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Article

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Interview with Marion Fourcade

Marion Fourcade (fourcade@berkeley.edu) is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California Berkeley. In her first book, *Economics and Societies* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2009) she develops a compelling comparative analysis of the national trajectories of economics in the United States, Great Britain and France. Her research has also appeared in professional journals such as *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Theory and Society*.

How did you get involved in economic sociology?

Path dependency and chance. I was a dual major in economics and sociology in college, and I tried to keep this dual orientation for as long as I could – until it became practically and intellectually untenable. Already back then the “economists” who interested me most (Albert Hirschman, Amartya Sen, Janos Kornai) were not your typical modern mainstream persons, even though there was a place for them in the core institutions of the field (all three taught at Harvard). I came to wonder about the boundaries of what is considered acceptable work in economics, and it is on the basis of that project that I applied to the sociology PhD program at Harvard University.

So I came to “economic sociology”, as you put it, through my knowledge of economics and my interest in making sense of the intellectual structure of this field. Then I took courses at Harvard that exposed me to the political sociology of economic ideas and expertise – e.g. works by Peter Hall, Margaret Weir, Theda Skocpol – and I became very interested in the question of why certain economic ideas succeed or fail to influence policy. For a while I worked on the supply side movement in the United States, and on the role of neoliberal think tanks in diffusing the supply siders’ message; being French, I could not help but wonder if these organizational structures had counterparts in my home country. It is this comparative interrogation that launched me on a path I’d rather forget – a mammoth enterprise to chart the historical-institutional bases of the production of economic knowledge in three (there were initially four) countries.

So the irony is that I don’t like to think about myself as an “economic sociologist” if this means (as it often does)

being a sociologist of markets and organizations. I have inched closer to the latter definition as a result of having to teach economic sociology and developing my acquaintance with that literature! But broadly speaking I consider myself a comparative sociologist interested in knowledge and politics – and economics happens to be the domain where I have pursued this interest empirically. My next book, for instance, is a straightforward Durkheimian study of the social bases of classificatory systems.

Are there books or articles that have particularly influenced your vision and practice of economic sociology ?

Pardon me if I am a bit exhaustive here but “my vision and practice of economic sociology” as you put it, is still very much a work in progress! Different epochs, different research projects call for different references. And I am still learning very much from the work of others.

I have already mentioned the historical institutionalists. Their books and articles were my starting point. But my approach soon became much more ‘culturalist’ after I encountered works by John Meyer and Frank Dobbin, among others. *Forging Industrial Policy* had a considerable influence on the way I came to think about cross-national comparisons and I still consider it to be one of the best books ever published in this genre. (My other favorite here would be a quite different, but equally compelling, book: *The Fabrication of Labor* by Richard Biernacki.)

Some years ago I rediscovered *The Social Structures of the Economy* and, with it, the extraordinary richness of Pierre Bourdieu’s analytical framework for thinking about economic processes (or any social process for that matter). I haven’t published much in this vein but his structural approach to markets had a big impact on me. Bourdieu’s analysis of the housing market in terms of structural homologies between fields provides in my view the only credible sociological account of what economists analyze as the somewhat miraculous meeting between supply and demand. Furthermore, his emphasis on consumption is enormously important. It is also often overlooked: economic sociology, particularly in the United States, has been almost exclusively concerned with production. (I still do not understand why *Distinction* is not a must-read for every

economic sociologist.) With that in mind, considerations about dispositions/taste and marketing (in addition to the traditional topics of market regulation and structure) naturally had to play an important role in an analysis Kieran Healy and I are currently conducting on systems of credit used by low-income Americans.

Another influence and great exception to this “productive” orientation of economic sociology is the work of Viviana Zelizer. *Pricing the Priceless Child*, which I read in my first year in graduate school, occupies a very special place for me. I did not read it as an “economic sociology” book at first. I don’t think many people did at the time. For me it was a fantastic historical account of an especially revealing cultural transformation. It is only later that I came to see how important and useful it was for conceptualizing (and empirically studying) the socio-historical underpinnings of economic value – something that is also at the core of my current project on the economic valuation of nature in France and America.

In your recent book you describe the practices and conceptions of economists as profoundly shaped by the institutional and cultural context in which they are located. Could you tell us what the main characteristics of the profession are, in the US, France and Great-Britain?

Some of these differences are readily observable at the organizational level, of course people are educated in different systems, find different jobs, are perceived differently by the public, and have very different political entanglements. As a result, and even though there are all kinds of “scientific” connections and influences across borders, the histories of these national fields are quite specific. These institutional features – and particularly what I call in my book the exercise of public power – have a huge impact on the kinds of questions people ask, the tools that they develop, and the way they communicate. As a profession and as a discipline economics is very much the product of these particular social structures (which it also influences, of course).

As for the intellectual differences between countries, I guess you will have to read the book, because it is difficult to do justice to the complexity of the stories I try to tell in one paragraph. Suffice to say that, in each country, we do not have a “school” but a “field,” with a wide range of intellectual positions and fierce struggles, as well as certain

distinctive central tendencies – to be horribly reductionist, the American obsession with growth and efficiency, the French obsession with productivity and rational order, the British obsession with the conceptualization and measurement of welfare. One paradox I like to point out is that the supposedly more “competitive” and decentralized organization of the U.S. field has produced, in fact, quite a large degree of intellectual homogeneity among the core institutions of the field (at least as far as the methods and practice of economics are concerned – the politics of economics is another matter altogether), whereas the more state-managed French institutional structures harbor a higher degree of intellectual segmentation and diversity.

As for economic sociology, do you think it is possible to define differences of the same kind between national traditions?

Absolutely. Here we can reflect on the French/American difference, which I am most familiar with. Philippe Steiner has written very compellingly about this. It is quite remarkable that some research currents, which in France can legitimately claim to be part of economics, would not easily be considered that way in the United States – and have been, instead, of great interest to American economic sociologists. You also have that consumption/production difference, which I just alluded to, not to mention the lesser commitment of French economic sociologists to the signature methods of American economic sociology – network analysis. For fear of embarrassing myself, however, I will not venture any further into a back-of-the-envelope analysis of these differences.

Do you think a dialogue is useful/possible with economists? What could be the basis for it?

Let’s talk about theory first. With institutionalist economists such a dialogue comes about naturally, for obvious intellectual and historical reasons, and also because non-dominant approaches seek to enroll allies outside of their field. Of course a conversation partly occurs with the mainstream, too. Some economists are engaging sociological and psychological research as a way to bring their behavioral models closer to reality. But it is also true that the basic premise of sociology – the idea that social order always *preexists* individual consciousness, to put it quickly – is very hard to square with the basic premise of neoclassical economics: the existence of a utility function. I also don’t know if you will ever be able to (or should) incorpo-

rate the sociological premise into mathematical models! The fact that we have these very different theories of action and analytical styles means that we often talk past each other, even with the best intentions.

These two disciplines have also very different structural positions and different politics. Being prominently enrolled into the state, corporations and international organizations, economists not only command considerable amounts of resources, they have also acquired a much more secure “fix it” culture. Sociologists, on the other hand, often find themselves both marginalized *and* shying away from direct policy involvement.

The result is that on policy issues economists tend to reign supreme. This is true across the board, but especially in macroeconomics. We sociologists have had very little to contribute to public discussions about exchange rate policy (the euro), monetary policy, fiscal policy, or regulation – with some rare exceptions. Political scientists fare a bit better, yet even they rarely manage to raise their credibility above that of economists on these issues. But of course this macro level is where the most important political stakes of our time are being played out. Think about the current crisis facing the EMU. We should be able to contribute something to this debate – analyzing the symbolic dimensions and political consequences of various courses of economic action, for instance – and we don’t, or not much.

Perhaps the best way to engineer a productive dialogue would be to engage in direct, practical work together. Of course, this is easier said than done, due to the cultural and structural differences I mentioned before.

You have recently developed a comparative analysis on the economic valuation of “nature” in the US and France, relying on investigations of major environmental pollution cases. What conclusions do you draw on the meaning of these monetary valuations?

That it’s incredibly complicated. That how you produce economic values for something depends in part on how you experience and conceptualize this thing in the first place. ‘Nature’ is not the same thing in France as it is in the United States. We think about it and relate to it differently as a legal problem, as an ecological problem, as a political problem, as an economic valuation problem. And consequently we produce different legal, political, biological, economic technologies for it. With different results, and different effects. You could say that the quick conclusion of a study like this is that ‘the French are French and the Americans are American;’ but of course the real value of comparative research does not lie in showing that things are different but in showing *how* they are different across countries, and also how they hold together within each country. With that in mind, the stronger theoretical take-home point is that the tools we produce to do these highly technical economic valuations in each country actually embed all kinds of socio-cultural assumptions regarding our experience of the natural world and the different “orders of worth”, which sustain that experience (to use Boltanski and Thévenot’s terminology). Thus we fall back onto the sociology of knowledge, as we should.