**Argumenter dans un champ de forces. Essai de balistique sociologique, by Francis Chateauraynaud, Paris, Pétra, 2011, 484 pp., ISBN 978-2-84743-039-4**

‘The French exception’, a term most often associated with the country’s somewhat protectionist cultural policy, despite the inevitable downsides of isolation, sometimes generates novel innovations outside of the mainstream. One of the most interesting recent examples is the French pragmatic sociology, developed largely in reaction to the alleged excessive determinism of Bourdieusian sociology (e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).[[1]](#footnote-1) Somewhat at the margins of the pragmatist tradition, and together with his small research group (GSPR) at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, Francis Chateauraynaud has developed his ‘socio-informatics’ (Chateauraynaud 2003) analysis of public controversies in areas such as health and the environment, nuclear energy, GMOs and nanotechnologies since the early 1990s. The ‘sociological ballistics’ presents the current thinking within this strand of pragmatism.

The starting point for the research that Chateauraynaud and his team have conducted since the early 1990s lies in the re-emergence of radical criticism and contestation in the area of public controversies related to risk and technology. In France, the beginning of the new era can be dated back to 1991 and the eruption of the ‘contaminated blood’ scandal, followed in the subsequent years by a number of controversies concerning for example the health impacts of asbestos, nuclear power and radiation risk, the ‘mad cow disease’, and the GMOs. The present book continues this work and provides numerous empirical examples drawn from about twenty cases of conflict and controversy over the period from 2002 to 2010. While many of these cases represent the bread and butter of science and technology studies, the book extends the range of analysis to more unconventional areas such as war conflicts in Iraq and Kosovo.

But what does Chateauraynaud seek to demonstrate through his ‘sociological ballistics’, by comparing these cases of conflict and controversy? The central task can be summarised in two questions. First, how can one explain why some causes, contestations, demands, and topics take foothold in the public discussion and policymaking, possibly thereby fundamentally changing the framing of problems and solutions as well as policy outcomes, while others - however honourable and justifiable they might be -remain as protests by the few? Second, how can one model the constraints upon public action and provide a minimum of structure to analyse across cases and situations without unduly reducing the range of the possible trajectories?

A common thread running through the book is a central characteristic of pragmatism: the constant attempt to go beyond the conventional dichotomies and bridge the boundaries between, for example, micro and macro, structure and agency, theory and practice, and quantitative and qualitative. In order to do so, Chateauraynaud remobilises the concept developed in his earlier work, namely that of ‘*prise*’, which could be translated as ‘grip’, ‘grasp’, or ‘hold’ (Bessy and Chateauraynaud 1995). The concept is derived from the ‘sociology of perception’, which – adhering to ‘moderate’ constructivism – acknowledges the existence of a reality independent of our perception, but affirms that it is only through a historically shaped collective practice that we are able to ‘get a hold’ of that reality and ‘grasp’ its characteristics.

On this foundation, ‘ballistics’ develops its central concept, ‘*portée de l’argument’*, which could be translated as the reach and the impact of an argument. However, the word ‘*portée’* also refers to the distance or the trajectory travelled by an object, the point(s) of impact, and the ‘grasp’ or ‘grip’ as described above. The ‘portée’ of an argument – in all of these senses – does not depend only on the quality of the arguments or the argumentative competence of the actors. Hence, to reach public arenas and to have an impact an argument must certainly be based on a logically and ethically defensible cause, and be expressed intelligibly and convincingly. However, this alone is not enough, since the advocates of the cause must also have be able to enter – and operate effectively in – a ‘force field’, that is, in the context of the prevailing power relations and structural constraints. True to his commitment of transcending dichotomies, Chateauraynaud employs ‘portée’ as a devise for building bridges between the ‘internalist’ and ‘externalist’ explanations within argumentation theory. ‘*Portée*’ acknowledges the fact that the success of an argument in the public sphere can be reduced neither to its inherent quality attributes, nor to extra-linguistic factors such as the status of the protagonists and characteristics of speech situations.

The nine chapters of the book are presented in three parts. The first chapter presents the central ideas of ‘ballistics’, and explains the changing regime of critique and mobilisation since the early 1990s. The book then motivates the need for a new approach by exposing the lacunae in the existing approaches such as the argumentation analysis in sociology of public debate and controversies (chapter 2) and frame analysis (chapter 3). Chapter 4 finalises the first part of the book by outlining the six phases of an ideal type of a ‘ballistic trajectory’: the emergence of a cause; scientific controversy; accusation, denouncement, polemic and scandal; political mobilisation; normalisation (introduction of new measures of standardisation and policy); and relaunch and rebound. The second part of the book is dedicated to scientific and technical expertise and the construction of evidence – a process in which Chateauraynaud sees public controversies playing a vital role. Chapter 5 draws on science and technology studies to elaborate on the various roles of expertise in critique and contestation, while chapter 6 focuses on the production of credible and reliable evidence, arguing that the key challenge in any such process is to render the evidence ‘tangible’, notably by anchoring it in the ‘common sense’. Chapter 7 examines the role of lived experience and emotion in the production of evidence. The third part of the book switches the focus to future visions and the internationalisation of controversies. Chapter 8 introduces the character of a ‘backwards visionary’ as a skilful observer of ‘weak signals’, and the degree of openness of the future visions as a key quality requirement for such visioning. Chapter 9 deploys the concepts of ‘ballistics’ to the analysis of the mobilisation of causes based on universal values, within the constraints placed by vested interests and power at the international level.

In a brief concluding chapter Chateauraynaud suggests that the force and the virtue of pragmatism is a kind of casuistry: an effort to increase the intelligibility of societal processes by joining and comparing cases that at first sight seem disconnected and incomparable with each other. Instead of pretending to provide an ultimate, unquestioned interpretation of a process, pragmatic analysis advocates openness: it merely provides a first shot, designed to invite other actors and analysts to re-examine and enrich the analytical framework, and provide novel interpretations.

‘Ballistics’ is enjoyable reading to even those without in-depth knowledge of pragmatic sociology. For the readers of CPS, the book treads on mostly familiar ground. For instance, Chateauraynaud’s suggestion that the plurality of the forms of engagement – including non-deliberative ones – should constitute a quality criterion for good democracy resembles the attempts to connect the strands of ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ forms of deliberative democracy (e.g. Mansbridge 1999; Hendriks 2006).

Unquestionable strengths of the book include its rich case study material, which helps avoid excessive theorisation, and the explicit attention to internationalisation of controversies and the detailed analysis of interaction between different levels of analysis – from grassroots to the global. The variety of the types and domains of empirical examples of controversies, in turn, exemplifies an often-employed strategy by pragmatists to test and refine their theoretical constructs.

In the richness of the empirical material lies, however, perhaps also the main shortcoming of the book: an additional period of maturation and condensation might have resulted in a more easily digestible product. Any volunteers for producing a slightly abridged English-language translation…?

**References**

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1. The popularity outside of the country’s borders has grown to an extent that calls into question the applicability of the term exceptionalism itself. See for example a special issue on pragmatic sociology in the European Journal of Social Theory: year 2011, vol. 14, no. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)