



Economic Sociology or Sociology?

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There is no doubt that new economic sociology has helped to vitalize sociology and has paved the way for both more detailed and profound sociological analyses of the economy. The field is constituted by a number of works and their authors. Many of the central texts are included or reflected in collections that have been published by Richard Swedberg et.al, as well as in the *Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, edited by Jens Beckert and Milan Zafirovski.

I would like to take the opportunity, however, to discuss four critical points, without having the space to elaborate on, or qualify, them. Finally I will direct attention to what I see as important issues and directions for the future development of economic sociology.

The sound reaction among leading US sociologists to Parsons' value based analysis had the unfortunate consequence that values were excluded from many sociological studies. The dominating network perspective downplays both value and meaning. This deficit of meaning and value is the first problem with economic sociological research.

Economic sociology has partly been formed against the dominating theory of the economy, neoclassical economics. In many cases economic sociology merely provides an "add on" to the insights, findings and theories used by orthodox economics. Even though neoclassical economics is good to think with, we cannot in the end wage war against someone that more and more becomes a straw man. The development of the field of behavioral economics must be acknowledged. A more profound point, however, is that economic sociology will never be a more systematic alternative to neoclassical economics if it does not develop and use a clearly sociological starting point. That economic sociology mainly has made theoretical and empirical points tailored to economics is the second problem with economic sociology.

Most economic sociological studies, old as well as new, tend to focus on production of commodities or business to business relations, but fewer seem to realize and admit that consumption, at least today, is at least as important. The third problem that one can recognize in the new eco-

nomics sociology literature is the weak orientation to consumption.

New economic sociologists share the idea of the economy as a social construction. However, when one reflects on how this idea is used, it is clear that, for example, most of the network research is essentially bound up with a naturalistic idea of associated units, and underpinned by an ontological realism. This also means that studies are made using a fairly objectivistic approach. This follows from an idea that there is a world "out there" to be discovered. That we tend to take the world for granted, (realism), instead as analyze the profound consequences of social constructivism, is perhaps the most important of the points I have mentioned.

As an alternative to simply say that we should have an economic-independent, social constructivist economic sociology that pays attention to consumption and values, I would like to point to some ideas that I see as central. Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu and not the least Harrison White have attempted to develop genuinely sociological alternatives to economic theories. They conceptualize the economy as being "part" of society. Moreover, both White and Bourdieu have tried to develop approaches that can handle tangible units, which are called disciplines by White and fields by Bourdieu, of social life.

What I suggest is certainly not to stop doing good studies about specific markets, organizations or economic "fields". My point is merely that this cannot be the only focus. Ever since Comte, sociology has studied society at large, in contrast to different, more specialized disciplines. This virtue of range is something that we ought to defend. To have range is an advantage when connecting literatures, but it is also an advantage because it makes it easier to contrast the economy with other "parts" of society.

I argue that the suggested approach, to study the smallest meaningful units and their interconnections from a social constructivist starting point, makes it easier to analyze values, how consumption and production are related, how different social units across the globe depend on each other, and so on. This I see as the most fruitful kind of analysis since it retains the idea of doing sociology of concrete phenomena, but with the ambition to understand them in relation to each other and to a larger whole. Some steps have also been taken, for example, at the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Societies by Jens Beckert and Wolfgang Streeck to bridge the gap between related literatures, such as economic sociology and political economy.

My overall point can be summarized in one sentence: economic sociologists should get out of the straightjacket that I think we are caught up in by merely doing "economic sociology", rather than doing sociology of economy and society.

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