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This issue leads off with some thoughts on the future role of economic sociology from Section Chair Nicole Woolsey Biggart. We then have three pieces following up on Marc Ventresca and Peter Levin's article from the last issue: Jens Beckert and Charles Smith reply, and Ventresca and Levin respond. Maja Magdalena Biernacka gives us a research report from Poland and we preview the Economic Sociology sessions from the upcoming ASA meetings. This issue marks the end of the editors' second term at the helm of ACCOUNTS*: we thank everyone for their lively contributions, and hope that our readers will continue to submit essays and opinion pieces to our successors! — The Editors.*

From the Chair

Nicole Woolsey Biggart

TWENTY YEARS AGO economic sociology was a stance more than an area of sociological inquiry. Sociologists were united more by their opposition to the intellectual imperialism of economics which was extending its domain into studies of the family, education, and other topics historically the territory of sociology. Economists were not acknowledging the contributions of sociologists, indeed hardly acknowledged we existed.

Economists, as a publicly visible and powerful discipline, may not have cared what sociologists thought, but we certainly cared about them. Modern economic sociology was spurred on in important ways by our largely one-sided conversation with economics. We attacked their methodological individualism, their lack of data, failure to formulate and test hypotheses, and ahistoricism. We got excited and encouraged ourselves to study their territory — the economy — using our many methods, quality data sources, and historical sensibilities. Our journals and seminars are evidence of how far we have come.

What I don't think we anticipated a generation ago was the move of economic sociology into the undergraduate classroom. I am heartened and a little amazed at the spread of liberal arts programs that take a broad view of the economy, markets, organizations, and business now being offered to undergraduates. These programs vary, but for the most part they are designed for students seeking a broader education than popular business or economics majors offer, although they typically include the prerequisites for graduate business school ad-

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missions, such as microeconomics, statistics, and calculus.

UC Davis started the Organization Studies program over a decade ago, and while it is a sociology major, it draws liberally from history, anthropology, economics, and psychology for its coursework. It gives a student interested in pursuing a business career a broad understanding of the social underpinnings of capitalism, economic development, globalization, and firm activity.

Duke University's Markets and Management Program, directed by sociologist Ken Spenner, is Duke's largest certificate program and has 500 undergraduates enrolled and over 2000 alumni. It draws on the strengths of Duke's economic sociology faculty and includes courses in the Chinese Economy, and Organization and Global Competition.

Linda Stearns was recruited recently by Southern Methodist University to establish a Markets and Culture program in sociology that promotes the study of the social bases of economic behavior. SMU students are required to take a foreign language and are encouraged to study abroad.

Cornell undergraduate sociology majors can focus on economic sociology, and Brown University is in the process of establishing a multi-disciplinary Commerce, Organization and Entrepreneurship program. A generation of students is learning a new way to think about money, markets, and economic life.

In our early enthusiasm as an area of intellectual inquiry twenty years ago I remember much discussion about how economic sociology could extend itself into the domain of public discourse and policy analysis in examining labor markets, the global economy, marketization, and all manner of economic life. There was little in Washington or at the World Bank that we couldn't contribute to. We would have a President's Council of Socio-Economic Advisors!

Although the White House hasn't called me yet, there is a growing body of economic sociology from institutional, network, and cultural perspectives that has intellectual and policy importance. A few of us have participated in National Academy of Science committees and on other public bodies that are interested in our alternative views on economic development, labor markets, and environmental issues. With time, and perhaps our own desire to see it happen, economic sociologists routinely might have a seat at the table at policy discussions. Do we really want to play this role? How could we get involved in think tanks and other policy institutions? I think this would be a great topic for our section to discuss, and I invite you to write to the editors of ACCOUNTS with your views.

While I would very much like a seat at White House social and economic policy discussions, I would consider it a real victory if at some future moment those discussions were guided by a former sociology undergraduate who understood economic activity in a broadly social science way, someone who had sat in on a couple of our economic sociology courses.

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Uncertainty and Ambiguity in Markets: A response to Ventresca and Levin

Jens Beckert

In their article "Information and Ambiguity in Markets," Marc J. Ventresca and Peter Levin (accounts Vol. 5/1, Fall 2004) point to a recently developing strand of work in economic sociology: The concern with actor's categories, criteria and conventions by which ambiguous situations become actionable. This work on meaning producing - and thereby also value-producing - categorization I take as an important and fascinating field of study for economic sociology. What I take issue with is the authors' proposed juxtaposition of the concept of ambiguity to an approach in economic sociology that starts from the problem of uncertainty. According to the two authors the work reviewed by them would "turn attention from uncertainty reduction" (p.2). Contrary to this position I argue that the concern with "category infrastructures" (p.2) can very well be understood as a special case within a paradigm that sees the handling of uncertainty as the crucial vantage point of economic sociology (Beckert 1996, 2002).

Uncertainty, contrary to risk, refers to situations where intentionally rational actors cannot calculate probabilities of outcomes. This brings into question the maximizing assumption of economic theory since actors do not know unambigously how to allocate their resources to obtain optimal outcomes. Uncertainty has two prime sources: it can stem from unpredictable changes in the natural or institutional environment or it can have its origins in the unforseeable choices of other actors (double contingency). Although uncertainty is closely linked to the issue of information, not all uncertainty can be undone by the search for further information. Fundamental uncertainty (Dequech 2001; Beckert/Dequech forthcoming) is characterized by the possibility of creativity and non-predetermined structural change. The list of possible events is not predetermined or knowable ex ante, as the future is yet to be created. Ambiguity, as defined by Ventresca and Levin, can be seen as a special case of the double contingency type of uncertainty: Actors act according to a plurality of logics that are possibly even contradictory, making it impossible for Alter Ego to predict Ego's course of action.

For this type of uncertainty, however, the same holds true as does for other types of uncertainty: Only by reducing ambiguity (uncertainty) through networks, institutions, power, norms, or cognitive scripts can actors find a basis from which to assess the situation and become willing to engage in market exchanges where they have to put their money at risk. Categorization, conventions and orders of worth are forms of cognitive scripts that function as mechanisms of reduction of uncertainty.

The correspondence of the work on categories, criteria and conventions with uncertainty as a paradigmatic vantage point of economic sociology becomes also apparent from some of the works discussed by Ventresca and Levin themselves. Olav Velthuis, for instance, explains the market anomaly that galleries sell all paintings of the same size of an artist for the same price, despite quality differences that are known to the artist and to the gallery, by the need to reduce uncertainty. If galleries would act differently this "would create a sense of disorder in a market where uncertainty already reigns" (Velthuis 2003: 194). The economics of convention (reviewed in Biggart/Beamish 2003) identifies the pragmatic task of any economy in the need of coordination of action. Economic exchange has its precondition in interpretations that “lead to a sort of 'agreement' about what is to be done - in the sense that what each person does meets the expectations of the others on whom he or she depends” (Storper/Salais 1997: 16). Such conventions are directly connected to the issue of uncertainty: “Conventions emerge both as responses and as definitions of uncertainty” (ibid.). Özgecan Koçak (2003) starts from the problem of uncertainty in her analysis of valuation processes in exchange markets. Finally, Kieran Healy (1999) frames his work on the organization of blood supply as the “management of uncertainty.”

My critical remarks are in no way intended to question the significance of the findings discussed by Ventresca and Levin. I only question the authors' theoretical assertion that the work on categorization would demonstrate the ”limits of the uncertainty paradigm” (p.2). To the contrary: it demonstrates the centrality of this paradigm for economic sociology.

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Response to Ventresca and Levin

Charles W. Smith

It was heartening and gratifying to see in Marc Ventresca's and Peter Levin's article the attention given to the role played by ambiguity in markets. It was also somewhat disappointing, however, that one would conclude from reading their article and their citations that the role played by ambiguity in markets is a recent sociological discovery. While I wholeheartedly approve the attention given the many recent studies engaged in such projects, the importance of ambiguity within markets of varying sorts has been recognized for over two decades. It is the central issue in my own *Mind of the Market: A Study of Stock Market Philosophies, Their Uses and Their Implications* published in 1981. While this book did not receive overwhelming sociological interest when it was published, it did sell over 50,000 copies and has been widely cited. Ambiguity is similarly central to my 1989 book, *Auctions: The Social Construction of Values*, which is cited and referenced heavily in over half of the articles cited by Ventresca and Levin. It is an issue that other sociologists and anthropologists (e.g., Appadurai, Dimaggio, Geertz, and Zelizer to name just a few) have also been engaged with for many years. Moreover, largely in response to these works, the importance of ambiguity within market processes has been incorporated into at least two encyclopedia/dictionary accounts of auction markets within the last few years. I make this point not only out of some personal umbrage, but also out of professional concern. I realize that it is practically impossible, and often not worthwhile, to properly locate present work in relation to everything that has been done before. On the other hand, it is professionally counter-productive to ignore earlier work that bears directly on present work. Whatever may be lost in one's ability to claim innovation is normally offset by incorporating elements of what have been done before. Reinventing the wheel may bring with it personal gratification, but it does not advance a discipline.

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Reply

Marc Ventresca and Peter Levin[1]

We appreciate the comments from two distinguished colleagues. The gist of our accounts essay is to reconnect studies of market dynamics with work on institutions and organizations that treats managing ambiguity as a primary project, in contrast to reducing uncertainty. We may well be "speaking prose" together with Prof. Beckert — in the concern for how different conceptions of uncertainty and ambiguity lead to substantially different "problems" for research and practice. Beckert (1996) examines contemporary economic usages of "uncertainty" to suggest that much contemporary work on uncertainty-as-risk neglects key intuitions found in both Keynesian and Knightian notions of uncertainty. His notion of double contingency develops the insight that "uncertainty can be reformulated as a situation of double contingency, i.e., a situation in which actors make their actions reciprocally dependent on each other" (1996: 805), and he identifies four categories of social devices by which people can reduce uncertainty: 1) tradition, habit, and routines; 2) norms and institutions; 3) structures; and 4) power (1996: 827ff, see also White 1992).

Prof. Smith's work on auctions also distinguishes risk, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Markets in this vision capture value in the object, value in how others think about the object, and value across different kinds of objects. Auctions in their various guises render price. Ambiguity takes place prior to the auction — in deciding who should come, what the objects 'are,' what kind of auction to use. This is the institutional arsenal that transforms ambiguity into uncertainty, into risk, to constitute "price." In our reading, "uncertainty" is already an outcome of institutional and practical work — the result of efforts to domesticate the unknowable and to create tools of one sort or another for managing, inter alia, risk. Ambiguity, on the other hand, indicates the presence of competing and often incommensurable logics in policy and practice (Espeland 1998). Our point: The analysis of uncertainty reduction is important and useful, but may well under-specify the infrastructure work that occurs to make uncertainty reduction a feasible set of activities (Barry and Slater 2002; Heimer 2001). We advocate for approaches in economic sociology that re-embed in ambiguity and often contested logics the naturalized "uncertainty reduction" starting point of much social network and institutional analysis.

Smith points to lacunae in our citations. Biggart (this issue) argues that economic sociology has shifted from a start up to plural

[1] We thank Kieran Healy, Sandra Kalev, and Mark Zbaracki for wisdom.

traditions that draw broadly on general sociology. In this spirit, the intent of our essay was to refocus on ambiguity in markets, with direct grounding to work on organizations, occupations, and work. This to extend the "canon" in economic sociology (where the colleagues Smith notes and his own work rest securely), not at all to neglect the rich legacy literatures. We claim not novelty at the cost of respect for prior work, but rather an effort to point to how work on ambiguity at the intersection of economic and organizational sociology can extend recent studies of market dynamics.

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Economic Sociology at the ASA Meetings

This year's ASA meetings in Philadelphia will have a large number of sessions of interest to economic sociology section members We summarize them here. This year's Program Chair is Thomas D. Beamish, University of California Davis.

Invited Panel: "Economic Sociology in the Next Decade and Beyond." Organizer: Thomas D. Beamish, University of California Davis. Panelists: Richard Swedberg, Cornell University; Viviana Zelizer, Princeton University; Marc Ventresca, Said Business School and Wolfson College, University of Oxford; Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas, University of California Berkeley; Ruth Aguilera, Department of Business Administration, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Paper Sessions: "Exchange, Interaction, and Interpretation in Economic Transactions" Organizer: Marc Ventresca, Said Business School, Oxford University. · "The Organization of Markets." Organizer: Timothy J. Dowd, Emory University." · "Macro Processes and Transnational Trends." Organizer: Greta Krippner, UCLA. · Bruce Carruthers, Northwestern University, has organized five panels: "Cultural Approaches to the Economy" · "Economic Innovation and Change: Micro and Macro Perspectives" · "Economic Networks and Relations" · "Moral Boundaries and the Economy" · "Sociology of Money, Credit, and Banking."

Refereed Roundtables: We have five refereed roundtables, on the topics of "Case Studies of Exchange Relations" · "Case Studies of National Markets" · "Theorizing Transnational Economic Trends" · "Theory Building in Economic Sociology."

Consulting Cadre Dilemmas in Poland

Maja Magdalena Biernacka

Foreign investors might initially calculate that the local workforce shall be operated by a supply and demand press button and get a surprise if their premise turns out to be wrong. "Do not fall in love with the company, since the company shall never fall in love with you!" — echoes the warning heard from an employee responding to a survey, being part of a recently completed project on the work ethic in business consultancy companies in Poland. This qualitative research was conducted in 1999–2001 in selected business consultancy companies, both multinationals and small local enterprises.

Although the stereotype of the workaholic yuppie appears in the Polish media, our respondents struggle hard not to be perceived so. Typically, no matter how much they sacrifice they would not call themselves "workaholics." Few admit they have ever suffered symptoms of what they call workaholism. The rest resist being classified as rat-racers. Cruising in between their ambitions, desires, search for self-fulfillment and employers' requirements, they do their utmost to draw a strict borderline between professional and private life and that is a fully conscious self-concept defense action.

Company identity is wearing alarmingly thin. The respondents are astonishingly explicit: "Do I identify with the company? What does that mean? How can I possibly identify with a structure or with a mass of individuals I will never get to know in person? Provided we define identification as loyalty — then, OK — I do identify, which means I do my best to be loyal." Or, they make a careful selection: "I identify with the services we provide, with some colleagues . . . I identify (do not identify) with X's policy, priorities, etc. Or: "the company's name shall look impressive in my CV and that's all about it."

The notion that an employer might have a formative effect on the employee hardly ever works that smoothly here, especially if you try to implement it in the elite segment of the nation's workforce. Superficial obedience and consensus is something this society has exercised almost to perfection and many are still practicing — but if one observes them closely much denial and not much true enthusiasm is found underneath.

"Membership?! I belong to my wife and that's all when it comes to my membership or participation or belonging."

Pretending is sometimes surviving. Getting involved in an explicit discussion over a task with the CEO or so is not customary. Open refusal to perform a nonsense task is sometimes observed, but many are not assertive enough to do this. Most respondents use a back-door formula, playing for time and waiting till the superiors change their minds, or saying one thing and doing another. That is what they say having warmed up after a few minutes of conversation with the interviewer. They replace their studied politeness with a more problematic "real me." Subsequently, there is a backlash on the premises — "What is it all about? Where is this researcher really from? Is this survey really anonymous?" For many, "real" means "private." "Membership!?," jokes one young professional, "I belong to my wife and that's all when it comes to my membership or participation or belonging." On a daily basis some diversify the "me" structure into the real private "me" as opposed to the "9 to 5 me" or "7–11 yuppie-like me" participating in what they seem to perceive as a corporate masquerade which is over when one heads back home.

Impediments to communication are staggering and no one seems to be at fault. Internal company surveys barely solve the intra-company communication shortage problem — as reported by the employees. The researcher was told: "You are playing a very useful role here; What a relief, I was craving to talk about my problems to someone; or: I thought you had been sent by the company. Anyway, even if it is so — that is fine with me, let them know what I think about them!" And as for the burden of work motivation, many employers have long been and are still experiencing similar obstacles to productivity in Western Europe and the US as they currently do in Poland. No wonder outsourcing has recently become trendy worldwide. Deep down, employers find it obvious that MBA personnel handbook formulae may not be so easily implemented. Employee satisfaction policies are given little credit and perceived as sheer window-dressing. Likewise, the average CEO would much rather abandon the HR director on the premises and then let his hair down somewhere in Curacao than enthusiastically subject anyone (or be subjected himself) to the latest fad efficiency formula. So would the HR people. Compared to today, things were much simpler clear cut a decade ago. A positive myth of the barely known US and Western Europe trumped a negative one of the Soviet Union, accompanied by much curiosity and hurrah for the new. Certainly, Poles have made substantial progress preparing themselves for what the future may hold. But now, having experienced the new system a significant percentage still tend towards euroscepticism rather than euroenthusiasm. There is a lot of work ahead. "Tell me one thing, please. Are they afraid of us? We have no bad intentions! We want to be friendly. We want to socialize. How come no one seems to be willing to respond when I say 'hello' in a pub? Isn't that weird?" wonders an expat who has spent three years in Poland.

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