

Book Reviews

and breadth of media across the globe, the need for organizations to communicate distally to global publics through it and, in a Baudrillardian twist, the implosion of public spheres (global and domestic) into the media.

Despite McDonnell's important discussion of cultural entropy early in the book, some of the more crucial insights seem lost in (applied) translation once we reach the nuanced detail of the case study. For instance, the "dissipation of energy," as characteristic of cultural and thermodynamic entropy alike, was hard to recognize in the many instances of cultural entropy that McDonnell documents in AIDS media campaigns. How, for instance, is the refashioning, as bedroom wallpaper, of posters nominally intended to encourage contraceptive use (p. 138) an example of dissipating energy in a cultural object through the conversion of a different energy (presumably) from unintended use? Why not understand this less in Ludwig Boltzmannian terms and more in Ann Swidlerian terms, that is, new meanings acquired by organizing new action? Or even the paleo pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce (still useful as ever) and his holy triumvirate of "interpretants"? McDonnell's important point about energy and its connection to meaning via materiality is understood in principle (chap. 1) but somewhat dissipated (pun intended) in practice (chaps. 4, 5, and 6). This also applies to the fascinating instance of *nonentropy* between design process and public use that McDonnell finds in this case: Ghanaians' understanding of HIV avoidance is strongly shaped by the image of "AIDS as killer" (p. 155). As McDonnell argues, this campaign-constructed meaning has entered practical consciousness and become automatic (p. 188). But is energy dissipation (or the lack of it) really involved here? Is cultural entropy necessary to explain it? Based on McDonnell's analysis, which itself neglects to give his own innovative terms center stage, perhaps not.

McDonnell's introduction of cultural entropy will be pathbreaking. I'm sure of it. Ultimately, however, his analysis still relies on abstractions (e.g., something called "everyday life" being, in the last analysis, somehow holistically responsible for cultural entropy [p. 6]) that he so clearly wants to avoid given his focus on materiality and energy *cum* cultural meaning. Nevertheless, McDonnell opens an important and necessary door in this book. It is one that culture scholars (even the most ardent nonmaterialists among them) should consider following him through.

Re-Imagining Economic Sociology. Edited by Patrik Aspers and Nigel Dodd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii+324. \$110.00.

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Here's a basic criterion for evaluating a social scientific theory: *Does the theory make progress addressing an important, difficult "research question" that other social scientists can appreciate?* This criterion seems so obvious

as to be banal. After all, a social scientific theory is a tool—a means, not an end. And we cannot assess the value of a tool if we do not know what tasks it helps us solve; nor can we know the limits of that tool and whether we might need to combine that tool with others to get the job done. And finally, without knowing the purpose of the tool, we can hardly assess the toolmaker's claims that she has made improvements in the tool or that her tool is superior to those of competitors.

Oddly however, senior scholars often seem to dispense with the basic step of articulating a clear, compelling research question. A charitable explanation is that it is their privilege—or even their duty—to write with more subtlety and flair than junior scholars, and if one reads carefully, the research question is actually there. And then if you don't see it, perhaps it's because you're not smart enough to see that the emperor really is clothed. A more cynical explanation is that this approach is in their interest. After all, if one can assure oneself of readers without having to articulate a clear research question, one has effectively built an impregnable wall around one's work. Because if there is a market for the tool I am selling, even when its purpose is obscure, it is really a bauble masquerading as a tool, and all I need to do is keep on selling my bauble in the same way. My only worry then is that fashions will change. But this worry is mitigated by the fact that I am a senior scholar and junior scholars are watching me for fashion leads.

What does this have to do with the edited volume under review? Everything. In particular, the most striking feature of this book—an edited volume on theory in economic sociology that brings together prominent economic sociologists from Europe and from American sociology departments (business school-based sociologists are pointedly excluded)—is that it is so difficult to figure out what questions economic sociological theory is meant to answer. And as such, it is also hard to be very positive about how economic sociology has evolved in the 30 years since it burst into prominence as a subfield. Indeed, if 14 years ago Jesper Sorensen fretted about the diffuseness of the “new economic sociology” (see his book review of *The New Economic Sociology: Developments in an Emerging Field* [*Administrative Science Quarterly* 48 (2003): 534–37]) and wondered whether economic sociology had become a social movement rather than a coherent scholarly enterprise, such concerns are reinforced by the volume under review. Indeed, these very concerns are *repeated* by Neil Fligstein in his concluding chapter, albeit with a rosier conclusion.

To be sure, times have changed. For instance, whereas during the 1980s and 1990s Granovetter's “embeddedness” was where it was at, Bandelj's chapter reviews how, during the aughts, Zelizer's “relational work” and “circuits” became all the rage. But whether “circuits” is an improvement over “embeddedness” no one can say, since it is not clear what question either line of work was meant to answer.

An important aside: there is a big difference between theory and metatheory, and Granovetter's classic 1985 essay—still the lodestar for the authors in this volume—is metatheory. This is why Fligstein remarks that

Granovetter deserves a Nobel Prize even though he's not sure what he would say should a reporter should ask him why Granovetter's essay was important. To be sure, Granovetter has done good theory, best represented by his classic work on the strength of weak ties and on the threshold model of collective behavior. Moreover, metatheory has its place, for suggesting the kinds of questions we might ask and the kinds of answers we should pursue. But we are lost if all we do is metatheory, if only because this makes it much harder to evaluate progress. Many of the chapters—especially those by Knorr Cetina, Thevenot, and Nee and Opper—seem to confuse theory and metatheory, leaving the reader with little sense of what he has learned. Meanwhile, Swedberg's chapter, "On Theorizing," essentially recapitulates Stauss and Corbin's model of "grounded theory" development but fails to articulate why someone might be in the market for a [better] social scientific theory in the first place.

A related point: whereas the introduction to this edited volume (written by Aspers, Dodd, and Anderberg) identifies the "performativity" movement associated with Michel Callon and Donald Mackenzie as a key new development, this is a bit awkward because even Mackenzie has already abandoned it. (Note the absence of a mention of performativity in his 2011 *AJS* article, "The Credit Crisis as a Problem in the Sociology of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology* 116:1778–1841 on the financial crisis only five years after the publication of *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* [MIT Press, 2006]; this absence reflects the fact that the crisis was evidence *against* the idea that economic theories "make markets"). Perhaps keeping up with economic sociological fashions is a tough game to play after all. Note finally in this regard that many of the authors seem to be shadowboxing with the neoclassical economics of the 1980s, when the field was overly theoretical, rather than engaging with the contemporary version, which is overly empirical.

All hope is not lost though. Good work is still done even within a broader movement that—at least judging by this volume—has lost its way. In particular, I appreciated the chapters by Beckert and by Carruthers. Each scholar articulates a clear research question and makes useful progress on it. In Beckert's case, the larger question is the unusual dynamism of capitalism relative to other/prior economic systems, and the specific insight is that capitalism "institutionalizes an organization of economic activity in which actors orient themselves to an open and unforeseeable future" (p. 58). One virtue of Beckert's clear articulation of the question and his compelling development of his theory is that it is clearer how we might improve upon it. In particular, Beckert's theory could be enhanced by recognition of the role of modern political institutions in institutionalizing the notion of a continuous individual via the conferral of citizenship rights and obligations. But an incomplete theory that adds insight on an important question is still quite valuable.

For his part, Carruthers provides a highly lucid account of the tortured history of the regulation of financial derivatives through the financial crisis.

His (somewhat implicit) question is why self-regulation by the industry (“private law”) failed even though existing (Weberian) theory implies that it can be a good solution to the problem that markets require the clear delineation of rights and obligations. His answer—that “systematic financial stability is a public good that the private market undersupplies” (p. 141)—seems eminently reasonable. It also happens to be an idea that many left-leaning economists would endorse; it is refreshing that Carruthers seems untroubled by that.

A more general implication is that just because your party (sociology) is out of power doesn’t mean you have to dissent from the ruling party (economics) on every issue. After all, if power corrupts, powerlessness can corrupt too—at least when it comes with job security. The hallmark of a permanent opposition is a proclivity toward smug posturing. And not only is such posturing unattractive, it is unproductive. At the time of this writing, a “know nothing” political movement has gained ascendance in the United States, making it urgent that all scholarly fields unite under the banal banner of articulating clear questions and developing useful answers to those questions. Economic sociologists should “lean in” to this task.

England’s Great Transformation: Law, Labor, and the Industrial Revolution. By Marc W. Steinberg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xiii+233. \$95.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (paper).

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I eagerly read Marc Steinberg’s beautifully written book, *England’s Great Transformation: Law, Labor, and the Industrial Revolution*—on labor in 19th-century England—without a single disappointment. It is an exemplar of comparative/historical sociological work, both theoretically and methodologically, seamlessly blending micro- and macrolevels of analysis empirically and analytically. The empirical work relies on a skillful analysis of court records, government documents, and trade journals that, despite the difficulty in using historical materials that are often disparate and discontinuous, Steinberg blends into a powerful narrative that should have a big influence on sociological studies of labor and capitalism, both past and present.

He shows how employers used law to control and discipline their mostly male workforce. To do so, he picked three case studies: pottery manufacturing in Hanley, fishing in Hull, and farming and needle manufacturing in Redditch. In these cases, employers prosecuted their laborers for criminal offenses much more often than elsewhere in England. Employers prosecuted them under the master and servant law, which governed labor relations. Adult males could sell their labor power contractually, but this sale bound them to the employer. Employers could then prosecute their laborers crim-