

Steiner, Philippe

**Article**

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# Economic Sociology in France: Interview with Philippe Steiner

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*Philippe Steiner is a longstanding member of France's lively field of economic sociology and a professor of sociology at the Université Paris IV, Sorbonne. The third edition of his book *La sociologie économique* was published by La Découverte (2007). In the interview, conducted by SASE in connection with the SASE 21st Annual Meeting in Paris this July, he tells us about the state of the art in France and discusses his recent work on the market for human body organs. From November 2009 Philippe Steiner with associate editors Sidonie Naulin (Université Paris-Sorbonne) and Nicolas Milicet (Université Paris-Sorbonne) will take over the editorship of the Newsletter. We welcome him and his team and look forward to their plans for the Newsletter.*

## What is going on in the field of socio-economics in France?

**Philippe Steiner:** There are two elements that I would like to pinpoint. First, in France there is currently institutional acknowledgement of the importance of this sub-field of sociological enquiry. To illustrate this, we can look at the fact that in 2003, the *Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS) agreed to create and partially fund a network of scholars, whether economists or sociologists, working in economic sociology. During its first four years, this network was a hive of activity, sponsoring several workshops in various regions of France on different topics (the labour market, the food market, money, Harrison White's theory of markets, to mention a few). In addition, the network organized annual meetings in which senior scholars commented on doctoral students' research in progress. This is an essential task when the institutionalization of the field is at stake. Most importantly, the CNRS has finally agreed to give this network an extra four years of financing, which I see as a good sign. This is a sign that the field is maturing, and that it is important to help people active in this domain in order to reinforce past achievements in the study of the economy from a sociological point of view. I

would add that economic sociology is now often included in university curricula, and it is currently one of the three topics that candidates for the *agrégation*, a highly selective exam in the French teaching system, must study intensively.

My second point, which may be seen as either a cause or consequence of the first, is that a lot of interesting research is blossoming in the field. Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi inspired some researchers to stress the gift dimension at work within today's society (see for example *La société vue du don*, Paris, La découverte, edited by Philippe Chanial, a disciple of Alain Caillé, or *Le dictionnaire de l'autre économie*, Paris, Gallimard, edited by Jean-Louis Laville). There are also studies that approach economic activity from an ethnographical point of view: hospital management (Nicolas Belorgey, from the EHESS) and financial business (Horacio Ortiz, from the EHESS as well), to mention two recent outstanding PhD dissertations. Florence Weber has followed this approach, notably in her research on the care industry for the elderly and she has provided a general overview for scholars interested in this ethnographic approach (*L'ethnographie économique*, Paris, La découverte). Following Eve Chia-pello (*Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, written together with Luc Boltanski, Paris, Gallimard) and Frank Cochoy's lead (*Sociologie du packaging. L'âne de Buridan face au marché*, Paris, La découverte), there is also a growing number of people studying the managerial dimension of economic activity, public accounting practices included. This is a topic of utmost importance, given the rapid growth of new public management in France today.

## What sets the study of socio-economics in France apart?

Aside from the fact that French social scientists are increasingly connected to the international academic and scientific world, there are, in my opinion, three elements that may explain how the study of socio-economics in France is unique.

First, there is a strong connection between heterodox political economists and economic sociology. After World War II, many French economists veered away from mainstream economics. A new French economic journal (*la Revue économique*), which is now the most important journal of its kind, endorsed the idea that political economy should be strongly linked to other social sciences, such as history and sociology. This idea wasn't taken up, and their endeavor faded away in the beginning of the 1970's. However, Marxism was important in the French academic world, which meant that the strong connection between political economy and the social sciences remained influential. This led to a second strand of political economists unwilling to follow the neo-classical or mainstream approach of political economy as an "inexact and separate science", in the words of Daniel Hausman. Consequently, French economic sociology has a strong link with economists belonging to the *Ecole de la régulation* (Robert Boyer and his disciples) and to the *Economie des conventions* (Olivier Favereau, François Eymard-Duverney among many others) devoted to the study of various coordination processes. The book edited by André Orléan, an active and innovative scholar in the fields of finance and money, who is strongly influenced by the Durkheimian approach (*L'économie des conventions*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France), provides an excellent example of the connection between French "institutional" economists and French economic sociologists. Does this mean that French economic sociology is different because, to use Mark Granovetter's words, it comes from economists? This would be incomplete; a second element must be considered.

The second important element comes from the strong influence of the sociology of science. To make a long story short, this can be illustrated by the *Centre de sociologie de l'innovation*, created at the *École des Mines* by Lucien Karpik. Karpik was interested in the study of professions and regulation (a topic studied by Jean-Daniel Reynaud, who was highly influential in the field of the sociology and economy of labour relations). He wrote a seminal chapter on market coordination, using his research on lawyers (*Les avocats*, Paris, Gallimard), and stressed the role of quality uncertainty and trust in the economy. Meanwhile, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour combined the Foucauldian approach to sciences and technology with pragmatic and ethnographic approaches. This became crucial about ten years ago, with the collective work of Michel Callon and his disciples, particularly Fabian Muniesa, on performativity. The disci-

ples of Bruno Latour, notably Frank Cochoy, also made an important contribution to this approach with their research on marketing, merchandizing and the daily functioning of contemporary markets.

These two strands of thought are not separate. The best illustration of the present state of affairs is provided in Lucien Karpik's last book (*L'économie des singularités*, Paris, Gallimard; the English translation will be soon available: *The Economics of Singularities*, Princeton University Press). In that book, the reader encounters a personal implementation of these two strands of thought, with a broad and powerful synthesis of different socio-technical arrangements (such as guides, hit parade, networks, etc.) and coordination processes. These elements make market exchange possible when quality uncertainty is present, and when quality becomes more important than price for the consumer. This book, as well as much other research, is about more than just economic sociology. It reaches the level of general sociology or theoretical sociology, which I take as an indication of successful work in a given subfield of sociology.

The third element comes from the idiosyncratic French educational system. In France, there is a wide gap between universities and the so-called *Grandes écoles*, the latter playing a much more important role in the continuity of the social elite than the former. Within some of these *Grandes écoles*, and notably within the three *Ecoles normales supérieures*, it was highly common for young scholars to study economics and sociology together – when it was rare in the universities. This means that these schools produced and continue to produce bright young students for whom economic sociology is a legitimate research field.

## How did you become interested in the market for human organs?

When I was working on *The Durkheimian School and the Economy* (*L'école durkheimienne et l'économie: Sociologie, religion et connaissance*), published in 2005, I was surprised by the small amount of research devoted to modern gift-giving behaviours, aside from the works of Alain Caillé and Jacques Godbout (*L'esprit du don, La découverte*). The research that had been conducted in this field was either from a broad, theoretical point of view or consisted of general surveys covering a wide variety of gift-giving practices. In the latter, for example,

the living donation of a kidney was given the same treatment as domestic practices, such as a husband fixing sandwiches while his wife repaired the car.

Once, in the LSE bookshop, I was drawn to a new edition of Richard Titmuss' famous book, *The Gift Relationship: From Blood to Social Policy*. I should add that this book is not extensively read in France, as I do not remember hearing of it previously. I was mesmerized. I stayed for quite some time, reading the introduction and some pages regarding Titmuss' classification of gift-giving behaviour.

At that time, it became clear to me that organ transplants were of the utmost importance. The reason for this is apparent: Titmuss' book radically changed the domain of blood, as can be seen by the reaction of the American political system. As a result of Titmuss' research, American law-makers decided to prohibit market transactions in the case of whole blood. However, Titmuss fell short in that he claimed that market relationships should be completely banned from the domain of blood transfusion. There are many countries in which full blood cannot be bought and sold, but parts of blood can be. An example of this would be plasmapheresis, in which red blood cells are not collected. I thus decided to consider why, in the case of solid organs (kidney, heart, lung, liver and pancreas), the ban on market transactions was and still is so stringent and so widely accepted – the exception being Iran, since an Act passed in 1988 makes it here legal to buy a kidney from an unrelated living person on a regulated market. In a nutshell: I think it is useful and necessary to study why market relationships are banned in a world so prone to believe that markets are the solution to (almost) any issue related to scarcity and exchange of resources between people.

### **You have two books that will be published shortly, could you tell us about them?**

The first is a book that I co-edited with my friend and colleague François Vatin, sociologist in *Nanterre université*: it is a treatise of economic sociology, and will be published next September (*Traité de sociologie économique*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France). This book is a direct result of the network that I mentioned above. In it, almost all the major French economic sociologists present their past achievements and explain

their current, cutting-edge work. French-speaking scholars and students interested in this topic will thus find an up-to-date assessment of what is going on in the field as far as the French-speaking community is concerned. I believe this book will be useful to foreign scholars and help them to understand the current state of affairs in France.

The second book is about organ transplantation (*La transplantation d'organes: un commerce entre les êtres humains*; Organ Transplantation as Social Commerce). The aim of this book is to understand how the system actually works in the absence of market transactions. I would like to stress three points. First, the present system results from the tension that surgeons acting as organizational entrepreneurs created when they began to be successful, first in renal transplants and subsequently in liver, heart and lung transplants. However, their technical successes were not enough, and in the 1980's the harvesting of human body parts (HBP) lagged behind the medical needs of patients and transplant surgeons. This created the need for broader organizations, such as the United Network for Organ Sharing in the US, l'Etablissement Français des Greffes (now the Agence de la Biomédecine) in France, or the Organización Nacional de Trasplantes in Spain. The series of organizations that produce, distribute and use HBP function thanks to various sets of rules (for example, the dead donor rule that requires that HBP be harvested on legally dead patients when post mortem production of HBP is concerned, or the complex set of rules for matching HBP with patients on waiting lists). However, these organizations also need rules concerning financing the massive costs associated with transplant surgery, immunosuppressant drugs and post-transplant care. HBP always have a cost associated with them, even when they result from a gift. These costs are similar to the tariffs set for resource transfers within a multidivisional firm: they must stimulate people to improve their performance within the various departments involved, they must cover the local costs, and they must further the strategic goals of directors – in this case, increasing the number of transplants. This means that there is a social construction of tariffs within this series of organizations, just as there is a social construction of market prices. Second, in the production of HBP, three kinds of interests are at play: the personal interest of the donor (whether living or dead), familial interest, particularly that of the relatives of the dead donor, and finally, collective interest. The latter results in part from the fact, and this is a point of

paramount importance, that renal transplant, the most common transplant (about 60,000 such transplants are made yearly in the world), is far less costly than the alternative therapy of dialysis. These three interests are at work in similar situations involving death: in the case of the law of bequest (see Jens Beckert's *Inherited Wealth*) or on the life insurance market (see Viviana Zelizer's *Morals and Markets*). What comes as a surprise, however, is the fact that in the US and Europe, familial interest is in jeopardy because it is considered to be a major obstacle to the production of HBP. In the US, many states have passed laws that prevent members of the family to reverse the choice made by the dead patient. In France, debates on bioethics in Parliament have resulted in the strengthening of the presumed consent law in order to downplay familial interests. The difference with market coordination is thus made less clear, and we get the same results from the organizational incentives that make the Spanish system so efficient. Finally, let us consider the debate on the creation of a biomarket for HBP. Market coordination would be limited to incentives for the production of HBP, mainly kidneys, and there would be no spot market in which buyers and sellers would meet and bargain. This market would be a regulated market and thus, as some surgeons and bioethicists suggest, notably in the US, this market coordination would not be morally aggressive. This is a major concern because the boundaries of market transactions are at stake. This is a perfect example of Polanyi's double movement thesis: some act in favour of spreading market relations, while others resist this invasion because they consider it to be a deadly threat to social life. My personal position is to refuse the creation of biomarkets for HBP, because of what I call the "transplant trade", just as there was an Atlantic slave trade when slavery was still legal. A biomarket would allow middle class patients from rich countries to buy HBP from poor people living in poor countries. Such trade is repugnant, to use Alvin Roth's words (see his "Repugnance as a Constraint on Markets" in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2007), because it would make inequality and poverty a medical resource for the rich, threatening the republican view of liberty.

### What is your next research project?

I would like to consider the positive dimension of the critique of political economy. The four main characters involved are Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Marcel

Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu. All of them wrote harsh critiques of political economy. This, I believe, is well known. The fact that their critiques are associated with several strands of research on non-market transfers of resources is less salient. Comte stressed the role of gift-giving and the law of bequest as examples of altruistic behaviour within the industrial society. His last books (*Catéchisme positiviste* and *Système de politique positive*) made clear that he considered the superiority of altruism over selfishness as the great social issue of the time. Durkheim was certainly influenced by Comte's ideas, but he nevertheless did not use Comte's thesis as a basis for his own research programme. He instead progressively slipped away from altruism/selfishness to a different topic of interested/non-interested behaviours. This meant that the biology of the brain and, more generally, the anthropological dimension of Comte's approach were left out in order to stress the sociological aspect of both behaviours, as, according to Durkheim, selfishness and altruism result from social processes. This was then at the heart of Mauss' work, particularly in the introduction and conclusion of his celebrated essay on the gift, which should be read with his essay on sacrifice, written in collaboration with Henri Hubert. In *The Gift*, Mauss was bold enough to suggest that men follow a limited number of rules (the three famous obligations to give, to receive and to give back). No doubt, Bourdieu was well acquainted with this essay and many others from Mauss and Hubert (notably their study on *La magie*). He was also undoubtedly familiar with the important essay published in 1927 by a former student of Mauss, René Maunier, in which Maunier studied gift-giving during weddings (*Twassa*) in Kabylie, precisely the region in Algeria where Bourdieu conducted his own ethnographic fieldwork on the rituals and symbolism related to house building and the honour code, both so important during wedding ceremonies. This gave rise to Bourdieu's paper in the 1970's on symbolic exchange, which I take as the last avatar of the intellectual movement that initially appeared as a critique of political economy. I consider the sociology of markets to be of paramount importance within economic sociology, but it would be wrong to believe that the whole field revolves around the market: there are a large number of social exchanges and resource transfers not carried out through markets. In this respect, I fully agree with Harrison White's claim that the market is nothing but a kind of social arrangement (arena in White's parlance) for matching people and resources. Theoretical studies are essential for elaborating that point and for providing

tools to understand how different social arrangements work.

**From November 2009 you will be editing the Economic Sociology Newsletter. What plans do you have for the next issues of the Newsletter?**

Basically, we would like to continue the efforts made by the previous editors of the *Newsletter*, that is to offer information on what is going on in this most active field of sociological research. Hence, any relevant contribution would be welcome by my two co-editors and myself. From our own side, for the issue forthcoming in November this year, we plan to put together a set of papers dealing with the commercialization of the body, which is

a hot topic in the field of transplant medicine and beyond. The second issue will provide a window on a non-European strand of economic sociology with a set of papers on Brazilian economic sociology, which constitutes a very active field of enquiry in its own right. Brazilian economic sociologists are dealing with topics that depart from those studied in Europe and the United States: particularly important are the political dimension related to poverty, the access to land, health, school or money and the concern with the sustainability of socio-economic processes in the agricultural sector. More generally, we believe that it is of great interest to have a better grasp on what is going on in other countries and continents and we want to further intellectual exchanges in this respect. The content of the third and last issue is not yet fully thought out, but a set of papers dealing with economic anthropology and economic ethnographic could be one possible focus.