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## Article

# Note from the editors. Introduction: Economic sociology and history

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# Note from the editors

## Introduction: economic sociology and history

As noted by Jean-Claude Passeron (2006) in his analysis of the assertoric spaces of social sciences, history and sociology share many epistemological principles: as general social sciences, they are distinguished from the more specialized ones (such as geography or demography), and since both rely on empirical work, more than on their ability to produce formal models, they work as sciences of inquiry (*"sciences de l'enquête"*) as opposed to sciences of models (*"sciences du modèle"*), such as economics. But in spite of this epistemological proximity, which one might expect to facilitate inter-field dialogue, the increasing divide in the dynamics of the social sciences has made the opportunity for discussion more and more unusual. This issue is specifically dedicated to the presentation of studies that organize heuristic discussions between history and economic sociology, provided either by sociologists or by historians.

Several insights might be produced by fruitful connections between the two disciplines. Historical approaches to the study of the economy are, first of all, a way to escape the functionalist approach that threatens so many perspectives in economic sociology. Historians offer, for example, precise genealogies of certain market institutions that economic sociology analyses too often through the lenses of a functionalist perspective, reducing the institution to its function in the present. On the other hand, archive work allows us to see how very long-standing institutions are rooted in specific historical contexts and have been frequently reshaped throughout their history by actors who either promoted or fought against them. The form of these institutions often has more to do with the type of coalition that was necessary to establish them, rather than the sole goal they were pursuing. Historical accounts of economic institutions meet the general interest in institutional dynamics of proponents of institutional entrepreneurship or institutional work (Powell and Colyvas, 2008; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). The (frequently implicit) functionalist perspective that is the backbone of much work in institutional sociology is often motivated by the assumption that uncertainty is one of the main characteristics of modern

economies (Stinchcombe, 1990; Beckert, 1996). Historians opportunely recall that uncertainty is far from limited to modern economies, since the uncertainty facing a ship-owner who chartered an expedition in the 18th Century, or an early middle-ages merchant trying to assess the value of goods, was certainly not lower than what we face today.

Secondly, relying on historical studies of markets and the economy provide some insights to break with an evolutionist vision of markets. There exist some important studies, in particular by Fernand Braudel and Karl Polanyi, that already have deeply interrogated an evolutionist vision, which opposes face-to-face, local, trust-based exchanges from the past with globalized, institutionalized and bureaucratized markets. Historiographical work, including that focused on very ancient periods, may demonstrate how some technical devices were already at play within exchanges, while sociological studies on contemporary markets describe the role of face-to-face negotiations or vernacular devices even within very technological and globalized market relationships. Obviously, even though markets have greatly evolved over time as the role of technologies and institutions became more and more significant, they have also always been multi-faceted realities, connecting institutionalized practices with locally rooted routines. As a result, it can be of great interest for contemporary market studies to draw inspiration from historical studies on markets, to better assess certain mechanisms that seem to have been at play as long as economic exchanges have occurred.

The different studies presented in this issue have been proposed by several academics who work at the boundary of the two disciplines. They all provide fruitful perspectives on connections between history and economic sociology. *Gilles Laferté*, an economic sociologist, describes the long history of economic identification in France. He develops this concept drawing from the notion of political identification that has been used by historians and political scientists to consider the creation of records on individuals. Economic identification, which corresponds the recording of information on debtors, appears as an important economic institution that, for its promoters, aimed at replacing trust-

based and face-to-face economies with exchanges based on bureaucratic information and automatic technologies, considered to be essential for globalized exchanges. Nonetheless, Gilles Laferté shows how these two credit-granting mechanisms rubbed shoulders instead of succeeding each other after the 19th century. He also points to the role of the state in the development of economic identification.

The issue of state intervention in the economy is also at the core of the paper by *Alain Chatriot*. The historian pays tribute to the historiographical shift of the last twenty years that allows historians, and more specifically modern historians, to reintegrate the history of the state and of economic policy within political history. Such work allows for the consideration of economic institutions as the result of political processes that involve numerous political actors with deeply intertwined interests. More specifically, Alain Chatriot studies the regulation of the grain market in France, which led to the creation of a new economic institution during the summer of 1936: the National Inter-professional Grain Office. He demonstrates how such an institution cannot be understood without considering the functioning of the political institutions of that specific period in France, during which socialists were running the Parliament. He also points out how its continuation after this period was also deeply anchored in the support by the reactionary regime of Marechal Pétain and then by political actors under Liberation. Such an institution cannot be analyzed today without considering how it went through the diverse political processes that connected it to large coalitions and networks of actors.

Placing actors at the core of the analysis leads the modern historian *Pierre Gervais* to show how modern history could provide a more historicized understanding of market mechanisms and economic institutions. He focuses in his paper specifically on the logics of profit calculations practices performed by early modern merchants, raising questions that are very close to some perspectives adopted today in economic sociology. He then demonstrates that although economists would interpret some features of economic exchanges during this period as incomplete information on products and the opportunism of actors, merchants developed techniques and practices to calculate profits and losses. Practitioners from this period were in fact very zealous, echoing their counterparts today, in drawing statements from their activities that show annual

gains and losses. Pierre Gervais also analyses how merchants dealt with the lack of information in economic exchanges at the time, by relying on a combination price/quality evaluation, a technique not so different from what occurs today with some multi-dimensional goods for which no generalized commensurability systems exists.

These similarities between market exchanges from the past and today are even more striking when they include even earlier examples of economic exchange. The paper by *Laurent Feller* deals with the measuring of value in the Middle Age. During this period, actors had to manage exchanges of things which they had very few means to evaluate or compare, since no comparison scales existed. In consequence, it appears that exchange partners went far beyond the nominal price to evaluate products, involving themselves in deep negotiations over the commitments that each party agreed to, in order to stabilize future transactions and facilitate the circulation of items. For example, they might negotiate conditions of monetary and non-monetary payments (objects or servitude) that blurred the boundaries between what economic anthropologists usually define as economic exchange and noneconomic exchange. Although this study describes a period during which the use of money was not yet generalized, it also resonates with some aspects of contemporary economic exchanges, in which suppliers of manufactured products may be willing to cut their prices in return for other types of non-monetary commodities or services provided by their clients (shortened delays in payment, reduced delivery services, greater involvement of the buyer in terms of quantities bought). Historiography obviously provides some insights that might be fruitful for recent development in economic sociology around value and valuation processes.

These different studies also emphasize the shifts that have occurred in economic history. Of course, a great deal of economic history studies – especially those produced in departments of economics – continues to rely on quantitative data and econometric techniques. Yet some historians dealing with the economy have shifted away from quantitative assessments of economic historical events and towards to the studying of precise practices, logics, mechanisms and processes, areas that require specific competencies, like in-depth archive work and historiographical study. The evolution of the discipline of economic history and the specificity of these types of research that are firmly rooted

within history while having strong connections with economic sociology are clearly described by *Philip Scranton* in the interview he gave for this issue. However, the historian also continues to insist on differences in methodology and theory that separate the two fields of study, even though he regrets that sociologists do not collaborate more often with historians. The work of *John Padgett*, who also gave an interview to this issue, provides a contrast. He insists on the joint contribution that sociologists and historians can make to the understanding of social processes.

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