

Filippo Barbera

Patrick Aspers, Orderly Fashion. A Sociology of Markets. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, 237 pp

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Book reviews

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The sociology of markets is among the most lively subfields of contemporary economic sociology. Since Harrison White seminal contribution, economic sociology questioned the received wisdom of economics about the way market works. The main differences have to do with the very idea of market: if economics thinks about market as a coordination mechanism which works through the law of demand and supply, economic sociology considers market(s) as social structures, namely as: “a social structure for the exchange of rights in which offers are evaluated and priced, and compete with one another” [p. 11]. Another difference regards the focus of the analysis: if economics look mainly at “exchange markets”, economic sociology looks instead at “production markets” and it assumes that they are cliques of producers who watch each other reciprocally, share the same resources and opportunities and define a common meaning accordingly. A concept alike to the one of niche, of simmelian roots.

For Aspers, buyers and sellers have specific identities and a status order of these identities work as the ordering principles when there is a lack of generally accepted scales of values, or when transactions occur within a situation of radical uncertainty. This kind of uncertainty cannot be lowered through contractual arrangements, incentives and prices as in standard economic theory, but requires scale ordering about what's worth and what is equal to what. The inadequate coordination power of prices can be filled by two devices: standard and status. For instance, the ethical production of goods takes place in a social structure that is ordered by standards rather than by status. Hence the value underlying the evaluation is more entrenched than the firms being evaluated [p. 86]. In both cases the problem of equilibrium is replaced by the problem of order: differently from individual transactions in a “perfectly competitive market”, specialization, differentiation and stability of niches (standard based or status based) become the main analytical issues for a sociological approach to markets.

Aspers apply these key principles to the analysis of the global fashion industry and especially to Branded Garment Retailers (BGR). The book is organized as follows: chapter one deals with the sociological conception of market and introduces the idea of “affordable fashion” which exemplifies the BGR market. Chapter two expands this idea and shows that the market is a consequence of actors interpreting the world in different ways, having different goals and also positioning themselves by using different strategies in the course of various struggles [p. 61]. This chapter sidesteps the process through which the BGR's identities becomes stable, what social constructions make up these orders and in what processes they are constructed. These issues are scrutinized in chapter three: “an identity can in principle be generated in a market if a firm's activities acquire coherence over time by means of a narrative” [p. 62]. Since Berger e Luckmann's work the theme of “social construction” is customary in social theory. This identifies the idea that no event in itself is either objective or inevitable, but its causes and consequences depend on a vast array of social processes that attribute an identity to the event itself.

So, for instance, BGRs achieve their identities not only as a results of their products, but also depending on how they advertise and how they design their stores. Chapter four analyses the market in which BGRs operate as buyers of garments and in which garment manufacturer operate as sellers. I found especially illuminating the discussion about design [pp. 95-102] and business relationships [pp. 107-110], which builds on the difference between “embedded ties” and “arm’s length ties”. Chapter five put in a global perspective the market for garment: “the producer market for fashion garments is truly a global market, which means that firms in Bangladesh may compete with firms in Bulgaria for the same order” [p. 146]. Chapter six explores the problem of BGRs from the investors viewpoint, showing that BGRs’ identities in the final consumer market and in the financial market are related. This leads to Chapter six, which deals with the idea of “partial orders” or, in other words, it asks in what way markets and non-markets are embedded in each other. This is the richest chapter in theoretical terms and I will discuss it in more details in the following.

As I said, the key issue for a sociology of markets is order. Aspers uses a social constructivist perspective in which: “order is understood in relation to the special role of man” [p. 166], that is through the ability of people to acquire a “reflexive identity” and to reflect on their being in the world. Stability of socially constructed meanings is achieved only in relation to other social constructions, as in a game of mirrors. The second theoretical contribution regards the sociology of fashion: from a sociological standpoint, we can speak of “fashion” only when the social structure of identities is relatively more entrenched than the object. The third field concerns economics sociology in general and the sociological approach to markets in particular. Aspers argues that a market order has three prerequisites. First of all, it has to do with what the market is “about” [p. 166]. The second refers to the “culture” of market, that is the formal and informal institutions that define the “rules of engagement” to solve the problem “how to operate in the market”. Finally, a central issue is the so-called “problem of value”: what’s worth? Prices, according to the author, emerge in different ways depending on the kind of market: status or standard, switch-role or fixed-role. Furthermore, markets should be conceived as “partial orders”, that is as “fields” (Bourdieu), “social molecules” (White) or “niches” (Simmel) which connect social structure, meaning and action. The idea is also close to what anthropologist claim about the economy, namely that: “one should see the economy as multicentric and made up of different transaction spheres” [p. 173]. This point leads Aspers to criticize the “varieties of capitalism” literature, arguing that observed differences of various kinds (profit, labour contracts and so on) can and should be analysed and understood at the level of markets rather than nations.

All in all, Asper’s book does a good job in showing that the market is a “complex” social object: values, status, identities, uncertainty and social structures are the main components of it and an empirically sound analysis must take these elements into account. Some remarks can be underlined as well: first of all, the book offer only a scant consideration of power relations in market and on their role in shaping economic transactions. Second, the theoretical framework – though rich and detailed – seems here and there much too tailored to the empirical raw material. And this, in principle

though not in practice, hinders the generalisation of the theoretical framework to other markets.

Filippo Barbera
University of Turin