

JUSTIFICATION, EVALUATION AND  
CRITIQUE IN THE STUDY OF  
ORGANIZATIONS: CONTRIBUTIONS  
FROM FRENCH PRAGMATIST  
SOCIOLOGY

# RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS  
VOLUME 52

**JUSTIFICATION,  
EVALUATION AND  
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OF ORGANIZATIONS:  
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM  
FRENCH PRAGMATIST  
SOCIOLOGY**

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# **SECTION I – INTRODUCTION**

# JUSTIFICATION, EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE IN THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

Charlotte Cloutier, Jean-Pascal Gond and  
Bernard Leca

## ABSTRACT

*This volume presents state-of-the-art research and thinking on the analysis of justification, evaluation and critique in organizations, as inspired by the foundational ideas of French Pragmatist Sociology's economies of worth (EW) framework. In this introduction, we begin by underlining the EW framework's importance in sociology and social theory more generally and discuss its relative neglect within organizational theory, at least until now. We then present an overview of the framework's intellectual roots, and for those who are new to this particular theoretical domain, offer a brief introduction to the theory's main concepts and core assumptions. This we follow with an overview of the contributions included in this volume. We conclude by highlighting the EW framework's important yet largely untapped potential for advancing our understanding of organizations more broadly. Collectively, the contributions in this volume help demonstrate the potential of the EW framework to (1) advance current understanding of organizational processes by unpacking justification dynamics at the individual level of analysis,*

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(2) refresh critical perspectives in organization theory by providing them with pragmatic foundations, (3) expand and develop the study of valuation and evaluation in organizations by reconsidering the notion of worth, and finally (4) push the boundaries of the framework itself by questioning and fine tuning some of its core assumptions. Taken as a whole, this volume not only carves a path for a deeper embedding of the EW approach into contemporary thinking about organizations, it also invites readers to refine and expand it by confronting it with a wider range of diverse empirical contexts of interest to organizational scholars.

**Keywords:** Economies of worth; justification; critique; evaluation; French Pragmatist Sociology

French Pragmatist Sociology and in particular studies building on the Economies of Worth (EW) framework have profoundly renewed the landscape of social theory and sociology over the last 30 years, first in France and then beyond. In his endorsement of the English translation of Boltanski and Thévenot's *On Justification. Economies of Worth* in 2006, David Stark describes the book as 'one of the most important contributions to the field of sociology' that 'does not fit neatly into any of the major theoretical perspectives that currently dominate the field'. For others, *On Justification* is simply 'the most important sociological treatise in post-Bourdieu French sociology' (Baert & Carreira da Silva, 2010, p. 43). In his endorsement of a recent collection of essays dedicated to Boltanski's work (Susen & Turner, 2014), the pragmatist philosopher Hans Joas claimed that 'Boltanski has given new meaning to the notion of "critique" – away from the pretensions of academic radicals, toward actual human beings and their moral judgements'. The 'spirit' of the EW framework and other major books from French Pragmatist Sociology (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) has not only diffused to social theory through engagements with critical scholars (du Gay & Morgan, 2013) or debates with lead authors from the Frankfurt school (Boltanski, Honneth, & Celikates, 2014) it has also acted as a catalyst for important sociological developments around the concept of valuation (Fourcade, 2011; Hutter & Stark, 2015) and cultural models of action (Silber, 2016; Vaisey, 2009).

Despite early acknowledgement of the relevance of the EW framework for studying organizations (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007; Livian & Herreros, 1994), and a recognition that it provides 'a highly original perspective stressing the importance of processes of critique and justification for the production of organizational order and change' (Jagd, 2011, p. 344), organizational scholars

have not yet fully explored its potential for investigating organizational phenomena. Past organizational theory research that has mobilized the EW framework has tended to use it as a way of complementing more mainstream theories – such as new institutionalism or the institutional logics perspective. For example, [McInerney's \(2008\)](#) study of field-configuring events in the technology assistance field helped unpack how institutional entrepreneurs ([DiMaggio, 1988](#)) legitimize new practices by providing accounts that serve to align them with dominant orders of worth. Other studies using the EW framework have been helpful for advancing our understanding of institutional work, by explaining legitimacy maintenance ([Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006](#)) as a dynamic combination of multiple orders of worth ([Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011](#); [Ramirez, 2013](#); [Taupin, 2012](#)). While demonstrating the 'generative' potential of the EW framework by combining it with other theories is both interesting and useful, there are many missed opportunities in failing to embrace the EW framework as a theory that is worthy for its own sake, one that can be particularly helpful, for example, for uncovering some of the normative contradictions that underlie institutional life by investigating how individual actors engage with a plurality of moral orders.

Some of this potential can be seen in studies that have mobilized the EW framework to address topics such as intra-organizational dynamics of justification ([Jagd, 2011](#)), the strategic management of pluralistic organizations ([Daigle & Rouleau, 2010](#); [Denis et al., 2007](#)) decision-making in public management contexts ([Dodier & Camus, 1998](#); [Fronza & Moriceau, 2008](#); [Oldenhof, Postma, & Putters, 2013](#)), or inter-organizational relations ([Cloutier & Langley, 2017](#); [Mesny & Mailhot, 2007](#)). By recognizing the dynamics by which distinct value sets and normative orders in intra- and inter-organizational settings can be made compatible or not, the EW framework offers a pragmatic approach for (1) unpacking what underpins social critiques of unfair situations in social life ([Boltanski, 2011](#)), and (2) understanding how actors negotiate agreements around issues of justice ([Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006](#)) and by so doing, help researchers arrive at a more fine-grained understanding of how social actors manage to coordinate their actions.

It is in light of the above observations and the opportunities they gave rise to that we settled on the following four objectives for the volume: (1) clarify how individuals manage the contradictions and compromises inherent in organizational pluralism by considering the daily moral life of actors inhabiting institutions; (2) look at organizations critically by unpacking the rhetorical foundations of critiques, and pragmatically examining the roles of rhetoric and justification in the critical operations that organizational actors engage in; (3) reconsider the notion of worth beyond its purely economic sense and consider the multiple facets that constitute and produce value in organizational life and (4) push the boundaries of the EW framework itself and by so doing, help further embed notions such as justification, critique and valuation in our