

CONVERSATIONS WITH RAYMOND BOUDON

TRAIAN ROTARIU¹

ABSTRACT. On the 15th of January 1991, Raymond Boudon was awarded *Doctor Honoris Causa* of the Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca. His visit occasioned several formal and informal encounters with members of the newly revitalized Sociology Department led by Ioan Aluaş, opening up inspiring conversations which were published soon after as an imaginary dialogue between professor Boudon and his formal doctoral student, Traian Rotariu. The article aims to provide wider access to these conversations by translating them into English.

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Traian Rotariu (TR): You often use the term „intellectuals”. How would you define this category of persons and why would they be of interest for sociologists?

Raymond Boudon (RB): The term “intellectual” is hard to define. Although the word as such is recent – it only dates back to the Dreyfus affair – it refers to a long-lasting social category that used to be called “humanists” in the 16th century, then „philosophers” in the 18th century. In this sense, the intellectuals are those

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² Traian Rotariu’s reconstruction of these dialogues was published in Romanian as “De vorbă cu profesorul Raymond Boudon” [Conversations with professor Raymond Boudon] (1991), *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Seria Sociologia-Politologia*, 36(1-2): 141-144.

who, employing their prestige and authority as producers of knowledge, engage into the critique of dominant values, the expression and promotion of new values, which may actually be not new at all, but rather a return to the dominant values of previous times. The most prominent examples of this sort of intellectuals are, probably, Erasmus, Voltaire and Zola. This definition can be extended, linking the notion of intellectuals to the idea of a critical stance towards all existing “institutions”, understood in the broadest sense of the term as a multitude of forms of social organizations up to a global level. At the end, the term could gain an even larger sense, referring to all those who contribute, directly or indirectly, to the production, confirmation and diffusion of values, world-views, ideas, knowledge and other symbolic products, especially when these contain axiological or, more generally, philosophical consequences. That is why, at least in France, those who work in humanities and social sciences are more readily seen as intellectuals than those working in natural sciences, although there is no doubt that the latter too belong to the category of intellectuals, at least in the broadest sense of the term. For sociologists, this category is interesting from many points of view, but now I would like to discuss only one. Namely, the relations between intellectuals and their publics, in other words the problem of intellectual markets. Needless to say, these markets are domain-specific. The physicist, for example, addresses a rather narrow public of those who possess certain competences to understand experiments and tests’ results, while the public of a writer is much wider, as the only skills needed are reading and a kind of sensibility to such artistic products. The evaluation criteria also differ: a theorem is evaluated in terms of “true” or “false”, while a novel in terms of “good” or “bad”. Nothing new with this distinction, yet it offers coordinates for a wide spectrum of intermediary sciences, which “behave” differently in relation to the cognitive and the aesthetic value-categories. It is the task of the sociology of science to explain how it is possible that representatives of these intermediary disciplines adopt divergent strategies towards these value-categories, and that within an auto-proclaimed scientific discipline we meet an aesthetic discourse. And it is also the task of sociology to explain why, in certain circumstances, intellectuals awarded with significant credit try to convince their publics about certain value-judgements or, the other way around, why the public so eagerly accepts well-known intellectuals’ judgements in domains outside of their fields of expertise.

TR: There was lot of attention driven to the assumption that sociologists would have an ability to manipulate people. What do you think about that?

RB: I wouldn’t use such a term, but rather *influence*. From the very beginning of the discipline, there were persons who explicitly tried to influence the society which they were living in. This is the case of August Comte. In other

words, there is a long history of all these. Looking at sociological studies, we can differentiate between at least four categories. There are studies that try to *explain* social phenomena, others are merely *descriptive* and materialize most often in research reports; some are *essayistic* and appeal to our sensibility, their authors trying to reach out to a larger public, with all the consequences of potential fame and market success; while others attempt explicitly to influence social change. In this latter category one may include the Frankfurt School, or those working within the frame of the *labelling theory* from the sociology of deviance in the US, or feminist research focusing on the status of women. Generally speaking, these studies do not provide novel information, or only very few. Nevertheless, laying the emphasis on certain problems or social categories, and insisting upon them, they manage to influence opinion.

TR: If I understand you correctly, only the first two types of products should be called “sociological”. Then, what should be the role of sociology in nowadays societies?

RB: The response comes naturally, based on the previous classification. Essentially, the sociologist should be *a producer of knowledge* concerning various aspects and problems of social life. This knowledge may take a simpler, descriptive form, responding to questions such as *How many? How much? How?* or more complex questions, with an explanatory value, such as *Why?* Studies from the first category offer information well known by those living in those situations, but not by the society at large; for example, life in prisons or in shared accommodations. Moreover, for the functioning of modern societies, it is necessary to know certain facts that can be expressed quantitatively – statistically, which only sociologist may offer. Similarly to demographers and economists, it is the responsibility of sociologists to collect certain kinds of social data. Explanatory studies should answer legitimate questions about observations of social phenomena and processes that are not self-evident, easy to comprehend. For example, why suicide rates increases or decreases in a particular social category, or why the intensity of religious phenomena changes, or why a given ideology cannot penetrate certain societies. I consider important to bear in mind that, when trying to answer such questions, provided that they are clearly and precisely formulated, sociologists employ explanatory paradigms in an analogous manner as natural sciences do.

TR: Do you consider then that there are no differences between explanations provided by social sciences and natural sciences?

RB: Essentially there are no differences. The explanations of social phenomena follow the same scheme as explanations of natural phenomena; think, for example, about the refraction of light. The starting point consists of a set of

already accepted statements, and the conclusions derive from them. The only problem we encounter in social sciences is that we have actors who are consciously attempting to reach certain objectives. That is why, in order to provide a complete explanation, social sciences need to go down at the level of the individual and be comprehensive in the Weberian sense of the term. Nonetheless, this does not mean that one should abandon scientific objectivity.

TR: Turning to a different topic: you often write about a “crisis of education” or of educational institutions. Could you elaborate more on this?

RB: Indeed, this is a problem that had preoccupied me for a long time, given the important place of the school in nowadays societies, evident by simply looking at the high number of persons involved in educational activities (students and teachers) and the amount of expenditures on education. Despite the considerable effort of Western states, there were significant changes concerning students and teachers alike, which can be seen as effects of the crisis of the educational system. I have written extensively on this topic, thus I would only mention the most important things. The general crisis of secondary education can be detected across Europe, although some of its features differ from country to country. One of the causes resides in the fact that the increasing number of pupils entering secondary education was not met by expanded infrastructure and enlarged number of teachers. After 1955, France gradually turned away from an elitist model of secondary education towards mass-education, which meant not only a quantitative change, but also a change in the strategies of the involved actors. Notably, the number of pupils who failed exams and consequently repeated school years has been approaching zero, which indicates that average quality of training and evaluations decreased, and the value of high school diplomas eroded. Moreover, nowadays the compositions of classes are very heterogeneous from the point of view of competencies, motivation to study, students' expectations etc. All these generate great difficulties for the French educational system. As mentioned before, there are differences between countries, even between neighbouring countries such as France and Germany. In the latter country, secondary education is basically divided between theoretically-oriented and technical schools. While technical schools exist in France as well, its segment had been constantly eclipsed by theoretical schools. This difference largely explains why the transition towards mass secondary education occurred more smoothly in Germany.

Similar problems can be detected in the case of tertiary education. In the US, 70% of high school graduates enter tertiary education; in France this percentage is still lower, yet steadily increasing. However, in the US tertiary education is much more diverse with respect to the level of competences, ranging

from colleges that barely reach out at the level of the French Baccalaureate to highly competitive elite-universities. Thus in the UK anyone could find a college/university that meets her/his expectations, whereas in Romania this is hardly possible.

TR: By the end, I would like to ask you about your impressions in Romania during this very first visit.

RB: The visit was short, the days incredibly busy, therefore I couldn't see much. However, I was positively impressed by the teachers and the students whom I met, by the depth of their knowledge and horizons of preoccupations. Transylvanian cities are beautiful and I was glad to see that they have luckily escaped from the bulldozers that destroyed the historical centre of Bucharest. Needless to say, I have sensed the amount of deprivation, especially material deprivation: to be honest, I was horrified by the miserable conditions in trains. But I do hope that you will have the wisdom and determination to overpass all these difficulties and next time when I visit Romania I will encounter more smiling faces and more optimism.

(editors' translation from Romanian)

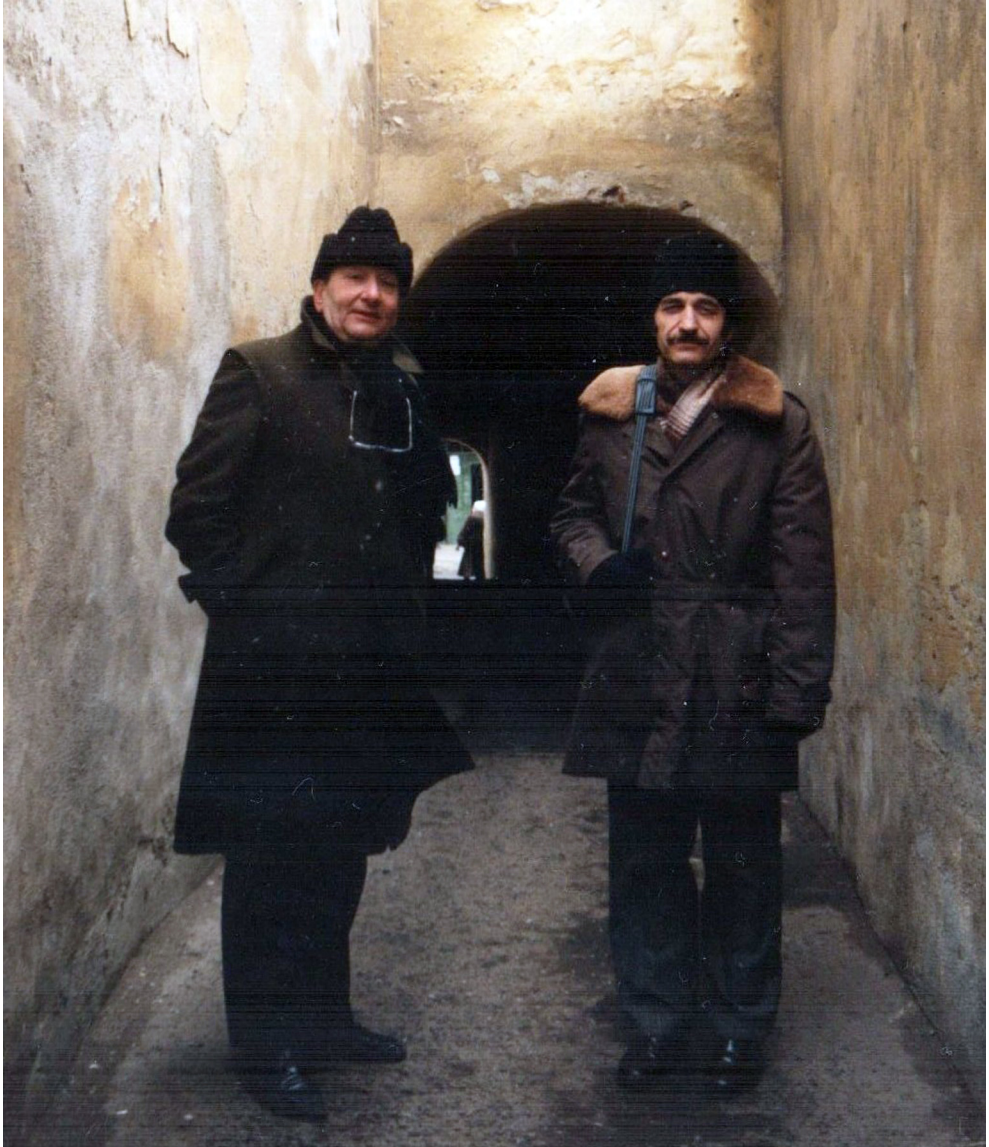


Photo of Raymond Boudon (left) and Traian Rotariu (right) near the wall of the Alba Iulia fortress, Romania, January 1991. Courtesy to Traian Rotariu.