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Article

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Interview

Alya Guseva interviewed by Zsuzsanna Vargha

Alya Guseva is an economic sociologist with interests in market emergence, particularly the development of new financial and consumer markets in Eastern and Central Europe, and postcommunist Asia. She is the author of *Into the Red: The Birth of the Credit Card Market in Postcommunist Russia* (Stanford 2008), and a co-author, with Akos Rona-Tas, of *Plastic Money: Constructing Markets for Credit Cards in Eight Postcommunist Countries* (Stanford 2014). Her work appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, *Socio-Economic Review*, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, *Journal of Comparative Economics* and *Journal of Family Issues*. She is involved in a collaborative project on domestic money management in Russian households (with Dilyara Ibragimova of Moscow's Higher School of Economics). With an interest in connecting economic sociology and the sociology of biomedicine and health, she is currently researching transnational reproductive markets.

Alya Guseva is Associate Professor of Sociology at Boston University. She is the Chair of the American Sociological Association's Economic Sociology section, member of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) Executive Council, serves on the Editorial Board of the *Socio-Economic Review*, and together with Akos Rona-Tas (UCSD) and Bruce Carruthers (Northwestern) she co-organizes SASE's permanent research network on Finance and Society. aguseva@bu.edu

1 As the Economic Sociology Section Chair, you have expressed a long-standing interest in building bridges between disciplines and across national borders. Where does this agenda come from, and what disciplines and other boundaries do you find most compelling to address?

Economic sociology itself was born out of a boundary dispute as it reached into the territory traditionally studied by economic theory with its distinct sociological toolkit (social networks, institutions and culture). So it is only natural that economic sociology continues reaching across the aisle and engage with other ASA sections and other related social science disciplines (I find anthropology and feminist economics to be most promising in this respect). It may be that bridge-making is becoming more and more important, as more symbolic fences are being erected. I

have recently come across some really interesting numbers: the size of the overall ASA membership stayed practically the same since 1970, but the number of sections in the ASA jumped from 8 to 52 (with several more groups circulating petitions to become sections-in-information).

2 Going back to national or regional differences, can we say that economic sociology is practiced differently in the US and elsewhere? How do you see the key differences with European economic sociology in particular? Where do you see shared interests and overlapping agendas?

Is economic sociology practiced differently in the US and elsewhere? Yes and no. Yes, because there are clearly certain historical affinities such as the influence of STS, ANT, accounting studies, etc. that gave rise to distinctly European traditions in economic sociology, such as performativity, social studies of finance and value and valuation studies. On the other hand, given the mobility of scholars and the diffusion of ideas (the very bridge-building I am advocating), schools of thought that originated as distinctly European or distinctly American may not stay this way. And this is the reason for a 'no'.

There are many topics, though – all of them central to economic sociology – that are actively researched on both sides of the Atlantic, in parallel fashion or collaboratively, such as markets, finance and financialization, money and value. These are the empirical examples of shared interests and agendas.

3 What other differences do you see within Europe, for example with Eastern European and Russian academic communities?

In places that are heavily influenced by the American economic sociology tradition, like the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, I do not see many differences: I have a lot in common with scholars there; they have read the same authors and are contributing to the same arguments and debates. But I am sure there are other, more distinct traditions, which are more insulated primarily because of language barriers: those scholars may have read American or Western European authors in translation, but they do not publish in the English-language outlets, and for this reason are largely invisible to the English-speaking world.

4 To what can we attribute these differences – intellectual traditions, national academic structures, academic and political culture, the properties of the research object, the economy?

Probably all of those, albeit to a different degree. This could be a very interesting project: tracing intellectual trajectories and affinities between economic sociologies in different countries to these various factors.

5 What can US and European economic sociology learn from each other, and what is your vision for bridging them, as ASA Section Chair and in the long term?

Cross-fertilization between different traditions of economic sociology has been going on for quite some time but more can and should be done. However, the ASA platform may not be the best for these conversations. SASE, on the other hand, has been on the forefront of such transatlantic bridge-building. This year's SASE meeting is at Berkeley, and the program, organized by Marion Fourcade, promises to be fascinating. I have a soft spot for SASE. It is much smaller and more manageable than ASA, and the shared general interest in "socio-economics" coupled with diversity of countries of origin and academic traditions make for a very interesting mix.

6 In your own trajectory, how did you come into contact with what we may call economic sociology and who have been your greatest influences – within economic sociology and more broadly?

I did not have any particular interest in the economy or in markets when I applied to the PhD program at UC, San Diego. Most likely my interest developed gradually, out of my personal experience of witnessing the collapse of the socialist block and subsequent, sometimes disastrous, attempts at market reforms. At UCSD I took several classes taught by East Europeanists, including Akos Rona-Tas, who also had a strong interest in uncertainty and rationality. These encounters inspired me to write one of my qualifying papers on economic sociology, in particular on the dynamic relationship between economic sociology and economic theory in terms of their approaches and subject matters. The long line of names that influenced me at that stage is probably quite standard for any US-trained economic sociologist of my generation: Granovetter, Swedberg, Smelser, Powell and DiMaggio, Biggart, Zelizer, Dobbin, Weber and Polanyi, Akerlof, Elster and Geertz (paying tribute to my early interest in rationality and uncertainty).

7 Your work on the sociology of finance has highlighted market formation but increasingly also the importance of looking at households as actors in finance. How do you see the place of domestic finance and households in the economic sociology research program?

Economic sociologists have traditionally downplayed the household as a subject of inquiry, focusing instead on profit-making, the firm and the market. It is particularly ironic because the word "economics" is derived from *oikos*, Greek for "the household." In part, this curious omission may be rooted in the origins of new economic sociology as a response to the expansionist encroachment of rational choice economists, like Gary Becker, into traditional sociological areas of inquiry, including the household. Economic sociologists went on the offensive and challenged economics at its core. So with a notable exception of Viviana Zelizer, most economic sociologists have remained doggedly focused on the market and avoided the household.

I have become an ardent advocate for making the household a legitimate focus of economic sociology inquiry, alongside the market, the industry, the firm and the workplace. If we are serious about understanding the challenges that families and individuals face in their daily lives, we ought to examine those challenges in the context of households. Take inequality, for instance. In stratification and income/wealth inequality studies, households are typically approached as a unit of analysis rather than an object of inquiry, and "head of household" responses to surveys are taken as representative of households as a whole. Such an approach assumes equitable distribution of resources within the family, obfuscating the very real possibility of complex internal dynamics that could result in significant intrahousehold inequality.

Opening the "black box" of the household will challenge economic sociologists to test their approaches and apply their tools to a setting where economic behaviours are not only culturally and structurally embedded, but also tightly intertwined with emotional and relational concerns, are gendered and/or informal.

8 The financial crisis has been a major productive event for economic sociology as a field, revitalizing an already vigorous field. How did the crisis or crises change your own thinking about finance, markets, economics?

I have been fascinated by the process of emergence for quite a long time. I have dedicated many years to researching the question of how a working and predictable market order is created in consumer finance in Russia and elsewhere in the post-communist world. This has culminated in the publication of two books: *Into the Red* in 2008 and *Plastic Money*, co-authored with Akos Rona-Tas, in 2014. However, if earlier I was mainly interested in how the emerging markets prevail despite the numerous obstacles in their paths and what it takes on the part of various actors, including the state, to put markets into gear, following the financial crisis, I started to become concerned much more than before with the moral foundations (or outcomes) of markets. In the case of consumer finance this includes financial inclusion and predatory lending, but also the loss of privacy and increased transparency and traceability of plastic money, and their effects on surveillance and control. Akos and I explore these issues in a chapter we recently wrote for a new collection on money.

9 What do you see as the greatest challenges for economic sociologists today?

I see two main challenges, perhaps shared by sociology as a whole. First is a threat of balkanization, as I already explained earlier. My interest in initiating dialogues and collab-

orations across section (as well as disciplinary and national) boundaries is motivated by this concern. The forthcoming issue of *Accounts* [the ASA Economic Sociology section newsletter] is featuring several examples of such cross-boundary dialogue, including conversations with economic anthropologists, with economic sociologists teaching in non-sociology departments and with those on a non-academic track. Our section is also organizing several joint events at this year's ASA meeting in Seattle, including a joint reception with the Comparative Historical section, and the Organizations, Occupations and Work sections.

The second challenge is how to be relevant outside academic walls, particularly in policy debates. Compared, perhaps, to their European counterparts, American sociologists are rarely even invited to the table. Economic sociologists are particularly sensitive to this oversight because economic policy debates have been heavily dominated by economists. But I get optimistic each time I come across my colleagues making a splash in the blogosphere, authoring New York Times OpEds, or being invited as experts to high-level economic policy discussions (for instance, Fred Wherry recently took part in a roundtable on financial inclusion hosted by the National Economic Council and held at the White House).

For more details on Alya Guseva's work, please see the faculty page <http://www.bu.edu/sociology/faculty-staff/faculty/alya-guseva/>