Durkheim and the Birth of Economic Sociology

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failing at fulfilling the requirements of the reidentification criterion. The systematic use of the reidentification criterion would endogenize context by making it a lasting element of the description of the individual and of identity. This integration could help explain the effect of changes that affect the individual and identity over time.

Second, internalist conceptions of the individual—that account only weakly for the role of interactions or that are not socially embedded—may lead to underestimate the role of conflicting motivations due to social commitments and norm valuations. Such conflicting motivations may mitigate the effect of incentives, which is of primordial interest to economists. Building on this argument, the book urges one to think about the effects of policy on identity.

Davis’s new proposal is powerful and potentially groundbreaking as current economics is increasingly behavioral. Davis’s previous book (2003) on identity was accompanied by a boom in theoretical research. This new book is an essential and useful companion to theorists, empiricists—especially experimentalists—and policy-makers who wish to rely on adequate representations of individuals and who may wish to study identity.

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Philippe Steiner, professor of sociology at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne, may be portrayed as one of the most outstanding representatives of economic sociology in Europe, and beyond. His work combines explorations into the intellectual
foundations of economic sociology and political economy with empirical studies in the same domains. Among his most recent monographs is a study on markets for the transplantation of human organs. Unfortunately though, reflecting some persistent characteristics of French academia, most of Steiner’s works have been available only in French language. Therefore, his new English book, *Durkheim and the Birth of Economic Sociology*, is a welcome exception from this trend. In fact, it is a translation of Steiner’s French monograph *L’école durkheimienne et l’économie—Sociologie, religion et connaissance*, published in 2005. The translation has been prepared by Keith Tribe, a renowned historian of economic ideas in his own right and who provides a brilliant effort in reorienting Steiner’s reasoning to an international English-reading audience. This aspect hints at a key characteristic of the book: its original format addressed an exclusively French readership, and thus the English translation opens up an intellectual universe that has remained somewhat neglected in the international discourse on economic sociology.

The cornerstone of this effort is the work of Émile Durkheim, who is usually perceived as one of the intellectual founding fathers of modern sociology. However, most interpretations of Durkheim’s ideas have not linked him to the domain of economic sociology, which is rather identified with scholars such as Vilfredo Pareto or Max Weber. In this context, Steiner set out to reconstruct Durkheim’s ideas as a genuine contribution to the intellectual formation of economic sociology. This reconstruction of Durkheim’s ideas is taken as a point of departure for a comprehensive outline of the intellectual evolution of Durkheimian economic sociology in France, with François Simiand, Maurice Halbwachs, and Marcel Mauss serving as key contributors, who would emerge as most relevant sociological scholars in the Durkheimian tradition. The key question is, however, whether Durkheim and his followers were actually proceeding in line with a distinct paradigm. Steiner’s answer is definitely affirmative, and thus, he examines the diverse facets of Durkheimian economic sociology in a like-minded manner.

The key thesis of the book is provided by Steiner’s proposition, put forward in Chapter 1: Durkheim formulated two distinct research programs on the social representation of economic affairs, namely a sociological critique of the categories of political economy and a distinct sociology of economic knowledge. Durkheim’s early work, in particular his first landmark monograph on the social division of labor, critically evaluated the reasoning of classical political economy. At this point, Steiner is keen to underline the intellectual relevance of the German Historical School on Durkheim’s sociological perspective. Although the historicist influence would diminish over time, it still gives evidence for some common roots of Durkheimian and Weberian sociology in France and Germany,
respectively. Durkheim’s original research program then claimed that economic affairs are subject to specific social representations. Professional groups would emerge as decisive organizational expressions of these social representations. Durkheim viewed them not only from an analytical point of view, but also in the normative terms of social reform. Yet, this paradigmatic emphasis on social representations of the economic world seemed to contradict Durkheim’s further sociological endeavors. Indeed, in the preface to the second edition of *Division of Labor*, Durkheim explicitly announced that he would reorient his research interests toward the role of religion in primitive societies as a means to understand the functional underpinnings of modernity. As pointed out in the second chapter of Steiner’s book, this seemingly anthropological turn constituted a second research program. However, with its reconsideration of the sociology of knowledge as an intermediating perspective between economic sociology and the sociology of religion, this second research program did not yet abandon the project of the social representations of economic ideas. With its inherent interest in the correspondence between the ideas of religious and economic values, it still kept in line with key concerns of Durkheim’s earlier research agenda.

However, it was left to two of Durkheim’s most outstanding disciples, François Simiand and Maurice Halbwachs, to elaborate on the early Durkheimian critique of political economy. Both scholars served as contributors to the Durkheimian journals *L’année sociologique* and *Annales sociologiques*, and they used this position in expanding the line of reasoning that had been put forward in Durkheim’s analyses of the division of labor and the role of contract. This is the content of Chapters 3 and 4 in Steiner’s book. Simiand, in particular, continued with Durkheim’s critique of economic categories. His classification of economic phenomena took issue with the problem of outlining economic systems, quite in line with contemporary German discussions between Schmoller, Sombart, and Weber on the characterization of modern capitalism. Simiand felt that the German Historical School lacked workable conceptual foundations, yet he also rejected the a priori rationalism of neoclassical economics. Instead, Simiand’s “positive political economy” should reflect empirical studies on key issues such as prices, wages, and money, which were to be combined with the first Durkheimian research program on the critique of economic categories. At this point, Steiner underlines Simiand’s intellectual leadership, whereas Halbwachs is said to have failed in offering novel perspectives on Durkheimian themes, despite his impressive command of contemporary economic literature.

In paralleling these efforts, Marcel Mauss went on to pursue the second Durkheimian research program of economic sociology with its focus on the relationship between religion and the economy. Chapter 5 of Steiner’s book is devoted to this topic while Chapter 6 compares the insights of Mauss and Simiand.
Yet, it is once more Durkheim’s reasoning on contract and social order that serves as an intellectual point of departure. Here, the key question is which social mechanisms promote the coherence of a diversified society—and how can such an extended social domain be coordinated without centralized interventions. Mauss’s economic sociology, as put forward most prominently in his work, The Gift, takes on an anthropological viewpoint in discussing the moral foundations of social behavior. In this context, Mauss describes the moral underpinnings of human action as a historical expression of the duality of selfishness and altruism. Accordingly, social behavior transcends the logic of market exchange and thus cannot be reduced to a utilitarian calculus. Indeed, the market process has to be viewed in its ritualistic and mythical dimension, quite in line with Durkheim’s arguments on the religious origins of the idea of economic value. This line of reasoning provides a terrain for a convergence of the two Durkheimian research programs in the works of Mauss and Simiand during the 1920s and 1930s. Mauss’s contemporary essays, which include critical assessments of Soviet bolshevism, are set in relation with Simiand’s work on money, wages, and business cycles. Decisively, according to Steiner, the reconsideration of the social representation of economic phenomena blends both of these Durkheimian research programs.

Steiner’s book closes with two chapters on the persistent relevance of the Durkheimian perspective in economic sociology, in particular by highlighting the sociology of economic knowledge. Chapter 7 refers to the formative work of Auguste Comte and his approach to the political economy of industrial society. This is meant to outline the intellectual milieu that influenced Durkheim’s own efforts. In contrast, Durkheim’s reconsideration of the social representation of economic knowledge stands out as a specific feature of his approach that remains highly relevant for current discussions. In referring to the social construction and dissemination of economic knowledge, Durkheim’s views on the schooling system and socialization processes are taken to the fore. This leads to the problem of rationalization, as presented in Chapter 8, which contrasts related Durkheimian ideas with Max Weber’s positions. While there are some parallels between both, Steiner suggests that the Durkheimian sociology of knowledge exhibits argumentative advantages with its recognition of the actual motivations underlying social interests and economic behavior. Accordingly, further analytical explorations in the social representations of economic knowledge are most promisingly framed by Durkheimian economic sociology.

In sum, Steiner provides a brilliant addition to the expanding body of work on the intellectual foundations of economic sociology. His book on the Durkheimian research program is well designed to accompany standard works such as Richard Swedberg’s on Max Weber (1998) or Yuichi Shionoya’s on Joseph Schumpeter.
Among others. In fact, a minor critical issue regarding Steiner’s book is its lack of references to recent advances in the new economic sociology, as promoted for instance by Swedberg. At this point, the book remains true to its original French milieu and focuses almost exclusively on intellectual developments in domestic academia. Yet again, this issue is overshadowed by the major insights the book provides for the intellectual history of economic sociology.

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