral thesis, *De la division du travail social* (*On the Division of Social Labor*, 1893), he set out to identify the logic of the division of labor in modern society, the new conditions of social cohesion, and the attachment of individuals to groups and society in the context of industrialization. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the Marxist analysis is in keeping with the times (the exploitation of the working class, etc.) and primarily focused on explaining the industrial revolution, whereas the

Durkheimian analysis highlights the logic and consequences of the emerging division of labor within modern society, which proves highly relevant to the description and explanation of contemporary social stratification. The rational cores of the two classic authors are well known, and this is not the place to return to them. Moreover, their respective theoretical approaches founded two traditions of social class analysis. The Marxist perspective inspired several research programs in the second half of the twentieth century—suffice it to mention the one led by Eric Olin Wright and that (in part) of John Goldthorpe. The Durkheimian perspective was less successful than its predecessor in the field of social stratification during this period, but today it inspires and guides a new approach to social classes defined as microclasses (see Grusky 2005). As numerous contributions in sociology and economics show, it is possible to see what is worth retaining in the Marxist and Durkheimian approaches in the light of empirical studies without falling into relativism. I'll come back to this later.

Hyperbolization, as defined by Boudon, is frequently found in conjunction with certain theoretical approaches. Hyperbolic arguments and extreme formulations are often proposed to dramatize a situation or to focus the reader's intention. Boudon has shown that one of the cognitive mechanisms at the root of hyperbolization is the privileging of a binary vision of the world based on the principle of the excluded middle. It is characteristic of militant discourse, but also of a certain critical sociology that does not hesitate to highlight very real social problems—no one will dispute their existence—with the aim of sparking protest action or supporting the need for profound social change. “False ideas are often hyperbolic interpretations of true ideas” (Boudon, 2003: 152). He illustrates this idea by criticizing Leo Strauss's interpretation of Max Weber's thought, which he regards as unfounded and relativistic. Both Marx and Durkheim drew conclusions from their analyses of social change, social cohesion and the attachment of individuals to society, which were, as we know, very different. The *Communist Manifesto* by K. Marx and F. Engels, published in 1848, is a hyperbolized extension of their scientific analyses. Durkheim's analysis escaped hyperbolization. Once he had developed his theory of the division of labor, he devoted three chapters to the analysis of social classes in the last third of the 19th century—in terms actually close to those of the Marxist approach—showing that he was aware of the working-class misery of his time, but without making exploitation the

key concept in his explanation of the new societal logic emerging. His theoretical framework specified the conditions for social cohesion resulting from the division of labor, such as equality of opportunity (a revolutionary idea at the time), social and geographic mobility, state intervention in regulation and social justice.

The third intellectual mechanism specified by Boudon posits that many works in the social sciences seek to reinforce explanation with arguments and statements that align with the values or interests of the researchers or receivers of these explanations. This reinforcing effect guides the development of a sociological approach that relies not only on its truth (in the sense of grounded knowledge), but also on its usefulness, to take up a distinction advanced following V. Pareto. “Certain ideas are endorsed, not only because they appear credible, but because they respond to cognitive, ideological or material interests, whether these are carried by classes, groups, social movements, movements of ideas or individuals” (Boudon, 2008: 29). A theory or explanation can be useful and true at the same time, but it can also be useful without being true when, for example, it legitimizes a demand justified by good feelings. In such cases, the theory or explanation is accepted, not on the basis of the criteria by which it is judged to be scientific, but because it is consistent with a conviction. This is clearly the case for the economists, criticized by A. Deaton, who questioned the empirical evidence that raising the minimum wage did not increase the unemployment rate.

The criterion of the usefulness of a given sociological approach is well illustrated in the “presidential address” of the president of the American Sociological Association, Joya Misra (2024), under the heading of “policy sociology,” as evidenced by the title of her conference: “Sociological solutions: Building communities of hope, justice, and joy”:

There is an increasing consensus that sociologists should use our work to create a more just and humane world, translating our insights into action. I argue that community-engaged sociology aimed at solving social problems can help rebuild democracy, strengthen academic freedom, and foster greater trust in science. (...) I argue that the central mission of sociologists today should be to work with communities to provide opportunities for experiencing hope, joy, and justice. Critically, work done in collaboration with communities must also be centered in how we recognize and evaluate sociological work, pushing back from neoliberal

models of academic production and interrupting the complicity of sociology and higher education in colonial processes” (Misra, 2025: 2).

“Engaged sociology,” “neoliberal models,” “complicity of sociology” are concepts that define her sociological perspective. In her lecture, the President acknowledges the importance of “good sociology” (in her words) which excels, for example, in highlighting the structural features of inequalities, but she pleads for “sociology to emphasize the advantages that social scientists could offer if we oriented our work more towards finding solutions” (idem). I’m not questioning the fact that “engaged community research” leads to scientific results—particularly because of the involvement of social actors in studying the situation of marginalized people, minorities of various kinds, excluded people living on the margins—producing knowledge that will be both true and useful. While useful, the empirical results of the research undertaken must be evaluated according to criteria that ensure their scientific character and inclusion in the corpus of sociology, as proposed by J. Misra.

#### SCIENTIFICITY AND RELATIVISM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Raymond Boudon underlines the difficulty of determining the demarcation criteria between science and non-science, and the difficulty of distinguishing between two sociological interpretations or analyses. He applies Kant’s idea of truth to scientificity—just because there are no general criteria for truth does not mean that truth does not exist—pointing out that there is no checklist for determining whether a sociological explanation is true. The fact that there are no general criteria of scientificity potentially paves the way for relativism, but scientificity does exist, and it is possible to counter the negative representation of science. To achieve this, we need to examine—as in the case of primary propositions and general principles—the reasons for preferring one sociological explanation to another. “It is precisely because it is possible to determine on the basis of solid reasons whether one theory is to be preferred to another that certain theories irreversibly disappear in favor of theories deemed preferable on the basis of well-defined criteria that vary from case to case” (Boudon, 2008: 33). For example, I’ll take a closer look at how to distinguish between different explanations for inequalities in education, or inequalities between social classes. But first, we need to clarify what we mean by scientificity.

In order to prefer one explanation to another, and thus circumvent relativism in the social sciences, R. Boudon suggests referring to the model of scientific activity itself. Secondly, he maintains that comparison makes it possible to arbitrate between competing or divergent explanations. I would add that the accumulation of knowledge over the years helps to reinforce the scientific nature of the analysis of social phenomena. I'll examine these three ways out of relativism in science, giving some examples.

Boudon specifies the nature of scientific activity aimed at explaining any given phenomenon. A system of arguments {S} validly explains P if all the components of {S} are acceptable and compatible, and if no available alternative {S'} is preferable to it. However, the question of whether {S} is preferable to {S'} is frequently undecidable, and it can be difficult to propose a convincing answer to the attempt to describe and explain reality as it is. On the other hand, it is possible to examine the reasons for preferring {S} to {S'}. Newton explains why an apple falling from a tree falls to the ground. However, the alternative observation of the apple floating in water does not call into question Newton's law of falling bodies, as any physicist can explain. But things aren't always that simple. "This situation of undecidability is common in science, and the desire to escape from it is one of the driving forces behind scientific progress" (Boudon, 2008: 96). Undecidability is one of the sources fuelling the representation of scientific knowledge as relative, and Boudon insists that there are no general laws in sociology, but rather conditional laws. This idea was formulated in a different way in the long quotation from Deaton's thought reported above.

Human action takes place within a given structure and a precise context that must be considered in the explanation. This is the teaching of G. Simmel (1984 [1923]) when he argues that sociological explanation is not nomological, as in the natural sciences. The same cause can produce similar effects in diverse societies or environments, but not necessarily, since these effects can also be different, as shown by the public policies adopted in different countries. An "ocean of uncertainty" (Boudon) fuels relativism in science as in everyday life.

The study of inequalities in education illustrates the relevance of examining the merits of the various explanations put forward on the basis of empirical data. Raymond Boudon and Pierre Bourdieu have

put forward different analyses of this phenomenon, and their explanations have given rise to debates—not directly between the two principals, who engaged only by allusion or in footnotes, but rather among other investigators—and to many hyperbolic elaborations by numerous commentators. Boudon's first principle is that young people make rational choices in formulating their educational plans; these choices are influenced by the family and social contexts in which they live and with an eye to financial constraints. Bourdieu's first principle is that individuals internalize the objective opportunities and cultural heritage derived from what he calls their habitus, which they acquire in the social class to which they belong. He points out that both the internalization of opportunities and the habitus can change in the different fields in which individuals find themselves, particularly in a longitudinal perspective. I would like to point out in passing that the concepts of context in Boudon and field in Bourdieu are not without certain similarities, an idea that deserves to be developed further, but that would go beyond the scope of this contribution. The two sociologists share a certain pessimism about the ability of education to reduce social inequalities. Bourdieu emphasizes social reproduction through unequal access to diplomas and the determining weight of class habitus. Boudon argues that social inequalities are observed because the employment structure has shifted upwards much less quickly than the educational achievement structure. The school system produced thousands of graduates in the last third of the 20th century (in part by opening access to post-secondary degrees to women) while the job market was slower to create positions capable of absorbing them. He argued as early as 1973 that rational individual strategies aimed at continuing studies (in a restrictive context, he specifies) led to a devaluation of diplomas—new graduates having access to less qualified jobs than before with the same diploma—but he also observed that the diploma remained profitable, hence the increase in demand for education.

Marie Duru-Bellat examined the analyses of the two sociologists in light of 40 years of empirical research on inequalities in education. Boudon's explanation holds up better than Bourdieu's when examined in the light of empirical data compiled subsequent to their work. She argues that Boudon's first principle, taking account of an actor's extended rationality in a context of constraints (low income, deficient information, etc.), better explains educational inequalities than Pierre

Bourdieu's internalized habitus. Social determinism, cultural heritage, and the social reproduction function of schooling cannot fully explain the massive schooling of women or the rise in graduation rates from one generation to the next, to consider only these two phenomena. "But the actor is no freer in Boudon than in Bourdieu, whether we are talking about the social determinants of choices or the internalization of objective chances..." (Duru-Bellat, 2023: 53). She pertinently points out that the "direction of displacement" of certain students investing in more profitable courses proposed by Bourdieu is close to the strong reasons of students sensitive to risks according to the financial situation of their family in Boudon (it is easier to project oneself into the future in a wealthy family, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

Raymond Boudon's model has been pursued and developed in at least three directions clearly identified by Estelle Herbaut (2024). Richard Breen and John H. Goldthorpe (1997) put forward "the most influential theoretical framework for explaining socially differentiated career choices in Anglo-Saxon research, even if its use in the French-speaking sphere remains marginal" (Herbaut, 2024: 21). Their theory of subjective expected utility specifies that students and their parents decide and arbitrate their choices by considering three factors: the cost associated with continuing their studies, the perceived probability of success or failure, and the expected benefits. The second type of model considers rationality limited by the inadequacy and weakness of information on the education system, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Finally, cognitive sociology has recently been mobilized to study student decision-making and educational inequalities based on the work of Kahneman and Tversky (1979). Cognitive biases can alter decisions made under uncertainty, as is the case with risk aversion, which states that individuals value a loss more highly than a gain of the same value. Some researchers have hypothesized that students and their families are motivated by the prospect of upward mobility while paying more attention to status loss and downward mobility (Tutić, 2017). Similarly, still with reference to cognition, the proliferation of options in the education system gives rise to the paradox of choice (the large number of possible choices makes the decision more difficult) and the status quo bias (individuals choose routine or familiar paths), which would explain why individuals' choices are not optimal. I note in passing that Boudon criticized the work of Kahneman and Tversky, arguing that "the origin of these biases remains mysterious (...) and

not ‘explained’” (R. Boudon, 2003: 10, underlined by RB). This criticism is too radical. Without falling into psychological reductionism, contemporary research in neuroscience, cognitive psychology and social sciences has opened the way to the explanations that Boudon seeks, as the work of Gérald Bronner (2001, 2006) has shown.

This brief review of various works on educational inequality also illustrates Boudon’s idea that comparison is of major importance in advancing scientific knowledge in sociology and in establishing solid knowledge that will lead to the reformulation of theoretical frameworks. “When theories lead to comparisons resulting in incontrovertible judgments, they take on the appearance of being scientific” (Boudon, 2008: 33). This idea is not new, and I see as proof this statement formulated by Denis Diderot (1753) on the patient work of scientific researchers. “Sooner or later, the dusty laborer, digging blindly in the depths, will bring up the piece that proves fatal to this obstinately erected edifice erected; it collapses, leaving only a hodgepodge of building materials, until another daring genius undertakes a new combination.”<sup>4</sup> Sociological research conducted over the past half century has made it possible to make fruitful comparisons that question the validity of many “obstinately erected” theories and allow us to evaluate the explanations of different social phenomena. To illustrate this, I will mention two contemporary studies by French sociologists, Ph. Coulangeon and S. Paugam.

Ph. Coulangeon (2021) provided a detailed analysis of mass consumption and in particular the consumption of cultural products, drawing on a large number of empirical studies carried out over more than forty years and questioning the explanatory power of the concept of habitus, which refers to “the conditioning associated with a particular class of living conditions” (P. Bourdieu). He shows how the democratization of education and the diffusion of cultural resources have contributed to the ‘recomposition’ of social classes. The symbolic and cultural boundaries between the latter are now blurred and class cultures are no longer as clear as they once were, even if their cohesion was quite relative and had been idealized in sociology in the 1970s and 1980s, illustrating in passing the phenomenon of hyperbolization. The author argues that the homology between forms of cultural capital and social classes has broken down and that the strong version of cultural capital formulated by Bourdieu has proven empirically fragile. He observes, with supporting data, that the social destinies of individuals

remain influenced by their origins even if the democratization of education has had a redistributive function that has benefited the least favored social categories, which led him to propose “a weak version of habitus.” For the author, the democratization of education has not led to a decline in the cultural level of individuals provided that it is measured in relation to that of their background and not in relation to that of the socially selected population. Finally, he emphasizes that the cultural fragmentation of societies is not just a matter of class or social inequality, but that it is organized around a plurality of dimensions to be taken into account such as sex, age, generation or ethnicity.

For his part, Serge Paugam explicitly favors the notion of habitus in his book *L'Attachment social* (2023) but he proposes to amend it by formulating four analytical requirements, which allows him to attenuate the deterministic character that has been repeatedly criticized in Bourdieu's theory. The author posits 1) that dispositions are plural and are expressed in different spheres of social life, 2) that habitus is also acquired in adulthood under the influence of participation in various collectives, 3) that there is an affective dimension through which dispositions are formed, and finally 4) that individuals have a reflexive capacity to react that varies according to social environments, situations, trials and circumstances of daily life. Paugam therefore also formulates a weak version of the theory of habitus, while maintaining the binding nature of internalized social norms. In his analysis of the various forms of social attachment observed in some thirty different societies, he grants leeway to individuals to whom he recognizes a capacity for action, stating that they can escape in whole or in part from the normative constraint in different ways in the societies he compares. Thus, he explains why marriage and fertility rates are declining in Japan by referring to the reasons invoked by women. More educated Japanese women marry less and have fewer children in order to be able to work in the context where norms in couples and in companies do not match their career plans. Similarly, the analysis he offers of the situation in France is as follows. “If the organic participation link is preeminent in France, it is not only because professional groups are both organized and regulated by a centralized and interventionist State; it is also because social statuses are highly hierarchical and individuals constantly refer to this institutionalized hierarchy to distinguish themselves from one another and, if necessary, to demand an improvement in their status by putting pressure on the State, via large street demonstrations,

which often surprise our foreign neighbors by their scale” (Paugam 2023: 525). Paugam’s interpretation of his data seems to me to be based on Boudon’s strong reasons rather than on habitus itself in its weak version.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, let us consider a third way of circumventing relativism in science: the accumulation of knowledge. “Facts, of whatever nature, are the philosopher’s true wealth,” argues Denis Diderot.<sup>6</sup> The proliferation of empirical research and the proliferation of grounded knowledge have over the years tested the explanatory power of different theoretical approaches. “Are the hypotheses true? The more we extend the consequences, the more truths they embrace, the more evidence and strength they acquire,” states Diderot in the same text.

I will take as an example work on social stratification, which enjoyed a golden age in sociology in the 1970s and 1980s. The major surveys on social classes were based on quite different theoretical frameworks, fueling the impression of a certain relativism in the way they were characterized. This impression has proved to be mistaken, however, because certain principles and axioms behind each of the proposed paradigms, justified at the time of their formulation, subsequently turned out to be better than others at accounting for the data, as shown by the two most important paradigms that were proposed for the construction of a social class scheme in the last third of the 20th century. Wright’s original Marxist-inspired scheme left little room for the operational identification of the middle classes at a time when the latter were nevertheless expanding rapidly in developed societies. The author subsequently amended his scheme to circumvent this criticism, but it must be acknowledged that it does not fully account for contemporary empirical data. Similarly, John Goldthorpe’s Weberian-inspired scheme underestimated the contribution of cultural capital, as he himself acknowledged in his latest publications. We owe to his compatriot Mike Savage the development of a social class scheme that gives a large place to cultural capital and the education of individuals.

At the end of the 20th century, critics put forward the thesis of the end of social classes on the grounds that existing measures were no longer differentiating and were unable to explain social facts such as voting or market consumption. This thesis is nowadays contested on the grounds that it is rather the measurement of social classes that must be rethought on the basis of new principles. A new generation of

studies has been inspired by the founding analysis of Émile Durkheim in *The Division of Labor in Social Life* (1893) to establish the construction of microclasses and to justify a shift towards the study of inequalities rather than emphasizing the opposition between antagonistic social classes. A new way of considering the social status of individuals has emerged and it has proven fruitful in the explanation of various social phenomena such as voting or consumption. Occupations and professions have in fact long been analyzed as being based on different logics, whether exploitation (Marx), authority (Weber) or domination (Bourdieu). However, another dimension in the contemporary world of work has emerged quite clearly, to the point of justifying the development of a new way of conceiving and operationalizing social classes: the functional cooperation and interdependence between occupations highlighted by Émile Durkheim, all typical features of the division of labor in modern society (Langlois 2025). The latter was fully aware of the effects attributable to social classes, as the last three chapters of *The Division* show, but he did not give conflicts between classes the structuring character that they had in Marxist approaches. The reasons for this situation are well known. Over the years, the occupation of individuals has acquired an institutionalized aspect. The state and the legislative apparatus closely regulate the labor market as well as the relations between labor and capital. Associations, corporations, and unions intervene closely in professional activities and impose standards on them. Finally, professional qualifications and individual diplomas have also contributed to disrupting the world of work. All these factors have allowed the two dimensions clearly identified by Émile Durkheim to take effect in our time in the process of division of labor.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE ROLE OF AFFECT IN SCIENCE

Affect can also play a role in science. “A scientist who believes he has a good hypothesis will normally be keen to verify it. This can lead him to pay attention to the facts that support his hypothesis, to neglect those that contradict it, and to subsequently endorse a false belief” (Boudon 2008: 38). When a researcher has spent his entire life developing a paradigm, Boudon once argued, it is very difficult for him/her to abandon it and he/she is encouraged to modify or amend it, even if the final result remains unsatisfactory or has no impact on the scientific community. But there is more. The question of the links between research and commitment is increasingly pressing today. Max

Weber addressed this issue, as is well known, in his lecture “Politik als Beruf” (*Politics as a Profession*, 1919). Politicians display their beliefs, take a stand, and act on the world. Scientists, for their part, analyze the facts of society. They set out primary propositions, and their axioms have an epistemological status, not a moral or political one, as stated above. Other contemporary authors have extended Weber’s reflections. Norbert Elias (1993) differentiates between commitment and distancing, and Fernand Dumont (1981) distinguishes between truth (in the sense of grounded knowledge) and relevance.

Another criticism goes so far as to call into question the very identity of the researchers by arguing that they cannot abstract himself from the point of view imposed by his identity status, which comes from his gender, the color of his skin, his ethnicity, his social class, or his national culture. The white man would thus be incapable of achieving the universal. Some go even further. Can the female anthropologist analyze and understand the myths of Canadian indigenous peoples? Is the white man justified in investigating the Black man? Is he even less justified in investigating the woman of color? The effort of empathy—an attitude expected of field researchers—is, in this perspective, considered an attempt to appropriate the culture of the other, which would make it impossible and unjustified for a white anthropologist to collect and study the myths of indigenous peoples. This time, the debate is no longer about the need to distinguish between grounded knowledge and its relevance, but rather about the very possibility of reaching the truth (understood in the sense of grounded knowledge) for the sociologist perceived as being locked in his/her culture and incapable of empathy leading to the understanding of others. However, this criticism reduces the human being to his cultural, gender, and racial identity, masking what he has in common with others and, above all, his capacity to understand the other and the different.

In her address as President-elect of the American Sociological Association, Mary Romero (2020)—a sociologist from a minority cultural group, it should be noted in order to understand her point—criticized “the empiricist tradition of objectivity in which sociologists are detached from their research” by arguing for a sociology committed to the pursuit of social justice. “I now turn to ASA’s role in contributing to the empiricist tradition of ‘objectivity’, which functioned to isolate and marginalize groups, particularly scholar-

activists, working-class sociologists, sociologists of color, women sociologists, indigenous sociologists, and LGBTQ sociologists.” The president adds: “All knowledge production is socially situated, subjective, and historically located. For most of the history of American sociology, the researcher’s and theorist’s standpoint has been implicitly or explicitly white heterosexual middle-class males.” (M. Romero, 2020: 23).

It is impossible to overstate the fact that some sociologists neglect to refer to minority and/or female authors and fail to consider on their merit potentially fruitful ideas. But it is one thing to recognize these deficiencies and criticize them, another to argue that they are attributable to race and sex (white male) and to campaign for the deconstruction of categories of sex, phenotype or ethnicity, or to fall into “the temptation of indistinction” between the objective and the subjective, in the words of Dominique Schnapper (2024). “The confusion of the objective and the subjective is one of the examples of an evolution towards a general indistinction which constitutes one of the risks of distortion of democratic societies: refusal to distinguish between masculine and feminine, knowledge and belief, humanity and animality, “feeling” and law, politics and religion, politics and penal law, public and private, etc.” (D. Schnapper, 2004: 335 my translation). It is up to epistemological analysis and the critical analysis of sociological explanations to detect possible biases attributed to sex, ethnicity or phenotype that intervene in empirical work, to highlight omissions and to report on knowledge that has been neglected. This becomes possible because, normally, the researcher explains the initial propositions on which his research is based and specifies all the elements of the methodology which led to the results obtained.

Engaged sociology and policy sociology emphasize the criterion of utility in the Pareto sense. However, both Mary Romero and Joya Misra (see above) have been careful to point out that it is necessary to respect the commonly accepted rules of the sociological method in establishing facts, and in particular the need for examination of results by the scientific community (peer review, critical discussion with colleagues, etc.). The two presidents of the American Scientific Association argue that the criterion of utility should lead sociologists to explore neglected areas in social research with new or little-used theoretical and methodological toolboxes likely to bring out verifiable knowledge. The choice of research subjects, problems, and even

methods and concepts is often of external origin, but this does not prevent the evaluation of results from obeying internal rules that fall within the scope of scientificity, as argued by R. Boudon and M. Clavelin (1994). Engaged sociology and policy sociology should not be confused with activism because they are capable of producing useful and true knowledge. Sociology is not “a combat sport,” and Nathalie Heinrich maintains that there are places for activism and places for research. Michèle Perrot—to whom we owe significant work on women’s history—has defined herself as a historian and feminist, but not a feminist historian, to clearly distinguish between the project of scientific knowledge in history and the commitment of the activist.

#### NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

In the normative sphere, Boudon proposes prioritizing reflexivity over benevolence or tolerance to ensure respect for cultural diversity. Reflexivity makes it possible to circumvent normative relativism. Thus, according to him, it encourages us to favor methods of social control—less cruel punishments for crimes, abolition of the amputation of the thief’s hand—which have the same deterrent effect as the heavy penalties imposed in the past. The law of retaliation or clan revenge are nowadays disqualified because civil justice is based on different principles which we prefer from the point of view of certain criteria (for example, minimizing the risk of judicial errors) and which prove to be as effective in ensuring social order as the harsher or more cruel sanctions favored in the past. According to Boudon, the explanatory schema for this reversal of perspective unfolds in two stages: an institutional or technical innovation occurs, and a rational selection of innovations is implemented. “As this rational selection can only be the work of individual social actors, they must be driven by a tendentially rational judgment about the institutions, behaviors or states of affairs that they have before their eyes. But this rationality is twofold: when faced with an innovation, they tend to ask themselves whether it leads to happy consequences and whether it is based on acceptable principles. A good innovation is therefore one that appears acceptable from both an instrumental and an axiological point of view” (Boudon, 2008: 97).

In support of his analysis, Boudon mentions that the death penalty imposed on the murderer has long been justified in the name of its deterrent effect and in the name of the principle of proportionality

between the criminal act and the sentence imposed. But respect for life, which leads us to condemn murder, also encourages us to condemn the killing of the murderer and to prefer a life sentence. Similarly, we do not believe that the penalty should be proportional to the status of the victim as in the case of regicide in the past, in the name of the equal dignity of persons. In both cases, it is the diffuse rationalization (as defined above) which, through reflexivity, leads us to question formerly accepted practices that were based on valid reasons at the time, but which are no longer so obviously so. On the other hand, Boudon recognizes that circumstances, the weight of the past, and social pressures can call into question the change in norms and open the way to normative relativism and even to certain reversals.

Diffuse rationalization characterizes the emergence of new norms and new social representations, as seen with various political ideas. I will give an example from Canadian history. At the beginning of the 17th century, royal absolutism was considered the guarantor of social order. However, Father Lejeune, a Jesuit in New France (Canada), was surprised to see that public order could emerge from discussion and negotiations between the chiefs of several Indigenous nations that had previously been in conflict. Gathered in Quebec City and after lengthy discussions, they reached an agreement. The Jesuit priest observed that social order could emerge from what is today called democratic negotiation and that it does not necessarily depend on the authority exercised by God or the King, nor is it imposed by the victor's force of arms. We know that the diffuse rationalization that fueled the critique of royal absolutism is implicit in several 18th-century historical works, one of the best known of which is Guillaume-Thomas Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of Europeans in the Two Indies* (1775).

Questions relating to morality also bear witness to diffuse rationalization. The cardinal principle that everything that does not harm others must be permitted is increasingly important today. Similarly, we believe in the distinction between good and evil, but we want to know the reasons why a situation or a behavior can be judged good or bad. The rational conception of authority asserts itself over authoritarian and charismatic conceptions. "We accept authority, but we want it to be justified" (Boudon, 2008: 117). He thus echoes an idea already formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Great principles such as the separation of spiritual and temporal power are recognized in democratic societies, but they are applied in different ways, as illustrated by countries such as France, the United States, England, and Germany due to the contingencies of their own histories. The motto “In God we Trust,” which appears on American coins, could not possibly have an equivalent on European coins. A second source of cultural diversity lies in the distinction between the universal norm and the particular custom that expresses it, as in the case of polite expressions, which vary from one society to another. Boudon finally emphasizes that “certain ideas appear to be in competition with each other and, by their very nature, cannot be ranked in a hierarchy relative to one another. The case of religions is illustrative in this regard” (Boudon, 2008: 91). The identity of religions is preserved against criticism by the immunization of a doctrinal core, and some of their elements are considered to be part of faith. “Moreover, religious diversity induces remarkable diversity in a multitude of ideas and practices outside the religious domain” (p. 91). Societies thus have a cultural singularity and a collective identity. Boudon emphasizes the interplay of historical forces, namely the circumstances and the weight of societies’ history.

Normative relativism has gained considerable ground in our time, but Ernest Renan also foresaw it in his time:

For a long time to come, the applause and the public’s favor will be for the false. But the true has great force when it is free; the true endures; the false changes constantly and falls. This is how it happens that the true, although understood only by a very small number, always ends up on top. (Renan, 1883: xviii).

I’m not sure that Renan’s optimism will ultimately “win out.” Indeed, the contemporary situation does not favor the triumph of truth. Social media increases the circulation of untruths tenfold, and its followers favor bubbles in which they consume discourses that share the same theme and interact with their peers. Similarly, cognitive sociology explains that adherence to falsehoods relies on mechanisms that reason finds difficult to counter.

#### THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL

Relativism raises the question of the relationship between the particular and the universal, between community affiliations—defined according to sex/gender, ethnicity, religion, language, phenotype/race,

etc.—and what we might call our common humanity. Those who call the universal into question argue, for example, that the works of women and those of artists from cultural minorities are less present in fine arts museums or that minorities are not sufficiently represented (in proportion to their weight) in various institutions. More broadly, the most frequent criticism of universalism is its formal nature, which is unable to give a place to different types of belonging. Nathalie Heinich responds to this challenge by saying that the universal is a value to be brought about, not to be confused with its non-realization. “This criticism is therefore a sophism, a fault of reasoning, based on the confusion between the descriptive level of facts and the normative level of values” (Heinich, 2021: 8). However, in the face of these criticisms, many museums have been more attentive to acquiring and showcasing in their collections the works of underrepresented artists without abandoning the application of the same recognized criteria of artistic quality as for those that are already valued. This example illustrates the fact that it is possible to apply the approach proposed by Raymond Boudon, which consists of examining the strong reasons that explain a factual situation and the reasons on which to base oneself to propose changes and bring about a value. Thus, works from the Indigenous nations of Canada now find their place in Canadian fine arts museums (and they are no longer relegated only to museums of civilization or regional Indigenous museums) based on the evaluation of their intrinsic qualities carried out according to established criteria recognized for the entire artistic field. Indigenous art belongs to a particular culture, that is a fact, but that does not mean that it should be confined within its difference. The works of indigenous people deserve to be evaluated and recognized for their aesthetic qualities, like those of Greek sculptures or the altarpieces of French churches. Their «de facto» exclusion is thus countered by recourse to the normative framework of values. This perspective allows us to escape another criticism often made, namely that universalism is a “Western-centric” point of view and that it is part of a relationship of domination based on power or interest. Boudon argues that universal norms based on strong reasons take time to emerge (the right to vote granted to individuals, the abolition of the death penalty, equality between women and men, etc.). Is the same not true for the normative evaluation of the works of minorities or marginalized people of all kinds? G. Simmel raised this important question by pointing out that Socrates paid with his life for having argued that the laws of the city could be criticized in

the name of universal principles. “The very idea of the existence of universal principles could not be accepted in a world which divided humanity into categories foreign to one another, opposing Greeks and barbarians, citizens and slaves” (Boudon, 2003: 58).

A return to the work of Émile Durkheim will help clarify the question of the relationship between the particular and the universal. He addressed the issue of individual attachment to groups ranging from the particular to the most extensive, more precisely, to the family, the tribe, the nation, and humanity. He recognized the moral superiority of attachment to humanity and argued that “human ends were higher than the highest national ends” (Durkheim, 1928: 88). But he also highlighted the difficulties of realizing this principle and explained that since humanity is not a society or a constituted group, the ideal sought should be achieved in the highest group known to us, the nation. S. Paugam returned to Durkheim’s analysis of attachment. He emphasizes the emergence of different factors that militate in favor of attachment to humanity today. “Human interdependencies are increasingly expressed on the scale of all humanity” (Paugam, 2023: 604). Thus, many risks are no longer those of a particular social group, as was the case for workers at the time of the industrial revolution, but they go beyond national frameworks and are now shared by all the inhabitants of the planet (ecological disasters, global warming, pandemics, terrorist threats, etc.). Other structural factors contribute to the development of social attachment to humanity, such as international migration, the expansion of means of communication (low-cost aircraft, media, internet, etc.) or the spread of an international, popular and commercial culture, but Paugam immediately emphasizes that neither the shared risks nor the structural factors he has stated are sufficient to give priority to attachment to humanity rather than to a more restricted group. To explain this, he refers to the strong motives of individuals rather than the Durkheimian explanation of attachment to a group considered too distant from them. “In the immediate future, reality forces us to take into account all the forces that oppose it: the valorization of individual merit to the detriment of the collective spirit, the exclusive pursuit of happiness within oneself, the establishment of physical or moral boundaries with other groups, the desire of the most developed nations to preserve their lead over the rest of the world, the refusal to share the burden of ecological conversion” (p. 608). These reasons are valid and refer to

instrumental rationality (refusal to share the burden), axiological rationality (valorization of individual merit), or even affectivity (search for a sense of belonging within oneself).

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While there are no general criteria for scientificity, the scientificity of what Boudon (1994) calls grounded knowledge does indeed exist and retains its legitimate character, contrary to many of the criticisms leveled at it. Science is not independent of social context, as Boudon suggests, following Durkheim and many other authors, but this does not call into question the achievement of scientificity as an ideal to be sought. Several authors who participated in the conference organized by R. Boudon and M. Clavelin (1994) argued that scientists are often guided by extra-scientific principles, but this dependence is not incompatible with objectivity or the search for truth. I will conclude by quoting Denis Diderot again. “I imagine the vast enclosure of science as a large field dotted with dark and lighted squares. Our work must aim either to extend the limits of illuminated places, or to multiply the centers of light on the ground. One belongs to the genius who creates; the other to the sagacity who perfects” (Diderot, 1753: 17).

#### NOTES

- [1] All translations of quotes in French into English in this text are mine.
- [2] “What truth is there that these mountains confine, that is a lie to the world beyond?” Montaigne, taken up by Pascal in *Pensées* (1670), fragment 294 of Brunschwing’s edition.
- [3] I would add that the concept of reconversion in Bourdieu – which reflects the strategies implemented by individuals to access a certain social status in a context of devaluation of diplomas and in the face of the multiplication of courses in the school system – is not unrelated to the principle of rationality of the actors and to their strong reasons for acting.
- [4] Denis Diderot, *De l’interprétation de la nature*, 1753.
- [5] I developed this criticism further in a text published in *L’Année sociologique*, 2, 2025, and one can read Serge Paugam’s response there.
- [6] Denis Diderot, *De l’interprétation de la nature*, 1753, paragraphe XX.
- [7] To illustrate the neo-durkheimian approach, see Weeden et Grusky 2005; Jonsson, J. O. *et alii* 2009; C. Jayet 2021.

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## ABSTRACT

Relativism raises major issues for scientific knowledge and for the planning of life in contemporary societies. Relativism is widespread because it takes three different forms—cognitive, aesthetic and normative—all of which follow the same well-defined logic in Boudon's work. This article looks at the intellectual and social mechanisms behind relativism according to R. Boudon to counter the impression of relativism that often characterizes the social sciences. It examines the role played by affectivity and the pursuit of interest in the appeal of relativism, followed by the important question of normative relativism. Finally, the article considers the difficult issue of the relationship between the particular and the universal, a question already addressed by

Émile Durkheim over a century ago when he examined the social attachment of individuals to groups and to Humanity.

