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Itinerary in Economic Sociology

Lucien Karpik interviewed by Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier

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1 What was it that first drew you towards the study of Economic Sociology?

From the beginning of my activity as a researcher I was interested in the comparison between traditional France and modernist France, and this led me to choose two completely different research subjects: large technological firms, and the legal profession which, at the time, had changed very little since the nineteenth century.

In the sixties and seventies, relations between Economics and the Social Sciences concerning their integration into a general theory generated lively debate, primarily in history and ethnography. This was not the case of Sociology, probably due to the influence of Marxism. My research on large technological firms sought to bring to light and explain the strategies of those firms that renewed their products largely on the basis of scientific research. Along with economic concepts, the analytical framework applied notions such as multiple criteria of evaluation (forms of rationality) or power struggles. This research therefore presented itself as an attempt to combine two Social Sciences, without the term Economic Sociology being used.

Our choice was deemed unrealistic by some, who advised me to be cautious. I disregarded their opinions. Along with a small group of young researchers, we drew up an analytical framework and chose a method based on participant observation. We then set out to explore a firm and were granted access to one that we studied partially. Despite our efforts, this first "fieldwork" was also the last. The

advice that we had ignored had been sound. It was still a time when May 1968 was fresh in people's minds and Sociology was seen as a dangerous science. We had to stop.¹

2 How was the link formed between the Sociology of Lawyers and Economic Sociology?

This situation paved the way for research on lawyers. Two reasons justified this choice: first, while the Sociology of Professions in Anglo-Saxon countries was flourishing, intermediate groups were of little interest to French Sociology and History, as they focused essentially on global realities such as social classes or the State. But I wanted to show these groups' importance in the transformations of French society. Second, I wished to criticize the notion of "profession" which, over and above the diversity of approaches, was considered as a singular, universal reality, when in fact it was a construction based exclusively on the Anglo-Saxon reality, especially that of the US.

I adopted a socio-historical approach that combined an in-depth survey on the practices of contemporary lawyers, and a reconstruction of their history spanning several centuries. This analysis enabled me to construct three historical forms of the profession: the "State bar", the "classical bar", and the "composite bar" the last two of which applied to the contemporary period. Each of these historical forms combined constituent realities – cultural, political, social, economic – of the profession, according to a predominant organizing principle.²

Unexpectedly, my research on lawyers highlighted the two themes that were going to occupy me for a long time to come: first, the privileged relationship that lawyers have with the building and defence – not only judicial but also political – of individual freedoms, and consequently their lasting ties with political liberalism (in the limited sense given by the profession); and second, the opacity of the lawyers' market.

3. Why has the lawyers' market become a strategic research subject?

For most sociologists the lawyer's profession, like other professions, was defined by collective action driven by the goal of increasing and appropriating rents, because lawyers were considered as *homo economicus* seeking to maximize profits. So the bar was merely a machine for exploiting clients.³ The references varied: both Max Weber and Karl Marx, along with others, were mobilized, but in fact "monopolistic" theory as it was called simply used the reasoning of neoclassical theory. It was no coincidence that this interpretation was the same as Friedman's.⁴ Yet this dominant theory was based on nothing other than a principle of authority.

At the time, the French lawyers' market was, and had always been, characterized by a set of rules (total prohibition on personal advertising and touting) that precluded the formation of a system of public information on lawyers' qualities and fees. For the clients, as well as for the lawyers, the market seemed opaque. Logically, the client's choice could but be random. Neoclassical economic theory was therefore inapplicable. Yet the market was sufficiently effective to have crossed the centuries: this was the enigma that had to be solved.

Critique was easy but another way had to be found.⁵ The new analytical approach integrated four main arguments: 1) the judicial service was chosen neither exclusively nor even primarily on the basis of relative prices, as the only resources that defendants had to support their cases were the qualities of their lawyer. Therefore, their choice was oriented by the wish to find a "good" lawyer, or the best lawyer, whatever that may have meant to them. Hence, *quality* took precedence over price. And judgement predominated over calculation.

2) The lawyers' supply was composed of multiple types of competence which were at least partially incomparable to one another. The demand consisted of clients with diverse judgement criteria. In a system that excluded public information, it was unlikely that the demand would spontaneously encounter the most adequate supply. Yet this qualitative and quantitative information did exist: it was concentrated in networks: networks of interpersonal relations, for clients, and *networks* of professional relations, for lawyers. The opacity of the market was therefore an outside view of reality;

3) As a result of the relationship of representation that gave a greater or lesser degree of discretionary power to lawyers, this coordination was subjected to strong threats of opportunism and to its consequences, right down to market failure. This weakness was more or less neutralized by *trust* in information, in lawyers, in the bar, and in the judicial institutions;

4) A survey was later to confirm these propositions and show that the lawyers' market was heterogeneous. In one in every ten cases, when a standardized service replaced an individualized service, and when lawyers were consequently considered by clients to be interchangeable, price prevailed. In the other cases quality prevailed.

The new "Economics of Quality" model integrated apparently heterogeneous notions – quality, prices, judgement, trust, supply and demand – whose unity and relevance found their expression in the intelligibility of the market functioning. It presented a general interpretation, which also identified the exceptional conditions under which neoclassical theory became relevant.

4 How did you move from "the Economics of Quality" to "the Economics of Singularities"?

It was easy to see that the "Economics of Quality" applied not only to the lawyers' market but could also be used for other goods and service markets. To be able to generalize this approach, it was necessary to devise new concepts. At the same time, when I was doing these intermediate analyses, I engaged in Political Sociology, which became a lasting interest.

Far from equating lawyers to *homo economicus*, socio-historical study over the long period from the eighteenth century to the 1970s had shown that it corresponded to a political model organized around lawyers' liberal commitments. Terry Halliday (American Bar Foundation) reached the same conclusion, although via a different route. Our encounter (with, later, the arrival of Malcom Feeley, University of California, Berkeley) was to lead successively to three international studies involving a total of over 25 researchers from different countries, who agreed to embark on research within the same theoretical frameworks. The first study concerned four "developed" countries; the second, ten countries in Asia and Latin America; and the third, ten former British colonies in Asia and Africa.⁶

These studies were designed to answer two main questions: do lawyers everywhere (individually and/or collectively) maintain a privileged relationship with political liberalism?⁷ Under what conditions do these forms of commitment appear and disappear?

At the same time, I also devoted myself to developing the concepts needed for the generalization of the "Economics of Quality" and above all those of networks and trust. A new notion was then introduced, that of "judgement devices"⁸ which, associated with singularities, represented a particular modality of "market devices".⁹ It denoted the symbolic and material arrangements which, in a quality market, that is, an opaque market, offered clients forms of knowledge that, through systems of interpretation, allowed judgement and therefore reasoned choices. In other words, the devices impacted on the clients' practices. This was the case of personal devices such as networks, and also of impersonal devices, as a study on a century of Michelin guides shows. I looked at the evolution of the symbolic signs and judgement criteria which underpin the evolution of classifications of the "quality" of restaurants and, correlatively, serve as guiding principles of customers' tastes.¹⁰ The effectiveness of these devices was inseparable from their credibility.

The notion of trust was the most problematical. Its elaboration started with two critiques on its use in economics. The first focused on the active extension of the field of economic theory which, in Williamson's work, took on the particular form of a negation of social reality. For this author, trust was a useless concept. Since calculability was possible – and he argued that it was so for all economic and social interaction, with the exception of relations between close friends, family and lovers – coordination supported itself, for it was based exclusively on the convergence of interests.¹¹ The critical scrutiny focused here on the generality of the conditions underlying this proposition, that is, the presence of a common space of calculation and the existence of a common world of observation. It ended up showing, in particular, that Williamson confused calculation and judgement, and concluded that this author was unable to disqualify reality and therefore the notion of trust.¹²

The second critique focused on the use, by economists such as Kreps, of a conception in which trust was devoid of all content¹³. This made it possible to establish simple and direct relations between cause and effect. Here again, there was a denial of the reality of trust which, far from being transparent, was defined by specific contents that

precluded the transformation of empirical relations into general principles. It was in the footsteps of Simmel that a "substantivist" conception of trust was then elaborated: this reality was characterized by the necessary combination of knowledge and belief.¹⁴ As a result, relations between causes and effects defied the linear model.

5 Could you roughly outline the theoretical perspective that you call the "Economics of Singularities"?

The book *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities*¹⁵ starts with a paragraph that sets out its general goal: "Neoclassical Economics, even in its latest versions, ignores one particular category of markets. Therefore I propose a set of tools and reasoning to describe this reality and to explain its functioning as well as its evolution" (p. 3). This particular category of market is defined by a set of goods and services – *singularities* – which, far from being mysterious or exotic, are part of our daily life: works of art, novels, films, restaurants, wines, luxury goods, medical or legal services, and so on. More generally, the term singularities applies to artwork, cultural products and individualized professional services.

As the general approach cannot easily be summed up, I will limit myself to highlighting the conceptual system and the general reasoning by successively examining: 1) the characteristics of "singularities"; 2) the logic of choice: judgement; 3) the judgement devices; 4) the regimes of coordination; and 5) the processes of singularization and desingularization. I won't present the price analysis here as it is too long to fit into this paper.¹⁶

Definition

Three characteristics combined define singularities: *multidimensionality*, *incommensurability*, and *radical uncertainty*. First, multidimensionality of goods and services serves as support for the diversity of evaluation criteria used by consumers. Second, singular products oscillate between incommensurability and commensurability. The first term, which excludes all comparison, refers to a shared cultural construct, historically built and maintained, which makes us recognize the equal dignity of works and activities that are part of different worlds. The second term, organized around a particular point of view – individual or collective – produced an equivalence between singularities, and thus a possibility of comparison. Depending on the perspective, one may prefer Mozart to Bach (or vice-versa), the Beatles

to the Rolling Stones (or vice-versa), or traditional gastronomy to molecular gastronomy (or vice-versa).

Finally, radical uncertainty of quality is associated with singularities, as their value is unknown before the transaction. One can make a judgement on the practices of doctors or lawyers only after having used their services. The same applies to films, novels and cultural products in general. The exchange is no more than a promise. Even though neoclassical analysis, with "experience goods" or "confidence goods", has ignored uncertainty less and less since the 1970s, it nevertheless disregarded Knight and Akerloff's notion of radical uncertainty¹⁷, as it could not be neutralized by calculation, not even calculation based on probabilities. Only trust can manage this – more or less.

Judgement

Singularities are chosen according to a specific logic embodied in the notion of judgement. To choose a "good" film or a "good" novel, a "good" doctor or a "good" lawyer, is to be more interested in quality than in price, whatever the meaning ascribed to "good". The theory of action must therefore be transformed. Whereas all the characteristics of *homo economicus*' action are reduced to the single dimension of the maximization of profits or utility, on the contrary *homo singularis*' concrete action always combines "symbolic orientation" – the choice of qualities according to the diversity of judgement criteria – and the "instrumental orientations" based on the comparison of prices to satisfy economic interests. The relative weight of each of these two principles varies, with one limit however: *singularities can exist only when symbolic orientation prevails over instrumental orientation* or, in other words, when the action has primacy over price. This has two consequences: 1) the plurality of evaluation criteria applied by the actors implies that the choice results not from the calculation but from a *judgement*. This is the synthetic choice by means of which the actor can integrate into his or her choice multiple criteria with variable weighting; 2) the primacy of quality over price implies that singularities markets are defined by the *primacy of competition by qualities, over competition by prices*.

Judgement devices

The complexity of products and the cognitive constraints that are imposed on consumers preclude the spontaneous encounter between products and consumers' points of view. In fact, an unequipped market is an opaque market.

Without a cognitive aid, consumers would be condemned to random choices. This aid is provided by a variety of *judgement devices*: symbolic and material devices – brands, critiques and guides, hits, box-offices and audience ratings, labels and, last but not least, interpersonal relations – that produce and spread oriented knowledge on the market. These devices do not create transparency between pre-existing supply and demand; they construct both the supply and the demand.

This knowledge has three common features: it is oriented; it is formatted; and it has to be credible. *Oriented* because it is necessarily arranged around a judgement criterion (or a particular configuration of judgement criteria); *formatted* because it has to comply with the constraints of judgements; and finally *credible*, which implies that the judgement devices should be trustworthy. The oriented knowledge proposed by judgement devices participates to a large extent in the activity of *qualification* of products, that is, in the transformation of products in order to make them desirable, more desirable than competing products, and thereby able to capture consumers.

Regimes of coordination

Because they *necessarily* equip all markets and exert different systematic influences, judgement devices serve for the construction of *regimes of coordination*. These "pure" models, alone or combined, explain the diversity of modes of functioning of markets. Essentially, they are built by the combination of categories of devices whose particular effects can be identified.

A first operation divides all judgement devices into two categories: *impersonal devices* and *personal devices* or networks. A second operation concerns only impersonal devices which, in turn, are subdivided into two categories: *substantivist devices* and *formal devices*. The former encompass judgement devices that provide knowledge on the specific content of products (all types of critique, guides, promotions, etc.), while the latter are devices that produce rankings (hit parades, box-offices, lists of winners).

This general classification produces seven regimes of coordination. All are distinguished by the primacy of quality competition over price competition. Each of them is defined by a particular configuration of devices and by a particular logic of functioning. The regimes of coordination serve to account for empirical realities as diverse as markets

for paintings, luxury wines, mega-films, mega-brands, mega luxury firms, lists of winners (box-office, hit parade, etc.), lawyers' services, and so on.

Singularization and desingularization

Singularity markets are the product of history because they belong in particular to the processes of singularization and desingularization. Singularization may have taken place in a distant past as in the case of classical works of art, or in a recent past, which enables us to identify the collective work that has produced this result, as in the case of wine markets. It may be at play for certain goods and services that were initially differentiated. It is nevertheless *desingularization* that is collectively dreaded. As products became standardized and commonplace, quality was replaced by price and the singularities market was replaced by the standard market.

6 Could you situate the Economics of Singularities in French Economic Sociology?

The development of the Economics of Singularities was part of a collective movement which started essentially in the late 1980s, and which represented a shift from the former situation.¹⁸ I sum up this trend in a single feature that, to my mind, is fundamental: *pluralism*. The pluralism of approaches, with the theory of symbolic goods (P. Bourdieu), the theory of regulation (P. Boyer), the theory of social regulation (J.-D. Reynaud), socio-technical analysis (B. Latour and M. Callon), structural analysis of networks (E. Lazega), the Economics of Conventions (F. Eymard-Duvernay, O. Favereau, A. Orléan, R. Salais and L. Thévenot) and the Economics of Singularities. Also, the pluralism of researchers who define themselves more directly in terms of specific problems, such as "market professionals", the qualification of products, coordination devices, consumers' practices, and so on.¹⁹

These commitments were not defined only by the development of multiple approaches over the same period; they were also marked by a circulation of problems – even if the solutions adopted by each approach differed – and of concepts – even if the meanings were not the same. The most distinctive features of the period were a collective dynamism and an optimism that probably stemmed from the common awareness that, for the first time, Economic Sociology focused on the core of the economy: the func-

tioning of the market. This is the overall goal that has made French Economic Sociology quite original.

Endnotes

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19For a more detailed presentation, along with bibliographic references, see Karpik, L., *Valuing the Unique*, 124-128 and *Mehr Wert*, 154-157. For overall analyses see Steiner, P., *La sociologie économique*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999, 2007; Steiner, P. and Vatin, F., eds, *Traité de sociologie économique*. Paris: PUF, 2009.