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Introduction for the French Reader

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Introduction for the French Reader

by Mark Granovetter

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In this introduction for the French Reader to a collection of my essays from 1973 to 1990, I hope to accomplish several aims. One is to comment on what ideas are common to all these rather diverse efforts, and in what ways my thinking evolved during the period of this work, and since. A second and closely related goal is to discuss how these essays have been interpreted in France, and to link those interpretations to some characteristic differences between anglophone and francophone economic sociology. Finally I would like to consider to what extent the literature of economic sociology will converge or diverge between the French and Anglo-Saxon intellectual traditions.

I received my graduate training in Harvard's Department of Social Relations between 1965 and 1970. In terms of intellectual influence, three elements of this department are worth mentioning: 1) rather than being purely a sociology department, Social Relations included faculty and students in anthropology, psychology and sociology. Thus my training was rather interdisciplinary. 2) Although Talcott Parsons was still a major figure in this department, his influence was declining; and 3) A young professor named Harrison White, who was to become one of the founders of sociological network analysis, had recently arrived, and was soon to become my mentor and the major intellectual influence on my work.

The group of students who gathered around Harrison White was lively and iconoclastic. We thought of ourselves as rebelling against the reigning orthodoxy of Talcott Parsons in sociology, and this led us to devalue concern with symbols, values, norms and culture in society, as we thought of these concepts as being associated

with somewhat vacuous and circular reasoning in the complex scheme of categories which Parsons and his disciples had perfected.¹

In place of cosmic language and speculation about “social systems” and “consensually held values”, we placed our hope for the success of theory on what we took to be the far more concrete and real analysis of social networks. In doing so, we meant to reverse Parsons’s emphasis on vague social system concepts, and to restore to a central place in theory the actions of individuals and how those linked to the actions of others.

Yet, we clearly separated our ideas from another line of thought that emerged from our department, also in opposition to Talcott Parsons: this was the psychological reductionism of George Homans, whose arguments about social exchange were founded in part on the base of a behaviorist psychology championed by his friend B.F. Skinner [Homans 1961]. Although we appreciated Homans’s renewal of interest in individual motives, most of us thought he went too far in asserting that all social action could be understood by looking at incentives and reinforcements driving the behavior of individuals. The analysis of social networks was very centrally a sociological rather than a psychological analysis. The relationship rather than the individual was the main element of study, and the overall structure of social networks was important in a way that could never be captured by understanding the motives of individuals. In this way, we thought of ourselves as firmly in the sociological tradition of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, arguing that social life had a reality *sui generis* that could not be reduced to psychology.

In general, therefore, since this formative period, students of social networks have rarely joined with the forces of reductionism. But network analysts have nevertheless suffered from two failures of vision. One is that in many cases, they have pursued the details of social network analysis without interest in the larger problems of social theory that prompted attention to social networks in the first place. Thus, much social network analysis has studied the quantitative properties of social networks for their own sake, and engaged in highly specialized and narrow work which at times seems almost sectarian. I have complained of this tendency on at least two occasions, in a 1979 article, and in my keynote address to the annual social networks convention in 1990 [Granovetter 1990]. The other tendency, of which I have myself sometimes been guilty, is to devalue concern with the larger cultural, political and institutional framework within which social networks are embedded.

¹ Ironically, in recent years, once the decline of Parsons’s influence was apparently final, rebellious students who want to contest the current orthodoxy have rediscovered Parsons’s work, and in the U.S., one now finds informal study groups excitedly dissecting some of the same ideas that seemed so stale to rebels of thirty years before.

But despite such lapses, most students of social networks have thought from the beginning, as I already signaled clearly in the first two paragraphs of my 1973 paper “The Strength of Weak Ties”, that the main reason to be interested in networks was that their analysis offered a possibility of making the link between individual action and macro-social pattern. The argument was not that networks were more important than the two poles that they connected, but rather that they were the crucial medium that transmitted causal linkages from one level to the other; moreover, since virtually all sociological work occupied itself exclusively either with the micro or the macro level, and neglected this crucial middle level that provided the proximate cause of so many social actions and patterns, it was justified to focus sharply on this neglected level. Yet, it was perhaps inevitable that this sharp focus would mislead some readers to think that the intention was to privilege this level of social networks, and to assert its autonomy from the larger social framework.

Such a misreading can be found, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu’s article, “Le Champ économique” [1997], where, commenting on my 1985 article “Action économique et Structure Sociale”, he suggests that the emphasis on social networks constitutes a “vision interactionniste”, qui “ignorant la contrainte structural du champ, ne veut (ou ne peut) connaître que l’effet de l’anticipation consciente et calculée que chaque agent aurait des effets de son action sur les autres agents ... faisant ainsi disparaître tous les effets de structure et toutes les relations objectives de pouvoir” [1997, 55]. Indeed, in an implicit comparison to methodological individualism, Bourdieu characterizes this view as “interactionnisme méthodologique” implying that the atomization of utilitarian thought is reproduced by social network theorists, but at a different level of analysis [1997, 55, note 27].

Because of such misunderstandings, it is important to point out that the vision and the spirit of what has been called the “New Economic Sociology” in the English-speaking world is in fact extremely similar to that of much francophone economic sociology, including Bourdieu’s excellent article, and the work summarized in the special 1997 volume of *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*.² One source of such misreading is, as I have suggested, the sharp focus on social networks in some of my work. Such a focus certainly characterizes such articles as “The Strength of Weak Ties” and “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness”.

Yet, near the end of the second [1985] paper, I pointed out that “the level of causal analysis adopted in the embeddedness argument is a rather proximate one. I have had little to say about what broad historical or macrostructural circumstances

² See especially the Introduction by Jean-Louis Laville, and the paper by Levesque, Bourque and Forgues

have led systems to display the social-structural characteristics they have, so I make no claims for this analysis to answer large-scale questions about the nature of modern society or the sources of economic and political change. But the focus on proximate causes is intentional, for these broader questions cannot be satisfactorily addressed without more detailed understanding of the mechanisms by which sweeping change has its effects” [1985, 506]. In saying this, I meant to distance myself decisively from any hint of “methodological interactionism”, which assumed autonomy of social networks from larger social formations and structures of power, but this message may not have been sufficiently explicit. Indeed, in my recent exchange with economist and game theorist Robert Gibbons [Granovetter 1999] on the French firms analyzed by Crozier [1963], I have made precisely the critique of economic models that they cannot always assume the autonomy of a setting where actors pursue their goals from a larger cultural, political and historically determined context.

A second source of misunderstanding derives, as I suggested earlier, from the failure of some anglophone economic sociology to sufficiently appreciate and explicitly analyze the important role of larger cultural and political forces on the action and the networks of individuals. In my own case, my fascination with social networks as a causal level linking micro and macro, has led at times to excessive emphasis on how the rational action of individuals leads to the construction and operation of social networks. In my 1978 article on “threshold models”, for example, I intended to combat somewhat vacuous arguments about the role of norms in regulating collective behavior. Instead, it seemed very important to abstract away from normative frameworks and observe how complex and nonlinear interaction sequences among individuals led to results that might vary considerably quite independent of norms or ideas. This is to say that whatever preferences or ideas individuals have, the way these individual actions aggregate to form collective outcomes is a separate and complex issue. And the argument does serve to shift the focus away from the ideas of individuals to a higher level, that of interactions among individuals over time.

Yet, I would now say that my framing in this article of individual action as rational, determined by the balance of costs and benefits, was quite unnecessary. The idea of a “threshold”, which I believe is quite useful, did not in fact require any particular model of human action. That I am willing to join a riot when half of those around me are can be due to any number of factors which do not involve costs and benefits. These could be purely irrational imitation, local norms about conformity, family influences on my personality, or variations in my level of commitment to some ideology. Thus, all the results of this and later articles of mine about thresholds [Granovetter and Soong, 1983, 1986, 1988] continue to hold regardless of what cognitive or normative elements produce thresholds of individuals.

And I would draw back rather sharply from the statement in the first paragraph of my 1988 article “The Sociological and Economic Approaches to Labor Market Analysis”, that most sociological studies of the labor market take a position of methodological individualism. This exaggerated statement probably derived from the fact that this article was aimed at an audience of economists, and in making sharp criticisms of most economic work on labor markets, I wanted also to establish some common ground. But it would have been much more accurate to say simply that sociological work takes the actions of individuals seriously, as does that of economists, but pays far more attention to social context.

Because the categories and ideas of Karl Polanyi have been so important for francophone economic sociology, and because Polanyi used the idea of “embeddedness” long before me, it is worth clarifying my attitude towards Polanyian ideas. In my 1985 paper on “embeddedness”, I made only brief comments on this, saying merely that Polanyi’s followers, the “substantivists”, overstated the embeddedness of economic action in premarket societies, and understated it for market situations [1985, 482]. I then proceeded to investigate only modern economies. This has led writers such as Laville [1997, 230] to suggest that my approach, by centering embeddedness research on the modern market economy, implies that markets are the only principle operating in such societies, whereas Polanyi’s approach more broadly identifies several principles of economic action: exchange, redistribution and reciprocity.³ Laville correctly notes that Polanyi’s most general writings imply that these principles of action occur, even if in different proportions, in all societies, and argues that a useful approach to modern society is to identify three economic poles: the market economy, driven by exchange; the non-market economy where goods and services flow from redistribution organized by the state; and the non-monetary economy where households and other reciprocating actors bestow goods and services on one another [1997, 233]. I am quite sympathetic to this approach. My critique of Polanyi centers on his highly polemical assertions in his 1944 book *The Great Transformation*, in which he argues that in the 19th century, societies entered an entirely new phase, in which the economy was disembedded and completely dominated other modes of allocation and sectors of society. But even within this same book, Polanyi shows that these assertions are mainly for rhetorical effect, since much of his argument concerns action that societies took to restrain the impact of market exchange, action that could not have been possible in a society completely dominated by the market. So, between the polemical

³ In his earlier work, Polanyi identified a fourth principle, which he called ‘householding’, i.e., provision of needs within self-sufficient households. In later work, this disappeared as a distinct category, apparently absorbed as a special case of reciprocity.

Polanyi who exaggerated the autonomy of the market, and the analytical Polanyi who points the way to investigating how exchange, redistribution and reciprocity interact and complement one another as modes of allocation in all societies, I feel a strong kinship to the latter.

And indeed, the discussion of Polanyi leads to some interesting comparisons between anglophone and francophone economic sociology. The two differences between these that Laville identifies both are related to Polanyian ideas. One is that “l’une des constantes de la nouvelle sociologie économique francophone est d’insister sur cet encastrement politique de l’économie marchande.”⁴ The other is the special francophone interest in how market, non-market and non-monetary modes of allocation are related to one another within a society [Laville 1997, 235].

And in fact, if one surveys the main contributions of francophone economic sociology, one finds echoes of Polanyi’s themes in most.⁵ The anti-utilitarian movement, whose first major statement was made by Caillé [1989], especially emphasizes the concept of the gift, as brought to our attention by Marcel Mauss, and which represents the extent to which goods and services are exchanged to achieve reciprocity rather than for gain, and in a socially defined and constructed frame of reference whose purpose is at least as much to sustain the network of social ties as to sustain material life. Similarly, the work of Laville, Perret and Roustang, and others, pays special attention to the sources of a “solidary economy”, in which social services derive from some combination of state and local action that combines market, redistribution and reciprocity [Levesque *et al.* 1977, 275]. And one can argue that the works of the regulation school, though emerging from economics and in part from Marxist inspiration, has also the Polanyian impulse of trying to understand how economic, political and social institutions (which we may interpret as the institutional supports for Polanyi’s exchange, redistribution and reciprocity, respectively) articulate with one another to produce macroeconomic outcomes.

In a more complex way, work on the “economy of conventions” also draws on the insight that different institutional sectors of a society must be considered together in order to achieve understanding of any one, such as the economy. The conventions school pays special attention to the normative and conceptual frameworks that guide actors’ thought about their economic action. If such thought were purely utilitarian this would not depart from standard economic theory. But instead, these scholars recognize that people draw their frameworks from a variety of different sources, that

⁴ For a closely related argument, see Caillé [1995, 22-30]

⁵ In these comments, I draw especially on the informative review of Lévesque, Bourque et Forgues [1997, 265-294] on francophone economic sociology.

may at times shade into one another or present conflicting principles of justification among which people shift. The variety of such principles is emphasized especially in the work of Boltanski and Thévenot [1991]. These arguments place more emphasis on individual actors and their cognitive apparatus than do the regulation theorists, and in this way they are closer to the work of traditional economics; yet, this conception also insists on the way the economic thought of individuals is embedded in larger social, political and cultural frames, thus linking the work closely to fundamental concepts of economic sociology.

Though these themes regarding structures of power and linkages among different institutional sectors of society may be more dominant in francophone than anglophone economic sociology, the differences have narrowed over time. After laying some foundations in my work of the 1970s and 1980s that centered on the analysis of social networks, I myself have gone farther in my more recent work toward integrating these network arguments with social, political and cultural forces, to achieve a more complete argument about economic outcomes [Granovetter and Tilly 1988; Granovetter and McGuire 1998; Granovetter 1995a, 1995b, 1999]. In a difficult but rewarding work, Harrison White, one of the originators of the social network perspective and of American economic sociology, has laid out his attempt to understand how political, economic, cultural and social aspects of social organization articulate with one another [White 1992]. In fact, if one thinks about what all the sociological theorists that command attention have in common, it is precisely that each one tries to spell out these articulations. Though Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, Polanyi, Bourdieu, White and others have quite different ideas of how these institutional sectors are linked, all agree that no analysis of social life can be narrowly focused on one sector, whether it is the economy, the polity or the realm of culture. American sociologists such as Fligstein [1990] have often emphasized the importance of linkages between the state and the economy; and a few, who are intimately familiar with the French tradition, have made direct use of French ideas, as with Stark who has showed in detail how ideas from “*les économies de la grandeur*” can be used to help understand the dramatic economic transformations in Eastern Europe [1996, 1012-1015].

Convergence will of course be slowed by the barriers of language, and the very small number of English-speaking sociologists who read French (or indeed any language but English), but in my view, there are fundamental similarities in the overall world view of those who do economic sociology in both languages, which will ultimately lead to convergence. Meanwhile, there is some advantage in the distinctive traditions, as contrast leads to a deeper search for understanding. In this spirit, it is my sincere hope that the present edition of my works will present contrasts of some interest for the French reader.

Original English version of the Introduction to: Le Marché Autrement: Essais de Mark Granovetter, edited and translated by Jean-Louis Laville and Isabelle This-Saint-Jean. Paris: Desclee-Brouwer, 2000.

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Introduction for the French Reader

Abstract: Granovetter conveys to French readers of some of his 1973-1990 essays what they all have in common, and how his thought evolved over this period. He relates how early social network analysts rebelled against Parsons' neglect of individuals and social networks by devaluing the importance of culture and norms, and how their later work tried to restore the proper balance. Comparing economic sociology in the French and Anglo-Saxon traditions, he concludes that while the former is often considered more attuned to power and institutions, the differences are smaller than has typically been imagined. While some adherents of the "New Economic Sociology" may have excessively privileged the causal role of social networks, he argues that his own work and the main thrust of this movement have always identified networks as a proximate and intervening cause that links the behavior of individuals to the development and operation of social institutions.

Keywords: embeddedness, social networks, anglophone vs. francophone economic sociology, consistency and evolution of Granovetter's thought, the "new economic sociology".

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