Book Reviews

Book: Aspers, Patrik, 2010: *Orderly Fashion.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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In his most recent book, *Orderly Fashion*, Patrik Aspers examines order in markets, through a detailed study of the global fashion industry, focusing on branded garment retailers, which sell clothes to final consumers. Examples include C&A, Gap, H&M, and Zara. While relying on empirical work based on observations and interviews, the book aims to contribute not only to the field of fashion studies, but also to sociological theory more generally and to economic sociology, especially regarding markets. With solid empirical research, an extensive, 20-page bibliography, and the ability of its author, the book succeeds in making valuable contributions to all these fields.

I will not summarize the book here. Aspers does it nicely, providing a summary at the end of each of the first six chapters and then discussing in Chapter 7 the findings of the book as a whole, before adding some final reflections on partial orders and their interrelations. The book also contains five appendices.

Aspers defines order 'as the predictability of human activities and the stability of social components in relation to each other' (p. 7). He studies markets as partial orders, limited in range but not necessarily local. These economic partial orders depend on other markets, as well as on noneconomic partial orders. Aspers adopts a social constructivist perspective: partial orders, including markets, are social constructions, i.e., meanings that result from social interaction and become entrenched (pp. 8-9). 'A central condition of the existence of partial order is that people perceive and act in such a way as to furnish evidence of such an order' (p. 171). This indicates an anti-realist stance, which is perhaps more clearly suggested when Aspers includes 'the realist assumptions despite claims of social constructivism' among the 'shortcomings of contemporary sociology' (p. 5. See also p. 209, n. 7). At the same time, however, Aspers acknowledges the pertinence of 'the question of ontological order', which 'remains to be addressed' (p. 166). Be it as it may, the tensions between realism and social constructivism do indeed deserve greater attention.

The book highlights the contribution of identities, products, and values to order in the fashion industry markets. Some of these markets are classified as 'status markets', where 'order is maintained because the identities of actors on both sides of the market are ranked according to status, which is a more entrenched ... social construction than the thing ... traded in the market, namely fashion garments' (p. 16; also pp. 58-60, specifically on the branded garment retailers' consumer market).

This contrasts with 'standard markets', such as the production markets for garments, in which the branded garment retailers buy the products (pp. 144-146). The book also investigates order on the financial side of the fashion business, again focusing on the branded garment retailers, but now examining their relations with their investors in the stock market, which is another standard market. Aspers wants to bring closer together the sociological research on financial and producer markets, showing how these different markets in which the branded garment retailers operate are interconnected.

Fashion is an interesting topic for economic sociologists as well as institutional economists (even for those who consider the fashion world as vain and despise it for that), not least because it involves both imitation and stability, on the one hand, and innovation and change, on the other. Fashion is not only shared for social reasons, but, more specifically, the fact that others are wearing a given type of clothes is for many individuals a major reason for one to do the same. Aspers' work can be used here to add that this happens in the fashion consumer market when the others are of the right type (p. 53), that is, significant others (p. 52), characterized by a high status. This is a selective version of a property of conventions that we may call conformity with conformity (Dequech, 2011). The consumption of fashion garments may also involve negative network externalities, as Aspers (p. 206, n. 10) remarks. I believe this may occur after a certain number of other users has been reached, again depending on the type of these other users.

The essence of fashion is, however, to change from time to time. Oscar Wilde captured this aspect when he stated that 'fashion ... is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months' (1887: 205-206). Aspers' study intends to show, among other things, 'how order and change are interrelated' (p. 2). In my view, it does so when discussing the very notion of fashion: 'only when the social structure of identities is relatively more entrenched than the object, and when a change of garment styles takes place, can one talk of fashion' (p. 166). Conceptually, therefore, Aspers links fashion both to order based on the principle of status, in the consumer market, and to change. He has reason to hope that his theoretical ideas on this will also prove useful in the study of fashion regarding objects other than clothes (p. 166).

To conclude, this is a very stimulating, well researched and well-written book, which deserves to be read by those interested in fashion, economic sociology and/or sociology in general.

References

Dequech, David, 2011: Financial conventions in Keynes's theory: the stock exchange. In: *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, forthcoming.

Wilde, Oscar, 1887: Literary and Other Notes – I. In: *Woman's World, November*. Reprinted in: *Oscar Wilde – Collected Works:* London: Methuen, 1908.

Book: Karpik, Lucien, 2010: *The Economics of Singularities.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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How is economic value created out of something that is unique? Lucien Karpik's new book on *The Economics of Singularities* (Princeton University Press 2010) invites us to take this question seriously and put it at the very centre of a sociology of markets. He shows us that this problem of making uniqueness marketable is a problem for actors in many fields of business and he shows that this is not a trivial problem. With exemplary care and knowledge, Karpik shows us how conventional economists have tried to explain the problem away and he makes us marvel at the devices people employ to confront it.

These devices help consumers choose between products they cannot know in advance and they help to reduce risk for producers who cannot know what people will like. Consider, for example, the guides that explain and rate fine wines, the names that brand recordings of classical works, or the advertising budgets that accompany big blockbuster movies.

Karpik writes the book about what he conceptualises as a specific kind of market: markets in singularities. Singularities, as Karpik defines them, are multidimensional and their dimensions are dependent on each other; singularities are uncertain and singularities are incommensurable.

Karpik does not tell the somewhat familiar story of how commensuration and standardization, rankings and ratings erode uniqueness. Instead, as Karpik shows, in the rise of new products – and especially the rise of new symbolic products – over the past decades, forms of standardisation and forms of singularisation have gone hand in hand within many markets.

In demonstrating the role devices play in cases where markets are constructed against the odds - the book is an important contribution to economic sociology. In the best traditions of defamiliarisation, the book is also a beautiful book.

The book raises an important question for future comparative work on markets. I wonder whether what Karpik says about markets for singularities is not an even more general feature of markets than he suggests. Karpik makes claims specifically about the economics of singularities as though that was a distinct category. But is it? Is Karpik's analysis about a specific corner of the world while we can leave the rest to more conventional modelling? If it were not, this, in some way, would makes us lose the central category of Karpik's contribution, but it would make his work a basis for a comprehensive rethinking of how empirically and comparatively different markets are constructed.

The problem of uniqueness, in some forms, seems irreducible as a property of many more markets than Karpik suggests. Any given lightbulb is unique, as one will notice if one has only one and it breaks after dark. There is some kind of quality uncertainty about that lightbulb (- but not perhaps about web content). Every person is also unique and his or her needs subject to interpretation, so that my enjoyment of any given product is to some extent contingent and unpredictable, even to me.

On the other hand, of course, lightbulbs are more similar to each other in some ways than, for example, *Sex and the City*