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Economic Sociology at the ESA in Amsterdam

by

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In August this year Amsterdam hosted the fourth conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA), under the general theme "Will Europe Work?". Along with five symposiums, the programme also included a number of paper sessions run by various sectional units or Research Networks, among them six sessions organised by the Research Network Economic Sociology. What follows is a brief report of these six sessions, highlighting some of twenty or so papers that were presented.

During the first two sessions more general and theoretical issues were addressed. Here three papers sought to bring into focus the untapped potentials in the heritage of classical sociology. In *Max Weber's Sociology of Capitalisms*, Richard Swedberg called attention to Weber's analysis of the different ways in which capitalist economies can be, and have been, organised in history. The author argued that Weber's account embraces a social action-dimension as well as an institutional dimension; and that a variety of different types of capitalism can be discerned.

Soeren Jagd's paper, *Max Weber's Sociological Theory of the Firm*, was devoted to the Weberian model of the modern rational business enterprise, as distinguished from both the neo-classical economic theory of the firm and the models developed within economic sociology. The main argument here concerned Weber's extension of the conventional model by adding several types of variables, such as ethical orientations and institutional restrictions on the mobility of key economic resources. In another paper, *Crossing the Boundaries of Economics and Sociology: The Case of Vilfredo Pareto* Partik Aspers highlighted Pareto's emphasis on the non-logical parts of human action, and the implications that this kind of action has for social life in general and economic activity in particular.

In *The Intersubjectivity of the New: Toward A Pragmatist Theory of Innovation*, Jens Beckert addressed the problematic conceptualisation of innovation within the neo-classical framework. The paper can be characterised as an attempt aimed at a sociological approach to the innovative process which, informed by pragmatism, emphasises the piecemeal character of this process and its intersubjectivity. Finally there was a paper written by Bernard Convert and Johan Heilbron, who presented a sociological account of the recent re-emergence of economic sociology in the United States after decades of stagnation. The authors discussed two main interpretations of the revival of New Economic Sociology and pointed out some barriers to its reception in Europe.

The focus of the two subsequent sessions was on questions discussing various aspects of the emergence of economic institutions, particularly in the transition economies of Eastern Europe. Under this general heading Janos Istvan Toth presented a paper on recent changes in the ownership structure of enterprises in Hungary, while György Lengyel's paper, *Action Potential, Exit and Radical Voice*, reported on some empirical findings regarding the effect of material conditions on the

readiness of people to participate in radical protest actions. Another paper that deserves to be mentioned is *The Relevance of Gender and Class in Becoming a Top Manager in Hungary*, in which the author, Lilla Vicsek, reported on her findings which suggest that gender has a stronger impact, as compared to class origin, on Hungarian women's chances of becoming top managers.

During the following session entitled 'Informal Economy and Survival Strategies', two interesting papers were presented. The first of these, *Private Protection, Taxation and Law Enforcement in Post-Communist Russia*, by Vadim Volkov, addressed the dissolution of the state monopoly on the use of force in post-communist Russia and the emergence of new actors who have taken over this once so characteristic function of the state. In the second paper, *Return of the Crowd: Shareholders of Russian 'Financial Pyramids' in Mid 90s*, Vadim Radaev explored the informal practices and after-failure strategies of small private investors, caught in these pyramids.

In a paper entitled *Informal Economic Activity: Strategies of Households and Communities*, Madeleine Leonard developed an argument against omitting a whole range of economic activities which take place outside of the market, within households and communities. And finally, touching on a similar topic, Sokratis Koniordos reported in *Informal but Real Power Structures in Labour Relations* his research results on the various control strategies used by employers within small and medium size enterprises in Greece.

During one of the sessions a business meeting was held in which the formation of an electronic network was announced. This network, it was agreed, is meant to function as a channel for exchange of ideas, information and knowledge about work in economic sociology being done everywhere in Europe, as well as to facilitate contacts among scholars and researchers in the field. The overall purpose is to tie the community of European economic sociologists closer and make it more coherent. The network will be administrated by SISWO (Institute for the Social Sciences, Amsterdam) and will give out an electronic newsletter three times a year.

Another issue that was discussed at the business meeting concerned the nomination of new members to the organising committee, which for the next two years will be in charge of ESA's Research Network Economic Sociology. The following were nominated: Patrik Aspers (Stockholm University, Sweden), Sokratis Koniordos (University of Crete, Greece) and Janos Istvan Toth (Research Institute of Economic, Budapest, Hungary). The electronic voting is due to take place soon.
