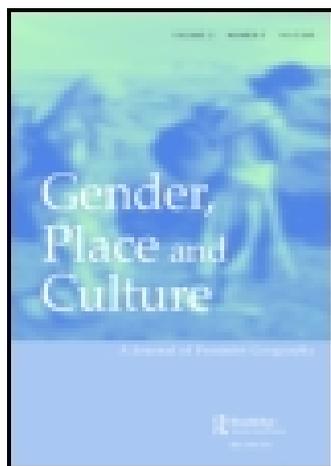


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Love and justice as competences

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BOOK REVIEW

Love and justice as competences, by Luc Boltanski, 2012 (the English Edition), originally published in 1990 in French as *L'Amour et la Justice comme competences*, 339 pp., \$26.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-745-64910-8

Dr Luc Boltanski (who was born in 1940) is an eminent French sociologist, Professor at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, and founder of the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale. He is a seminal figure in the new 'pragmatic' school of French sociology. His theorizing has significantly influenced sociology, political economy, and social and economic history.

I do not think *Love and Justice as Competencies* – first published in 1990 and translated from the French in 2012 – would appeal to most readers of *Gender, Place, and Culture*. The text does not really focus on any of the topics appropriate to the journal. It would probably be more appealing to specialists in political and moral philosophy.

In theory, Dr Boltanski's text should have fascinated a general audience. His intriguing theme is people with grievances. Those folks who write furious letters to their assemblyman protesting their ill treatment. Those who, like the Ancient Mariner, approach us on the street, clutching our sleeves, telling us of the wrongs they have suffered. Those cranks who write letters to the newspapers, assemble evidence, 'giving themselves inflated titles, piling on official stamps, underlining numerous passages, and so on' (p. 11). Of course their desperate efforts to convince others of their sanity and the merit of their claims only succeed in making them sound crazy.

Normally, such topics would be of natural interest to scholars interested in *Gender, Place, and Culture*. The author adds:

The book seeks to clarify the principles of justice on which people rely when they engage in critiques or produce justifications, and when they make explicit the operations by means of which they establish the well-foundedness of their assertions by using proofs to relate them to reality. (p. 34)

He continues:

The framework Laurent Thévenot and I developed together and presented in *On Justification* aims principally at supplying an instrument for analyzing the operations that actors perform when they develop critiques and have to justify them, but also when they justify themselves in the face of critiques advanced by others, or when they collaborate in the search of justified agreement. (p. 36)

Fine. Sounds promising.

Unfortunately, the text does not go there – at least not for a long while. American scholars tend to be pragmatic, no-nonsense, data-centered empiricists. As most people read through Parts I and II, I suspect they will find themselves saying: 'Get to the point. Why do you spend so many chapters citing classic theorists and ignoring all recent work? Why do you spend so much time dissociating yourself from all previous sociological work? Why keep telling us what you *are not* – distinguishing yourself from modern-day sociology, previous justice researchers, love researchers, laboratory researchers, etc.?'

Can't you just tell us what you *are*?' All the digressions make the careful reader's mind reel. Perhaps if Dr Boltanski had begun by briefly telling us what he was interested in, his major questions and hypotheses, how he investigated those questions, and what he concluded (the material covered in Part III), and *then* progressed to his philosophical musings and justifications, readers could have made sense of it all. But given the current structure, it is likely they will become frustrated early on, not knowing where all this is going, and quit reading.

And the text *is* hard going. The following sentence is typical:

The presence of agape is temporalized on the basis of the past, as a memorial of the Revelation, and on the basis of the future as an eschatological announcement of the Kingdom. In this sense, present time is itself a manifestation of agape, a "gift given," which is governed by the memorial and "*epekatastis*," or constant progress ... (p. 117)

Interpretable to be sure, but hard work.

A few *Gender, Place, and Culture* readers, however, may come from a very different tradition. They may be specialists in French political philosophy, political and moral sociology, and the like. Many scholars relish the work of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, the classical theorists, and enjoy complex and multifaceted arguments about the nature of the sciences, the ideal content of various disciplines, the nature of scientific research, etc. Many would say: 'Who cares if the author goes off on labyrinthine tangents? Every now and then there is a real gem embedded in all the musings.' They may well find this book appealing.

The author does not seem acquainted with the long tradition in America of research on social justice, social exchange, equity, and love – including agape. Early on he states, for example, that: 'there is an almost total absence of reflection on love in sociology' (p. x). That is not true. For the past several decades there has been virtually a cottage industry of research on these topics. A simple check of GoogleScholar will access a flood-tide of references on these and related topics. This was the case in 1990 when the book was published and is, of course, even more true today.

Perhaps the author does not mention such modern research because he does not find recent scholars' intellectual frameworks appealing or because he judges their empirical methodologies to be suspect. If that is the case, he might have at least cited them and listed them in his numerous mentions of what he is *not*.

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