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Article

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Mark Granovetter on Economic Sociology in Europe

The following text is an excerpt from an interview with Mark Granovetter, conducted by Richard Swedberg on September 10, 1999 at Stanford University. In the first part of the interview Granovetter discusses his current research, and in the second part - from which the excerpt has been taken - he talks about his view on economic sociology in Europe.

Granovetter says that he is currently involved in three major research projects. The first is a theoretical work in economic sociology, Society and Economy: The Social Construction of Economic Institutions. The current task is to reconstruct various draft chapters and to pull together all the material theoretically. Projects number two and three fall in the category of sociology of industry. The first is called "The Social Construction of the Electricity Industry in the United States, 1880-1925" (for working papers and similar items, see website www.stanford.edu/class/soc315b). The second industry project is termed "A Network Study of Silicon Valley". Granovetter is also editor of a successful book series at Cambridge University Press, "Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences".

Question: What is your opinion of European economic sociology?

Answer: I think it is hard for me to say what European economic sociology is --except for the French version -- because most Europeans who do economic sociology are so fully integrated into the world tradition of economic sociology that I don't think of them as doing something separate.

Now, if you ask me how Swedish economic sociology is different from American economic sociology, it seems to me that they all do very similar things, and it has never occurred to me to ask what is different about Swedish or European economic sociology. I think there may be some separate traditions in economic sociology, but within each tradition there are Europeans and Americans together, and there is more variation between traditions than there is between countries. France is often the exception, partly because of different traditions, and partly because the French always take pride in having their own intellectual productions. Thus I think there is perhaps a distinct francophone (as they call it, I think mainly so as to include Québec) economic sociology.

As you know, there is a book of my papers, especially in economic sociology, that has just been translated into French and is about to come out [from the publisher Desclée de Brouwer, in Paris]. The title has not been decided yet, but it may be the same as the one they used for a volume of mine in Italian: The Strength of Weak Ties and Other Essays. In any case, I wrote an introduction to this book in which I talk about the relationship between, on the one hand, my economic sociology, American economic sociology and the New Economic Sociology, and, on the other hand, francophone economic sociology. There are certainly distinctive themes in francophone economic sociology, compared to anglophone economic sociology. It is, for example, much more interested in culture, power, institutions and class relations and how these relate to what is happening in communities. I also talk there about the different traditions in French economic sociology, where there are numerous schools: the conventions school, the regulation school and the interesting work by Thévenot and Boltanski on Les Economies de la Grandeur (1991). Some of these people are in fact economists, and in the French-speaking world there are perhaps as many economists as sociologists,

who do something that looks like economic sociology, even though they call it economics, for example, "the economics of conventions". It is hard for me to see that there is really anything much in the English-speaking world that looks like that, and is as sociological as that, while in a sense it nevertheless is economics.

These days I am certainly also more interested in the cultural and semiotic aspects of the economy than I was some years ago. It has taken me a while to get around to that, but I now see its importance. I talk in the introduction to my French book about how I and others who worked with Harrison White as his graduate students in the 1960s were in rebellion against the dominant Talcott Parsons framework, which looked like a rather elaborate taxonomy and did not pay enough attention to concrete social relations and networks of relations.

It seems to me that in what you might call a sort of over-reaction to this very abstract argument, we were aggressively uninterested in cultural or mental states -- we were almost, though never quite, behaviourists, without ever giving up the idea that meaning is terribly important (we had, after all, read Weber). But it wasn't clear how to integrate that with the more concrete and manipulable and non-tautological parts of social life that we were paying more attention to, like social networks.

The pendulum has now swung back, and I think that a lot of us have become quite interested in these matters, and in part been influenced by the French. The work of Pierre Bourdieu has had an important impact and made us understand that these cultural aspects are quite wrapped up with issues of power and networks.

And this brings me to propose that in the long run there will be considerable convergence between anglophone and francophone economic sociology. You can already see this taking place, for example, in the work of people like David Stark, who has a deep appreciation of the French tradition but who also uses many of the ideas and tools of anglophone economic sociology [see e.g. Stark in M. Callon (ed.) The Laws of the Markets]. I think that the more these French works are appreciated in the English-speaking world, the more convergence we will see.

But it certainly has been healthy to have had a divergence; otherwise everybody would have been thinking the same way, and everything would have been less rich as a result. It is good to have some contrast in vision - it makes you think about whether there might not be some way to enrich and make more subtle what you are working on. That's how I view European economic sociology.