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## **A TIRELESS INVESTIGATOR: A TRIBUTE TO LAURENT THÉVENOT**

Honorary Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Laurent Thévenot is a leading figure in contemporary social sciences. He is also recognized as a classic author, whose numerous books and articles have become essential references in the field. Laurent Thévenot contributed significantly to renewing sociological paradigms, which, in the 1980s, seemed somewhat bogged down in traditional oppositions: on the one hand, deterministic models that cast agents as passive subjects subordinated to overarching social structures, and on the other hand, rationalist models that portrayed individuals as free and rational actors. Together with Luc Boltanski, he was one of the architects of the “practice turn,” which, in the 1990s, opened new modes of theoretical problematization and empirical investigation (Schatzki et al., 2001). After briefly reviewing the main directions of this shift, I will focus on the central features of Laurent Thévenot’s approach.

### **THE PRACTICE TURN**

After the hermeneutic turn of the 1980s, the social sciences (sociology in particular) underwent a pragmatic shift in the 1990s. This led, especially in France, to a stimulating problematization of various fields of study, such as urban sociology, scientific controversies, media coverage, religious experience, social work, statistical categories, and court cases. Despite their differences and disagreements, pragmatic sociologies share a common orientation. Rather than starting from the individual or from the social order

to then examine how they might articulate, merge, or absorb one another, they begin with action itself. This action-focused framework analyzes the ways in which activities of adjustment, coordination, and justification enable ordinary agents to create and maintain a shared world (Breviglieri & Stavo-Debaugé, 1999; Kaufmann, 2012).

Drawing on multiple intellectual traditions, such as phenomenology, semiotics, ethnomethodology, ordinary language philosophy, and pragmatism, pragmatic sociologies converge in their concern to restore actors' *capacity* for action while avoiding a return to subjectivism or individualism. The driving forces behind activity—rather than merely personal or subjective—consist of the situated “commonalities” on which social actors tacitly or explicitly agree. These commonalities rely on the generic know-how social individuals possess as ordinary members of a community—a community whose horizon is indefinitely expandable because it rests on the presumption of a *common humanity*. In contrast to a sociological concept of capabilities understood as distributed *a priori*, pragmatic sociologies emphasize the plurality of modes of engagement and the wide range of skills that can characterize all human beings (Dodier, 1991).

From a pragmatic perspective focused on how the social is practically accomplished, human beings hold no monopoly on agency. *Non-humans*, whether elements of the natural environment, technical artifacts, or social institutions, encapsulate and organize information, guide attention, and shape the actions of their potential “users” (Callon & Latour, 1981). Thus, pragmatic sociologies shift their focus away from disembodied individuals or overarching structures, examining instead the fine-grained workings of situated action. How do people interact with others and draw on the material, linguistic, and symbolic resources of their environment? How do they negotiate their engagement in a situation and adjust to circumstances? The answers to these questions lie partly in the type of device or *arrangement* that pre-organizes the range of actions and forms of engagement—private or public, minor or major—that are suited to the situation. However, this preorganization is by no means deterministic: improvisation, revision, and creativity are necessary to discover the most appropriate way to act. Indeed, social appropriateness results from a fragile equilibrium between *practical know-how* (how to perform a given action), *standards of correctness* (how to perform this action properly), and *moral duty* (that this action rather than another ought to be performed in this situation). Present across all currents of pragmatic sociology, the emphasis on individual capacity, on the social as a practical accomplishment, and on distributed agency underwent significant shifts and refinements in the important work of Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski, *De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur* (1991).

### GRAMMAR IN ACTION

In the “economies of worth” model, the pragmatic project takes the form of a “grammatical investigation” of the plurality of worlds of action, organized into six “orders of worth” (*cités*): civic, market, industrial, domestic, fame/opinion, and inspired. Each order is characterized by a principle of worth, a model of person, a test of worth, and a typical institution or object. For example, the principle of worth of the civic order is collective welfare, equality, and solidarity. Its model of person is the citizen; its test of worth is contribution to the common good, its typical institutions or objects are laws and public services, and its potential critique is being too bureaucratic or neglecting individuality (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). An order of worth is thus a normative framework that evaluates what is “worthy” in each situation, establishes categorical equivalences between people (citizens, consumers, women, Black people, executives, etc.), and defines the common goods at stake.

According to Boltanski and Thévenot, these basic orders of worth and their main practical, cognitive, or moral landmarks can be formalized in *grammatical* terms because they define modes of action and justification and the appropriate emotions to a type of situation. Like linguistic grammar, the social grammars underlying the *cités* can be described along three main dimensions: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (Kaufmann, 2012). The “syntax” of the relation refers to the system of places that delineates the range of actions and affects expected of its “occupants.” Social grammars also have a *semantic* dimension: a given system of places can only function effectively if it is intelligible to the “flesh-and-blood beings” who are expected to instantiate and embody it. Finally, social grammars have a *pragmatic* dimension: the here-and-now course of action gives rise to improvisations, shifts, subversions, and appropriations that are not only possible but necessary. In contrast to structural approaches, which tend to point to a “beyond” or “below” of the situated course of action—namely external structures—a grammatical approach retains the notion of structure and order while situating it at the concrete level of social interactions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991).

Moreover, thanks to objects and devices that guide the framing of situations, people can agree on appropriate actions without having to probe the intentions behind their fellow actors’ behavior. Grammatically speaking, they know that denouncing a political scandal entails a sense of indignation and an appeal to a system of justice that presupposes victims and guilty parties. Similarly, they know that selfish interest fits the grammar of economic exchange but cannot be invoked in friendship or family relationships. Importantly, the multiple grammars that regulate the appropriate form of action and the judgment they entail are not undermined

by the deviations, transgressions, or irrelevances that punctuate interaction. A community of action can be sustained only if mutual tolerance accompanies the ongoing processes of adjusting, correcting, and revising one's behavior in light of the situation as well as others' responses. However, when practical discrepancies that can be revised *in situ* escalate into genuine disagreements about how a situation should be defined or what course of action should be taken, they change status. They become "grammatical mistakes" that oblige those responsible to undergo a "test of justification" and to make explicit the reasons for their mistake or transgression. For instance, a spouse who asks for money in exchange for a service rendered to their wife commits a grammatical mistake—if not a moral affront—that calls for an explanation.

The "test of justification" (*l'épreuve de justification*), which may confirm existing principles or revise and transform them, generally arises from local disagreements and disputes that occur when people rely on different grammars and regimes of commitment (for example, settling scores during a romantic dinner or making a marriage proposal at a political rally). Yet, the test of justification can also shift scale and reach the highest authorities, including "big entities" such as the justice system or the state. By disrupting the normal course of public life, "state tests" (terrorism, police brutality, etc.) trigger a collective inquiry into the existence and legitimacy of the state, forcing it to justify its presence, to question its attributes, or even to retreat by renouncing some of its prerogatives (Linhardt, 2005).

## TWO DIFFERENT PATHS

Whether small- or large-scale, the test of justification always involves a process of generalization that enables people to extricate themselves from the "infelicitous situation" in which they are immersed and to seek higher-level reference points with which to establish a new agreement. The test of justification that emerges when agreement is no longer self-evident therefore initiates an inquiry into the norms and conceptions of the common good that can restore a new balance of coordination. Such a test necessarily entails a *process of publicization*, which Thévenot and Boltanski subsequently model in different ways. For Thévenot, the process of publicization makes it possible to move from the "regime of familiarity" and proximity—rooted in embodied judgments that assess the success of an act according to ordinary appreciations of appropriateness—to the "regime of justification," which elevates courses of action and the persons involved to a level in which they must withstand justificatory tests grounded in general principles and shared semantic criteria. By contrast,

for Boltanski, publicization enables a shift from the “register of correctness,” grounded in tacit agreement and routine forms of equivalence, to the “register of denunciation and criticism,” in which actors explicitly challenge the legitimacy of states of affairs.

In both accounts, however, the different regimes of action are connected by both discontinuities and continuities. Discontinuities arise because the implicit expectations that govern, for instance, a marital relationship (e.g., gift/counter-gift) are not of the same order as the explicit appeal to a normative third party (e.g., fairness in the division of tasks) that comes into play in a marital dispute or a request for divorce. Continuities exist due to a genuine continuum between the normative resources for action—which constitute a potential repertoire of reasons for acting, tacitly actualized in practice—and their explicit thematization when disagreement or dispute arises. Judgmental activities that qualify a situation are thus always poised to shift into justificatory activities, which involve “generalizing” a particular behavior to demonstrate that it is grammatically correct rather than arbitrary.

### **ENDOGENOUS GAMBLE, CRITICAL STANCE**

To observe how actions are “in the making” and how situations are experienced as closely as possible, pragmatic sociologies, in general, and the economies of worth, in particular, refrain from positing collective entities or social categories *a priori*. These exist only via their pragmatic instantiation in situated categorizations, claims to status, or attributions of qualification. In a movement that is primarily *descriptive*, pragmatic sociologists can neither invoke the reality of an exogenous structural or categorical order nor rely on an extrinsic scientific criterion to interpret situations. Their task is first to account for the endogenous normative and interpretive resources the actors themselves effectively mobilize. Instead of severing itself from ordinary procedures, as proponents of the epistemological break would suggest, scientific inquiry must illuminate, extend, and systematize the critical and descriptive resources already embedded in the social world.

### **AT THE CROSSROADS OF GENERAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MODERNITY**

Pragmatic sociology, as developed by Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski, is characterized by three main “gestures.” The first is an *empowerment* gesture that recognizes actors’ reflexive capacities for action, expressed via their normative orientations and their critical sense of justice. The second gesture

involves reinterpreting the social world as *plural* and traversed by various values, norms, and “orders of worth” that define how people relate to others and to themselves. The third gesture emphasizes the uncertain dynamics by which beings and entities are brought together in *conventional forms of equivalence*, adjusted to specific registers of action.

Thévenot deploys and refines these three gestures with great subtlety in his theoretical and empirical work. For him, the *common* is neither a given of the social world, guaranteed by membership or participation in preexisting collectives, nor a stable, intrinsic property of social agents. As suggested by the lexicon of displacement, circulation, and movement that pervades his research, the common is the provisional outcome of a dynamic process of pooling human existences. Thus, rather than constituting a starting point, it delineates a horizon of expectation—and very often, an enigma.

This enigma is partly reduced by what Thévenot, together with Boltanski, calls “the anthropological presumptions of modernity”: concern for the common good, a sense of justice, and the presumption of a common humanity. These assumptions help contain, at least in part, the uncertainties of living together: they ward off the specter of pure violence or mutual exploitation. They also facilitate the tasks of coordination that underpin and sustain social cohesion. From this perspective, coordination is eminently performative: it brings into being a common world, populated by markers that are more or less general and stable.

### THE MARKERS OF COORDINATION

Laurent Thévenot’s approach makes it possible to map coordination markers ranging from impersonal and objectified conventions, such as educational qualifications, to the micro-adjustments of a friendly relationship. His focus on these markers dates to the “economy of conventions” movement, in which he played a major role. This current challenged the central premise of classical economics—the idea that market and price mechanisms alone are sufficient to ensure coordination between individuals—and showed instead that other mechanisms, such as trust, reputation, the common good, and familiarity, are equally indispensable.

Thévenot’s elegant notion of “investments in form” extends this analysis: people have at their disposal forms of action and coordination that greatly differ from simple market investment. These forms are at once enabling and constraining, shaping and informing the ways in which we relate to one another (Thévenot, 1984). Seen from this perspective, the economy of conventions shifts toward a *morality of conventions*: norms function as benchmarks or “guarantees” that orient actors in the social

world, allowing them to assess the social correctness of conventional conduct and to distinguish it from the moral righteousness of action. In Thévenot's writings, however, the economy of conventions also turns into a *politics of conventions*, which enable—and often impose—the equivalence and valorization of people, objects, and beings. This equivalence is fragile: the collectives created by coordination agreements are, according to Pierre Livet (a close interlocutor of Thévenot), always virtual. They rest less on an effective sharing of values than on a gamble, a presumption of shareability (Livet & Thévenot, 1994). Hence the *phenomenology of uncertainty* that runs through Thévenot's reflection: coordination agreements are inherently vulnerable. Even when they give rise to tacit renewals and unreflective trust, the artifices on which they depend can come to the surface and become visible and questionable, provoking concern, criticism, and investigation.

Focusing on coordination, Laurent Thévenot's work provides the social sciences with a renewed lexicon and perspective. Rather than reproducing the misleading opposition between individual and collective, he shifts attention to the tensions between the singular and the general, the private and the public, the near and the distant—tensions that, in his view, traverse and differentiate the principal modes of action in contemporary societies. For Thévenot (2006), these modes of action—or more precisely, *regimes of engagement*—are arranged along an ascending pathway that runs from the singular to the general, from the near to the distant, from face-to-face relations to relations sustained at a distance. One of the distinctive contributions of his work lies in beginning from the standpoint of individual actors and tracing the shifting scales and formats of coordination with which they are continually confronted. Indeed, people move between several regimes of engagement or “pragmatic regimes”: a *regime of familiarity*, nourished by close, person-to-person attachments; more impersonal coordination regimes such as the *regime of planned action* (*régime du plan*), exemplified by markets or administrations, which rely on efficient devices for coordinating at a distance with strangers; and the *public regime*, which rests on the constitution of a political community oriented toward general principles and a shared world (Thévenot, 2007).

### **THE LAYERS OF THE PERSON**

By starting with the individual's perspective, Thévenot's approach establishes the person as a genuine pragmatic center of gravity. While authors such as Bruno Latour focus on networks (chains of associations preceding and following the individual), Thévenot places the person, along

with the mediations enabling coordination with others and with oneself, at the heart of his analysis<sup>1</sup>. For Thévenot, mediations possess neither the simplifying power they hold in Latour's work nor the alienating power they carry, for example, in Dorothy Smith's (1990)—an author who has influenced Latour. Instead, technical and social mediations “prepare” (*apprêter*) the persons and reduce, expand, or sustain the extent to which they engage with the world.

From a pragmatic perspective, however, focusing on the person does not imply a return to the subject. For Thévenot (2009a), the person is always in the making: layered and plural, with multiple modes of engagement and ways of being in the world. As psychologist Philippe Rochat (2003) puts it, personal identity, rather than “egological,” is “ecological”: it depends on the forms and qualities with which one is endowed or on the claims one makes in situated engagements.

Plurality is central to the theory of engagement regimes. It is essential to the integrity of individuals and to the proper functioning of collective life. Its personal or communal suppression or depletion constitutes a serious threat. After all, as Erving Goffman (1961) noted, it is the hallmark of “total institutions.” Conversely, plurality and the pragmatic versatility of persons, acts, and situations are indispensable to a democratic society. What is at stake here is *power*—not primarily the power to make things happen, but the power to relate, to attach, and to categorize.

The power of categorization, embodied in statistics and other impersonal forms of typification, manifests itself in what Thévenot (2009b) calls “government by standards.” Such government operates by imposing a single, standardized format of coordination, thereby displacing the plurality of pragmatic regimes by which people ordinarily navigate the world. By de-pluralizing normative orders in this way, standardization naturalizes regulations to the point of erasing the horizon of endogenous criticism that once enabled individuals to perceive the artificiality and fragility of their markers of coordination.

### **A SKILLED “NAVIGATOR”**

Throughout his remarkable research career, Laurent Thévenot has shed light on the critical competencies of ordinary actors and their capacity to shift from one regime of engagement to another. A skilled “navigator” himself, he has been at once a generous colleague, an indefatigable sociologist, and a cosmopolitan citizen. For this, he deserves our recognition and gratitude.

**NOTE**

- 1 For a discussion of “coordination with oneself,” see Jean-Louis Genard’s insightful commentary (2011) on Thévenot’s *L’action au pluriel*.

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### **A TIRELESS INVESTIGATOR: A TRIBUTE TO LAURENT THÉVENOT**

#### **Keywords**

Pragmatic sociology;  
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Regimes of engagement;  
Sociological theory.

#### **Abstract**

In his impressive and innovative work, Laurent Thévenot showed that social life is built with fragile practices of coordination, justification, and shifting *regimes of engagement* (familiar, planned, public). His concepts—such as *orders of worth* and *investments in form*—show how people compose a “common world” in various situations and warn against the loss of plurality under rigid standards.

### **UM INVESTIGADOR INCANSÁVEL: HOMENAGEM A LAURENT THÉVENOT**

#### **Resumo**

**Palavras-chave**  
Sociologia pragmática;  
Thévenot;  
Regimes de engajamento;  
Teoria sociológica.

Em seu trabalho impressionante e inovador, Laurent Thévenot demonstrou que a vida social é construída por meio de práticas frágeis de coordenação, justificação e mudanças nos regimes de engajamento (familiar, planejado, público). Seus conceitos – como ordens de valor e investimentos em forma – mostram como as pessoas compõem um “mundo comum” em diversas situações, ao mesmo tempo em que alertam para a perda de pluralidade sob padrões rígidos.

**Laurence Kaufmann** is a full professor of Sociology at the University of Lausanne and Research Associate at the EHESS (Paris). Drawing mainly on sociology but also on history, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology, her interdisciplinary research focuses on social ontology and the constitution of collectives, the transformation of the public sphere, the authority of the first person and the role of emotions. Recent publications: L.Kaufmann (2025). "Discovering Society, Inventing Sociology: Sieyès and the Revolutionary Origins of the Sciences of Society," *Sociological Theory*, 43(2), 157-183.

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