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# The Superiority of Economists

Marion Fourcade, Etienne Ollion, and Yann Algan



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**Abstract**

In this essay, we investigate the dominant position of economics within the network of the social sciences in the United States. We begin by documenting the relative insularity of economics, using bibliometric data. Next we analyze the tight management of the field from the top down, which gives economics its characteristic hierarchical structure. Economists also distinguish themselves from other social scientists through their much better material situation (many teach in business schools, have external consulting activities), their more individualist worldviews, and in the confidence they have in their discipline's ability to fix the world's problems. Taken together, these traits constitute what we call the superiority of economists, where economists' objective supremacy is intimately linked with their subjective sense of authority and entitlement. While this superiority has certainly fueled economists' practical involvement and their considerable influence over the economy, it has also exposed them more to conflicts of interests, political critique, even derision.

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**Contents**

Introduction	1
Insularity	3
Hierarchy within	7
Getting a job	9
Getting published	10
Getting together	12
Friends in high places	14
The rise of finance	14
The B-School connection	17
A life of their own	18
Conclusion: Humble, competent people?	23
References	24

# The Superiority of Economists

## Introduction

There is an implicit pecking order among the social sciences, and it seems to be dominated by economics. For starters, economists *see themselves* at or near the top of the disciplinary hierarchy. In a survey conducted in the early 2000s, Colander (2005) found that 77 percent of economics graduate students in elite programs agree with the statement that “economics is the most scientific of the social sciences.” Some fifteen years ago, Richard Freeman (1999: 141) speculated on the origins of this conviction. His assessment was candid:

[S]ociologists and political scientists have less powerful analytical tools and know less than we do, or so we believe. By scores on the Graduate Record Examination and other criteria, our field attracts students stronger than theirs, and our courses are more mathematically demanding.

At first glance, the academic labor market seems to confirm the natives’ judgment about the higher scientific caliber of economists. Economists command some of the highest levels of compensation in American arts and science faculties, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. In fact, they even “earn more and have better career prospects” than physicists and mathematicians (Freeman, *ibid.*); only computer scientists and engineers do better. Unlike many academics in the theoretical sciences and humanities, many prominent economists have the opportunity to obtain income from consulting fees, private investment and partnerships, or from membership on corporate boards. Moreover, the economics profession was largely oblivious to its peculiar social circumstances – at least until the 2010 movie documentary *Inside Job* highlighted the complacent and lucrative relations between some of the field’s most distinguished members and the financial nebulae of Wall Street.

This much better financial position of economists, particularly in top universities, combined with the discipline’s emphasis on mastering quantitative reasoning (interpreted as a sign of higher intellectual capabilities) certainly stand behind the often-dismissive attitude of economists towards the other, less formal social sciences. But there are other reasons for the distant relations among social scientists. The social composition of their respective fields is very different. Self-selection into the different social sciences

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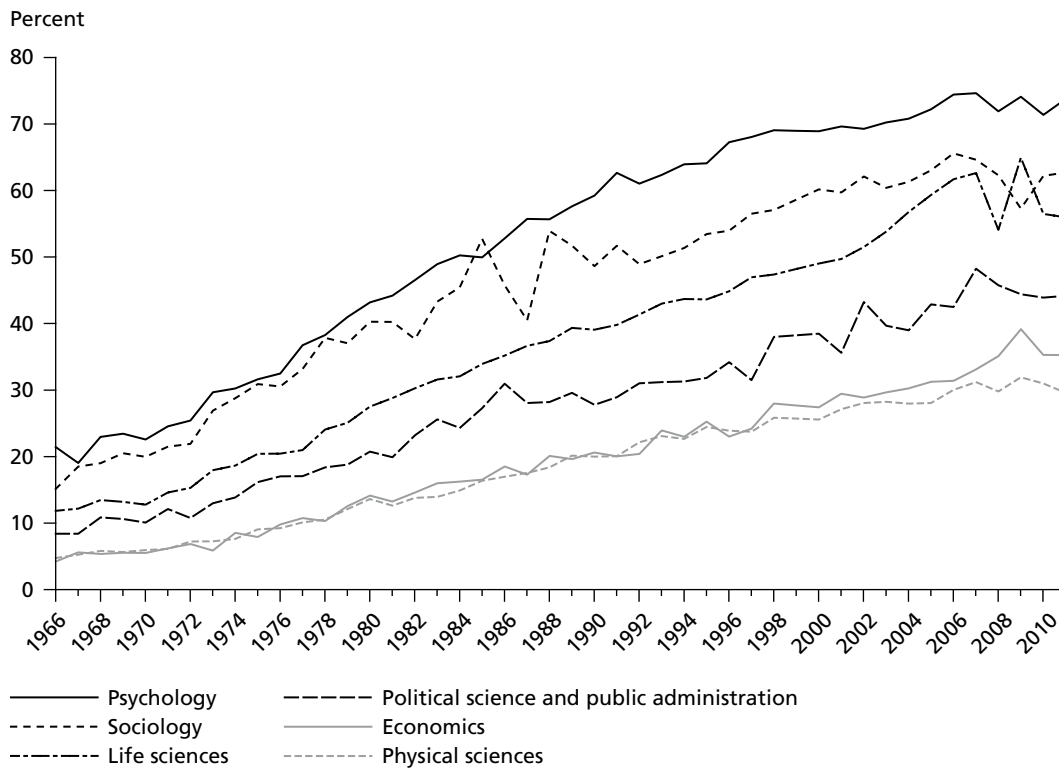
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is heavily patterned by social attributes, as is identification with them. For instance, economics, like physics or philosophy but in sharp contrast to sociology, is a very male-dominated discipline (see Figure 1). Thus relations between the disciplines are inevitably permeated by broader patterns of gender difference, stratification, and inequality. And while we do not have good comparative data on the social origins of social scientists in the United States (but see Bourdieu [(1979)1984] and Lebaron [2000] on France), we may posit that disparities in the present material conditions of the different fields generate important disparities in lifestyle and worldviews, as well as relational strains between them. So did probably the demographic growth of the disciplines, by nature more inward-looking and preoccupied with managing their own divisions and the consequences of field hyper-specialization when they expand (Abbott 2001). These signs of estrangement are all the more striking from a historical perspective, given that the neighboring disciplines of history and moral philosophy gave birth to political economy back in the nineteenth century (Ross 1991, for a US-focused discussion), while American sociology was born partly from within economics in the early part of the twentieth century (Young 2009).

In this essay, we explore the shifting relations between economics and the other social sciences in four specific dimensions. First, we document the relative insularity of economics and its dominant position within the network of the social sciences in the United States. Though all disciplines are in some way insular – a classic consequence of the heightening of the division of academic labor (Jacobs 2013) – this trait particularly characterizes economics. Second, we document the pronounced hierarchy that exists within the discipline, especially in comparison with other social sciences. The authority exerted by the field's most powerful players, which fosters both intellectual cohesiveness and the active management of the discipline's internal affairs, has few equivalents elsewhere. Third, we look at the changing network of affiliations of economics over the postwar period, showing in particular how transformations within higher education (most prominently the rise of business schools) and the economy have contributed to a reorientation of economics toward finance. Finally, we provide a few insights into the material situation, worldviews, and social influence of economists, which also set them apart from their academic peers. Taken together, these traits help to define and account for the intellectual assurance of economists and, in turn, for their assertive claims on matters of public policy.

When we refer to the “superiority of economists,” our *double entendre* has both a descriptive and an explanatory purpose. Economics occupies a unique position in the academic field: far-reaching scientific claims linked to the use of formal methods; the tight management of the discipline from the top down; high market demand for services, particularly from powerful and wealthy parties; high compensation. This position of social superiority also breeds self-confidence, allowing the discipline to retain its relative epistemological insularity over time and fueling a natural inclination towards a sense of entitlement. While the imperialistic expansion of economics into aspects of

Figure 1 Percentage of doctorates awarded to women in selected disciplines, 1966–2011



Source: U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System Completion Survey.

social science that were traditionally outside the economic canon has spurred some engagement with non-economics scholarship, the pattern of exchange remains strongly asymmetrical, causing resentment and hostility in return. And while economists' unique position gives them unusual power to accomplish changes in the world, it also exposes them more to conflicts of interest, critique, and mockery when things go wrong.

## Insularity

The intellectual trajectories of the social-science disciplines diverged substantially over the course of the twentieth century. Economics has left behind the historical emphasis of its continental youth in an effort to emulate paradigmatic natural sciences, such as physics (Mirowski 1989). Unlike their more literary forerunners, modern-day economists attribute their intellectual standing and autonomy to their reliance on precisely specified and parsimonious models and measures. They see the field's high technical

costs of entry and its members' endeavors to capture complex social processes through equations or clear-cut causality as evidence of its superior scientific commitment, vindicating the distance from and the lack of engagement with the more discursive social sciences. In a famous apology, Lazear (2000: 99–100) writes: "The ascension of economics results from the fact that our discipline has a rigorous language that allows complicated concepts to be written in relatively simple, abstract terms. The language permits economists to strip away complexity. Complexity may add to the richness of description, but it also prevents the analyst from seeing what is essential." An eminent professor echoed this view when he described, this time critically, the narrow epistemological demands of his discipline:

You are only supposed to follow certain rules. If you don't follow certain rules, you are not an economist. So that means you should derive the way people behave from strict maximization theory. ... The opposite [to being axiomatic] would be arguing by example. You're not allowed to do that. ... There is a word for it. People say "that's anecdotal." That's the end of you if people have said you're anecdotal ... [Another thing is] what modern people say ... the modern thing is: "it's not identified." God, when your causality is not identified, that's the end of you. (Interview by Fourcade, cited in 2009: 91)

For much of the post-World War II period, flexing one's mathematical and statistical muscles and stripping down one's argument to a formal and parsimonious set of equations was indeed the main path to establishing scientific purity in economics. With the empirical revolution in the 1990s and 2000s, this function has shifted toward a hard-nosed approach to causality, focused on research design and inference, and often extolling the virtues of randomly controlled trials (for example, Angrist/Pischke 2010). Although this move has not escaped criticism (for example, Leamer 2010; Sims 2010), it represents a significant departure from the now disparaged "over-theoretical" orientations of the 1970s and 1980s. This shift towards applied microeconomics, while very real, has not, however, dramatically broadened the network of interdisciplinary connections. To be sure, economists have started to consider topics that are more traditionally associated with sociology, political science, and psychology, from political institutions to family structure, neighborhood effects, peer effects or (as of late) social mobility. However, cross-disciplinary citation patterns continue to demonstrate a lack of engagement with the other social sciences. Of course, one of the most remarkable facts about US social science (continental Europe tends to be more ecumenical) is the extent to which *all* its constituent disciplines work in relative isolation from each other: economics, sociology, political science, and psychology all have high percentages of intra-disciplinary citations. But even so, economics stands out, with 81 percent of citations within-field in 1997, as against 52 percent for sociology, 53 percent for anthropology, and 59 percent for political science, according to Jacobs (2013: 82; Jacobs uses the *NSF Science and Engineering Indicators 2000*, appendix 6–54, based on a sample of the most cited journals in each field).



Table 1 Citations from flagship journals to articles published in the 25 top journals in each discipline, 2000–2009 (as a percentage of total citations in each journal)

Cited journals <i>Citing journal</i> (% of all references)	Top 25 economics journals	Top 25 political science journals	Top 25 sociology journals	Total number of papers/citations from this journal
American Economic Review	40.3%	0.8%	0.3%	907 29,958
American Political Science Review	4.1%	17.5%	1.0%	353 19,936
American Sociological Review	2.3%	2.0%	22.0%	399 23,993

Source: Compiled by the authors from the electronic Institute for Scientific Information's *Web of Social Science*. The high number of papers and cites in the *AER* is due to the Papers and Proceedings. We also looked at these data without the P&P. The patterns do not differ significantly.

There are several reasons for this, most importantly the different epistemological cultures of the various disciplines and power inequalities between them. First, the theory of action that comes with economists' analytical style is hardly compatible with the basic premise of much of the human sciences, namely that social processes shape individual preferences (rather than the other way round). In economics, by contrast, "de gustibus non est disputandum" (Stigler/Becker 1977): the action begins mainly when preferences are set.<sup>1</sup> Second, the qualitative methods that underpin the work of many interpretive social scientists often do not square well with the formal aspirations of the vast majority of economists, with their views on causality and their predilection for methodological and theoretical precision over a search for real-world accuracy. Third, even when substantive terrains overlap, the explicit or implicit pecking order between the disciplines often obstructs genuine intellectual engagement.

Examining the structure of inter-disciplinary citations in detail reveals sharp differences across disciplines. Surveying academic journals from 1995 to 1997, Pieters and Baumgartner (2002) found sharply asymmetric flows between economics and the other social sciences. Our analysis of citations in flagship journals for economics, sociology, and political science over the period from 2000 to 2009 confirms this pattern. As shown in Table 1, articles in the *American Political Science Review* cite the top 25 economics journals more than six times as often as the articles in the *American Economic Review* cite the top 25 political science journals. The asymmetry is even starker with regard to the *American Sociological Review*. While only 2.3 percent of the sociologists' citations go to their economic colleagues (often in a critical fashion, arguably), just 0.3 percent of the economists' citations go to sociologists (again, taking into account only the top 25 journals in each discipline). Citation data are, of course, likely to be biased downwards because sociology and political science tend to cast their citation networks more broadly overall and because of the role of books (which we do not account for) in them. Even

1 In the past ten to fifteen years however, a few economists have taken a more active interest in the formation of preferences. For examples, see Bowles (1998), and Fehr/Hoff (2011).

so, it is worth pondering these asymmetrical patterns, especially because the discrepancy is so large and other sources of evidence all point in the same direction. A targeted comparison of citations to important figures in sociology and economics who deliberately engaged the other discipline shows this well. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the top-cited name in US sociology today, received a single mention in the *American Economic Review* during the 2000s (against 60 in the *American Sociological Review*), while Gary Becker reaped 41 citations in the *American Sociological Review* (106 in the *American Economic Review*). During the same period Max Weber and Mark Granovetter received 4 mentions each in the *American Economic Review*, but James Heckman was cited 25 times by sociologists and Oliver Williamson 13 times.<sup>2</sup>

From the vantage point of sociologists, geographers, historians, political scientists or even psychologists, economists often resemble colonists settling on their land, an image reinforced by some economists' proud claims of "economic imperialism" (Lazear 2000). Lured by the prospect of a productive crop, economists are swift to probe the new ground. They may ask for guidance upon arrival, even partner-up with the locals (with whom they share some of the same data). But they are unlikely to learn much from them, as they often prefer to deploy their own techniques.<sup>3</sup> The fact that economics has moved outside its conventional precincts has not been accompanied by much more sustained social interactions across the disciplines, no matter how cordial the first encounters may have been. The only relative exception to this pattern (see Figure 2) is political science, in which the dominant economic paradigm has successfully conquered a segment of the discipline.

Opinion surveys further confirm this analysis. Table 2 suggests that economists have, in general, less regard for interdisciplinarity than their social-scientific and even business-school brethren. Economists are the only ones in this group among whom a (substantial) majority disagree or strongly disagree with the proposition that "in general, interdisciplinary knowledge is better than knowledge obtained from a single discipline." Such results are consistent with the notion that economists, with their distinctive confidence in the superiority of their own discipline, are less likely to feel the need to rely on other disciplines or even to acknowledge their existence.

As sociologists know well, this dynamic is characteristic of unequal situations: those in a central position within a field fail to notice peripheral actors, and are also largely unaware of the principles that underpin their own domination (Bourdieu [1979]1984). Instead, they tend to rationalize power and inequality as a "just" product of merit, whether effort or talent (a good example of this kind of rationalization would be citing higher

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2 The data come from ongoing research on social science. For preliminary results, see Ollion and Abbott, forthcoming.

3 Though they sometimes also repurpose the technique of others, as illustrated by the borrowing of network analysis from sociology.

Table 2 Response to the statement "In general, interdisciplinary knowledge is better than knowledge obtained by a single discipline" (in percent)

American university professors in	Agree, strongly agree	Disagree, strongly disagree	No answer, don't know
Economics	42.1	57.3	0.6
Sociology	72.9	25.3	1.8
Political science	59.8	28.0	12.2
Psychology	78.7	9.4	11.9
Finance	86.6	9.6	3.8
History	68.2	31.7	0.1

Source: From Gross and Simmons' survey of the politics of the American professoriate. The survey was conducted in 2006. The authors sampled 100 individuals in each field. Return rates were low (though not unusually low for this kind of survey) and varied substantially across disciplines (economists: 44 percent; sociologists: 55 percent; political scientists: 54 percent; psychologists: 49 percent; finance professors: 37 percent; historians: 54 percent).

average scores on the Graduate Record Exam for graduate students in economics, or the higher impact factors of economics journals).<sup>4</sup> By contrast, peripheral actors compulsively orient themselves toward dominant ones, whether positively or negatively.<sup>5</sup>

### Hierarchy within

The intellectual structure of the discipline of economics is often evoked to explain these asymmetric relations. The argument is that it is partly because economists have managed to preserve a more unitary disciplinary core that other social science fields may find it easier to refer to them, if only to establish a counterargument, than the other way around. In other words, the arguments of a unitary discipline are clearly identifiable from the outside, while those of a fractious discipline are more uncertain. From this perspective, the fact that citations in economics journals are less likely to be interdisciplinary than citations in other social science journals suggests that economics as a field looks both more inward and towards the top of its internal hierarchy. This pattern may be interpreted in two ways: there is more consensus in economics than in sociology or political science; and there is more control. Of course these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive: there might be more consensus because there is more control (for

4 Sociologists, instead, might point out that differences between fields in the Graduate Record Exam are strongly structured by social determinants such as class, gender, and race.

5 As another example of this general phenomenon, Fourcade (2006) notes that non-US-based scholars are much more likely to define their identities around the recognition they receive (or fail to receive) from American academic institutions than the other way around.

instance, if a consistent view of what constitutes quality research is promoted by those who control the top journals); conversely, control might be more effective and enforceable because there is more consensus.

There is substantial evidence that notwithstanding deep political differences among themselves, economists are more likely to think in a strongly integrated and unified framework than other social scientists. For instance, economists agree widely on the core set of principles and tools that structure PhD training. They also rely on textbooks much more than the other social sciences do, including at the graduate level (and graduate textbooks tend to be written by faculty from elite departments). In a survey conducted in 1990, graduate education was found to be “amazingly similar” across economics PhD programs (Hansen 1991: 1085).

In the interdisciplinary fellowship attribution panels studied by Lamont (2009), economists had more homogeneous standards of evaluation within and greater confidence in their judgment about research excellence even in other fields, and a higher likelihood to stick together as a group than panelists from other disciplines.<sup>6</sup> Only historians were similar to economists in the consistency and cohesiveness of their judgments about good historical craftsmanship, but even they were more divided internally along political lines, as well as more open to considering a variety of criteria when judging other disciplines. Judgments about the scholarly merit of proposals were more dispersed and less consensual in the humanities and other social scientific fields, making it harder to identify important works both within and without.

On the control side, economists manage their field tightly. Scholars have long noted that top departments in economics exert a remarkably strong influence over the discipline’s internal labor market (Cole 1983; Whitley 1984). The most convincing empirical study on this point comes from the comparison by Han (2003) of the hiring process in seven disciplines (their “tribal regimes”): two from the humanities, History and English; one from the natural sciences, Mathematics; and four from the social sciences, Economics, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology. Using *Lingua Franca’s* annual compilations in *Job Tracks: Who Got Hired Where* (1993–2000), Han found, unsurprisingly, that all of the disciplines follow a “prestige principle”: hires are strongly dependent on the prestige of departments as reported by sources such as the National Research Council and *US News and World Report*. The flows of students between departments are unequivocal: they show that universities hire only from institutions that are ranked at the same level or higher. Academia hence resembles the kinship systems described by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), in which some alliances (between students and departments) are preferred, while others, being taboo, simply cannot exist. This correlation between prestige and placement, however, is strongest in economics. There, the distinctions between

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6 Studying how mainstream economists established their position within the interdisciplinary school of advanced studies in the social sciences (EHESS) in Paris, Godechot (2011) finds a similar pattern of strong cohesion within and asymmetric relations and exclusion without.

clusters are more clear-cut than in any other discipline. Economics departments at the very top of the pecking order exchange students among themselves in higher proportions than in other fields, including mathematics. Three conclusions emerge. First, hierarchy is much more clearly defined in economics. Second, the field of economics is horizontally more integrated, with strong norms of reciprocity and cohesion in recruitment processes. Third, these norms and the hiring practices they sustain foster a strong temporal persistence of the prestige rankings. By contrast, psychology and sociology are more decentralized, less cohesive, and with less stable prestige rankings.

### Getting a job

The hiring process in the annual junior job market confirms these differences across the social sciences. In economics, the process is very organized, with most departments collectively deciding on the rank ordering of their own students applying for positions. This procedure, which is uncommon in many academic fields, is possible only in the context of economists' strong internal agreement on quality criteria, and because of the field's belief that search and placement processes can be more efficient that way, without altering outcomes. Once a department's own students have been ranked, market intermediaries ("placement officers") are delegated with the task of helping to make matches, by proactively selling the products on offer (so to speak) to potential buyers at the other end. Finally, a ritualized evaluation process progressively filters the vetted candidates, starting with interviews at the annual meetings of the Allied Social Science Associations held in early January. For the aspiring PhD graduate, the real action at the ASSA conference takes place in the hotel suites where the hiring parties – other academic departments, but also government agencies, international institutions, private sector firms – interview job candidates for several days on end. Meanwhile, in the public meeting rooms, the more established scholars present their papers to their peers.

The sociology junior labor market stands in sharp contrast to this careful orchestration of the circulation of students. To job applicants and faculty, the very notion of a collectively managed process of matching students to job positions would be both unworkable in practice and objectionable in principle. To be sure, social networks play a role and informal contacts sometimes precede on-site "fly outs," but they rarely take the form of a formal interview by a full committee, as they do in economics. Hierarchies between sociology departments are also more uncertain. A vertical structure does exist – sociologists, too, have "market stars" and keep a close eye on commonly referenced departmental rankings. But one would be hard-pressed to define the principles that underpin the pecking order. Devoid of consensual criteria for generating a putative hierarchy, and perhaps also less trusting of their colleagues' judgment, sociologists must keep the process more open in order to build up consensus from below, inclusively. In

economics, consensus is much stronger from the start; “information” about candidates is deemed homogeneous and therefore inherently reliable. As a result, the range of possible options is more tightly defined and determined much earlier.

### Getting published

The economics publications market is also comparatively more concentrated than in other social science disciplines in the sense that the most-cited journals exhibit a heavier concentration of papers from elite departments in economics than from those in sociology. This is true both in terms of the departments where authors work, and the departments from where those authors graduated. For instance, according to our calculations, the top five sociology departments account for 22.3 percent of all authors published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, but the top five economics departments account for 28.7 percent of all authors in the *Journal of Political Economy* (*JPE* hereafter) and 37.5 percent in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (*QJE*). The contrast is even starker when one turns to the institutions from which the authors got their PhD, with the top five sociology departments now totaling 35.4 percent in the *American Journal of Sociology*, but 45.4 percent in the *Journal of Political Economy* and a sky-high 57.6 percent in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

An economist might tend to regard this concentration as evidence that those departments at the top of the hierarchy are intellectually stronger relative to other departments of economics, than those at the top of the sociology profession are to other departments of sociology. A different view would point out alternative pathways to centrality or standards of excellence in other disciplines (for example, the relative importance of books). It would point to the existence of multiple criteria of worth, which are only imperfectly reflected in the hierarchy of scholarly journals.<sup>7</sup> Economists, by contrast, tend to see institutionalized hierarchies as emergent, truthful indicators of some underlying worth, and consequently are obsessed with them. It is worth noting that in no other social sciences can one find the extraordinary volume of data and research about rankings (of journals, departments, and individuals) that economists produce, not to mention RePEc (a research archive) and the continued existence of a substantial, if marginalized, subfield focused on the history of economics.

This intense awareness of hierarchies in economics breeds fierce competition for status, which may explain some of the most unsettling aspects of the field’s operating procedures. One notable fact is that several leading economic journals edited at particular universities have a demonstrable preference for in-house authors, while the *American*

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7 On the role of books in academic careers for sociologists, see Clemens et al. (1995). While the data used in this study are now 20 years old, there is no evidence that the two-pronged situation has changed much.

*Economic Review (AER)* is much more balanced in its allocation of journal space. Looking at home bias figures since the 1950s, Coupé (2004: 27) finds a consistent pattern of over-representation of in-house authors over time. Between 1990 and 2000, for instance, the Harvard-based *Quarterly Journal of Economics* “assigned 13.4 percent of its space to its own people” and 10.7 percent to neighboring MIT (against 8.8 percent to the next most prominent department, Chicago). Conversely, 9.4 percent of the pages of the Chicago-based *Journal of Political Economy* went to Chicago-affiliated scholars. This was equivalent to the share of Harvard and MIT combined (4.5 and 5.1 percent, respectively). Wu (2007) shows that these biases actually increased between 2000 and 2003.<sup>8</sup> Our data (2003–2012) confirm this domination of Cambridge, Massachusetts over the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* and (to a lesser extent) Chicago over the *Journal of Political Economy*. The supremacy of Cambridge, Massachusetts is even more striking when one looks at where the authors obtained their PhDs. In 2003–2012, the proportion of Harvard graduates publishing in the *QJE* was 20.5 percent, just edging MIT graduates (16.4 percent). Both were way ahead of the third contributor, Princeton (7.4 percent). In the *JPE*, Harvard, MIT, and Chicago graduates all hovered around 10–11 percent of the authors’ pool.

To be sure, there are many reasons for home biases in economic journals, such as higher levels of submissions from faculty and graduate (or former graduate) students if the journal is edited in-house; a higher likelihood of being encouraged by the editor, part of whose job is to bring in good papers through personal connections (Laband and Piette 1994; Medoff 2003); or the particular standpoint of the journal leading to self-selection biases in submission. But similar processes are also at play in other fields, without producing the same dramatic effects. Thus even if the social structure of the field may explain some of these differences, it does not explain them away: the structure itself stands at the core of the phenomenon that interests us here, which is the stable supremacy of three departments – Chicago, Harvard, and MIT – over the rest of the field, bolstered via control over two university-based journals. As a point of comparison, such home bias is virtually nonexistent in the only sociology journal edited out of a university department, the *American Journal of Sociology*, which is based at the University of Chicago.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that the pattern of home bias in top

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8 Wu finds that 14 percent of *JPE* pages published over that period went to Chicago authors, and a whopping 28 percent of *QJE* pages went to Harvard-MIT authors (specifically, 15 percent for Harvard and 13 percent for MIT). Our data for 2003–2012 show that the University of Chicago still ranks first with 10.8 percent of the authors published in the *Journal of Political Economy*, followed by Harvard (6.1 percent) and MIT (4.1 percent). During the same period, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* published almost twice as many authors (14.9 percent) from Harvard than from Chicago (7), with MIT coming third (6.2 percent).

9 If anything, our data suggest that there might instead be a bias against Chicago faculty in the *American Journal of Sociology*, who barely makes it into the top 20, with a mere 1.4 percent of published papers. Although this proportion rises to 6.9 percent for former Chicago sociology graduates, they are still topped by both Harvard (9.4 percent) and Stanford PhDs (8 percent).

economics journals, together with the stability of rankings of top departments, is not just a coincidence of geography and authors, but stems instead from a particular form of social organization and control.

### Getting together

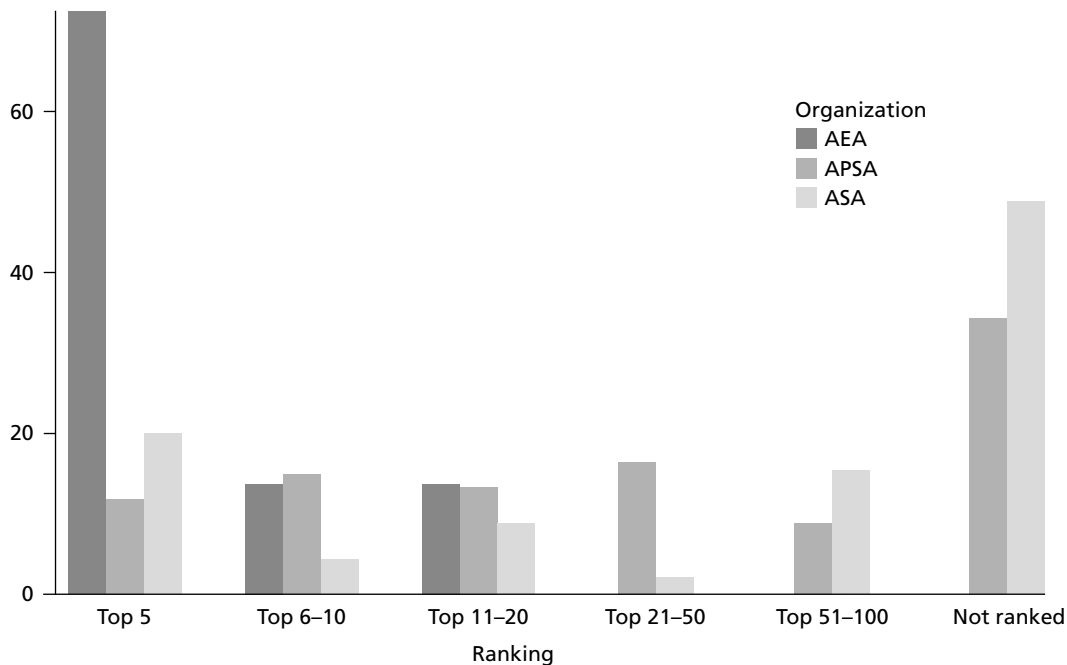
Finally, looking at professional associations across social scientific fields confirms the more cohesive and hierarchical organization of economics, and the more fractious character of its sister disciplines. A rapid comparison of the by-laws of the American Economic Association (AEA), the American Sociological Association (ASA), and the American Political Science Association (APSA) shows significant disparities in the distribution of political power across the disciplines. Despite being 18,000 members strong, the AEA is a minimalist organization based out of Nashville, Tennessee. Dues are low, at \$20–\$40/year as of 2014, the by-laws are short, at 1,770 words, and procedures are centralized. There are only six elected officers, and only one candidate typically runs for president-elect. As Figure 2 shows in dramatic fashion, the AEA leaders are drawn disproportionately from the discipline's elite departments: that is, 72 percent of the AEA non-appointed council members are from the top five departments, in contrast to only 12 and 20 percent, respectively, for APSA and ASA. The president-elect and program committee run the program for the annual meetings, which involves selecting the sessions to be conducted and the papers from a subset of the sessions to be included in the "Papers and Proceedings" issue of the *American Economic Review* (the May issue following the annual meeting) ahead of time. This procedure ensures a flagging of topics and authors deemed most important by the organization's leadership.

This approach contrasts with the more internally balkanized and also more grassroots nature of the American Sociology Association and the American Political Science Association. Although these professional associations have fewer members than the American Economic Association (about 15,000 for APSA and 13,000 for ASA), their staffs are larger and procedures are more complex, as reflected in the length of their by-laws: 4,657 words for the ASA, 5,529 for APSA. While the AEA is a unitary organization, community life among sociologists and political scientists revolves around "sections" or organized subfields, each of which has its own procedures, dues, awards, and program at the annual meeting. The ASA solves the political problem of internal divisions by having contested elections at both the central and section levels, while the APSA has long resorted to institutionalized horse-trading between the dominant constituencies. In both cases, the organizations' leaders are drawn primarily from non-elite institutions, as shown in Figure 2. Because the disciplinary core is less identifiable and more contested, members of the ASA and the APSA also identify less with the core: the rank-and-file is less bound to the elite and both associations fulfill primarily a democratic purpose of



Figure 2 Institutional composition of the Executive Council of three disciplinary organizations, 2010–2014

Members of the Councils (percent)



Note: Non-appointed members only, unique individuals. The “not ranked” category comprises mostly departments that do not have a graduate program, and a very small number of foreign institutions. The US News and World Report ranking of best graduate schools, by discipline, is from 2012.

integration across the board, an openness that is also reflected in the structuring of their conference programs. However, the marginalization of most of the association leaders at the ASA and the APSA from the high prestige core of the discipline, and also from political power, may explain both organizations’ frantic striving for influence, manifested, among other things, in their Washington addresses. To support this more elaborate infrastructure and expensive residence, dues for both organizations are among the highest in the arts and sciences academia: \$50 to \$350/year for the ASA and \$40 to \$320 for the APSA, not counting section dues.

### Friends in high places

For all the relative insularity and autonomy of economics, economists still do engage other disciplines. Our analysis of five top economics journals shows that between 19 and 25 percent of citations are outside the discipline, a fairly stable pattern since the end

of World War II. But when economics goes interdisciplinary, where does it turn? Have the disciplinary connections of economics changed over time, and if so, what does this tell us about the evolution of the field?

This framing provides us with a different road into the recent history of economics than much of the literature on economic publications, which is often focused tightly on the trends within economics: examples include the transformation of publishing patterns in economic journals (Card/DellaVigna 2013), the rise and fall of fields within economics in volume (Kelly/Bruestle 2010) and in relative prestige (Ellison 2010), or the downward trend in the use of mathematics and in the publication of theoretical papers (Hamermesh 2013). Instead, we begin by analyzing the network of relations between economics and other disciplines over time. In other words, we start from the assumption that who you cite says something about who you are. We find that changing patterns of external citations indeed tell us quite a lot about the inner situation of the discipline and the changing relative power of different constituencies.

### The rise of finance

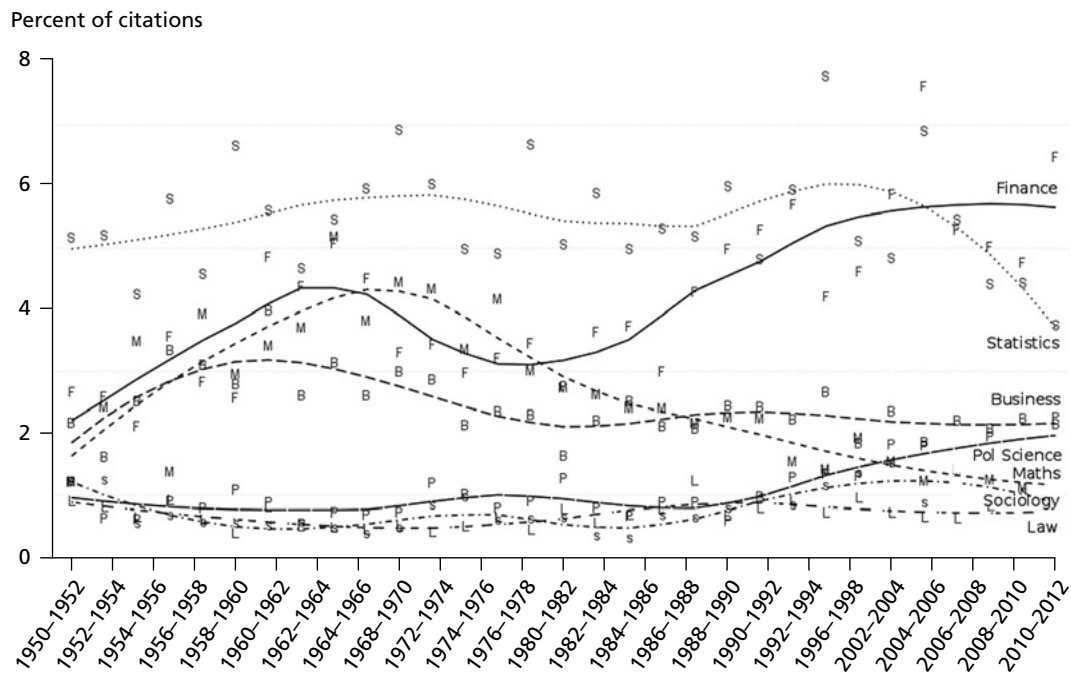
Figure 3 offers a simple representation of economics's extra-disciplinary references, based on our extensive study of citations in five top economics journals that were all founded well before World War II: the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (founded in 1899), the *Journal of Political Economy* (1899), the *American Economic Review* (1911), *Econometrica* (1933) and the *Review of Economic Studies* (1933).<sup>10</sup> The figure tells a story that is partly familiar, partly less so. The points in the figure show the share of outside-the-field citations in economics journals going to journals in the fields of Finance (F), Statistics (S), Business (B), Political Science (P), Mathematics (M), Sociology (s), and Law (L). Because there is considerable fluctuation from year to year, we show the patterns of the data as smoothed curves. The figure shows the dramatic rise of economics' engagement with mathematics and statistics in the post-World War II period. The high point of this engagement, in the mid-1970s, coincides with the low point of engagement with the other social sciences (such as political science and sociology), as well as with practical enterprises, such as law and, with a slight delay, business. Notwithstanding foundations' and government efforts to promote interdisciplinary ventures under the "behavioral sciences" label in the 1950s, the social sciences became clearly more estranged from one another in the 1960s–1970s. Nor was economics the only

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10 Citations were obtained from the Institute for Scientific Information's Web of Social Science. Citations to economics have also been removed for more convenient reading, and the lines were drawn using a smoothing coefficient.

See Appendix for more details: <[www.jourdan.ens.fr/~eollion/documents](http://www.jourdan.ens.fr/~eollion/documents)>.

Figure 3 Extra-disciplinary citation in five top journals



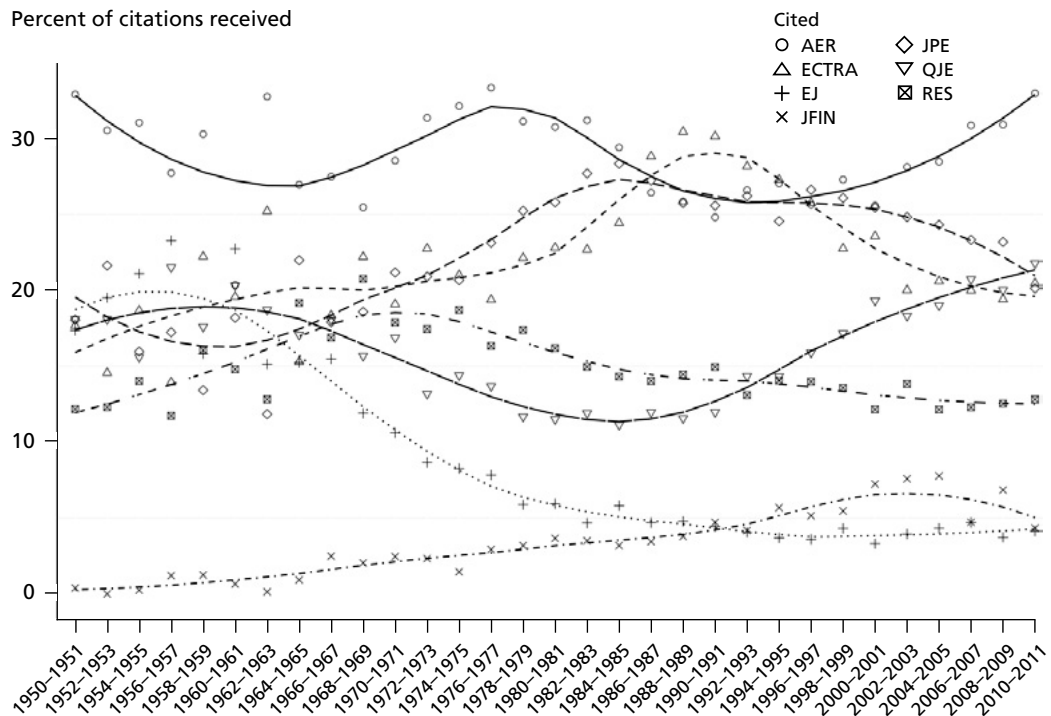
Source: The raw citation data were collected from the ISI's Web of Social Sciences.

driving force in this process: Cross-disciplinary experiments at Harvard (Department of Social Relations) or Carnegie-Mellon failed, and all the various fields retreated into their own distinctive form of abstraction and high theory (Steinmetz 2005; Isaac 2010).

The interdisciplinary ecology as it stood towards the end of the period depicted in Figure 3 looks very different. Citations to mathematics in the leading economics journals are practically gone and those to statistics have faltered. The other social sciences have made a modest comeback, particularly political science (which has had a partial conversion to rational choice theory). But the most striking trend from Figure 3 in recent decades is the continuous rise of finance as a purveyor of “interdisciplinary” references for economics.

In judging the magnitude of this trend towards finance it is important to note that our estimate of the rise of the role of finance within economics in Figure 3 is very conservative. Our list of five top economics journals does not include any finance journal. Figure 4 presents an analysis of citations between our list of five top economics journals over time, plus the *Journal of Finance* (*JF*; founded in 1946). We also included the British-based *Economic Journal* (*EJ*; founded in 1891), a core generalist publication for economists for much of the twentieth century, on a par with the *JPE* and *QJE* at the beginning of the period. The graph shows a lot of action at the top – the meteoric return of the *QJE* to prominence, the relative decline of *Econometrica* and *JPE* – but two other salient

Figure 4 Citations by seven journals to the other six



Source: The raw citation data were collected from the ISI's Web of Social Sciences.

transformations over the very long run are the constant decline of the British journals, particularly the *EJ* (which disappears into oblivion) and the rise of the *Journal of Finance*. Our bibliometric network data (not shown here) indicates that, by the 2000s, the *JF* was most closely integrated with the core US-based publications, receiving between 7 and 11 percent of the citations in the *AER*, *QJE*, and *JPE* (excluding self-citations from the totals). In other words, the *JF*, not an economics journal at first, has become an integral part of the disciplinary matrix. Other finance journals have followed suit, too, as financial economics has become the dominant approach in the field (Jovanovic 2008).<sup>11</sup>

11 The first issue of the *Journal of Financial Economics* came out in 1974, but it is now ranked as the eighth economics journal by impact factor. The *Review of Financial Studies*, first published in 1988, ranks twelfth. The *Journal of Finance* now ranks fifth by impact factor overall in economics, edging ahead of the much older *Review of Economic Studies*.

## The B-School connection

The institutional rise of finance as an intellectual powerhouse within economics follows from the establishment of a teaching base in business schools in the second half of the twentieth century. Over that period, business schools, which control the production of certified managers (through the MBA degree), have evolved from practitioner-dominated programs struggling for academic legitimacy to become the largest employers of trained social scientists, now rivaling traditional academic departments in the size and distinction of their faculties. A survey from 2004 found 549 economics PhDs teaching in the top 20 US business schools, as compared with 637 economics PhDs in the top 20 economics departments (Blau 2006). This absorption of increasingly large contingents of economics PhDs has turned business schools into formidable players within economic science itself – a transformation that is attested by the remarkable string of Nobel Memorial Prizes in Economic Science awarded to scholars based in business schools since 1990 (Fourcade/Khurana 2013): Eugene Fama, Oliver Williamson, Robert Engle, Michael Spence, Robert Merton, Myron Scholes, Merton Miller, John Harsanyi, and Robert Fogel to name but a few.

Our own analysis of papers published in the *American Economic Review* since the 1950s reveals a rapid rise in business school affiliations among authors, and a simultaneous and sharp decline in government-based authors. The share of authors whose primary affiliation is to a business school increased steadily from a low 3.2 percent in the 1950s to 17.9 percent in the 2000s. Conversely, contributions from scholars located in government agencies have become marginal.<sup>12</sup>

As the academic field of economics shifted toward business schools – and away from government – economists faced a new set of practical, intellectual, and political entanglements: higher levels of compensation, new connections and consulting opportunities, and often different politics as well (Jelveh/Kogut/Naidu 2014). In the 1980s, suspicion of government action grew markedly within the field, and economists arguably supplied part of the intellectual rationale for the deregulatory movement in public policy and for the expanded use of price and market mechanisms in education, transportation, health care, the environment, and elsewhere (Blyth 2002). Financial economists argued forcefully that the purpose of corporations was to maximize shareholder value, and provided a scientific justification for the management practices favored by a new generation of corporate raiders, such as leveraged buy-outs, mergers and acquisitions,

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12 Measures are based on self-declared affiliation on the articles we surveyed. When authors mentioned several affiliations (a trait that has increased over time), we adopted the following procedure: if there was a clear order, we opted for the first institution; otherwise, and in an attempt to not artificially increase the share of secondary affiliations, we gave priority to “economics department” when mentioned equally with any other institution.

See Appendix for more details: <[www.jourdan.ens.fr/~eollion/documents](http://www.jourdan.ens.fr/~eollion/documents)>.

and compensating corporate executives with stock options.<sup>13</sup> In a recent indictment of the “pervasiveness of the capture of economists by business interests,” Luigi Zingales (2013: 139) found that economics articles were significantly “less likely to be positive on the level of executive compensation, and significantly more likely to be negative” when none of their authors worked in a business school.<sup>14</sup>

### **A life of their own**

The position of economics in the institutional ecology of the American university has changed, as has that of economists within American society. Economists have distinct opinions, beliefs, and tastes compared with academics in other fields and with the broader American public. Evidence on this topic is dispersed, however, and must be pieced together from various sources. A sizeable share comes from economists themselves: the home-grown literature on the topic is abundant. The field is filled with anxious introspection, prompted by economists’ feeling that they are powerful but unloved, and by robust empirical evidence that they are different. In some classic examples, Marwell and Ames (1981) found evidence, in a structured laboratory game, that first-year graduate students in economics at the University of Wisconsin were less likely to make contributions to a public good. Frank, Gilovich and Regan (1993) cite a range of evidence suggesting that studying economics inhibits cooperation. The extent to which such differences persist across different laboratory studies, and the underlying causes of such differences, remain controversial. Is it that studying economics makes people more accepting of self-interested behavior in themselves and others? Or perhaps the discipline attracts more egoistic people? Frey and Meier (2005) look at voluntary student contributions to social funds at the University of Zurich, and find that those who later choose economics as a field of study are less likely to contribute – even before their economic studies begin. Whatever the underlying dynamic, there is suggestive and convergent evidence that economists are more comfortable and open than most about pursuing self-interest.

Economists are likely to find themselves in a minority position on some of their dearest ideas. Sapienza and Zingales (2013) argue that the more American economists agree among themselves, the more distant they grow from average Americans. In general, of course, economists favor using market-based solutions to address social issues (Whaples 2009). They support allowing payments to be made to organ donors, but the public finds the very thought distasteful. A sizeable majority of economists believes that

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13 See, for instance, Fligstein/Shin 2007; Jung/Dobbin 2012; Fourcade/Khurana 2013; Heilbron/Verheul/Quak 2014.

14 The sample included 150 of the most downloaded SSRN papers using the search keyword “executive compensation,” prior to 2008 (excluding survey papers).

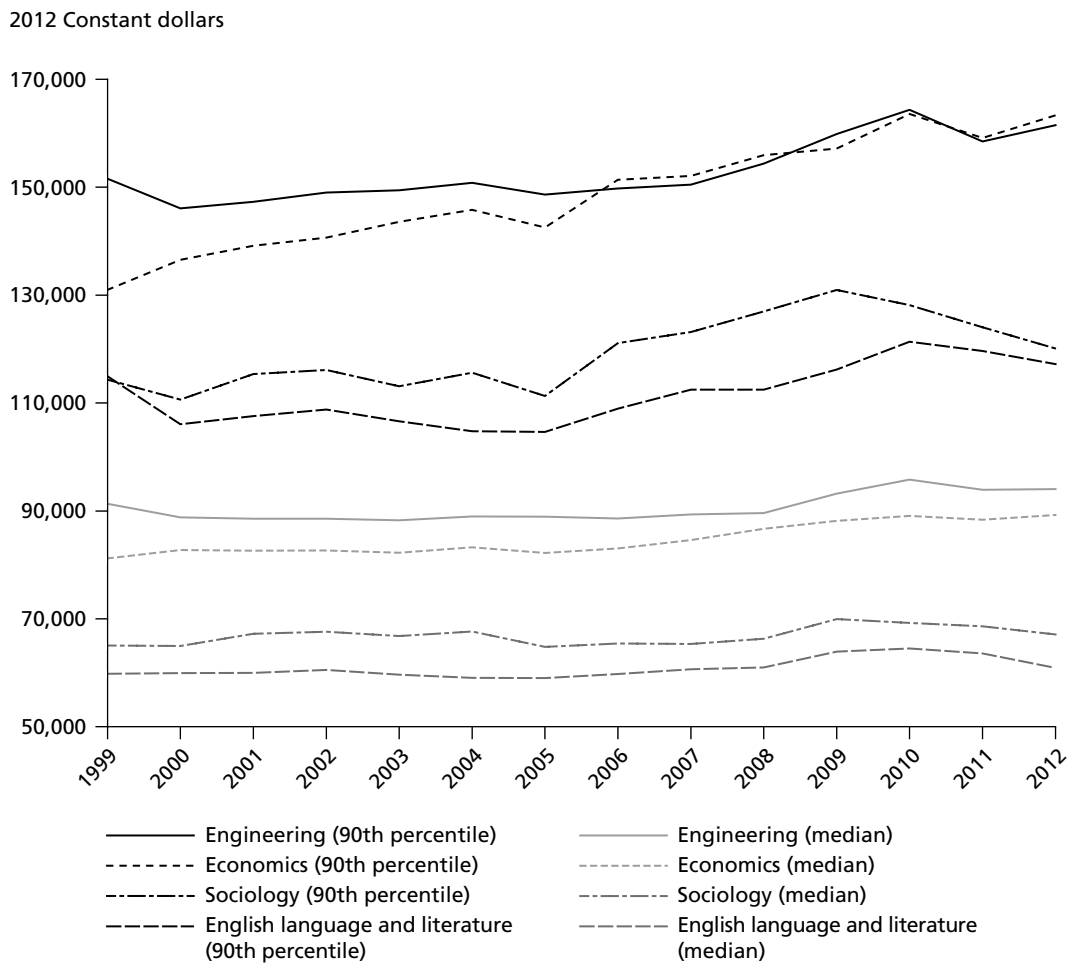
trade protectionism is economically harmful, but when asked whether “buying American” is good for the economy, the average American agrees (Sapienza/Zingales 2013: 638). Economists think that a market mechanism such as a carbon tax or a cap-and-trade system of pollution permits is a more cost-effective mechanism to curb climate change than regulatory steps such as car emissions standards, but most of their fellow citizens beg to differ. Economists may advise governments, but they do not convince the people.

Politically, economists vote more to the left than American citizens, like most of their university-based peers. They have been doing so for as long as political opinion surveys have been administered to academics: Ladd and Lipset (1976) offer a well-done early survey. Even though, on average, the contingent of libertarians among economists is much larger than among the US voting public as a whole, they still trust the government more, with some important institutional variations (for example, the University of Chicago remains distinctive). According to the Gross and Simmons survey of the American professoriate (see Gross 2013), economists are situated about halfway between humanities scholars and other social scientists to their left and business school professors to their right in most of their political opinions. For example, two-thirds of sociologists say that corporations make too much profit, but only one-third of economists and virtually no finance professors think so. The overwhelming majority of sociologists (90 percent) endorse the proposition that “the government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt,” but barely half of the economists and a third of the finance scholars agree with that proposition.

The worldviews of economists, like those of all individuals, are in part the product of their particular social entanglements, the material and symbolic situation and trajectory of their group, and that of each individual within it. Relative to other academics, economists do better in terms of income. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median salary for the 11,000 economics teachers in colleges, universities and professional schools was \$103,000 in 2012, and \$160,000 for the top 10 percent. For comparison, the median figure for sociologists was \$76,000, with the top 10 percent at \$118,000. These totals do not count additional sources of income from consulting work or other activities, which can be substantial. Furthermore, economists’ material situation has improved noticeably over the past two decades, particularly for the best-paid members of the profession, who now narrowly outstrip the best-paid engineers; by contrast, the median real wage in many academic professions (the humanities, mainly) and in the United States at large barely rose over the same period (see Figure 5). Whether this experience of group social mobility and greater intra-field inequalities affect the attitudes of many economists to the deteriorating relative economic situation of most of their less fortunate fellow academics and citizens is an open question.

This growing social distance of economists from the public at large would be irrelevant if economists were not making it their mission to maximize the welfare of ordinary people. Economics as a profession is prominently intertwined with public administra-

Figure 5 Annual median and 90th percentile wages in selected disciplines, 1999–2012



Note: Figure 5 covers teachers at junior colleges in addition to colleges, universities, and professional schools.

Source: BLS Occupational Employment Statistics, [www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm).

tions, corporations, and international organizations, which not only provide resources, including the use of these institutions to collect data, but have also led economists to acquire a “fix it” culture – or, as sociologists would put it, a particular “habitus,” a set of dispositions towards the world (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). Economists, particularly modern economists, want to fix things, which is both a product of their theoretical confidence and of the position of their discipline within society (Mitchell 1998). For instance, economic models routinely invoke the mythical figure of the benevolent “social planner,” imagining what she would do to make the world richer, healthier, and less vulnerable to shocks. They have developed a precise theoretical framework for evaluating when markets are efficient and when market failures can occur, and they have developed a vast econometric arsenal to parse out the effects of actual policy proposals.



In the past couple of decades, they have also become more likely to run narrowly specified field experiments, putting the administration of social policy or development aid at the service of research (for example, Banerjee/Duflo 2012). (One may note in passing that the experiments of economists are quite different from those of sociologists, who tend to run experiments to understand how people live.) Finally, economists are fairly certain about their ultimate judgment criteria: their predilection for efficiency over fairness, the eliciting of preferences from behavior, the design of experiments around a narrow menu of choices. These criteria support both an orientation toward policy adjudication and advice, and a distinctive willingness, even eagerness, to serve and intervene. If things don't work the way they *should*, then a smart intervention, a "nudge," may be called for (Thaler/Sunstein 2009).

Here again, there is a telling comparison with sociologists, who might also vie for the position of the Prince's counselor, but have been much less successful at securing influence. First, economics and sociology have different orientations to time. Economists generally pay little attention to history, "live in the now," and "see trajectories from the present forward," while sociologists have the reverse intellectual attitude, looking at the present as the outcome of a set of past processes (Abbott 2005). Thus sociologists often find themselves both effectively marginalized and shying away from direct policy involvement. Their intellectual habits center around social critique precisely because they are already outside: in the words of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it may be the case that they have to "make a virtue of necessity." Self-perceptions reflect these differences well. In Gross and Simmons' (2007) survey of the American professoriate, economists described themselves mainly as "intellectuals" and "scientists." Sociologists were most comfortable with the terms "social critic" and "scientist," unconsciously embracing their own peripheral position, but without abandoning the mantle of science. The combination of sociologists' desire for relevance with their deep ambivalence towards power produces a very different set of dispositions: sociologists analyze critically, sometimes rouse and stir, but they rarely venture to propose fixes and remedies (they are not in a position to do so, and would perhaps be reluctant, even if they had the opportunity). Political scientists, interestingly, saw themselves primarily as "intellectuals," but perhaps reflecting their much closer proximity to the political game, they were also somewhat more likely to distance themselves from the label "scientists" than either sociologists or economists.

The upshot of economists' confident attitude toward their own interventions in the world is that economics, unlike sociology or political science, has become a powerful transformative force. Economists do not simply depict a reality out there, they also make it happen by disseminating their advice and tools. In sociological terms, they "perform" reality (Callon 1998). Aspects of economic theories and techniques become embedded in real-life economic processes, and become part of the equipment that economic actors and ordinary citizens use in their day-to-day economic interactions. In some cases, the practical use of economic technologies may actually align people's behavior with its depiction by economic models. By changing the nature of economic

processes from within, economics then has the power to make economic theories truer. For example, MacKenzie (2006) discusses how academic financial theories gave rise to enormous markets in futures, options, and other derivative financial instruments: the use of the Black-Scholes-Merton formula by market actors altered economic processes in such a way that it improved the fit of the model to the reality of option prices.

The world has changed in important ways under the influence of economists. Economic reasoning, expertise, and technologies permeate capitalist activities, culture (including the media and best-seller lists), and institutions, from hospitals through courts to universities. Economists dispense their expertise on practically every issue of public policy, and have made steady gains in business and government, often in top political positions (Markoff/Montecinos 2009; Hirschman/Popp Berman 2014). Finance ministries, central banks, government agencies, international organizations, and dominant consultancies harbor large concentrations of professionally trained economists, who claim tutelary power over “the economy” while viewing societies as involved in a never-ending but ultimately beneficial process of economic reconstruction. Finally, the rational-formalist language of the economics profession underpins its universalistic aspirations. Economic fashions circulate across borders, drawing people and techniques in their wake. Much more than sociology or political science, economics is a symbolically and materially globalized discipline (Fourcade 2006).

Thus, most economists feel quite secure about their “value-added.” They are comforted in this feeling by the fairly unified disciplinary framework that supports them, higher salaries that many of them believe reflect some real fundamental value, and a whole institutional structure – from newspapers through congressional committees to international policy circles – that looks to them for answers, especially in times of crisis. In fact, the recent economic and financial crisis has arguably raised the profile of the discipline of economics even more, and has made its expertise even more sought-after: the deep recessions of the early 1980s and the Great Depression of the 1930s had the same effect.

But because economics is a transformative force, and its operatives tend to be in charge, economists are also more exposed. The financial and economic maelstrom of 2008, which few in the economics profession had anticipated (but whose institutional roots could be traced back, in part, to actions some of them had lobbied for), led some economists to engage in soul-searching about their lack of awareness, their intellectual bullishness, and the reliability of their claims to expertise. Following the discomfiting interviews presented in *The Inside Job*, in which prominent members of the profession emphatically denied the possibility of conflicts of interest for economists, the American Economic Association promoted a set of ethical guidelines. From his powerful tribune at the *New York Times*, Nobel Memorial Prize winner Paul Krugman aired the dirty laundry of macroeconomics – usually buried in esoteric models – in a fierce and very public manner (Krugman 2009). Subsequently, economists have begun to talk about distributional issues, the bread and butter of another social science, sociology, in a way

that was unimaginable just two or three decades ago. To be sure, the changing facts of inequality (Piketty 2014) warrant this newfound interest. But the intellectual winds in economics are shifting, too.

### **Conclusion: Humble, competent people?**

“If economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people, on a level with dentists, that would be splendid!” Keynes (1963[1932]: 373) famously wrote. Most modern economists have a strong practical bent. They believe in the ideal of an expert-advised democracy, in which their competence would be utilized and on display in high profile, non-elective positions in government and other institutions. But democratic societies are deeply suspicious of (non-democratic) expertise, and economic advice, unlike dentistry, can never be humble. The fact is that – in some ways true to its philosophical origins – economics is a very moral science after all. Unlike atoms and molecules, the “objects” upon which economists seek to act have a perspective on the world, too. Human life is messy, never to be grasped in its full complexity or shaped according to a plan: people act in unanticipated ways, politics makes its own demands, cultures (which economists do not understand well) resist. Thus the very real success of economists in establishing their professional dominion also inevitably throws them into the rough and tumble of democratic politics, forcing them to try to manage a hazardous intimacy with economic, political, and administrative power. It takes a lot of self-confidence to put forward decisive expert claims in that context. That confidence is perhaps the greatest achievement of the economics profession – but it is also its most vulnerable trait, its Achilles heel.

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