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ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY IN THE UK

by

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Traditionally, economic sociology in the UK has focused on work, employment and industry and the study of organizations. Both areas are securely institutionalized, with strong representation in academic departments and business schools, annual conferences and dedicated journals. More recently, however, a small but growing number of scholars have begun to problematize notions of economy and economic action which those more conventional areas arguably leave unquestioned. This has not been attempted in a systematic way in Britain since the work of John Goldthorpe and others on the 'political economy of inflation' during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Goldthorpe, 1978; see also Goldthorpe's debate with Smith in Smith, 1982, 1985; Goldthorpe, 1983). The re-emergence of work which interrogates the core concepts of economic life itself has obviously been influenced by the new economic sociology. But scholars in this area also draw on and collaborate with disciplines such as accounting and finance, socio-legal studies, geography and social/cultural theory. Relative to the US, however, there is little direct interaction between economic sociology and mainstream economics in the UK. In this article, I shall deal with the two major traditions of economic sociology before moving on to the newer sub-fields of accounting, regulation and the study of economic life and culture. I shall cover recent theoretical contributions at the end.

1. Work, Employment and Industry

The sociology of work, employment and industry is one of the best-established sub-fields of economic sociology in Britain, with a strong foothold in major academic departments, annual meetings such as the *International Labour Process Conference*, and dedicated journals such as *Work, Employment and Society*, *Gender, Work and Employment* and the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. Industrial sociology has a long tradition within sociology departments in Britain, but is no longer identifiable as a sub-field in its own right. Moreover, leading figures in the area are increasingly to be found reinvigorated (and, most likely, better-remunerated) in business schools such as Manchester, Aston and Warwick.

Some of the work undertaken within what used to be called industrial sociology remains primarily concerned with trade unions (for examples, see Ackers, Smith and Smith, eds., 1996). An attempt by John Kelly to theorize the field under the auspices of a 'mobilization theory' is perhaps the most notable recent contribution. Kelly seeks to explain how an individual sense of injustice can be transformed (via mobilization) into collective action. His approach is multi-faceted, drawing on traditional industrial relations research, sociological theory (Marxism; Shorter and Tilly's work on mobilization) and political sociology (see

¹ I am indebted to Patrick McGovern, Bridget Hutter, Gwynneth Hawkins and Andrea Mennicken for their help and advice in writing this article.

Kelly, 1998). Simon Clarke has undertaken research on the restructuring of the coal-mining industry, the restructuring of employment and the formation of a labour market, and changing gender relations and gender identity. He is currently studying the development of trade unions in Russia, in collaboration with international trade union organisations (Clarke, 1990; 1993; 1999).

A good deal of research being undertaken by economic sociologists in the UK still focuses directly on the labour process itself, and some of the most significant work has been undertaken by Paul Edwards and Paul Thompson in revising Marxist approaches to the sociology of work. Thompson argues vehemently against the increasing influence of Foucauldian perspectives in the sociology of workplace behaviour because they emphasise management practices to the detriment of the 'recalcitrant worker' (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995; for comparative work in this field, see Thompson, Wallace, Flecker & Ahlstrand, 1995). Chris Smith's recent work focuses on the impact of trans-national corporations on work organization and industrial relations, and argues against globalization theorists (e.g. Kenney and Florida, 1993) who suggest that Japanese corporations have exported a new 'production paradigm' towards which countries such as Britain and the US have increasingly converged (Smith & Elger, 1997; Elger and Smith, 1994; Smith & Meiksins, 1995).

Much to Thompson's chagrin no doubt, a major recent trend within economic sociology in the UK has been to focus on new management practices such as Total Quality Management (TQM). Earlier studies by Stephen Hill set the agenda in this area (see Hill, 1991; Hill & Wilkinson, 1995; Rosenthal, Hill & Peccei, 1997), and the current state of play is also exemplified by the work of David Knights in case studies of, among others, the retail industry and financial services. Knights argues that this new approach to management, although emphasising the maximization of employee participation, can be seriously undermined by power and identity relations that arise from the 'bottom line' drive for short-term profitability (Knights & McCabe, 1998; Knights & McCabe, 1997; Kerfoot & Knights, 1995; and more generally, see Knights & Murray, 1994). In the context of manufacturing, 'lean production' has been another key issue addressed by sociologists during the latter half of the 1990s (for an overview, see Stewart, 1999).

A major government-funded research initiative in this field has recently been undertaken in the form of a collaborative programme called The Future of Work, which involves fourteen separate research teams across the UK. For example, Stephen Hill, Patrick McGovern, Colin Mills and Michael White of the LSE are engaged in a five year investigation into changes in the employment relationship over the past twenty years. More specifically, they are concerned with the balance between work and family, changing forms and the possible intensification of control by employers, and gender segregation (see Hill, McGovern, Mills, Smeaton & White, 2000). The project seeks to build on the work of Duncan Gallie: key themes in his research include, in the tradition of David Lockwood's famous study (Lockwood, 1958), convergence between different categories of workers (Gallie, 1996a); the trend towards 'upskilling' as opposed to deskilling (Gallie, 1996b); and travelling farther afield, the process of marketization in the former state socialist republics (Gallie, Kostova & Kuchar, 1999). The recent work of Hill addresses flexible technologies and economic transformation in Bulgaria (Hill, Harris and Martin, 1997; 2000; Hill, Martin, and Vidinova, 1997), while McGovern has previously worked on human resource management, managerial careers and the football 'brain drain' in Ireland (McGovern, 1998; 1999; 2000; McGovern, Hope-Hailey & Stiles, 1998).

Moving closer to labour economics, in her work on the impact of labour-market deregulation Jill Rubery mounts an explicit challenge to Thurow's much-lauded job competition model (Thurow, 1976). She argues that, far from rendering the labour market more efficient,

deregulation may well lead to a rise of 'junk jobs' in Britain and elsewhere as the removal of conventional labour-market institutions undermines the capacity of employers to provide long-term training (Rubery, 1996). One of the key methodological differences between the sociology of work and employment and labour economics in the British context is that the former tends to place a strong emphasis on case studies whereas the latter tends to use analytical modelling. Paul Edwards, however, urges that these approaches be more closely combined (Edwards, 1994).

The analysis of change in employment regulation, occupational structure and employment practices has pushed the issue of gender increasingly to the fore as British sociologists get to grips with trends such as the increasing participation of women in the labour force (arising partly from growth of the service economy), the emergence of new technologies, and the decline of conventional models of the gender division of labour (see Crompton, Gallie & Purcell, 1996). Rosemary Crompton and Kate Purcell are leading figures in this field, while the work of Rubery (a labour economist who often publishes in sociological outlets) deals primarily with issues of equal pay and opportunities (see Rubery, 1998; Rubery, Smith & Fagan, 1998). Crompton's work is not only concerned with changes in the participation of women in the labour force but with the way in which such changes may shape the organization of personal and domestic life (Crompton & Harris, 1998). From the other direction, Gill Dunne's research into the domestic and working arrangements of same-sex parents suggests that sexual identity can play a vital role in moulding the experience of work (Dunne, 1998). But perhaps the most attention-grabbing research in the field of gender and employment during recent years has been undertaken by Catherine Hakim. In a series of quantitative studies which have generated debate well beyond the academy, she investigates the reasons behind the decisions by mothers of young infants whether to return to work (Hakim, 1996; 1998; 2000).

2. Organization Studies

Organization studies is another well-established area of economic sociology in the UK, with journals such as *Organization Studies* (which comes out of the European Group for Organizational Studies, EGOS) and the new (and reputedly fashionable) *Organization*.

The balance of power between the sociology of organizations, organization studies and organizational (or institutional) economics can appear obscure to the casual outsider, but the debates that have taken place on this question are summarized with clarity in Michael Rowlinson's *Organizations and Institutions* (1997). Rowlinson draws a distinction between organizational economics and organization theory (the latter is informed by sociology), and argues that while a merger between them is not on the cards, a more fruitful dialogue would be possible if the economists were to be more reflexive towards the value-judgements that are implicit in their models. Rowlinson acknowledges that organizational economics has left neoclassical economics behind, but suggests that economists such as Williamson still lack a convincing (i.e., evolutionary) account of organizational change. An earlier, more aggressive critique of the new institutional economics comes from Roderick Martin. He concedes that the approach has its benefits on the micro level, but argues that in respect of bounded rationality, power, values and norms and organizational change, it presents a woefully over-simplified, quasi-behaviourist account of human behaviour. In its stead, Martin calls for an elaboration of the 'interest-interdependence' approach developed by James Coleman (Martin, 1993).

Another leading sociologist in this field, Christel Lane, has sought to develop a more theoretical approach to relations between organizations (Lane, 1995). Trust is a core theme in Lane's work, which seeks to combine socio-legal and economic accounts of contractual and

inter-firm relations through comparative studies of various 'contractual environments' (see for example Deakin, Lane & Wilkinson, 1994). More recently, by drawing on Luhmann's conception of trust and its relationship to uncertainty, Lane argues that trust is more likely to co-ordinate expectations and interaction between firms where, as in Germany, their business relations are deeply embedded in industrial associations and the regulatory environment. On the other hand, where embeddedness is weak as tends to be the case in Britain, power is liable to fill this co-ordinating role with law as its instrument (Lane, 1997; Lane & Bachmann, 1997).

3. Accounting, Finance and Regulation

Several departments of accounting and finance in the UK include people whose work could reasonably be described as sociological (e.g. Peter Miller and Michael Power), or as informative for recent arguments and debates from new economic sociology. This is important not least because accountancy and auditing are topics that, although central to economic organization today, tend to be neglected by sociologists.

Power's influential book, *The Audit Society*, examines the roots and consequences of the explosion of auditing, which he describes as a 'technology of mistrust'. Power questions whether audits produce assurance, and argues that by imposing their own values, audits often have dysfunctional consequences for the audited organization. The book provides a useful sociological perspective on auditing, and extends Shapiro's notion of the 'control of control'. The work of Nigel Thrift and Andrew Leyshon, both geographers concerned with questions about the spatial configuration of financial centres and the 'technological embodiment' of knowledge, is also relevant to economic sociology (see Leyshon & Thrift, 1999; 1996; 1997).

Arguably the most significant recent development in Britain, however, has been that scholars from disciplines such as socio-legal studies and government who have developed a sociological take on regulation in areas such as health, safety and environment are beginning to turn their attention to areas of economic life such as financial markets and institutions. Moreover, they are raising questions about the conceptualization of economic life itself, similar to how they had once questioned conventional interpretations of the definition, scope and operation of the law. It is this new constellation of interests, together with the growing multidisciplinary interest in the phenomenon of risk, that lies behind the establishment of the Centre for the Analysis of Risk and Regulation (CARR) at the LSE, and it is worth noting that one of the directors of the new centre, Bridget Hutter, is a sociologist with a growing interest in economic sociology (see Hutter, 1997; forthcoming).

4. Culture and Economy

The study of consumerism, together with the continuing attention being given to postmodern theory in Britain, have helped establish a potential sub-field within economic sociology which focuses on the relationship between economic life and culture. Work in this area tends to be informed by cultural and social theory to a much greater degree than is usually the case in British economic sociology. It also overlaps with media studies as scholars begin to address the economic implications of the internet and the so-called New Economy. Articles in this field are most likely to be found in journals such as *Theory, Culture and Society* and, albeit to a lesser extent, *Economy and Society*.

Prominent sociologists in the field of culture and economy include Paul Du Gay, who is a descendent of the 'Birmingham school' of cultural sociology, and Don Slater, whose work

covers market and consumer society as well as, most recently, the internet. Du Gay's work ranges across questions of self and identity in the context of work, bureaucracy and consumer behaviour. In *Consumption and Identity at Work* (1996) he argues that the distinction between our identities as workers and consumers have become increasingly blurred in contemporary society, primarily through the powerful rhetoric of organizational reform. He also develops the concept of 'circuits of culture' via an analysis of the Sony Walkman (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997).

The theme of identity is central to the work of Peter Miller and Nicholas Rose, who seek to arbitrate between a model of the consumer as an innovative and creative pleasure-seeker, and as being exploited via the creation of false needs and thereby as having a profoundly enfeebled sense of self. Drawing on work undertaken at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and developing themes of identity and governance from their earlier work, Miller and Rose argue that consumer desires are bound up with a 'passional economy' in which various forms of psychological knowledge are used to render human desires and satisfactions, and indeed human subjectivity itself, somehow calculable (Miller & Rose, 1995; 1997). In a different vein, Fine and Leopold emphasise the individual commodity rather than the consumer. They argue, via case studies of the fashion industry, that the commodity creates its own 'system of provision' by vertically integrating the processes of production, distribution, marketing and consumption itself (Fine & Leopold, 1993). Don Slater's work, on the other hand, provides a broader, historical perspective on the notions of consumer and market society. The central thrust is that these 'entities', and even economic value itself, are chronically dependent on and embedded within modern and postmodern thought and culture (Slater, 1997a; 1997b; Slater & Tonkiss, 2000).

John Law will be known to most readers for his work on actor-network theory and technology, but he has also written on the relationship between culture and economic agency. He argues that economic liberalism can only survive when economic discourse is accompanied by and interwoven with other logics and discourses such as administrative and management accounting (Law, 2000). From cultural theory, Simon Wortham has attempted to use postmodern and post-structuralist philosophy – such as Derrida's work on exchange – in order to develop an understanding of economics as a form of cultural discourse (Wortham, 1997). From political economy, Andrew Sayer has recently written on the relationship between moral and political economy in a somewhat Smithian investigation of how moral sentiments can be overridden by economic pressures (Sayer, 1997; 2000a). He has also produced an article on embeddedness and trust in markets (Sayer, 2000b).

5. Theory

Many of those working on economic sociology take the view that our field would be considerably strengthened by a sustained theoretical exploration across the boundary between the disciplines of economics and sociology. One major difficulty, of course, is that, by and large, these disciplines speak starkly different languages. But two UK scholars whose work will be of interest to economic sociologists, Geoffrey Hodgson and Geoffrey Ingham, were trained in economics, while a third, Peter Abell, is a leading figure in mathematical sociology.

Before moving on to those three, a number of recent theoretical contributions are worth noting because they deal explicitly with the discipline of economics itself. John Wilkinson draws on French regulation theory and (specifically) convention theory. He seeks to situate the emergence, consolidation and transformation of different patterns of economic co-ordination in the context of the agrofood industry (Wilkinson, 1997). In a slightly more critical way, Graham Thompson argues that contemporary economics – both orthodox and heterodox –

faces a high degree of uncertainty as we revisit the economic terrain of the early twentieth century as characterized by massive internationalization and a renewal of large-scale economic cycles (see also on this theme in the specific UK context, Hirst and Thompson, 2000). Of particular concern to Thompson is what he calls the ‘secularization of the economic’, that is, the condition whereby all kinds of organizations across the public and private sectors and under varying political systems and ideologies are expected to display their competitiveness and efficiency (Thompson, 1997). But according to Ben Fine, the problem is not economic uncertainty but economic imperialism as economists persist in their attempts to ‘colonize’ other social sciences. He argues, however, that the declining popularity of mainstream economics among UK students presents us with an opportunity to reinforce non-mainstream understandings of economic life such as radical political economy (Fine, 1999; for a rejoinder, see Thompson, 1999).

Geoffrey Ingham has arguably blazed a trail on the borderline between economics and sociology, having long ago been appointed as a sociologist to the Economics Faculty at the University of Cambridge (he has since retreated to Social and Political Sciences). While Ingham’s earlier work was historical (*Capitalism Divided?* explored the origins and development of the City of London), he has increasingly turned his attention to the conceptualization and theorization of money. Contrary to the views of sociologists such as Ben Fine and Costas Lapavistas (see their recent spat with Zelizer in *Economy and Society*, August 2000), Ingham argues that our understanding of the nature of money will be inadequate if we regard its operation merely as a function of the requirements of the capitalist mode of production. Ingham broadly agrees with Zelizer (1994) that money has distinctive social meanings according to the context in which it is used; and with Dodd (1994) that monetary systems can be regarded for sociological purposes as elaborate structures or networks bringing together those who make, supply and seek to control money with those who use it. But taking a more historical approach, Ingham also goes further to suggest that credit money in particular should be seen as a force of production in its own right which has shaped the capitalist economy rather than, as Marx would have it, the other way around (Ingham, 1994; 1996a; 1998; 1999; for his intriguing arguments on new economic sociology, see Ingham, 1996b).

Outside Oxford at least, rational choice theory in Britain has yet to become quite the hot ticket that it has undoubtedly become in many sociology departments in the US. Goldthorpe’s recent *On Sociology* contains essays which pull together his extensive work on class mobility with a discussion of his ‘rational action theory’ approach (Goldthorpe, 2000). Peter Abell is also one of the leading theorists in this area, and has recently established a theory seminar at the LSE which draws together sociologists and others from disciplines such as government, management and accounting. Abell’s most recent work covers the informal structure of organizations, self-employment and entrepreneurship, and rational-choice theory (Abell, 1996a; 1996b; 1997; 2000).

The work of Geoffrey Hodgson perhaps represents the most sustained attempt by a contemporary Briton to draw economic and sociological questions together within a coherent theoretical framework, and probably it displays greater exposure than other UK research to the new economic sociology scene in the US. Hodgson ranges widely, writing on topics as diverse as institutions (1988), evolution (1993a; 1998) and most recently, utopia (1999). In *Economics and Utopia*, Hodgson rails against mainstream economic theories which ignore alternative modes of economic organization as not only morally bankrupt but inefficient. These alternatives should not be conceptualized statically as utopias, however, but incorporated into dynamic systems of learning that he calls ‘evotopias’, thereby tracking back to his earlier arguments on ‘phylogenesis’ and evolutionary economics (Hodgson, 1993b).

Hodgson's approach touches on many of the leading-edge empirical themes I have addressed in this article: on new forms of work and economic institutions, and on developing a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between economic life, politics and culture. And although the book is theoretical, he makes it clear that the 'learning economy' he has in mind could only be realised through more detailed and historical and empirical research.

It is this interaction, between theoretical analysis around the borders of economics and sociology and rigorous empirical research into economic institutions and behaviour, that characterizes the best and most exciting work in economic sociology, in the UK and throughout Europe. The trans-European dialogue which this newsletter facilitates and encourages can only enhance the prospect that more work on both boundaries – between economics and sociology on the one hand, theory and empirical research on the other – will be undertaken.

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