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ON A NEW MAJOR WORK ON DURKHEIM AND ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE STEINER

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Introduction

The reason for this interview is that Philippe Steiner, one of France's most accomplished economic sociologists, is just about to publish a major work: *L'école durkheimienne et l'économie. Sociologie, religion et connaissance* (*The Durkheimian School and the Economy: Sociology, Religion and Knowledge*), Geneva: Droz, October 2004; 370 pages; about 50 euros. The interview took place in the summer of 2004, over e-mail.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your academic background and how you became interested in economic sociology?

I was mainly trained as an economist. While studying as an undergraduate at the University of Reims, however, the Marxist approach was overwhelmingly strong, and political economy was understood in the very broad sense that it has in the Marxist tradition. At the *Ecole normale supérieure*, I had the opportunity to study sociology more in depth. This training in sociology at the *Ecole* was at the time relatively poor, but it was anyhow a useful addition to the type of mainstream economics that I had to study in Paris (my degrees were in mathematical economics and econometrics). The training in sociology was better when I did my higher degree (*agrégation de sciences socials*). At that stage sociology was on par with economics.

I decided not to continue any further in mainstream economics, and I choose instead to do a PhD in the history of economic thought - on the Physiocrats - in which the last chapter was devoted to their relation to capitalism and its spirit. Finally, by the middle of the 80's I got a secure position in Université Paris IX-Dauphine as a sociologist, and that meant that I had to teach basic lectures on the sociological tradition. I now began to read systematically the classical authors (Saint-Simon, Comte, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber and Pareto) and French modern sociology (Boudon, Bourdieu, Touraine and Crozier). I was surprised by the strong connection between the sociological approach and the economical one. I was well acquainted with this fact in the Marxian connection but at that time I discovered how true it was for the whole sociological tradition as well. I now began to often write 'Ec' (for economy) in the margin of the books I was reading.

I proceeded slowly with this turn in my thought since I had been appointed as an economist at the same university and my research was centred on the history of French political

economy. Nevertheless, I went on analyzing the link between economy and society, and it was while doing this that I came across the Durkheimian approach buried in the first series of the *Année sociologique*. I had the opportunity to meet Philippe Besnard, who was the leading scholar on Durkheim and the Durkheimian at the time. I wrote a first paper on "The Social Economic in Durkheim", and Besnard suggested that I should become a sociologist, which is also my present institutional identity.

Q: Can you tell us about your other work in economic sociology, before the book on Durkheim?

I began with a book on the history of economic sociology. In Europe, at that time (let's say in the very beginning of the 90's) it was not clear whether there was or not a field of inquiry that could be called "economic sociology". Together with a colleague (Jean-Jacques Gislain) I then decided to write a book on the history of the curious connection between political economy and sociology at the turn of the 20th Century, covering in the process six key authors (Durkheim, Pareto, Schumpeter, Simiand, Veblen and Weber). The book was accepted in a collection directed by Boudon, which was a real piece of luck for newcomers such as us.

My *habilitation* thesis in sociology (with Boudon as my supervisor) was an essay in the sociology of economic knowledge. In this case, my approach was a Weberian one, since my study of the various economic discourses was based on the opposition between two types of rationalization - formal and material - which I had found so illuminating when I studied Weber's sociology of law. I am still busy with the sociology of economic knowledge since it opens up new ways of looking at the links between economic theory, economic discourses, and social behavior in our modern societies.

Then I wrote a small book on contemporary economic sociology for a collection that is widely read by students and teachers in France. In this book I stressed the importance of network analysis which to my mind was — and still appears to me to be — the most innovative and powerful approach in the field.

Q: Of course everybody should read your new book on Durkheim, but since it currently only exists in French, could you kindly summarize the content of the book? What is the basic message?

The book is divided into two parts. The first one deals almost exclusively with Durkheim and the Durkheimians, up to the 1950's. In this part there is one basic idea: Durkheimian economic sociology (DES) developed according to two different seminal lines of thought. First, DES aimed at a harsh methodological critique of political economy, and suggested, as part of this, insightful empirical studies such as the one by Durkheim on the origin of contractual law, by Simiand on wage determination and by Halwachs on the consumption behavior of the working classes. Second, as Durkheim's interest in the sociology of religion and the sociology of knowledge grew, DES also became linked to economic anthropology, and particularly to the work by Mauss who was the major Durkheimian in that field (*pace* Maunier, one of his brilliant students). Interestingly enough, these two lines converged by the middle of the 30's with the joint efforts of Simiand and Mauss; and this becomes clear if one looks in detail at the two great achievement of DES, namely Simiand's essay on money (*La monnaie réalité sociale*, 1934, including Mauss' comments) and Mauss' essay on the gift.

The second part is different in nature. I essentially try to assess the relevance of DES for economic sociology. Basically, there are two ideas in this part. First, compared to Comte's and Marx's critique of political economy, DES is characterized by the emphasis that it puts on the sociology of economic knowledge, and particularly on the knowledge produced by experts. Second, I compare Weber's sociology of religion and the second dimension of DES, the one that is strongly linked with religion. Here I suggest that there exists an interesting similarity between Weber's view of Puritanism and Confucianism, on the one hand, and Durkheim's study of the pedagogical institutions in France during the 16th and 17th Centuries (mainly the Jesuits), on the other hand. In both cases, Durkheim and Weber studied institutions: the pedagogical system of the Jesuits with its strong emphasis on competition (emulation in their own language) and the Puritan concern with confirmation; and how these created life styles that suited modern capitalism.

The strong interest in Durkheimian thought for the educational system — an interest which was still important to Bourdieu — seems to me particularly relevant since Weber was almost silent on the ideal drives that motivate people in the "iron age", from the 19th century and onwards. The Durkheimian insight about the link between education systems and the life style of people who are especially trained within such systems, is helpful in that it allows you to go beyond Weber's (historical) limits in the domain of the sociology of economic knowledge.

Q: What is on your agenda for the future, when it comes to economic sociology?

I have mainly two research projects on my current agenda. The first one is about the donation of organs. This dramatic element in the modern health system in the wealthiest countries of the present world appears as something of a paradox. On the one hand, the donation of organs is not as central to our symbolic world as gift-giving once was in the case of the tribes studied by Malinowski, and, thus, this gift appears as a minor element of modernity, an element which could be replaced by a market for organs. On the other hand, the donation of organs is about primordial relations (life and death, life through death and technical efficiency), that entail symbolic reactions and emotions that prevent the very organization of such a market. This is the first paradox.

The second paradox is about the absence of a market for organs, although the number of people waiting for organs is dramatically larger than the number of organs that are available; so why do modern societies explicitly rule out such a market? And what would happen if they did not maintain such a position, as some have begun to do? What would such a world look like in which you had property rights to the body, in such a way that the owner could offer some pieces of it on a "spare parts market" (to use Fox and Swazey's felicitous formulation)?

My second research project is about the birth of political economy in France during the 18th century. Following the Weberian approach, my colleague Gilbert Faccarello and I are currently studying how the religious interest, which was very strong during the 17th century, was transformed into an economic interest that became very powerful as well by the end of the 18th century. If you accept Weber's insight on the importance of ideal interests, I think you will find it convenient to regard political economy as a powerful discourse on the theme of an ideal, even a life conduct. Of course, this means that you have to look at political economy at large, and not limit yourself to (a few) great economists. Our ambition is to do

this untill the beginning of the 19th century by carrying out a careful study of the French case, and where we look at leading political economists *and* the engineers who made political economy a reality by building roads, bridges, railways and the like. In a certain respect, this work is in line with Reinhard Bendix' book *Work and Authority in Industry* and the more recent study by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*.

Q: How do you see the future of economic sociology in general? And in France?

My general comment is that economic sociology is now entering into a 'normal' state of functioning, normal in the Kuhnian sense of 'normal science': there is now a stable set of approaches, enigma, etc., according to which scholars may organize their work in this very active field.

In the particular case of France, my view is that economic sociology is gaining momentum. The CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) has accepted to create a structure of coordination — whose name is GDR (research group) 'Economie et sociologie' — between the various research centers that are interested in this field of research. More than one hundred people are involved in this structure, which will begin to act effectively from next November and onwards (with a meeting in Université de Nanterre). This is particularly useful since some French economists, notably the ones who work within the Regulation school or the Economics of Conventions joined the GDR, which means that French economic sociology today draws on both economists and sociologists. I do believe that this is an important element for a steady collaboration between disciplines and for the development of economic sociology proper.

Now, if I turn to the content, I would like to stress the importance of the cognitive approach or the role of sociology of knowledge in the French case. This can take various forms such as the one implemented by Franck Cochoy on the basis of Bruno Latour's and Michel Callon's sociology of science, with its emphasis on the organizational work done by marketing and merchandizing. A different approach can be found in Bourdieu's school with Frederic Lebaron and some young scholars who have written their PhDs on topics such as economic journalism, economic expertise, etc. This line of study seems particularly fruitful to me because of the importance of "the cognitive turn" of economic theory; in this case, there is a real interest to work together. We will try to reap all the fruits of such an opportunity and more, if possible.