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Marion Fourcade, Economists and Societies. Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain and France, 1890 to 1990s. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, xxiv + 386 pp.

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Book reviews

Marion Fourcade, *Economists and Societies. Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain and France, 1890 to 1990s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, xxiv + 386 pp.

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The main thrust of this book is quite simple: far from being the universal or global science it is often purported to be, economics is deeply embedded in the cultural environment in which it flourishes, and in particular in that section of the cultural environment identifiable with political culture. “Economics is always and everywhere a political endeavor. To the extent that they involve choices about the structure of society (even if it is to leave society unchanged) and furnish arguments to be used in political struggles, economic methods inevitably have political underpinnings and political implications” [p. 125]. As political culture – together with political life at large – varies institutionally from countries to countries, and this has inevitably an impact on the ways people experience and understand economic life and conduct among other things, different countries have presumably produced different versions of the same economic discipline, if not different disciplines at all. Notwithstanding the success of economists in presenting their intellectual endeavour as a neutral pursuit, the argument is neither surprising nor new. An entire, and now well-established sub-discipline, the sociology of knowledge, could be evoked as the natural ground for this kind of argument. What makes this book an excellent and in many ways original addition to an already large stream of research focused on the social as well as political conditioning of economics as science (from Marx to Durkheim, from Myrdal to McCloskey), is the strong conceptual structure in which the argument is packaged, and its dialogical connection with a rich and subtly analyzed evidence, grounded on both historical records and original interviews with 95 professional economists. The result is outstanding, as many well-known scholars – including Nobel recipient George Akerlof – suggest in their telling endorsements as printed on the back cover.

Firstly, the book is outstanding for its wide and carefully researched empirical scope both in time and space. In order to pursue its agenda, it develops an historical-comparative cultural analysis of economics conceived as both discipline and profession, focusing on three crucial case studies – US, UK, and France (a fourth case study, Germany, is not included in the analysis even though the book takes stock from research done also in this country to develop its argument) – and a time span of more than one century. For each case, the book presents evidence relative to two analytically distinct levels: the objective, i.e. institutional, and the subjective, i.e. cultural. The first strategy aims to document and assess the procedures and rules which locally structure the production of economic knowledge (as the training process, the career organization, the kind of authority granted to economists etc.). The second strategy aims at discovering how economists, differently located in space (i.e. national countries) perceive and understand their role and identity, how they talk about themselves, how they practice as experts and, more important, how they conceive of their very discipline and its field of action. Both these strategies, the structural or objective and the phenomenological or subjective, have to be pursued when doing sociological research, as only through the interplay of these two levels social life

may become understandable and be accounted for – this was the main lesson of Bourdieu, explicitly invoked by the author. For each case study, three institutional loci are privileged as potential sources of incorporation of knowledge: what the author calls the “order of learning” (i.e. the educational sphere, including the academic system), the “administrative order” (i.e. the institutions devoted to policy making and advice), and finally the same “economic order,” i.e. the system of economic relation the economic discipline is called to study and claims to know. The mass of evidence collected and discussed in the three central chapters of the book, each devoted to one country, is noteworthy also for not being redundant: what is included is all worth of inclusion, and the reader never has the feeling to loose time entering in what might otherwise appear a technical discussion about why a certain piece of economic epistemology or methodology has been chosen by a certain group of economists and how it happens that such choice has become a revolution or, on the contrary, a failure. Simplifying the general comparative argument (as the same author does in the second chapter, devoted to a discussion of the historically grounded institutional logics which qualify, or better “make”, each countries), we can say that US, Britain and France have produced – and still are reproducing even if with growing interdependence which generates local changes – different kinds of economic knowledge and economics practice because of the inscription of both knowledge and practice in different politico-institutional frameworks. The assumption is that different social and political institutions ask for different versions of economic knowledge, as well as different species of economists, which better “fit” with social organization’s constraints and opportunities. The US, with a poor administrative culture and a strong suspicion for central powers which grounds a culturally generalized endorsement of the (free) market, has produced a professional economics proud of its objective standards, its technical competences, and its claims of scientific reliability. British elitism has produced a sort of intellectualized economics morally as well as politically engaged, where technicalities – including mathematical formalizations – are praised but never absolutized. In France a political structure based on the primacy of administrative action has generated a split between a strong body of economic administrators and managers (usually issued by the *Grand Écoles*) focused on economic policy, and a relatively weak group of mathematical economists marginalized in the academic system. It is the different organization and exercise of government – of state power – to mainly account for the different identities of economists and their science in the three countries. “In short, the discipline and profession of economics that emerged in each country incorporated different conceptions and practices of the political, particularly the different exercise and understanding of the nature and purpose of ‘government’” [p. 241].

It is not possible in this review to account for the thick description and detailed analysis of national fields which comprise the empirical bulk of the book. Suffice to recall the two main conclusions of these analysis. The first is that the social structures in which economists live, work and think (also about themselves) are largely national, and embedded in national histories and cultures. The second, apparently at odds with the first, is that the social structures of economics are also international. This is only an apparent oddity, as one important implication of the argument is that what looks like a global field – i.e. the international field of economics as science – is *de facto* an increasing and aggressive, almost imperialistic extension of a local field, i.e. the US one,

with its specific values and standards, including those same departmental and individual rankings economists “seem to be particularly obsessed about” [p. 256]. This is because since at least five decades – concomitantly with geopolitical changes and transformation of the same disciplinary contents – the social and intellectual positions of European (and not only European) economists are made and unmade in the US (through US based credentials, publications, conferences etc.) in such a way to generate fundamental asymmetries in the working of the field of economics – asymmetries the widespread representation of an international scientific community misses and indeed even masks. What is more interesting, this has an impact even on local fields, as connections to the US have become, and work as, a form of capital – grounding projects and practices of intellectual domination inside the same national fields.

As it should now be clear, the book has a strong cultural-sociological flavour, expressed in the assertion that “we must understand economic experts in terms of the cultural categories generated by their society” [p. 181], especially those produced and legitimated by the state with its powers of consecration and classification. Contrary to the standard economic assumption that individuals react rationally (i.e. uniformly) to varying structures of incentives and constraints, the book starts from the culturally sensitive and sociologically promising premise [p. 14] that different societies create different kind of individuals (e.g. economists). Cultural analysis is not news in economic sociology, of course, nor in the sociology of economics. However, differently from the recently proposed “performative” line of analysis (e.g. Callon) which makes economics and economists shaping agents of the economy (in order to bring economic activities in line with economic models), the book rests firmly grounded on a seemingly more traditional sociology of knowledge perspective which sees economic discourse and practice as society’s product as much as, if not more than, potential producer of society. The risk of being charged of old-style “culturalism” is high within such perspective, and accounts, I believe, for the elaborated conceptual structure of the book. The latter is, as suggested, the second ingredient of its outstanding character, which makes the book an excellent example of the new, mainly American, cultural sociology (incidentally, it is worth noting that it has been published in the series devoted to this vibrating new research field by Princeton UP, and edited by Paul DiMaggio, Michèle Lamont, Viviana Zelizer and Robert Wuthnow).

The book’s carefully elaborated conceptual and methodological architecture is a contribution in itself. It may be summarized along four lines. Firstly, Fourcade is eager to ground her research on a clear statement about method: in order to overcome the methodological impasse of a variable-oriented approach blind to the variability of meanings which qualify “variables” as culturally distinctive and not neutral or universal categories (e.g. the term “state” has different meanings in different places, but the same seems to be the case for the terms “economics” or “economist”) vs. a case-oriented approach grounded on interpretativism which easily falls into relativism, she sets forth what she call a “critical organized comparison” approach. Such approach comprises “both a critical analysis of the categories used in the comparison and a discussion of how these terms combine into fairly coherent constellations” [p. 13]. Secondly, structure and meanings, objective and subjective moments are continuously intertwined in the analysis (“a truly comprehensive sociological analysis must obviously be able to account for both of these moments”) and even before in the research design (through a collection of institution-

al data and of personal interviews to economic experts about their lives and minds). Structures exist, but they exist only in and through the perceptions and practices of agents who produce and reproduce, and sometimes in this very process change them. The lesson, as already noticed, is drawn directly from Bourdieu's praxeological or better generative-structuralist approach. Thirdly, the so called "performativity" of economics is not dismissed but reconciled with the macro-cultural framework proposed. This is done on the assumption that "from a comparative point of view, the interesting question has precisely to do with the articulation between economic knowledge and economic culture – with the degree of performativity allowed to economic theories in different nations, or with the substantive direction taken by the performance itself. To put it simply, different economic theories across nations might contribute to "performing" different economies, and universalized economic ideas and tools [...] once available, may not format all financial markets similarly" [p. 30]. Fourthly, the direction of influence between economics and polity, or more generally ideas and society, is a matter of dialogue – not only among scholars but also among social agents at large. It is senseless to try and settle once and for all the old causal debate about the primacy of ideas or social life, and about the exact kind of link between them. After accepting the idea that some "elective affinity" is there between discourses and social or political or economic regimes, the best we can do is to analyze their interactions empirically in time and space, their co-evolution, and before this their co-constitution.

All in all, Fourcade gets to a general theoretical standpoint: "Part of sociology's, and particularly political science's, mistake in dismissing explanations based on ideas lies in the analytical conceit that ideas are exogenous to the political system. Rather than assuming this, social scientists should analyze the coevolution of politics, policy, and ideas as they are shaped by social and institutional processes" [p. 242]. The point, as Fourcade underlines, is "not to treat the US, Great Britain, and France as self-contained cultures that would determine everything that happens within them but rather to show the structured, dialectical relationship between institution (political institutions in particular) and knowledge" [p. 239]. Scholars looking for universal causal statements about the primacy of ideas or institutions (as much as the two could be really distinguished) should clearly look for some other text. But it would be hard for anyone to argue that cultural analysis is not aware of the pitfalls of culturalism and is not working hard to overcome them, after reading this one.

Indeed, the book looks like a creative synthesis of much of the best sociology currently available in the States, from the new sociology of ideas to organizational neoinstitutionalism (especially in Stanford style), from the sociology of professions (in Andrew Abbott's re-reading of the field) to the new economic sociology (mainly in its performative version) and of course the sociology of culture in its post-Parsonsian, much-Bourdieuian shape. Curiously, no reference is made to that influential school of sociological cultural study celebrated as the "production of culture perspective" (e.g. Peterson, Hirsch, DiMaggio, Crane), that even on scientific knowledge production has been originally applied before specializing in the analysis of popular culture products (the latter may account for its absence.) The list of outstanding sociological institutions the author has worked in while researching for the book is impressive: Harvard (where she did her PhD thesis from which the book has evolved), Stanford, Princeton, and Berkeley

(where she teaches nowadays.) Among her many advisors and sources of inspiration we find the likes of Theda Skocpol, John Meyer, Frank Dobbin, Michèle Lamont, Orlando Patterson, Mark Granovetter, Viviana Zelizer, Michael Burawoy, and even Leo Goodman. As a French scholar working in the US, she (auto)exemplifies with her research and book what she discusses as the “imperialistic structure of the international field”, which works for economics as for sociology. Indeed, this is precisely the concluding remark of her book: “The work of sociologists is, after all, evidently subject to the same logics as those I have tried to expose in our powerful neighbour in the social-scientific field” [p. 262]. This book is a useful memento for the many sociologists impressed by the power of that neighbour: that scientific and intellectual success is also a social and political matter to be accounted for with sociological methods before being an object of unconditional cult and uncritical imitation. It is also an invitation to fellow sociologists to further this line of inquiry looking once again at their discipline and profession with the same scholarship, empirical evidence, and intellectual sophistication.

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