THE FUTURE OF ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY

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When the economist Michael Piore (1996, p. 742) looked out over the field of economic sociology he saw "an enormous hodge-podge of ideas and insights, existing at all sorts of different levels of abstraction, possibly in contradiction with one another, possibly just incommensurate, without a basic theory or structure to sort them out, or order them". Sociology is a messy business, to be sure, for society itself is messy – notwithstanding the pristine models found in economics. But if Piore stared long enough at the field, that hodge-podge would begin to take shape. Most of sociology is, after all, based on a handful of ideas.

It is true enough that we don't have a theory with the cogency of that first put forth by Paul Samuelson in Economics in 1948. Jeffrey Pfeffer argues that we should put aside paradigmatic squabbles and follow economics' lead. But the field is not as messy or splintered as all that. It is based on four core ideas about the social mechanisms that produce behavior. Squabbles among camps are disappearing, as practitioners combine these ideas. The future of the field is, then, both clear and bright, for we are empirically identifying the links between these four core social mechanisms and in the process developing a fuller depiction of how society shapes economic behavior.

If economics has understood society to be the individual mind writ large, sociology has all along understood the individual mind to be society writ small (Douglas 1986). Economists trace economic behaviors to human instinct – to greed. Sociologists trace behavior to *institutions*, or conventions that constrain what we can do and what we can imagine doing; *networks*, or social groups and their roles in creating identities as well as behavioral norms and constraints; *power*, or the use of position and coercion to determine how people can behave and how they see their own interests; and *cognition,* or how people's perceptions of the world shape their behavior in it.

In the last half of the twentieth century, the discipline framed these different approaches as contentious, pitting for instance a Weberian understanding of institutions against a Durkheimian understanding of networks. But more and more, analysts who begin in one camp visit the others. In The Architecture of Markets, Neil Fligstein begins with institutions; in Socializing Capital, William Roy begins with power; in Markets from Networks, Harrison White begins with networks. Each ends up importing so many ideas that that the end result is neither fish nor fowl. In each case, the end result is a view in which social *institutions* – customs and conventions – provide models for economic behavior and carry ideas about causality. In each case, new economic conventions spread through *networks*, and networks serve as bases of power for transforming institutions. In each case, *power* is shaped by network position, and power is used to influence the new economic institutions that emerge. And in each case, institutions, network position, and power shape the *cognitive* orientations of individuals and thereby influence how they will act back on the economic world they encounter.

Since Marx's The German Ideology, sociology has drawn sharp battle lines between material and ideal camps, or functional and cultural ones. The New Economic Sociology is transcending those divides, bringing the field back to where Weber (Swedberg 1998) thought it should rightly be – developing causal arguments that capture the relationships among the several mechanisms that contribute to social, and economic, behavior.

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