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Luc BOLTANSKI and Arnaud ESQUERRE, *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*  
(Paris, Gallimard, 2022, 352 p.)

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Luc Boltanski's and Arnaud Esquerre's new book, *Qu'est-ce que l'actualité politique ? Événements et opinions au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, looks at the relationship between two sets of processes that animate the public space: the first pertains to what the authors refer to as "*mise en actualité*," or the processes of putting out news; the second deals with *politisation*, or the process of problematization carried out with the facts that have been laid out on the table. The bigger ambition of their masterful analysis of the making of public opinion is to examine more closely the changes that our liberal and representative democracy currently faces, thereby offering insight on how to make it more resilient.

Based on text analyses of comments around news articles from *Le Monde* and videos from *YouTube*, the authors examine how the news is being made and being politicized in today's capitalist system. Boltanski and Esquerre present their theoretical and empirical work in the span of nine chapters coupled with a detailed introduction and thought-provoking conclusion—all structured around two parts that stand as the main pillars of analysis. These pillars present well-identified and stable concepts that put their theoretical and empirical examinations into movement. The first part, focusing on an ontology of the news itself, looks at how *l'actualité*, or the news, is tied to the longer stretch of History. The second, on the other hand, deals with the politicization that occurs in between the lines that have been inscribed in the news and the course of History it has traced.

Readers on both sides of the Atlantic who have the opportunity to obtain and go through this book will thus find themselves engaging in at least two important tasks: 1) fully appreciating the authors' conceptualizations of "*actualité politique*" and the processes of politicization they theorize, and 2) thinking about how these would be best translated or applied across different contexts. Early on, readers will quickly come to the realization that "*political news*" is probably not the right term to translate the very concept that Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre are dealing with in their analysis. In fact, the words "news" or the term "political" cannot fully encapsulate their ideas and intricate

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conceptualization of what *actualité politique* actually is. These words would be well too narrow as they would miss the link that the authors make to (the making of) History and (the processes of calibrating the inner conflicts found in our) Democracy. As a matter of fact, they would not make room for a fully-fledged comprehension of the processes of politicization that the authors discuss [246].

Despite significant attempts to find a better translation for their immensely rich and enlightening conceptualization of what *actualité politique* is, all that the English language seems to allow us to use is the lesser alternative of “current affairs” or “current events.” Nonetheless, it would be important to go beyond such limitations and fully appreciate Boltanski’s and Esquerre’s theoretical prowess without getting things lost in translation.

The authors’ approach, according to their claims, is to analyze these from the perspective of the “ordinary” people. More importantly, they attempt to capture processes that are *in the making*, or “en train de se faire,” and analyze in depth the different “déplacements,” or shifts that occur along the way. In order to do so, they conduct an analysis of 120,000 comments made at the bottom of articles in the newspaper *Le Monde* in September and October 2019, and complement these with approximately 8,300 comments found on two news video channels broadcast by the Institut National d’Audiovisual (INA) on YouTube in January 2021. Most of the comments they analyzed are rather short: approximately 1,000 characters for the ones found in *Le Monde*.

In Part I, the authors present an analysis of the formation of what they call “plan d’actualité,” linking it to temporality, processes of periodization, and the intricate relationship between the news and History. The authors identify two main forms of modality that characterize *l’actualité*: experience and hearsay (or what is heard of). Experience is what is accessible; what is heard of rather than experienced is what remains inaccessible. The former can be attached to history (small h)—the stories that one lives—while the latter can be brought back to History (capital H). The distance between what is experienced and what is heard of is often reduced by a process of transposition either through the fear of the threat that the news could have happened to us or through sympathy.

Both news and history share a common denominator: the periodization of time—differentiating between the time when the facts actually happen and the time they are enunciated or diffused. The authors delve into the idea of decomposing and de-structuring events but, ultimately, news and history go hand in hand [80], regardless of whether they more heavily draw on what they call primary facts or derived facts. The

interlink between the two then forge generations and their associated characteristics.

While Part I, which dealt with *actualité* and History, was focused on temporality, the periodization, and the complex interrelation between the present and the past (both making History), Part II more heavily focuses on the spatial dimension—especially along the political spectrum. It presents an empirical analysis of the “déplacements” or shifts or moves that occur in the cartology of the political sphere when dealing with a “political problem” and delve into the different characteristics of the processes of politicization.

After a thoughtful discussion of the different aspects of political discussions—such as the risks that they bring—the authors ensure that they have contextualized their data source by considering both the journalists and their readers as important players on the map. Their empirical analysis of the comments gathered was noteworthy—even if they mostly relied on word clouds and frequencies. Chapter 7, wherein they provide an in-depth analysis of what they call “le travail du ‘on’” best translated as “we” or rather “us”—they enrich the sociological analysis of the “us vs. them” by stressing that the idea of “we” denotes something more of belonging to a collective as opposed to using “on” which injects more of a distancing as it navigates between the “he” or “her” [190].

Going beyond an empirical analysis of the comments, however, the authors present their conceptualization of a political problem and the context in which it emerges—namely that of a divided society with the remnants of previous processes of politicizations that challenged the status quo. They show that the process of politicization is animated with its own dynamics and conflicts, especially across generations, and is developed on three main fronts: 1) *menace* or threat (especially vis-a-vis the future), 2) *recours* or appeal, and 3) *accusations* or accusations.

A central concept in this second segment of the book is the idea of “déplacement” or shift, defined as:

Modification of the context of interpretation of a theme, a proposition or any element of political semantics, having the effect of modifying its positioning on the left-right axis and thereby affecting its political meaning [274].

*Modification du contexte d'interprétation d'un thème, d'une proposition ou de tout élément de sémantique politique, ayant pour effet d'en modifier le positionnement sur l'axe gauche-droite et par là d'en affecter la signification politique [274].*

Such “déplacements” are traced throughout different empirical examples such as discussions around Islam or ecology.

As such, this book is a treasure trove of theories and insights on how to best understand what *actualité* actually is. Most notably, the ways in

which temporality is dealt with are absolutely remarkable. The dissection that is undertaken in terms of what composes and structures *l'actualité*, or news, highlighting the different time stamps that are attached to an event—such as the time the fact happens, the time it is picked up by journalists and enunciated or recounted, the time it is picked up by readers, and the time it takes to make History thought an inter-connection between the present and the past—is extremely enlightening and creative.

The ways in which they are able to unpack their complex theories are also outstanding. While building their theoretical framework on stable and well-delineated concepts that serve as the main pillar of their arguments, they are able to put things into motion in a way that allows the reader to see how *l'actualité* and History are in the making, *en train de se faire*, in a fluid and clear manner that should be a model for many of us.

Yet, the authors could have spent more time on making the second key word of their concept d'actualité politique. That is the *politique*, or political. They are clear on what is not meant by political in the scope of their work—neither a too narrow view of the politique nor a too broad view as if to say that “everything is political” just as some claim that “everything is social” [13]. However, readers would benefit from a crisper clarification of what their exact conceptualization of the term “political” is. Chapter 8 does try to clarify the concept of a “political problem” [199] but does not seem to be enough.

In light of this, a series of questions around the idea of the *political*, *inaccessible*, and “*déplacements*” still remain to be answered. Regarding the idea of the *political*, it would be important to further clarify: what actually is the *political* in the concept of *actualité politique*? Can there be social problems that are non-political in such a theoretical framework? If so, would they be subject to the same mechanisms identified here? Given that the authors emphasize that Left and Right political positionings rely on different ideas of progress, could we expect different mechanisms to be deployed in the media spheres of the Left and Right, or across the political spectrum? Assuming we can, one is prone to ask: why did the authors only look at comments from *Le Monde* and not from *Le Figaro* as well? More broadly, it would have been helpful to know how the selection of the articles and video clips commented on was made. For instance, was it only made with articles found in the political section of the newspaper?

As far as the issues of *inaccessibility* and *déplacements* are concerned, younger readers who identify as digital natives could well ask: is the inaccessible truly inaccessible nowadays? What about live videos? Or other avenues or mechanisms of resonance? To what extent should we

expect the dynamics to be different on social media, as opposed to comments around the mainstream media like *Le Monde*? Ultimately, should we not look at the work of journalists, rather than the comments made around the articles that have already been published, to fully understand the processes of making *l'actualité politique*? The authors speak of *déplacements* or shifts that lead to a repositioning of some sort; should we not also consider *detachments* or the more drastic breaking away from the status quo?

Last, but not least, readers are left with some greater questions around the issues of time, space, and agency: how is the sociology *temporalisée*, or the sociology of temporality, that the authors present here different from the existing processual sociology (à la Abbott, for instance)? Is this book not too French-specific, especially regarding the argument related to the interpretation of History and the making of History? One could also argue that there would be a need to “bring people back in” into the authors’ analysis—which tends to be very structural in its nature.

Nonetheless, scholars of public opinion and media sociology would greatly benefit from the theoretical and empirical undertaking that Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre present in this fascinating new book. In particular, the authors’ discussions of the implications that the *actualité politique* and the *déplacements* have on democracy’s well-being are remarkable. The insights that they put forward on extremism, pluralism, the need to mediate among different parties or entities, or even the distinction between factual truths and interpretations open the door to deeper conversations about the impact on our current democracy of misinformation, technology, polarization, and capitalism.

Most notably, they emphasize the tension that we each face as we try to make sense of History—both in terms of our own stories and History itself. They invite us to forge what they call a “conscience historique,” or historical conscience [264-265]. Political news, by giving access to what people would otherwise not have access to, seems to be key in equipping the different democratic actors of the critical capacity that is deemed indispensable for the well-functioning of a democratic system.

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