

Heilbron, Johan

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Economic Sociology in France

by

Johan Heilbron

Centre Lillois d'Etudes et de Recherches Sociologiques et Economiques (CLERSE)

johan.heilbron@wxs.nl

Until recently, economic sociology did not exist as a recognisable subfield in French social science. Various social science approaches to the economy emerged during the 1980s, but none of the French currents defined itself as economic sociology. The 'regulation school' developed an unorthodox macro-perspective, which was shaped by sources ranging from neo-marxism to the structural history of the Annales school. The 'economics of conventions' adopted an interpretative micro-perspective, focusing on economic actors and their situated interaction. The Revue du Mauss (1983) presented itself as an interdisciplinary platform for 'anti-utilitarian' currents of thought.

The reception of American economic sociology took place primarily within these various movements. Much of it was therefore perceived in a context which was quite different from the American one. Although some economic sociologists from the US, Mark Granovetter among them, participated in French conferences and workshops, their work was discussed in a constellation in which 'economic sociology' did not appear as a distinctive field of scholarship and research.

It was only when the publication of The Handbook of Economic Sociology (1994, ed. by Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg) that the scope and the promise of economic sociology became fully visible. Economic sociology has since become an issue in France as well, and the emerging interest is well illustrated by the fact that in 1997 three major journals published special issues on economic sociology: Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales (no. 119, 1997), Revue française de sociologie (no. 3, 1997), and Cahiers internationaux de sociologie (vol. CII, 1997).

In the following note I will briefly present four research areas in which work has been done recently. Given the rapidly expanding interest and the limited space available here, this is obviously only a selection of a larger set of research efforts.

The Structural Dynamics of the Economic Field

A first body of work has emerged from the network around Pierre Bourdieu's journal Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales (ARSS). As is well known, Bourdieu himself has a long-standing interest in the sociology and ethnography of economic practices. His early work on Algeria was, among others, concerned with the discrepancies between the dispositions of Algerian sub-proletarians and the demands of the capitalist market. Bourdieu's view that the functioning of fields demands specific dispositions of the actors involved, has remained one of the characteristics of the economic sociology that one finds in ARSS.

From its beginning ARSS has published a substantial number of articles in the domain of economic sociology, although they are not presented as belonging to a specific area, economic sociology, to be

separated from other areas of social science inquiry. Thematic issues of the journal, for example, were successively concerned with 'Le patronat' (no. 20, 1978), 'Le capital social' (no. 31, 1980), 'Le construction sociale de l'économie' (no. 65, 1986), 'L'économie de la maison' (no. 80-81, 1990), 'Economie et morale' (no. 94, 1992) and, most recently, 'Economie et économistes' (no. 119, 1997). Some of this work has received attention outside France (like the work on the French economic elite, and on social capital), other aspects have remained largely unnoticed.

The collective research project on the market for individual houses (ARSS 80-81, 1990) is a paradigmatic example of Bourdieu's approach to economic sociology. It analyses in great detail the arrangements and the functioning of this complex market. Bourdieu's starting point is that the purchase of a house is both an economic and a symbolic investment. It entails not only economic transactions but also an emotional investment, one that is linked to the family and, most often, to a project of biological and social reproduction. This specific characteristic gives the housing market a particular structure, visible, for example, in the way modern firms advertise their products by appealing to very traditional values. Various aspects of the market are subsequently studied in a series of articles: size, structure and strategy of major and minor firms, the actual interactions between sellers and buyers (as based on tape-recordings), the post-war evolution of the demand for housing and its determinants, the changing housing policy of state agencies.

A more recent example is Bourdieu's analysis of the French publishing field. Here again is a market for goods which are object of both economic and symbolic investments. By analysing 61 publishing houses with the help of multiple correlation analysis, Bourdieu and his co-workers found different dimensions which structure the French publishing field. The first dimension opposes the long-standing major firms, which cumulate all sorts of capital (Gallimard is the prime example), to small and recent firms that are practically devoid of resources. These small firms often do not possess much more than some symbolic capital in the form of the esteem and recognition they have gained from avant-garde writers, critics, enlightened bookshop owners and informed readers. The second dimension differentiates publishers on the basis of the structure of their capital, that is according to the relative weight of their financial and their symbolic capital. The third dimension distinguishes publishers who publish few translations, usually from little-spoken languages, from those who publish many translations mostly from English.

In a general article on the 'economic field' (Bourdieu 1997), Bourdieu proposes a systematic outline of his view. What he calls the economic field is the product of a process of historical differentiation which has allowed the economy to function according to specific laws ('business is business'). This particular social world is, first of all, seen as a field of forces between actors. The relations between these actors, usually firms, are based on the volume and the composition of their capital. The concept of a field is thus distinguished from the interactionist view which characterises both game theory and network analysis. The economic field is, secondly, defined as a field of struggle, as an opposition mainly between established powers and their challengers. Here Bourdieu treats a series of questions about the conditions and strategies of change (and in particular the role of technological capital). The competing actors or agents are no homogeneous units: firms and other institutions are themselves fields, consisting of competing groups. In order to avoid a mechanistic image of the field dynamics, Bourdieu thus differentiates his analysis further and in the last part of his paper introduces the notion of 'economic habitus' to replace what he considers to be a scholastic notion: homo economicus. As

a 'socialised subjectivity' the habitus informs the ways in which economic and other interests are actually perceived and pursued.

In addition to this general model and its applications, one more specific aspect of Bourdieu's work is worth mentioning, because it has produced interesting work for which there is no equivalent in American economic sociology. In the functioning of fields intellectual experts often play a strategically important role, especially if they operate in the name of science and rationality. The sociology of economic expertise and of economics is therefore an integral part of economic sociology. This reflexive dimension is indeed missing in much of American economic sociology. In the otherwise very complete Handbook of Economic Sociology, there is no chapter devoted to the sociology of economic expertise and economics. Some of the members of Bourdieu's group have done important work in this respect. Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth have investigated the genesis of the so-called 'Washington consensus', the neo-liberal model of economic policies which have replaced Keynesianism (Dezalay and Garth 1998). Frédéric Lebaron similarly published a paper on the social construction of 'economic neutrality', a study which was based on the monetary council of the French central bank (Lebaron 1997a). Lebaron has also studied the field of economics and presented an illuminating analysis of the main oppositions among leading French economists (Lebaron 1997b).

The attention for the cognitive dimension of economic practice is also present in other French research groups. One line of work is connected to ethnographical and anthropological approaches, the other to the history and sociology of economic thought.

Economic Ethnography and the Anthropology of Markets

The journal for a historically oriented social science, Genèses, published a special issue in 1996 devoted to 'economic ethnography'. The various articles, collected and edited by Florence Weber, share a great finesse in their descriptions and observations; they are particularly sensitive to the categories used to describe and classify economic practices, and they tend to combine this approach quite naturally with a historical perspective. Florence Weber's paper about the domestic economy starts with a critical analysis of statistical surveys and then proposes an alternative framework of analysis. Her paper contains, among other things, original reflections on the significance of 'personal relations'. Hervé Sciardet observes transactions on the side-walks of a flea market. Marie-France Garcia studies the way in which scientific representations intervene in the economy, either by crediting or by discrediting certain practices. Her paper is a continuation of an ingenious article she published earlier on the transformation of a strawberry market in the Sologne region (Garcia 1986). In this pioneering article, she described all the investments that were made to construct a new type of market. It was no coincidence that the new market corresponded so well with the 'pure market' described in economic textbooks. The young counsellor of the Chamber of Agriculture had in fact modelled reality on what he had learned during his training as an economist.

Michel Callon has recently commented on Garcia's paper in a collective volume which is concerned with the cognitive framing of the economy (Callon 1998). Coming from the anthropology of science, Callon states that economics, rather than observing and explaining, actually 'performs, shapes and formats' the economy. The economy is 'embedded not so much in society but in economics'.

Economics is understood in the broadest sense of the term including all the knowledge and practices that make up, for example, accounting or marketing. Sociology, in Callon's view, needs to avoid two pitfalls: to try to enrich homo economicus and to denounce the market. "What we expect from sociology is not a more complex homo economicus, but the comprehension of his simplicity and poverty." Homo economicus is not a fiction; it really exists and the task of the scholar is to understand how calculative agencies are equipped by economics to carry out their calculations. The objective of an anthropology of markets then is to explore the "diversity of calculative agencies forms and distributions and hence of organised markets" (Callon 1998:51).

History and Sociology of Economic Thought

In a very different way, Philippe Steiner has also been concerned with the role of economic knowledge. Steiner, who is both an economist and a sociologist by training, has published extensively on the history of economic thought. In some of this work he has adopted a sociological approach. His Sociologie de la connaissance économique (1998), for example, is a Weberian interpretation of economic knowledge during the formative period of classical political economy (1750-1850). Steiner looks at the various forms of economic knowledge in this period from the perspective of rationalisation. Following Weber's sociology of law and religion, he distinguishes especially between formal and material rationalisation. Not only is the formal rationality of economic theory understood differently by various economists, it is also often in conflict with other forms of rationalisation which equally affect the knowledge of economic processes.

Steiner is also more directly involved in economic sociology and currently co-ordinates a small French network for economic sociology. He has written about economic sociology as an intellectual tradition (1995) and co-authored a book with Jean-Jacques Gislain on the economic sociology of the years between 1890 and 1920. Starting from a number of basic problems inherent in economic theory, Gislain and Steiner show how the major economic sociologists have suggested answers to the questions that pure economics was not able to deal with. The book is organised thematically and discusses the work of Pareto, Veblen, Weber, Durkheim, Simiand and Schumpeter.

Steiner's most recent work is a textbook on economic sociology (1999, in press), which is actually the first one of its kind in French. It will be published this autumn by the publisher La Découverte in a series of smaller textbooks called Repères.

Finance and Social Exclusion

A last area of research which may be mentioned is 'finance and social exclusion'. A group of researchers at the Centre Walras of the University of Lyon -2 has carried out numerous studies in this field, most notably on saving behaviour and systems of micro-finance. Initially concerned with countries in the third world, the research extended to groups of immigrants in Europe, and has since 1994 focused on financial practices outside of the regular system of banking and finance.

In the fieldwork which is done, two types of questions are recurrent: which are the representations of money, saving and finance of the specific group concerned, and which kind of financial and other arrangements could prevent their social exclusion?

Among the recent projects L'euro au quotidien (1998) concerns the difficulties that may arise with the introduction of the euro. Various social groups -the elderly, the poor, the illiterate- will experience difficulties in using the new currency. These social and psychological obstacles are analysed in the book by Jean-Michel Servet -the current director of the Centre Walras. The book is published in the series 'Sociologie économique' of Desclée de Brouwer, a collection of books which includes books of Richard Swedberg, William Julius Wilson, and Jean-Louis Laville, who is himself the editor in chief of the series.

Another recent project is the collective research on Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS in English, SEL in French). Originating in the 1970s in Canada, these associations emerged in France in the 1980s and have spread rapidly during the past years. Despite their great variety, LETS are all characterised by a denunciation of the rule of money and by a "civic re-appropriation of the economy". Since they have their own currency, their economy is situated between the reciprocity of gift relationships and a market system. In Une économie sans argent (1999) Servet and his co-workers extensively describe the history of the movement, analyse their actual functioning and variety, and discuss their future prospects.

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