

Raymond Boudon as social theorist: A comparison with Ludwig von Mises

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Il est peu utile de discourir de façon abstraite d'un paradigme. La meilleure façon de le défendre est d'en présenter des exemples d'application nombreux suggérant qu'il a un degré de généralité suffisant pour mériter l'attention.¹

(Boudon, *Effets Pervers et Ordre Social*)

Abstract: This comparison between Boudon and Mises focuses on the main tenets of their respective conceptions of social science. It covers action theory, the theory of belief, the epistemology of social science, and also addresses the topic of liberalism.

Keywords: Raymond Boudon, Ludwig von Mises, action theory, theory of belief, epistemology of social science, liberalism

The three main cross-cutting issues in social science are its theoretical foundations, its epistemological underpinnings, and its policy implications. Raymond Boudon (1934-2013) has offered one of the most important reflections on these questions. The aim of this paper is to present his ideas on these topics through a comparison with another great social scientist, Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973), author of a groundbreaking and wide-ranging work in economics, epistemology, and social policy. These two authors hold similar—but of course not identical—views in the theoretical, epistemological, and political realms. This is what makes the comparison between them interesting and relevant: some fine points of their respective works appear more clearly in this kind of comparative assessment than through two separate investigations or through the comparison with an author who has a totally different viewpoint. Since the fields of study of our two authors are different, it would make no sense to compare the specific theories that they have respectively developed in sociology and in economics. But

¹ Which can be roughly translated as: “There is little point in talking of a paradigm in the abstract. The best way to defend it is to offer numerous examples of application showing that its degree of generality is sufficient to warrant attention” (Boudon 1977, 11).

they both address some fundamental theoretical issues that transcend their specialized fields: the theory of action is presented in Section 1 and the theory of belief in Section 2. The epistemology of social science is covered in Section 3 and liberalism in Section 4. The topic of liberalism, even though it does not belong to science in the strict sense, has been added to this analysis grid because the works of Boudon and Mises lead—just like any major contribution to social science—to policy advocacy.

1. Action

Boudon and Mises both think that *action* is the core concept of social science. In the important *Traité de Sociologie* that he edited in 1992, Boudon is the author of the very first chapter for which he chose this very simple title: “Action.” In the same way, Mises called his great synthetic treatise *Human Action* (1998 [1949]), and opens it with a chapter entitled “Acting Man.” For both of them, social science rests upon action as the unit of analysis. Any attempt to lay different theoretical foundations is deeply unsatisfactory and ultimately vain.

1.1 The concept

How do these authors approach the concept of action? How do they define and present it? It is surprising to find that Boudon remains quite elusive about it, while Mises devotes no less than five chapters to a thorough and comprehensive analysis of this concept.

In spite of the tremendous importance that he attaches to the concept of action, Boudon does not provide very detailed analyses of it in his work. In *Effets Pervers et Ordre Social*, he briefly defines action as “a behavior oriented towards the search for an end.”² In his main methodological book, *La Place du Désordre*, he does not offer any formal definition, but explains that an action has an “adaptive function” for the actor undertaking it. He then complements this (admittedly sketchy) presentation by saying that an action is “comprehensible” in the Weberian sense: “In the same situation I would probably, maybe, have acted in the same way.”³ One of the most detailed—or least vague—presentations is found in the entry “Action” of his *Dictionnaire Critique de la Sociologie*, in which he specifies that understanding an action implies to delineate “the intentions, and more generally the

² “... un comportement orienté vers la recherche d’une fin” (Boudon 1977, 191).

³ “... dans la même situation, j’aurais sans doute, peut-être, agi de même” (Boudon 1984, 41).

motivations of the actor,” the means (real or imaginary) at his disposal, and the assessment of these means by the actor himself. These preferences and means depend, in turn, on previous socialization processes and on the structure of the situation in which the actor is immersed (Boudon frequently insists that action theory is not an atomism).

In contrast with the succinct definitions offered by Boudon, Mises tries to specify meticulously what an action is, and also what is implied in the category of action (Mises 1998 [1949], Chap. 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7). He begins by defining action equivalently as “purposeful behavior,” “aiming at ends and goals,” “meaningful response to stimuli,” and “conscious adjustment.” More specifically, action means choosing between states of affairs and behaving accordingly. Three conditions are required for an action to take place: the actor feels “some uneasiness,” then pictures a “more satisfactory state of affairs,” and finally expects that the envisioned action will “substitute” the more to the less satisfactory state of affairs and thus bring a “psychic profit.” Only a very brief account of the Misesian presentation can be provided here: the category of action presupposes the concepts of means and ends, presupposes value (the scarcity of means implies a choice, i.e. an order of preference, between more valued and less valued ends), presupposes cost (the value of the end that is forsaken because a more valued one is pursued), presupposes psychic profit and loss (when the *ex post* value of the chosen course of action is resp. higher and lower than its cost), presupposes causality (no action could be envisioned in a totally contingent and chaotic world), presupposes the existence of a temporal order (the sooner and the later), and presupposes uncertainty (if the future was known, there would be no place for action which is an interference intended to change the future as it would have been with another action).

When compared to Mises’s in-depth analysis, Boudon’s formal presentation of the concept of action may seem underwhelming. But instead of considering this as a shortcoming, we suggest that it is revealing of the way Boudon conceives and illustrates theoretical social science. He is essentially interested in the *explanation of social phenomena*. So instead of delving into the abstract analysis of the category of action as such, he prefers to illustrate it with complex examples drawn from significant sociological studies. And in each case that he picks up, he makes clear that the aim of action theory is to find the *minimal set of characteristics of the actions involved* that allows for an explanation of phenomenon investigated.

The very first example that he uses in *La Place du Désordre* is the Coleman study on the diffusion of medical innovation (Coleman *et al.* 1966). The problem here is to account for the sigmoid curve of the diffusion of new drugs in hospitals: at first the number of doctors

adopting the new drug slowly increases, then it accelerates until about half of the doctors have adopted the drug (point of maximum acceleration), and then the speed of adoption slows down again until nearly all the doctors prescribe the new drug. In order to go beyond this purely empirical observation and reach a genuine explanation, action theory is required: a doctor contemplating to prescribe a new drug faces uncertainty (is the drug potent, reliable, safe?) and tries to circumvent it by searching for the most reliable source of information, namely the other doctors at the hospital. Since very few doctors use the drug at first, information is sparse and a bit unreliable, so that in the beginning the use grows slowly; but when more and more doctors come to use it, the information becomes more and more reliable and easily available, so that the diffusion process accelerates; then comes a point when less and less doctors need the information and ask for it, so that the process slows down until most or all of the doctors prescribe the new drug. The minimal characteristics of action are, in this case, the presence of uncertainty and the search for reliable information in a specific social setting (in private practice, the diffusion of new drugs is different).

In his own work, Boudon (1973) explains the appearance of massive inequalities of educational opportunity by three basic elements in the families' decisions of educational orientation: the cost of education, the achievement of the child as measured by his or her grades, and the reference group (a family assesses academic achievement differently according to the educational level reached by its members: a family of doctors will generally be much more demanding than a family of manual workers). These three characteristics suffice to explain the wide divergence in the demand for education between a high and a low social stratum, and generate as a result the vast amount of educational inequality generally observed. The decision here takes into account monetary costs, anticipation (of future success or failure in school), and the subjective perception of educational achievement.

In these examples and many others used by Boudon, action is complex and simultaneously features a number of elements that Mises carefully differentiates and analyzes separately in his theory of action, such as cost/benefit comparison, subjective valuation, limited information, uncertainty, etc. The approach chosen by Boudon makes perfect sense, however, in the context of the debates taking place in the realm of sociology. One of his main objectives is to try and convince many reluctant sociologists of the relevance of methodological individualism (and they would obviously not be very convinced by the Misesian definition of action as a way to remove "uneasiness"!). To this end, the abstract characterization of the concept of action would not be a great help. This is probably why, for him, the problem is not so much to investigate this concept as to show how it can profitably

be used by sociologists who may be tempted to resort instead, either to a crude empiricism, or to an objectionable social determinism. The epigraph at the front of this paper perfectly explains the approach chosen and consistently followed by Boudon: the usefulness of the actionist paradigm cannot be better demonstrated than by multiplying the examples of its application in the important studies written by contemporary and classic authors. It is clear that the difference that has just been pointed out between our two authors is more a difference in focus than in substance.

1.2 The critique against deterministic paradigms

Even though the deterministic paradigms that they criticize are different, the arguments put forward by Boudon and Mises are quite similar. Boudon objects to *culturalism*, a paradigm claiming that each society is characterized by a specific set of cultural values transmitted through largely unconscious processes of socialization (Benedict 1934; Kardiner 1939; Mead 1964). Societies are described in great strokes through their so-called dominant value system, even if deviant value systems can also be taken into account as subcultures. The society of the United States, for instance, has been characterized by a “need for achievement” (McClelland 1961). In this framework, there is no place for the concept of action. Patterns of behavior are determined by the value system that comes to impregnate each member socialized in a specific group or society. Mises also encountered—and harshly criticized—a deterministic conception of human behavior, namely the *instinct sociology* developed by the German sociologist Vierkandt (1928). In this case, behavior is allegedly determined by biological rather cultural forces, governed by innate instincts such as the “instinct of self-esteem,” “instinct of obedience,” “instinct to be of help,” “fighting instinct,” and so on: on account of the diversity of human behavior, to every instinct is also associated an opposite one.

Firstly, Boudon (2000 [1982]) and Mises (2003 [1933]) both argue that these deterministic theories are largely arbitrary. The extremely diverse forms of human behavior in countless social contexts, especially in developed and complex societies, cannot be adequately encompassed within the broad cultural or biological categories respectively delineated by culturalism and instinct sociology. To take a very simple example, people do not just want to eat: they want to eat a certain kind of food at a certain moment in a certain way and in a certain social setting (and each of these elements widely varies from one individual to another and even for the same individual at different phases in life). In all rigor, a specific instinct or cultural norm should be associated to each of these behaviors, but then indeed the most

general instincts or cultural norms would appear arbitrary or irrelevant, and social science would become a purely empirical, huge, and rather pointless catalog or kaleidoscope of human behavior in all its variety.

More importantly, in the view of Boudon as well as Mises, no instinct or cultural rule can determine meaningful human behavior. It is not only possible but quite frequent to act against one's own instincts, or against the rules prescribed by one's own culture. And even when people follow their instincts or their cultural norms, they choose to do so: they act. This is the reason why Boudon calls the interiorized values "parameters" of action (2000 [1982], 145). Mises similarly explains how emotions and instincts impact or even define the goals sought by acting man, and how they can also affect the assessment of the means of action: they do not make action disappear, but are instead elements of the framework in which action is decided (1998 [1949], 16).

A last major problem with deterministic theories is that they do not specify how the stipulated forces operate. The socialization process upon which culturalism rests is a "black box," to borrow the felicitous term used by Boudon (1998). Likewise, the instincts postulated by Vierkandt are "mysteriously operating forces" in the words of Mises (2003 [1933], 60). We simply do not know what these processes or forces consist of. Actionist explanation, on the other hand, is transparent: the individual acted in this way because he had good reasons to (Boudon), because he was pursuing this goal and had these means at his disposal (Mises). Once the good reasons or the means-ends framework are specified, the explanation of action is "final" in the sense that "nothing can be added."⁴ Mises (1998 [1949]) expresses the same idea by asserting that action is an "ultimate given" that is "not open to further analysis." In other words, the "internal world" of thought, valuation and purposeful action cannot be reduced to elements belonging to the "external world" of natural and physiological processes.

To sum up, the deterministic accounts of human behavior compare very unfavorably with the clear-cut, compelling, and final explanations offered by the teleological or actionist paradigm advocated by Boudon and Mises.

1.3 Comprehension and the logical structure of mind

One of the main tenets of Boudon's theory of action is the *postulate of comprehension* that he

⁴ "[W]hen a piece of behavior can be explained as the effect of reasons, nothing can be added. I believe that two plus two are four because it is true. Once this reason is given, I do not need to know more from psychologists or biologists" (Boudon 1998, 192).

formulates as follows: “Every individual ADABB can, in principle at least, be understood” (Boudon 2003, 20). ADABB is the acronym for “action, decision, attitude, behavior, beliefs, etc.”⁵ According to this postulate every action is comprehensible—in principle. In practice, however, it may happen that the sociologist (or the historian) does not have the information that would make sense of a specific action. If the values, the means, the goals or the techniques of the actor are imperfectly known, or not at all, then the act can remain opaque. But it would be erroneous to conclude that the behavior is unintelligible in principle, i.e. cannot be explained at all by comprehensible reasons.⁶ Mises also defends the principle of universal intelligibility of action, not so much in his theory of action as in his forceful critique of what he calls “polylogism” (1998 [1949], Chap. 3). Polylogism is the idea that there are different and heterogeneous structures of the mind—different logics, so to speak. People in a group characterized by one logical framework cannot apprehend the concepts, theories and ways of thinking of a different logical system. In the Marxian polylogism, for instance, there is a “bourgeois mind” and a “proletarian mind,” and of course only the latter has access to the truth while the former hopelessly errs. Mises explains that polylogism is a stratagem used by Marxists in order to circumvent the critique that economists have directed against the socialist schemes: unable to answer to this critique through argumentation, Marxists had to use another way to dismiss “bourgeois” reasoning, even if they had to subvert science and reason themselves in the process. The principle of universal intelligibility upheld by Mises can be called *monologism* or *unilogism*, even though he does not use these terms. Now, this “monologism” and the postulate of comprehension can be considered as identical. According to Boudon’s postulate, comprehension transcends the spatial and temporal limits of any society: all actions are in principle understandable, even if they are performed at another time and place in a completely different society. Likewise, Mises writes that “the logical structure of mind is uniform for all races, nations, and classes” (1998 [1949], 87).

Directly relevant to the issue at hand is the discussion by both Mises and Boudon of the famous theory of a “primitive mentality” expounded by the French anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl (1922), according to whom “primitive” people are allegedly impervious to the law of contradiction and use instead a “law of participation” whereby something can be itself and

⁵ In the original French, the acronym is ADACC: “action, décision, attitude, comportement, croyance, etc.”

⁶ See the enlightening example analyzed by Boudon at the beginning of his book *L'Idéologie* (1986): in the 1960’s, researchers from the cities could not comprehend why very poor women from rural India refused to take the contraceptive pill, and concluded that these women were just irrationally clinging to tradition. Further study showed that these women were instrumentally rational, but had a very different means-ends framework from the researchers. The latter had committed the cardinal mistake of sociocentrism (a mistake that is also understandable).

something else. So, do “primitive” people use a logic that is different from the one prevalent in modern societies? Mises (1998 [1949], 36–38) answers in the negative. He concludes from his reading of Lévy-Bruhl’s work that the latter has *not* demonstrated that the logical structure of “primitive” thought is heterogeneous and essentially different from ours. The *content* of thought in archaic societies is different, of course, but as Lévy-Bruhl himself noticed, the so-called “mystic and prelogical” aspects of primitive thought are also found in modern societies. On the other hand, pre-modern thought such as the philosophy of the Church Fathers can in no way be characterized as prelogical. In summary, Mises essentially criticizes the polylogic interpretation of Lévy-Bruhl’s work by revealing the simplistic and objectionable evolutionism that such an interpretation implies. Boudon (1990a, 35–43) offers a more elaborated argumentation. First, he notes that many sociologists and anthropologists of the time of Lévy-Bruhl himself disagreed with the idea of a specific and heterogeneous “primitive mentality.”⁷ Durkheim, for instance, preferred to pinpoint the similarities and continuities of human thought.⁸ He explained the belief in magical (non-existent) relationships by reasons that were convincing for the people believing in magic themselves. These reasons would also convince us if we were at their place and did not have at our disposal the knowledge provided by centuries of scientific progress.⁹ Even though some aspects of “primitive” processes of thought surprise us at first, they can be explained—with a bit of theoretical effort—in the framework of the usual laws of thought. Furthermore, the postulate of a “primitive mentality” fails to explain the fact that “primitive” and scientific minds coexist in the same society (and even in the same person in different contexts of everyday life). Ultimately, Boudon considers Lévy-Bruhl’s theory as *ad hoc* and *tautological*, *ad hoc* because its basic concepts have been created with the sole purpose of explaining what they are meant to explain, and tautological because these concepts only restate or paraphrase the processes they are supposed to account for. The principle of Ockham’s razor clearly advises to reject the convoluted hypothesis of a “primitive mind” and acquiesce to the straightforward postulate of (universal) comprehension.¹⁰

⁷ See the proceedings of the meeting of the *Société française de philosophie* about Lévy-Bruhl’s then recently published book on primitive mentality (Lévy-Bruhl *et al.* 1923).

⁸ Merllié (2012) offers a recent exegesis of the debate between Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl on this topic.

⁹ It is worthy of note that in this example Durkheim applies the postulate of comprehension, in contradiction with the holist and positivist methodology that he defends in his famous rules of sociological method (Durkheim 1895). Boudon has shown in a brilliant paper that there are other examples of methodological convergence between Durkheim and Max Weber (Boudon 1998, Chap. 3).

¹⁰ Cognitive psychologists have observed and brought to light many failures and biases in human reasoning, since the pioneering works by Tversky and Kahneman (1974). Some of them have been tempted, in an approach very similar to Lévy-Bruhl’s, to postulate the existence of different laws of thought for some inferences made in everyday life. Boudon (1990a) has made a significant contribution by showing that these inference biases can be

2. Belief

With the theory of belief, a notable difference appears between Boudon and Mises. The latter very specifically but also quite narrowly limits social science to the science of human *action*. Boudon, on the other hand, broadens social science and the theory of rationality to encompass the explanation of collective beliefs, including moral values.

2.1 Rationality as a polythetic concept

Mises identifies rationality with—or reduces it to—*instrumental rationality*, i.e. the rationality of purposeful action: an action combines means, in the way prescribed by a technique or recipe, in order to reach an end. The technique can be valid or flawed, the means appropriate or unsuitable, the end selfish or altruistic, but whatever the case an action *is* rational because it is set in the means-end framework of the actor. Writes Mises: “Human action is necessarily always rational. The term ‘rational action’ is therefore pleonastic and must be rejected as such” (1998 [1949], 18). So it does not matter if the action succeeds or fails, if it is moral or fraudulent, well-meaning or egoistic, it is “rational” anyway—simply because it is an action properly conceived as such.

Now, one of the most important contributions of Boudon is to have broadened the notion of rationality beyond mere instrumental rationality. In his view, rationality does not pertain to action only, but covers belief also. He is not the first sociologist in this kind of attempt (Max Weber paved the way, among others), but his *General Theory of Rationality*¹¹ is undoubtedly the most comprehensive, fruitful and thorough to date. Why is Boudon led to enlarge in this way the theory of rationality? Simply because a series of important and puzzling social phenomena are in need for an explanation, and this explanation cannot be found in the confined framework of means-end analysis. How do people get to their beliefs, and why do they hold onto them? It is clearly impossible to answer these questions by saying that people combine means in order to reach ends. Instrumental rationality cannot conceivably provide a theory of collective beliefs. On the other hand, the Weberian concept of understanding can be applied to beliefs as well as to actions. In the same way as we can understand why people act the way they do, we can understand why they hold the beliefs they do. Boudon adopts this

explained by perfectly understandable, even though erroneous, reasoning.

¹¹ His terminology is not homogeneous. He sometimes calls his theory the “General Rational Model” (Boudon 2003), or the “General Theory of Rationality” (Boudon 2008), or else the “Theory of Ordinary Rationality” (Boudon 2010).

top-down approach, so to speak, in which comprehension embraces both action and belief. In so far as the actors make use of reason in the elaboration of their collective beliefs, or resort to reasonable arguments to support them, they display a kind of rationality that is not instrumental but rather *cognitive*. Boudon therefore recognizes that the term rationality is *polythetic*: it can be used in different senses or modalities between which there is a “family resemblance” in the Wittgensteinian sense (Boudon 1995, 534–542; 1990a, Chap. 8). Here, it is the fact that there are *reasons* for the actors to act in this or that way, to believe in this or that idea, that creates the family resemblance between instrumental and cognitive rationality and brings them together inside of a more inclusive category.

2.2 Ideological beliefs

Boudon defines ideological beliefs as positive (as opposed to normative) beliefs about the functioning of the social or economic system that are quite widespread and happen to be *wrong*. An obvious objection can be raised against the use of the concept of rationality to explain this kind of beliefs: since they are mistaken, how can they be labelled “rational”? But just as being ineffective does not prevent an action from being rational (*ex ante*), being erroneous does not prevent a belief from being rational. The relevant viewpoint here is the one adopted by the actor. A belief is rational as long as it is adhered to on the basis of reasons that are *considered as good by the actors themselves*—not necessarily by an external and more knowledgeable observer. Furthermore, explaining why people believe in basic true ideas (2 + 2 = 4, the sky is blue, etc.) is not very interesting. It is more challenging to explain *in a rationality framework* why they believe in mistaken ideas, or, in Boudon’s own words, why they have “good reasons to believe in false ideas” (*bonnes raisons de croire à des idées fausses*).

Among the many examples presented by Boudon, let us pick a quite simple one. Workers often believe that the chief cause of unemployment is mechanization and the more and more widespread use of machines (Boudon 1986, 140). This is wrong, of course. With the tremendous development of industrial techniques and mechanization during the last two centuries, unemployment would be absolutely huge today—and this is not at all the case—if the overall effect of the use of machines was to destroy jobs. This mistaken belief in the positive relationship between machines and unemployment can nonetheless be explained by “good reasons,” because unemployment is the most immediate and visible effect of mechanization: workers can be and have been indeed displaced by the extension of machines. This is what

they “see” and can figure out straight away. Now, from the more comprehensive viewpoint of economic science, these reasons are certainly not “good”: firstly, the mechanization process also entails job creation for the conception, fabrication, maintenance, and improvement of said machines, and secondly the analysis of unemployment must be conducted in the framework of the functioning of the price system in the labor markets (not in a purely quantitative approach of number of jobs destroyed and created). It is however perfectly understandable that people who are not trained economists do not go into these fine points.¹² Even though their reasoning is simplistic from a “higher” perspective, it is rational from the standpoint of the actors—a nice illustration of this *subjective rationality* or *reason with a small “r”* that Boudon aims at elucidating.

The above instance exemplifies a “position effect” in Boudon’s terminology.¹³ Due to the position that they occupy in the social or economic system, the actors are led to conclusions that can be mistaken because their perception is only partial and misses the bigger picture. It is noteworthy that Mises uses exactly the same kind of analysis to explain why manual workers erroneously tend to believe that a collectivist economy can be as efficient as, or even more efficient than, a capitalist system. He offers the following explanation, which is a textbook illustration of a position effect on ideological beliefs:

The workman in the large or medium scale capitalist enterprise sees and knows nothing of the connections uniting the individual parts of the work to the economic system as a whole. His horizon as worker and producer does not extend beyond the process which is his task. He holds that he alone is a productive member of society, and thinks that everyone, engineer and overseer equally well as entrepreneur, who does not, like himself, stands at the machine or carry loads, is a parasite... Now from where he stands, the worker cannot see how things hang together. He might find out by means of hard thinking and the aid of books, never from the facts of his own working environment. Just as the average man can only conclude from the facts of daily experience that the earth stands still and the sun moves from east to west, so the worker, judging by his own experience can never arrive at a true knowledge of the nature and functioning of economic life. (Mises 1981 [1922], 320)

The explanation of ideological beliefs via rationality and “good reasons” could be criticized on the ground that this kind of beliefs essentially originates in political fervor—a

¹² Henry Hazlitt already noted long ago that the most prevalent fallacies in political economy are due to “the persistent tendency of men to see only the immediate effects of a given policy, or its effects only on a special group, and to neglect to inquire what the long-run effects of that policy will be” (2008 [1946], 3). He also devoted an illuminating chapter to the delusion “that machines on net balance create unemployment” (2008 [1946], Chap. 7).

¹³ Boudon also analyses at length what he calls “disposition effects,” “communication effects,” and “epistemological effects” (Boudon 1986; 1990a).

passion that supersedes reason and misleads people into adhering to fallacious ideas. Among classical sociologists, Pareto (1968 [1916]) is the one who argued that many beliefs are but a simple logical varnish on the feelings experienced by people. Boudon disagrees. According to him, the idea that ideological beliefs are simple cover-ups for sentiments and passions is “impossible to take very seriously.”¹⁴ Political passions can of course taint beliefs, but as he points out these feelings are often the effect of beliefs rather than their cause. People are first and foremost convinced by reasons that they subjectively consider as good. If these reasons show them that an injustice prevails, then, and only then, will emotion or even passion be triggered. In other words, Boudon favors what cognitive psychologists call “cold” theories of beliefs, as opposed to “hot” theories in which beliefs are heavily influenced by interests and feelings. This point is important in the comparison between Boudon and Mises, because as we shall see below the latter mainly uses a “hot” theory to account for what he calls the “anti-capitalistic mentality.”

2.3 Value judgments

Boudon (1995; 1999) extends his theory of rationality to the explanation of normative beliefs such as value judgments and moral sentiments—and his opposition to Mises becomes here manifest. He notices that moral judgments and feelings are not distributed randomly: they are related to the social context in which they are expressed or felt. Furthermore, these judgments make sense for the actors, and the sociologist can understand the subjectively good reasons why, in this or that context, people tend to favor this or that value judgment. In other words, value judgments can be explained in the framework of an *axiological rationality* that is a subset of the more general category of cognitive rationality. A good example is the moral condemnation of interest on loans in the Middle Ages. In a classic sociological work, Mannheim (1929) explains that interest tends to be disparaged in communities where people meet and personally know each other, because they can resort to forms of reciprocity such as payment in kind, later become lenders in turn, etc. When society extends and social relations become more and more anonymous, these solutions to the problem of reciprocity in loans become unworkable. Most often, lenders and borrowers do not and will never know or meet each other, so that the only solution is a formal monetary agreement with the help of a

¹⁴ “En tout cas, il me paraît impossible de prendre très au sérieux l’idée selon laquelle les idéologies serviraient seulement de couverture à des sentiments ou à des passions” (1986, 90). See his comprehensive analysis of Pareto’s theory of belief in Boudon (2000, Chap. 4).

financial intermediary such as a bank. It is therefore understandable that interest on loans tends to be disapproved in the first kind of society, but not in the second (Boudon 1992, 22). Still today, it is considered as shocking for parents to demand an interest on loans they grant to their own children.

In one of his most important case studies in the sociology of values, Boudon (2002) provides an analysis of some results of the famous *World Values Survey*. He observes that the answers are structured in a “neat, persistent and stable” way (2002, 50). The hierarchy of values therefore displays a kind of objective validity in the minds of the interviewees, which can be explained by “trying to impute to ideal-typical respondents a system of reasons” that accounts for the qualitative characteristics of the observed distributions (2002, 21). For instance, when people from developed countries are interviewed about their level of tolerance, their answers do reveal a moral hierarchy: tolerance is systematically lower for troubling behaviors such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and criminality; conversely, tolerance is higher for characteristics such as ethnicity. Boudon then generates a system of reasons—a model of axiological rationality—that accounts for this distribution. One of these reasons (his analysis is more comprehensive) is that it is more difficult to blame morally individuals for something upon which they have no hold, such as ethnicity, than for characteristics that appear to be under the control and responsibility of the individual exhibiting them, such as alcoholism.

Now, Mises never tries to develop a theory of belief as such, much less a theory seeking to account for value judgments. When he discusses value judgments, he always insists on their *arbitrariness* and on the necessity for the economist, as scientist, to remain entirely *neutral* towards them:

It is futile to approach social facts with the attitude of a censor who approves or disapproves from the point of view of *quite arbitrary standards and subjective judgments of value*. One must study the laws of human action and social cooperation as the physicist studies the laws of nature. (Mises 1998 [1949], 3, our emphases).

Further in the book he writes that “valuation is personal, subjective, and arbitrary.” In these and many other sentences, he definitely implies that the distinctive feature of value or moral judgments is that they are indeed arbitrary, in contrast with scientific statements that are opened to argumentation and reasoning, and can be compared to an objective reality. Although Mises never quotes David Hume in this context, he seems to be part of the Humean tradition according to which reason only belongs in the sphere of means, not in the sphere of

ends. As a result, his policy advocacy is mainly consequentialist and avoids as much as possible to resort to value judgments (see Section 4 below).

Mises erects an insurmountable barrier between judgments of value and statements of facts, for instance when he writes that “to call something fair or unfair is always a subjective value judgment and as such *purely personal* and not liable to any verification or falsification” (1998 [1949], 243, our emphases). Boudon, on the other hand, seeks to bring positive and normative statements closer together. It is true that values are in some cases “arbitrary” and “purely personal,” such as the preference between apples and oranges, vanilla and chocolate ice creams, and so on. But tastes are only one kind of value judgments. There are other kinds. When people judge that democracy is preferable to dictatorship, that political leaders should be accountable, that theft is bad, that plagiarism is shameful, etc., they have *good reasons* to think so. These reasons can be consequentialist: “This is good because it has mostly desirable consequences,” “That is bad because it has generally harmful effects.” But the reasons for a value judgment can also be purely axiological. Plagiarism, for instance, benefits its victims by enhancing their reputation. Why then is it universally despised? Because “it violates the principles that found the game of invention and creation” (Boudon 1999, 119). The consensus surrounding these kinds of judgments is not the result of random choices, nor of unconscious biological or social processes. It is grounded in reasons that can in many cases generate an *objectivity of values*, just as there is an objectivity of knowledge. To the objection that moral values evolve and change over time, Boudon answers that scientific theories also evolve and change over time—and are not deprived from their objectivity either. From a Boudonian viewpoint, Mises downplays the role of reason and unduly extends the scope of the theory of subjective utility to moral values and sentiments, committing the mistake of putting on equal footing very different kinds of value judgments. The preference between moral norms is often backed by an axiological rationality that produces, if not unanimity, at least a broad and comprehensible consensus.

2.4 Explaining the hostility to capitalism

Although Mises did not attempt to develop a fully-fledged theory of beliefs and sentiments, he wrote a short book on a topic that was of great importance to him, namely anti-capitalistic beliefs and feelings (2008 [1956]). His economic analyses and those of his great Classical and Austrian predecessors show that capitalism promotes a much higher standard of living than any alternative institutional scheme, such as interventionism and collectivism. An obvious

question then arises: why does capitalism face a widespread and sometimes deep hostility?

As we have seen above (Subsection 2.2), he answered in 1922 using the framework of subjective rationality: because of their position in the productive system, manual workers have (subjectively) good reasons to believe that collectivism would be more efficient than capitalism. The explanation that he offers in 1956 is completely different. There, he gives up any attempt at an explanation through good reasons. His main account of anti-capitalistic feelings is *irrationalist* as it focuses on the “resentment of frustrated ambition.” Here is his theory, in his own words:

- In a society based on caste and status, the individual can ascribe adverse fate to conditions beyond his own control.
- It is quite another thing under capitalism. Here everybody’s station in life depends on his own doing.
- Everybody whose ambitions have not been fully gratified knows very well that he has missed chances, that he has been tried and found wanting by his fellow man.
- [H]e becomes conscious of his own inferiority and feels humiliated... There are fellows who have outstripped him and against whom he nurtures, in his subconsciousness, inferiority complexes.
- In order to console himself and to restore his self-assertion, such a man is in search of a scapegoat. He tries to persuade himself that he failed through no fault of his own.
- He is at least as brilliant, efficient, and industrious as those who outshine him. Unfortunately this nefarious social order of ours [i.e. capitalism] does not accord the prizes to the most meritorious men; it crowns the dishonest unscrupulous scoundrel, the swindler, the exploiter, the ‘rugged individualist.’ What made himself fail was his honesty.
- The fool releases these feelings in slander and defamation. The more sophisticated... sublimate their hatred into a philosophy, the philosophy of anti-capitalism, in order to render inaudible the inner voice that tells them that their failure is entirely their own fault. Their fanaticism in defending their critique of capitalism is precisely due to the fact that they are fighting their own awareness of its falsity. (Mises 2008 [1956], 11–15)

In the Boudonian framework of cognitive rationality, this theory is deeply unsatisfactory: its irrationalist hypotheses are, not only convoluted, but implausible. Firstly, why would people fix so high a target that they are virtually certain to fall through? Mises does not justify this very questionable psychological trait. If people set an overambitious goal, will they not quite simply recognize their error and lower their expectations? Furthermore, everybody knows that climbing the social ladder requires efforts, efforts that one may not be willing to carry out. Secondly, why would people feel humiliated if they fail to climb the social ladder? They can instead attribute their failure to bad luck, to mistakes of their own or of their associates, to adverse economic circumstances, to lack of social connections, and so on. Let

us now suppose, for the sake of the argument, that a man tries to climb the social ladder, fails, and interprets this failure as a sign of “his own inferiority.” Failure is obviously not enjoyable, and people certainly prefer if external conditions are to blame rather than themselves. But Mises supposes that they will *choose* to be blind to reality. This is the most irrationalist element of his theory: it means that people deliberately turn off their reason in order to avoid to face a painful truth. Even though such a psychological response to humiliation is conceivable, as a general theory of collective beliefs it is truly farfetched. The last element of the theory is not satisfactory either. Assuming that people search for a scapegoat in order to keep their self-respect, why would they pick capitalism? Mises answers that it is because they consider capitalism as a “nefarious social order” that rewards dishonesty over integrity. In other words, people pick capitalism as a scapegoat because they already dislike it. Antagonism to capitalism is therefore an assumption in the theory that aims at explaining this antagonism: the explanation is, at least in part, circular. Furthermore it is questionable, to say the least, that capitalism “crowns the dishonest unscrupulous scoundrel,” and Mises does not explain why people would entertain this idea.

To sum up, in order to account for the “anti-capitalistic mentality,” Mises hypothesizes that people literally switch their reason off: they build unwarranted expectations, feel a misdirected humiliation, and intentionally blind themselves to reality. For Boudon (2004, 25), on the other hand, the hostility towards capitalism is very easy to explain: an organized order, such as the one created by the State, is much easier to conceive than the “spontaneous order” of the market; people and even intellectuals do not like capitalism because they do not understand it. Mises provided a very similar rational explanation in his 1922 treatise, but he later came to think that this “cold” theory could not account for the intensity of the hatred met by capitalism. He therefore renounced to rationality and searched instead for “psychological” (irrational) causes, such as envy, resentment, inferiority complexes, sublimation, and so on.¹⁵ But is there an incompatibility between sentiments and “cool reasoning”? Boudon convincingly argues that feelings often stem from reason: “understanding a moral sentiment most often implies to reconstruct the system of reasons on which it is founded. But there is more: a moral sentiment appears all the more intense, affectively, that it is founded on more solid reasons” (1995, 240). In this framework, people will dislike capitalism if they first have (subjectively) good reasons to think that it is a bad system: the worse they think it is and the

¹⁵ In his 1927 book on liberalism, Mises looks for the “psychological roots of antiliberalism,” and states that some cases of antiliberalism are a form of neurosis (the “Fourier complex”) that should receive a psychoanalytical treatment! In his 1956 book, he completely gives up this explanation of antiliberalism as a psychological illness.

better they think the alternatives are, the more intense will be their aversion towards it. Once we understand that people have *reasons* to believe that capitalism is the cause of exploitation, inflation, unemployment, crises, etc., and to believe that only state intervention can prevent these disastrous consequences, we quite easily figure out why, in Mises own words, “people loathe capitalism.” There is no need to resort to debatable irrational “psychological causes.”¹⁶

3. Epistemology

A striking characteristic of Boudon’s epistemology of social science is that it is always closely connected to the best theories developed by classical and contemporary sociologists. His epistemology springs, so to speak, from the sound theories put forward by social scientists over the last two centuries. Tocqueville, Weber and Durkheim are his main providers of theories—but they are not the only ones, of course. Never does he address an epistemological issue without detailed illustrations borrowed from the actual scientific work of great social scientists. Mises also elaborates his epistemological insights on the foundation of sound economic theories. Unfortunately, he does not make this connection as visible as Boudon does. As a result, his epistemology appears quite abstract and even perplexing, for instance when he claims that theoretical social science has an “aprioristic” character. Even though Boudon does not explicitly endorse this aprioristic epistemology, we shall see that his views are not incompatible with those of Mises, but rather complementary. In any case, the epistemologies of both our authors are firmly grounded in first-hand and first-rate knowledge of their respective disciplines.

3.1 *Sociology as science*

The scientific character of sociology is one of the main epistemological topics addressed by Boudon throughout his work. Is sociology a science? This question is controversial among sociologists. Some of them think that sociology should provide a global depiction of societies

¹⁶ There is one passage in which Boudon offers an explanation that comes close to the one expounded by Mises, although it is less irrationalist and more circumscribed in its application: “The emotion usually produced by an accumulation of misfortune or setbacks easily triggers in the individual a desire for explanation. He then tends to welcome a theory of his troubles or of the troubles of the collectivity to which he belongs, as soon as this theory has a modicum of credibility, and to dismiss any alternative theory... This process [of rationalization] is the foundation, especially... of these collective beliefs that attribute the adversity suffered by a social group to a powerful enemy, visible or occult, concrete or abstract (*gringos*, Jews, the ruling class, capitalism, globalization, etc.)” (Boudon 2003, 150–151, our translation).

(holist sociology), some think that sociology should observe and whenever possible measure the relevant aspects of life in society (empirical sociology, qualitative and quantitative), some think that it should denounce capitalism and study the resistance against it (critical sociology), some think that sociology stands in a middle-ground between literature and science (Lepenies 2003 [1985]), and this list may not be exhaustive. Boudon forcefully maintains that, above all, *sociology can be and should be a science*, and that in this regard it is not essentially different from the natural sciences. He encapsulates his view in the motto “sociology as science” that he chose as the title of his intellectual biography (Boudon 2010). A follow-up question immediately arises: what is science? Boudon clearly and repeatedly identifies science with *explanation* (1989; 1994; 2010; 2011a; 2011b). Scientific activity aims at formulating theories that explain the relevant phenomena in a research field. A phenomenon P is explained when its statement is logically deduced from a series of other statements S_i that constitute the theory T . Formally: $T = \{S_1, S_2, S_3, \dots\}$, $(T \Rightarrow P)$ is true.

Within economics the scientific and theoretical character of the discipline is much less debated than within sociology. It is probably for this reason that Mises does not spend a lot of time clarifying on an abstract level what science and explanation are. Browsing through his main epistemological works (2003 [1933]; 1998 [1949]; 1957; 2006 [1962]), we can infer that, for him, to explain is to state a relationship of cause and effect—the main effects investigated in economics being prices, wages, interest rates and the trade cycle. He also insists again and again that scientific explanation requires a valuational or axiological neutrality (the famous Weberian *Wertfreiheit*), in order to prevent the interference from any value judgment in the ascertainment and analysis of facts. He does not go beyond these elementary remarks. Boudon, on the other hand, feels the need to specify the kinds of phenomena to be explained, to offer multiple examples of sound and convincing explanations in the classical and contemporary sociological traditions, and to infer from these instances the qualities that make for a good theory.

In the social realm, not any kind of phenomena deserves an explanation. Anyone can immediately understand why people look to the left and then to the right before crossing the street. But there are many important questions whose answer is not as straightforward. Why is there no socialism in the United States (Sombart 1906)? Why did the Pharisees believe in the immortality of soul while the Sadducees did not (Weber 1952 [1917-1920])? Why did French agriculture lag far behind its English counterpart in the eighteenth century (Tocqueville 1952 [1856])? Why are technical innovations often unwelcomed by land owners in semi-feudal societies (Bhaduri 1976)? Why do women tend to commit suicide less often than men

(Durkheim 1897)? Why is the concept of soul universal (Durkheim 1968 [1912])? Why does the democratization of education not lead to a greater social mobility (Boudon 1973)? Why did criminality explode in the US in the 1960's and 1970's, i.e. during two of the most favorable decades of the post-war period (Cohen and Felson 1979)? In the sixties, why was the civil rights movement violent in the Northern States of the US and peaceful in the Southern States where discrimination was much more severe (Oberschall 1973)? Boudon calls these questions and all the others of the same kind "enigmas." The aim of theoretical social science is to provide persuasive solutions to these enigmas, or in other words to put forward satisfactory explanations for the phenomena investigated. And he shows that, indeed, all the questions above, and many more, have been answered with sociological theories that have stood the test of time and can therefore be considered as genuine scientific contributions.

On a general level, a theory should display a number of formal and substantial qualities (Boudon 1994). Any phenomenon P can be explained by itself, since it is true that ($P \Rightarrow P$). This tautological relationship, however, is the epitome of a bad explanation (Popper 1972, Chap. 5). A good explanation must take into account some of the other consequences P' , P'' , P''' , etc., that can be deduced from the theory T . These consequences must not stand in contradiction with acknowledged facts. But this purely empirical or "Popperian" (as Boudon calls it) criterion is *insufficient*, as he emphasizes it. A theory is made with concepts and statements using these concepts. The "non-Popperian" criterion requires that both these concepts and these statements should be *acceptable*: "A theory must not be assessed only from the point of view of the quality or of the validity of its consequences, but from the point of view of its intrinsic value, so to speak" (Boudon 1994, 114).¹⁷ He then discusses in detail the example of the prevalence of religiosity in the USA, and shows that the explanation provided by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* is just as solid as the explanation that Huygens offered for the movement of the clock pendulum: each and every statement of the theory is unambiguous and universally acceptable; the combination of these statements (*explanans*) leads by a logical deduction to the statement to be explained (*explanandum*); finally, other known statements can also be explained, so that the explanation is neither tautological nor *ad hoc*.

In his later work, Boudon (2011a; 2011b) summarizes his conception of "sociology as science" in a series of principles.

¹⁷ Boudon explicitly disagrees here with the purely instrumental approach advocated by Friedman (1953), according to which the assumptions of a theory need not be realistic since *only* their predictive or explanatory power matters.

- The most basic one is “explanatory purpose” (*finalité explicative*), which states that sociology aims, just as any natural science, at explaining phenomena.
- Not any explanation goes, so that the principle of “argumentative balance” (*équilibre argumentatif*) requires that the statements comprising the theory should all be unambiguous, mutually compatible, and easily acceptable; this principle also offers a criterion that helps to assess a theory vis-à-vis its competitors.
- The principle of “methodological singularism,” to which Boudon attaches a great importance, is explicitly borrowed from Mises (1998 [1949], 44–46). It states that the scientific approach in sociology (and economics) rests upon the explanation of singular and carefully circumscribed phenomena, as opposed to broad and fuzzy entities.¹⁸
- Scientific explanations aim at universal validity, untainted by any moral or political value judgment, and must therefore comply with the Weberian principle of “axiological neutrality.”
- Last but not least, the principle of “methodological individualism” proclaims that every social phenomenon is a product of human action.

Mises would have agreed with each and every one of these principles. But a difference with Boudon appears, more in focus than in substance. Boudon uses these principles to establish a kind of *resemblance* between social science and the natural sciences, in order to convince his reluctant sociologist colleagues that their discipline can reach a high level of genuine scientificity. Mises acknowledges that theoretical social science belongs to the general category of explanatory science (and to this extent there is no contradiction with Boudon). But he does not need to convince other economists that their discipline is a science. They do not dispute it. So his main argument bears on a subtler point, namely that theoretical social science is of an entirely different sort than natural science: it is not an empirical science such as physics or chemistry, but an “aprioristic” science such as mathematics. To this contentious issue we now turn.

3.2 Epistemological apriorism

For Mises, economics as a theoretical enterprise is part of a larger scientific field that he calls

¹⁸ Writes Boudon: “It is the great Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises who devised the notion of methodological singularism in order to identify the approach that has the purpose to explain singular phenomena, and to differentiate it from the one that seeks to embrace vast entities in a global perspective. For von Mises, *methodological singularism* is a necessary condition of any scientific *explanation*. The perspective that can symmetrically be called *methodological holism* can lead to interesting *interpretations*, but not to *explanations* in the strict sense” (2011a, 731, our translation).

praxeology, the theoretical science of human action, and that is not an empirical but an “aprioristic” science.¹⁹ His writings on this topic were ridiculed by Mark Blaug as “so idiosyncratic and dogmatically stated that we can only wonder that they have been taken seriously by anyone” (1992, 81). They are definitely “one of the most controversial aspects of his work,” as a foremost exegete of Mises puts it (Hülsmann 2003, *xli*). But this epistemological apriorism needs to be set in its proper context and correctly understood, because the Kantian terminology can be misleading. Mises is not at all some kind of “idealist” claiming that the mind somehow creates a reality that conforms to its a priori categories.²⁰ Quite the contrary. For Mises, if people act, it is because they want to adjust to what he calls the “real external world” (2006 [1962], 11). So when he writes that the statements and propositions of praxeology “are not derived from experience,” he does not mean that they are somehow cut off from this “real external world.” Rather, he points to an essential difference between the ways the statements of praxeology and those of the natural sciences are validated as true (Hülsmann 2003).

In the natural sciences, the validation of regularities is obtained a posteriori through “experience,” i.e. through carefully devised observations or experiments. In the case of praxeology, the situation is completely different. The most fundamental concepts are unobservable: choice, values, cost, psychic profit or loss, are all impossible for an external investigator to perceive. We know that they exist because we know the concept of action and deduce them from it. But how do we know the concept or category of action itself? Our senses can only perceive bodily movements and voice sounds, so the knowledge of the concept of action cannot be obtained “a posteriori” via sensory perception. Mises therefore concludes that this concept is an “a priori” knowledge. No conceivable observation or experiment could corroborate or falsify “a posteriori” the central postulate of praxeology, namely that “Humans act.” We know, beyond any doubt, that humans act, i.e. that they consciously use means in order to reach ends. This is not a simple hypothesis that needs to be put to test but rather “a self-evident proposition, fully, clearly and necessarily present in every human mind” (Mises 2006 [1962], 4).²¹

¹⁹ Mises writes that the scope of praxeology “is human action as such, irrespective of all environmental, accidental, and individual circumstances of the concrete acts. Its cognition is purely formal and general without reference to the material content and the particular features of the actual case. It aims at knowledge valid for all instances in which the conditions exactly correspond to those implied in its assumptions and inferences. Its statements and propositions are not derived from experience. They are, like those of logic and mathematics, a priori. They are not subject to verification or falsification on the ground of experience and facts. They are both logically and temporally antecedent to any comprehension of historical facts” (1998 [1949], 32).

²⁰ Hoppe (1995, 19–22) convincingly makes this point.

²¹ Since this knowledge is true and corresponds to the reality of the external world, it can be labelled “real” or

Mises's discussion on this topic is quite abstract, but Hoppe (1995, 14–16) offers a series of illustrations that are helpful in order to properly understand his apriorism. A very good example is the law of exchange, which states that when two persons engage in a voluntary exchange, each one of them values the good received more than the good given in exchange (double inequality of use values²²). How is the truth of this law validated? In the natural sciences, a hypothesis becomes a law when it successfully undergoes a series of empirical tests, and this law can still be challenged subsequently by new and more thorough tests. Now, the law of exchange can obviously not be validated this way. No matter how many times we observe people exchanging goods, no matter how sophisticated and intrusive our measuring instruments are, we will never grasp the nature of exchange. It is instead the concept of exchange, properly understood, that allows us to make sense of the bodily movements or sounds voiced when an exchange takes place. Furthermore, the law of exchange is universal in that it can be applied to each and every exchange that has ever occurred or will ever occur. All the elements that Mises uses to define praxeology can be applied to the theory of exchange: this theory is “purely formal,” “valid for all instances” of exchanges, it is “not derived from experience,” and is “logically and temporally antecedent to any comprehension” of exchange (see Mises's full quotation in note 19).

To the best of our knowledge, Boudon has not specifically written about Misesian apriorism. He must nevertheless have been familiar with it, since he has undoubtedly read the epistemological chapter of *Human Action*, where he has found the concept of “methodological singularism” that he frequently uses in his later works. In his main epistemological work (Boudon 1984), he seems at one point very close to the Misesian position. He analyzes a classic 1929 paper by Hotelling on the “stability of competition.” Consider a village comprised of just one street that is a straight line. Two identical grocers want to establish their business on this street along which the buyers are uniformly distributed. If they take their decision independently, where will they choose to locate their store? The “optimal” position (with minimal transportation costs for the consumers and identical incomes for the grocers) is: one of them at $\frac{1}{4}$ along the street and the other at $\frac{3}{4}$. But if they decide independently, then they will both choose to settle at the center, else they will lose a part of their customers to the other seller. Hotelling also uses this model to explain why the platforms of political parties

“empirical” if the Aristotelian vocabulary is chosen instead of the Kantian terminology (Rothbard 1957; Hülsmann 2003).

²² As soon as the possibility of exchange opens up, the good possessed gets an exchange value, and if this value is higher than its use value, then the value of the good for its owner is its exchange value. When an exchange occurs between two actors, for each one of them the exchange value of the initially possessed good is higher than its use value.

(Republicans and Democrats) tend to be close to the center of the political spectrum: in order to maximize the number of votes. But it is well-known that some elections are won by a landslide. Does this kind of event *refute* the Hotelling model? The answer, of course, is no. In fact, this model also helps explaining the strongly unbalanced results in some elections: the ideological position of one of the candidates has drifted away from the center and the more centrist candidate has found himself closer to a much larger number of voters. The Hotelling model can therefore be used to explain the outcome of many elections, whether the result is tight or a wide margin. This is why Boudon calls it a *formal theory*, a name that he has chosen not in reference to Mises (who is not quoted in his 1984 book) but to Simmel and his “formal sociology.”²³ Boudon then distinguishes between *formal theories* on the one hand and *theories stricto sensu* on the other: when the parameters of a “formal theory” are specified, it becomes a “theory stricto sensu” from which an explanation of empirical phenomena can be drawn. He compares the formal theory to the equation of a line: $y = ax + b$. The line can only be drawn—the theory stricto sensu can only be obtained—when the values of the parameters a and b are specified. He concludes that the Popperian epistemology is, in the case of formal theories, totally inadequate:

[A formal theory], as such, cannot be applied to any real situation. No prediction nor any empirical conclusion can be drawn from it. It is not *refutable* in the sense of Popper, since it does not contain any affirmation about reality. Still in the sense of Popper, it is not a *scientific* theory. But it is not a *metaphysical* theory either. Popperian categories do not permit to classify it. (Boudon 1984, 213, our translation)

Mises formulates a similar critique of Popper’s falsification criterion:

If one accepts the terminology of logical positivism and especially also that of Popper, a theory or hypothesis is “unscientific” if *in principle* it cannot be refuted by experience. Consequently, all a priori theories, including mathematics and praxeology, are “unscientific.” This is merely a verbal quibble. (Mises 2006 [1962], 63)

There is, at first sight, a resemblance between Boudon’s formal theories and Mises’s praxeology. But this similarity is only superficial. Boudon rejects the Popperian criterion for *formal theories* only, not for *theories stricto sensu*, while Mises rejects it for *theories stricto*

²³ At about the same time when he was writing *La Place du Désordre*, Boudon was translating into French Simmel’s book on the philosophy of history. Boudon’s book (1984) and his translation of Simmel’s (1984 [1923]) were published in the same year.

sensu. It must be emphasized that what Boudon calls a “formal theory” is *not* a theory. It is a framework within which a theory can be developed, or in other words it is a *family of theories*.²⁴ It is only when the “parameters” of a formal theory are specified—when one theory within the family is picked up—that an explanatory theory is formulated. In the case of “formal theories,” the Popperian criterion of falsifiability is not so much wrong as it is irrelevant.

Now, the central issue does not concern “formal theories” but rather “theories *stricto sensu*,” which will be called “theories” for short (and because it is what they are). In the case of theories, Boudon accepts the Popperian criterion of falsifiability: if a theory is incompatible with known facts or data, it is empirically refuted.²⁵ Mises, on the other hand, totally rejects the Popperian criterion for all (actionist) theories of social science. There is an apparent disagreement here that needs to be addressed.

Let us consider the following theories:

- (Hotelling theory) T_H : in a political two-candidate election, if voters are uniformly distributed along the political spectrum, if they vote for the “closest” candidate, and if the candidates are both located near the political center, then the result of the election will be tight.

- (Exchange theory) T_E : if two actors have reverse preferences between the goods they respectively possess (double inequality of values), if they are informed of the situation, if there is no legal or physical obstacle to exchange, if the cost of the exchange is low enough, and if there is no higher bidder on either side, then they will proceed to an exchange.

A theory is falsifiable in the sense of Popper (1959 [1934]) if its deductions can in principle be found incompatible with a singular empirical fact. The theories T_H and T_E are *not falsifiable* in this sense: as soon as their premises are valid, their conclusion logically follows. If an election is won by a wide margin, or if no exchange occurs, it is because the premises of the theories T_H and T_E respectively are not validated in the particular cases investigated. The validity of these theories remains entirely intact in the cases when their premises hold. Even if we do not go so far as saying that they are *a priori*, these theories fit the Misesian description of praxeology: “Its cognition is purely formal and general without reference to the material

²⁴ The Hotelling model can be considered as a Boudonian “formal theory” of the results of two-candidate political elections. Under the assumptions that people will vote for the “closest” candidate and that there is a roughly uniform distribution of voters along a one-dimensional political spectrum, there are as many theories in this family as there are possible ideological “locations” for the two candidates: from each couple of locations can be deduced the percentage of votes received by each candidate.

²⁵ But even if a theory is compatible with known facts and data, it can still be rejected for other reasons, such as ambiguous or unacceptable premises. For Boudon (1984; 1994), the Popperian criterion is necessary but not sufficient to assess a theory: non-Popperian criteria should also be taken into account (for instance the Weberian criterion of comprehension).

content and the particular features of the actual case. It aims at knowledge valid for all instances in which the conditions exactly correspond to those implied in its assumptions and inferences” (1998 [1949], 32). Our first conclusion is therefore that *Mises is right* when he claims that *Popper’s criterion is inappropriate* in actionist social science. But there is also an empirical element that is to some extent neglected by Mises: the verification that the premises of the theories hold in the particular case under study. Before any of these theories is accepted as a true explanation of a particular case study, the empirical validity of the premises and of their consequence must be checked. Our second conclusion is therefore that *Boudon is right* to emphasize the *criterion of empirical adequacy* of a theory (its premises and its implication), but he should not label this criterion as “Popperian” because falsification has not the same meaning in actionist social science and in the natural sciences. In the natural sciences, a falsified theory *disappears* from the scientific scene, not to be used ever again (unless it can still serve as an approximation to the better theory). In social science, an *actionist* theory cannot be falsified in this way. If it does not apply to the phenomenon investigated, then it can still apply to other phenomena at other moments or places. Only the *application* of an actionist theory to specific historical circumstances can be refuted, not the theory as such.

So in spite of the fact that Boudon acknowledges the Popperian criterion and Mises totally rejects it, there is no contradiction but a noteworthy complementarity between their epistemological conceptions. Firstly, Boudon improperly uses the label “Popperian” (so we argue) to describe a simple Tarskian criterion of truth or factuality. Secondly, they do not analyze the same modality of the validation of theories: Mises focuses on the internal validity and Boudon on the external one. They respectively insist on the aspect that is the most relevant for each one’s discipline, the *logic of action* for economics and the *correspondence with the facts* for sociology.

3.3 Theory and history

The epistemological part of this paper is already quite long, so that only one paragraph can be devoted to the important topic of “theory and history.” Being on the Austrian side of the *Methodenstreit*, Mises (1998 [1949], Chap. 2) starts his epistemological reflection by sharply differentiating between theory (praxeology) and history. Theory uses what he calls the “mental tool” of *conception* (adapted to universal theorizing), and history the mental tool of *understanding* (that takes into account the individual characteristics of the phenomenon). Economics abounds with theories that can be applied to innumerable historical circumstances:

marginal choice, exchange, confrontation of supply and demand, intensification of the division of labor, decreasing returns on production, price control, inflation, economic cycle, etc. The difference between the theories, conceived *in abstracto*, and their multiple historical applications, understood in their individual specificities, appears very clearly. In sociology, the distinction between theory and history is not as clear-cut as in economics, due to the kind of phenomena investigated. Many important sociological theories are elaborated in order to explain a single historical event: why the French intellectuals had a revolutionary mindset in the eighteenth century (Tocqueville), why religiosity is very much alive in an advanced and individualist nation such as the USA (Tocqueville, Weber), why there is no socialism in the USA (Sombart), etc. In such instances, the distinction between conception and understanding is not immediately apparent. But it is present. All these theories can be “decontextualized,” so to speak. They can be formulated in the abstract language of praxeology (conception) by removing all the temporal and spatial references, while the actionist substance of the reasoning is kept intact and can be applied to any other historical context in which the premises of the theory are valid.²⁶ Because he follows a more pragmatic approach than Mises, Boudon does not explicitly make the distinction between conception and understanding, but his analyses of sociological theories could be formulated without difficulty in this Misesian framework, with a strict differentiation between theory and history.

4. Liberalism

Boudon is a moderate liberal in the tradition of Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Max Weber, three authors that he frequently quotes and uses in his work. He is not an exponent of the liberal doctrine, though, and has not written extensively about liberalism. His main contribution to this topic (Boudon 2004) is not a study of liberalism proper, but rather of the

²⁶ Here is a decontextualized version of Tocqueville’s theory of the high level of religiosity in America, inspired by the presentation offered by Boudon (1994). Consider two countries *A* and *B*: country *A* has a centralized State and a dominant Church [France, Catholic Church] and country *B* a decentralized State and a multitude of small churches [USA, protestant sects]. In country *A*, the centralized State is in direct competition with the Church in the provision of services of education, healthcare, etc.; but the State has distinct advantages over the Church: first, it has the power to levy heavier taxes and increasingly fund a great number of services, and second, it benefits from the ideological changes brought by modernity (rationalization, questioning of authority, etc.); in this competition, the State will tend to overcome the Church that will little by little lose its power and influence. In country *B* prevails, not competition but rather complementarity between the State and the churches; first, the State is not threatened by the latter, and second, its power is limited, so that the churches can keep playing essential roles in civil society; furthermore, since the churches do not compete with the State, they are perceived as transcending the ideological differences, and can thus avoid any collateral damage from political discords. The question asked by Tocqueville in a specific historical context therefore receives a *generalizable* answer.

sources of anti-liberal thought. He offers nonetheless in this book a series of remarks that outline his conception of liberalism as a rich, complex and evolving tradition. Mises, on the other hand, is one of the most important advocates—perhaps the most important—of economic liberalism in the twentieth century (Hülsmann 2007). He defends a radical version of liberalism, centered on the concept of private property and on the conclusions of a comparative economic analysis between capitalism, socialism and interventionism.

4.1 Economic liberalism and beyond

According to Boudon, liberalism rests above all on a philosophical principle postulating “that the individual aspires to the enjoyment of as much autonomy as possible, and wants his dignity respected to the extent that he shows the same respect to others” (*philosophical liberalism*). This principle is “at the root” of two other principles: *economic liberalism* “aims at leaving as much room as possible to the market and only accepts statist regulations under the condition that they provide undeniable advantages,” and *political liberalism* “insists on the equality of rights, on as wide an extension as possible of *liberties* and also on the limits of State intervention” (Boudon 2004, 23, our translation). So over and beyond its economic and political modalities, liberalism has a higher purpose, which is to increase personal *autonomy* and to warrant an equal *dignity* for all.

Mises upholds a much more circumscribed conception of liberalism. The key word of his definition of liberalism is *property*, and more specifically *private property of the factors of production*.²⁷ The contrast with socialism—public property of the factors—cannot be made to appear more clearly. The expression “private property” is noticeably absent from Boudon’s characterization, although the concept is implicitly present in the notion of market used in his definition of economic liberalism. Mises does not introduce any hierarchy between economic liberalism and a higher or more encompassing conception of liberalism. He goes so far as to write that “liberalism is applied economics” (2005 [1927], 154). He therefore avoids the consistency problems raised by the tripartite definition used by Boudon (how is “economic liberalism” derived from “philosophical liberalism”?). The private property of the factors of production and the implied principle of contractual freedom together form a very demanding criterion that places strict limits on State intervention. As a result, Mises’s liberalism is

²⁷ “The program of liberalism, therefore, if condensed into a single word, would have to read: *property*, that is, private ownership of the means of production (for in regard to commodities ready for consumption, private ownership is a matter of course and is not disputed even by the socialists and the communists)” (Mises 2005 [1927], 2).

certainly more radical than Boudon's.

The difference between them, however, is not just that Boudon defends a broader and more accommodating form of liberalism, while Mises defends a narrower and more uncompromising form. Their respective approaches diverge at a deeper level.

Boudon defines liberalism by the *values* that should prevail in a liberal society, namely personal autonomy and equal dignity. It is a bit unfortunate that he does not precisely explain why he chooses these values. They are highly reminiscent of the Kantian moral doctrine, and Boudon (2004) indeed cites repeatedly the name of Kant, but without any direct quotations (none of Kant's works are listed in the bibliography of his book). For Mises (2005 [1927], 158), the social doctrines should not be distinguished by the ultimate values that they seek to attain, but rather by the *method* that they want to implement in order to make these values occur. This is because most of these values and aims are common to liberals and socialists: well-being, peace, fairness, humanity, etc. And autonomy and dignity can be added to this list. The concept of autonomy is of course related to the ideal of freedom, but freedom itself is a notoriously vague concept that can be stretched in many directions, including very illiberal ones. The concept of dignity is even more problematical. Almost any forcible wealth redistribution could be justified in order to bring more "dignity" to people allegedly mistreated in one way or another by the market economy. In other words, values such as autonomy and dignity are not at all objectionable, but they do not seem to discriminate properly between liberalism and anti-liberalism. The concept of property, on the other hand, strictly differentiates the methods of social organization respectively advocated by liberalism and by socialism. For Mises, liberty (private ownership of the factors of production) is a means, not an end.²⁸ For Boudon, liberty ("philosophical liberalism") is an end, not a means, and in order to reach this end he is ready to accept and even welcome a (moderate) dose of interventionism of the State in the market, if this interference benefits all the participants.²⁹

4.2 *The defense of liberalism*

Boudon (2004) does not offer a detailed defense of liberalism but it should be remembered that his book is not a treatise on liberalism, so the comparison with Mises (2005 [1927]) is a

²⁸ "Liberalism is distinguished from socialism, which likewise professes to strive for the good of all, not by the goal at which it aims, but by the means that it chooses to attain that goal" (Mises 2005 [1927], *xxii*).

²⁹ In some areas, the market "can indeed be regulated to the benefit of all the stakeholders. This is even one of the essential functions of politics at the local and international levels" (Boudon 2004, 220, our translation). He does not give any concrete example of the kind of regulations that he has in mind here.

bit imbalanced. On the economic side, Boudon criticizes rent control (that eventually turns against tenants themselves) and the agricultural subsidies paid by the governments of developed countries (that are highly detrimental to the less developed countries). But he also insists that liberalism displays its own “adverse effects.” In fact, he devotes more pages to the adverse effects of liberalism than to those of State interventionism! He analyzes at length the undesirable consequences of the market economy in the cultural realm, through the examples of reality TV (with its vulgarity) and of the art market (with its proliferation of phony “masterpieces”). In both cases, he provides a demand-and-supply explanation of these effects: the demand for celebrities is much greater than the supply of authentic celebrities (artists, sports, scientists, etc.), so that celebrities need to be created out of the blue with persons that display no merit whatsoever, and this is “the sociological stroke of genius that led to the birth of reality television” (2004, 172); likewise, on the art market a large number of people or institutions with money to spend form a demand that far exceeds the supply of authentic masterpieces, so that fake ones can find buyers—with the self-interested connivance of art galleries, museums and art critics.³⁰ It is noteworthy that Mises also explains the development of “trashy literature” as a supply-and-demand phenomenon: “What characterizes capitalism is not the bad taste of the crowds, but the fact that these crowds, made prosperous by capitalism, became ‘consumers’ of literature—of course, of trashy literature.” He does not blame capitalism for exposing these vulgar tastes, however, and adds that “this does not prevent great authors from creating imperishable works” (Mises 2008 [1956], 79).

Boudon devotes only a few words to political liberalism, briefly mentioning the rule of law (*État de droit*) and the freedom of opinion and of circulation. His defense of “philosophical liberalism” is somewhat more elaborated. Dignity will be discussed in the next subsection in connection with the topic of inequality. We focus for now on the notion of autonomy that, he tells us, “was so dear to Kant and to all the liberal movement” (2004, 67). Boudon explains that this concept has been unduly attacked by “the schools of thought like Behaviorism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis or Structuralism, which treat the autonomy of the subject as an illusion, as negligible, or else as irrelevant from a scientific viewpoint” (2004, 74). Boudon convincingly argues that all the variants of positivism commit a huge scientific mistake when they seek to eliminate the autonomy of the actor from sociological and psychological theories. They are simply wrong when they endorse a heteronomous conception

³⁰ Boudon also recognizes, of course, that “if the market is able to produce adverse effects, it can also produce beneficial effects. The exacerbated competition that prevailed between the Renaissance painters because of the excess supply has something to do (along with other factors, of course) with the fact that they have produced indisputable masterpieces” (2004, 188, our translation).

of man, in which behavior and beliefs are determined by hidden psychological or social forces that totally escape the conscience of the subject. However, this whole discussion seems to miss the point: if autonomy is a scientific fact, how can it be defended as a value of the liberal doctrine?

In Mises's approach, liberalism is primarily understood as a means towards economic progress, and the defense to which he resorts is therefore very different from Boudon's. At the outset, he emphasizes the "magnificent economic development" that has taken place with the advent of liberal policies towards the end of the eighteenth century, a development characterized by a multiplication of the population that lives "incomparably better" than in the earlier centuries (Mises 2005 [1927], *xvii*). Now, there are three main systems for organizing production in society: socialism (collectivism), liberalism (capitalism), and interventionism. These systems have all the same goal, which is to improve the standard of living of the population. They can therefore be rationally evaluated as means to this end. Value judgments are not required in order to compare them: economic analysis suffices. Very briefly, Mises destroys the socialist idea with his famous argument on the impossibility of economic calculation in a collectivist commonwealth (Mises 1981 [1922]), and he thoroughly criticizes interventionism on the ground that the interferences of the State in the market defeat their own purpose and impoverish society (through price control, restrictive measures, credit expansion and inflation, and confiscation and redistribution; see Mises 1996 [1929]; 1998 [1940]; 1998 [1949]). He concludes from this purely scientific analysis that capitalism is the only rational system of social organization. To those who downplay economic progress from an ascetic viewpoint, he retorts that most people prefer wealth to poverty (this is the only moment when he makes a value judgment). And to those who claim that liberalism has "nothing to offer man's deeper and nobler aspirations," he replies that no social policy is able to satisfy them anyway: "It is not from a disdain of spiritual goods that liberalism concerns itself exclusively with man's material well-being, but from a conviction that... inner, spiritual riches cannot come to man from without, but only from within his own heart" (Mises 2005 [1927], *xx*). Mises's defense of liberalism is much more detailed and comprehensive than Boudon's, and this is not at all surprising since Mises spent most of his life analyzing and criticizing the socialist and interventionist schemes (we have already emphasized that the comparison between them on this topic is quite unfair to Boudon).

4.3 Inequalities

Liberalism, and especially economic liberalism, is often blamed for generating excessive, unjust inequalities of wealth, income, and status. Boudon addresses this important criticism early in his book. He acknowledges that liberals accept certain forms and doses of inequality on account of differences of skills and abilities, but insists that “the most moderate and probably the most consistent” among liberals want these inequalities to be, as much as possible, “functional” (2004, 29). In other words, inequalities need to be justified by their contribution to the functioning of the social system. This is a point that he repeatedly and forcefully makes in all his discussions on the topic of educational inequalities of opportunity, which are for him the archetype of a dysfunctional, highly objectionable form of inequality. He reminds us that in the 1960’s, in France, the probability for the child of a manual worker to go to the university was a fortieth the probability for the child of a senior executive. Such a high level of inequality of opportunity cannot be justified by any functionalist argument. For him, it clearly breaks the rules of a fair social game and contradicts the liberal principle of an equal dignity of all: “the individuals composing a society being all of an equal dignity, liberalism also implies that they all get equal opportunities, as far as possible” (2004, 50).

Mises, even though he does not use this terminology, perfectly agrees with the principle of functional inequalities, and he applies it in his defense of the inequalities of income generated by the market system. At a basic level he explains, firstly that the confiscation of the incomes of the wealthiest people in a capitalist system would not enrich the masses (“because those of moderate means far outnumber the rich”), and secondly that the equalization of all incomes would greatly reduce the incentive to produce and impoverish society to the point where each one would get “far less than what even the poorest receives today” (Mises 2005 [1927], 12). Of course, with the help of the Austrian price theory, a deeper analysis can be provided. As far as wages and rents are concerned, the inequalities of income of the corresponding factors (labor and land) are determined by supply and demand, and ultimately reflect their relative contribution to the satisfaction of the needs of the final consumers. It is easy to understand why an interference by the State on the market price of these ordinary factors results in economic inefficiency: if the State sets the price above the market clearing price, then some units of the factor stop being demanded and remain unused (unemployed workers, idle pieces of land), which leads to a reduction in output and therefore to an impoverishment of society; if, conversely, the State fixes the price below the market clearing price, then some of the units are wasted because the producers are not incited anymore to allocate them to the uses where

they satisfy the most urgent needs of the consumers. So if the government decides to equalize the incomes of the originary factors by gradually heightening the lowest incomes and reducing the highest ones, then rationing expands on one side and waste on the other, so that more and more damaging consequences ensue—until the perfect equalization of all hourly wages and rents per square foot brings about a total economic disaster. Let us now turn to the great fortunes built on a combination of entrepreneurship and capitalist investment. They are often the targets of severe criticism. In this case too, Mises offers a defense based upon a functionalist argument. The owners of these fortunes can only stay wealthy if they “perform a service indispensable for society,” namely if they keep investing their capital in profitable ventures (2005 [1927], 43). When a capital is profitably invested, it is the sign that it adequately contributes to the satisfaction of the needs of the final consumers.³¹

Entrepreneurial profits indicate that the invested capital corrects the imbalances between the wants of the consumers on the one hand, and the pool of available techniques of production and productive inputs on the other. In a world of radical uncertainty, with continual, unavoidable, and mostly unexpected changes in wants, techniques, and resources, simply maintaining the value of a capital requires wise investments. If, on the other hand, mistakes are repeatedly committed, then losses will be suffered: capital will be transferred into the hands of entrepreneurs more capable of adjusting production to the most pressing demands from final consumers. In a market economy, therefore, the great fortunes can only remain great if they are invested the way the masses of final consumers want them to be. So, for Mises, these large inequalities do not prevent the free market from being in the long term best interest of the whole population.

There is not much difference between Boudon and Mises when it comes to the principle of a functionalist or utilitarian defense of the inequalities of income and wealth brought about by the market process. But they disagree about *equality of opportunity*, since Boudon endorses it while Mises rejects it. In connection with economic competition in the market place, Mises calls equality of opportunity “an alleged, imaginary, and unrealizable ‘natural’ right” (1998 [1949], 277).

For Boudon, as we have seen, equality of opportunity, especially in the realm of education, is an essential value of liberalism, derived from the core principle of the equal dignity of all.³² In his sociological work on educational inequalities (Boudon 1973), he has

³¹ Mises (1981 [1922], 123–126) argues that in a market economy there is no discrepancy between production “for profit” (profitability) and production “for needs” (productivity).

³² We may note in passing that the word “dignity” scarcely appears in Mises’s books, and when it does it is never

shown that their main cause is found in the demand for education by the families: the higher the social strata, the greater the demand for education, i.e. the more the parents will incite their children to pursue their studies towards upper and more prestigious levels. This differential in the demand for education between the social strata gives birth to an educational inequality that grows more and more as students get to higher and higher educational levels. To reduce at least a part of this inequality (it is of course impossible to suppress it completely), Boudon (1990b) advocates, first a broader and more rewarding scholarship system to help the children of modest origins to cover the costs of studying, and second a strengthening of educational meritocracy (in the sense that it should be more difficult for children from higher social strata to progress through educational stages if their school achievements are subpar³³). These measures would help to offset some of the inegalitarian effects of the demand for education. But what about the autonomy of the families? Is it not to some extent denied by the meritocratic measure envisioned by Boudon? It might be argued that an inconsistency slips in here, between his dignity principle and his autonomy principle. It is impossible to know for sure what Mises would have thought of these egalitarian educational measures. Maybe that he would have found them unobjectionable, but this is doubtful because he was much more suspicious than Boudon of governmental interferences. For instance, he was against the legislations seeking to protect individuals from themselves, such as the prohibition of alcohol, morphine, cocaine, etc. Even though he described these substances as “poisons” and “deadly enemies of life,” he feared that this kind of intervention would open the Pandora’s Box of many similar interventions in other domains, so that the government would end up abrogating personal freedom through a regulation of the lives of individuals “down to the smallest detail” (2005 [1927], 32).

Conclusion

No comparison between the conceptions of social science of Boudon and Mises seems to have previously been made. This paper has sought to fill this gap and to bring to light the most salient features of their respective views. This comparison can now be summed up under the three headings of *complementarity*, *opposition*, and *divergence*. (i) Boudon and Mises

in the context of a presentation of the principles of liberalism.

³³ “... maybe the only really efficient way to act against [educational] inequalities consists in reinforcing the dependency of the school career of the student on the academic results. The participation of the family to the decision of orientation is certainly essential. But it is the source of adverse effects...” (Boudon 1990b, 542).

complement each other as far as action theory and the epistemology of social science are concerned. Mises offers a more detailed presentation of the constitutive elements of action while Boudon shows how the concept is used in more complex examples borrowed from significant sociological studies. Their defenses of the actionist paradigm as the core of social science are remarkably similar. Turning to epistemology, their prima facie disagreement—Boudon to some extent accepting the Popperian falsifiability and Mises totally rejecting it—turns out to be more apparent than real. They respectively insist on complementary aspects of the validation of theories, Mises focusing on the a priori side (logic of action) and Boudon on the a posteriori (correspondence of the theories with the historical circumstances). (ii) The topic on which they clearly oppose each other is the theory of belief and value. Mises does not develop a theory of belief, and always describes value judgments as purely personal and arbitrary. Boudon, on the other hand, convincingly extends the theory of rationality to account for beliefs and values. He shows with great details and through many examples that the value judgments held by the actors in this or that social context can be explained by reasons that appear good to the actors themselves. His theory of axiological and more generally of subjective rationality can rightfully be considered as a major breakthrough. (iii) Finally, on the topic of liberalism, our two authors diverge. Boudon expounds a conception of liberalism that intends to go beyond a narrow Misesian economic liberalism. But the values of autonomy and dignity that he puts forward are questionable, in the sense that they are not specifically liberal, and the way he defends them is not very persuasive. Overall, his broad conception of liberalism lacks the rigor and consistency of Mises's.

At the core, each one of these two great authors warns us, in his own way, against the pitfalls of positivism on the scientific side, and of State interventionism on the political side. Hopefully, this comparison—and sometimes confrontation—between them has helped to get a better understanding of their respective contributions.

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