

CONFERENCES

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Workshop Review: New Economic Sociology and Sociology: Where Do They Meet? Where Do They Diverge? Warsaw, May 22–23, 2017



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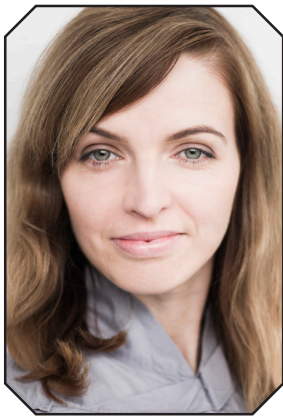
Abstract

This review presents the theoretical grounding and agenda of a series of works on new economic sociology that was launched in May 2017, in Warsaw, by the Polish Sociological Association's recently constituted Economic Sociology Section. The workshop series comprises three annual meetings held in the second part of May. The long-term plan is to explore the relationship between sociology and new economic sociology by considering specific theoretical problems and, eventually, research sites. The first meeting, which was held this year, was a general warm-up and an attempt to establish the nature of the borders between new economic sociology and the discipline of sociology, and, to a certain extent, even economics. The second meeting, scheduled for 2018, aims to investigate the modalities of reacting to organizational decline or economic crises that the new economic sociology may be considered to have highlighted in addition to Albert O. Hirschman's "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty." The third meeting, which will take place in 2019, is planned in relation to a concrete research site that has been explored in new economic sociology, sociology, and anthropology (e.g., consumption; economic practices concerned with work, entrepreneurship, health, and education; or even art and food).

Keywords: new economic sociology; Albert O. Hirschman; workshop; Warsaw; Polish Sociological Association.

The Polish Sociological Association's recently constituted Economic Sociology Section has launched a call for arguments and debate related to the place of the study of economic life within the broader sociological discipline. This topic is intended to be discussed over a few meetings, to be held annually, under the generic title "Bringing the New Economic Sociology Back into Sociological Analysis." As the title shows, this workshop series starts from the assumption that the new economic sociology, in its focus on 'correcting' the manner in which economics approaches economic life, runs the risk of becoming decoupled from sociological discourse. Thus, the workshop series was launched as a call—an alarm signal, to be more accurate—for new economic sociologists to try to use the findings of the new economic sociology in order to address the main assumptions and contradictions not only in economics but in sociology as well.

In this initiative, the Economic Sociology Section collaborates with academic centers affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology (Polish Acad-



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emy of Sciences) and the Institute of Social Prevention and Resocialisation and the Robert B. Zajonc Institute for Social Studies (University of Warsaw). This network does not exhaust the organizational footprint of the Polish sociologists associated with economic sociology. Yet it represents a stream of researchers which combines a culturally oriented economic sociology with a classical interest in class and power relations, as well as in the moral aspect of economic actions. In addition, it is serious about brokerage with other analytical streams, such as the sociology of unintended consequences, the sociology of failure, the sociology of time, and even the sociology of music. This stream, although currently under construction, has manifested itself quite vividly in recent years. Among its successes, one can count the materialization of the first Economic Sociology Section in the framework of the Polish Sociological Association, the initiation of international partnerships for the study of economy and society (such as the Max Planck Partner Group for the Sociology of Economic Life and the collaboration with the University of Naples Federico II), and the development of research projects funded by the mother institutions and the prestigious Polish National Science Center.

The workshop series comprises three annual meetings, held in the second part of May. The long-term plan is to explore the relationship between sociology and the new economic sociology by taking into account specific theoretical problems and, eventually, research sites. The first meeting—*New Economic Sociology and Sociology: Where Do They Meet? Where Do They Diverge?* (22-23 May 2017)—hosted this year, was a general warm-up and an attempt to establish the nature of the borders between the new economic sociology and the discipline of sociology – and, to a certain extent, even economics. The second meeting, scheduled for next year—*Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Alternative Economic Models and Responses to Decline in Contemporary Society* (21-22 May 2018) —aims to investigate the modalities of reacting to organizational decline or economic crises that the new economic sociology may be considered to have highlighted in addition to “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” (the classical triad that was originally identified by Albert O. Hirschman in 1970 and which has continued to fascinate sociologists ever since). The third meeting, which is to take place in 2019, is planned in relation to a concrete research site that has been explored in the new economic sociology, sociology, and anthropology, for example: consumption; economic practices concerned with work, entrepreneurship, health, and education; or even art and food. This last workshop will also abstract from the initial findings and try to convey a general manifesto.

Thus the 2017 discussion on the relationship between the new economic sociology and sociological analysis was mainly the first in a series of debates that aims to explore this problem from various angles. It took place at the premises in Warsaw of the Polish Academy of Sciences, in the room named in honor of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, the intellectual muse of scientists in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe. The workshop consisted of three parts, divided as follows: theory; research sites; and possible paths and overlooked issues. It involved ten panels in total, and each part was opened with a guest speech. The first two parts, on theory and research sites, were followed by a more general roundtable that summarized the conclusions of the first day of the workshop. The

third part, which focused on applied new economic sociology, concluded with an informal wrap-up session on challenges facing the discipline.

The first part, relating to theory, was opened by Andrzej Rychard's guest speech on the potential of economic sociology to illuminate some aspects and mechanisms of post-communist transformation. Rychard referred to processes of depoliticization in Polish society that have effected a decoupling in the rhetoric of political elites as well as a more general disengagement from the political sphere at the level of society. Next, the two panels on theoretical models, theoretical connections, and brokerages explored the status of distinct streams both within the new economic sociology and in relation to sociological analysis at large. Sandy Ross spoke about contemporary determined, but unclear, theoretical practices of blending the categories of economy, society, market, and culture, which do not really address the nature and characteristics of blending. Ewa Roszkowska and Ugo Corte (also speaking on behalf of Tom R. Burns and Nora Machado) revised Goffman's interaction theory from the point of view of game theory, bringing Goffman's theory back to game theoretical analysis (to paraphrase the title of the workshop). Andrzej Bukowski and Seweryn Rudnicki tackled the possibility of delivering a new, more integrative definition of innovation supported by practice theory. Gerhard Fuchs contributed a distributed paper on relational theory and the theory of fields.

The second part, related to research sites, began with Salvatore Babones's guest speech on power relations and globalization trends in contemporary society. Babones used a macro-sociological perspective embedded in systems theory to explain the dominant role of the United States in the contemporary developing global configuration. The succeeding two panels brought the focus toward a more qualitative sociology and the new economic sociology. Sebastian Giacovelli explored the applicability and potential of the notion of expectations in sociology and the new economic sociology. Seweryn Rudnicki took the bull by the horns and asked directly what sociology could learn from the new economic sociology. Joe Deville and José Ossandón (also speaking on behalf of Jeanne Lazarus and Mariana Luzzi) brought the discussion into the arena of financialization and domestic economic practices, introducing and theorizing an oikonomization approach. Marta Olcoń-Kubicka underlined the assumptions of a culturally oriented economic sociology and applied these to the study of household calculation practices and technologically sustained earmarking by young Polish middle-class couples.

The third part, regarding possible paths and overlooked issues, began with Patrik Aspers' guest speech on the challenges facing the new economic sociology, which was a theoretical tour de force. It explained the structure of the canon of the new economic sociology and the conditions that have led to the institutionalization of some topics (such as performativity) and to the near-absence of others from its agenda (such as the relationship between production and consumption). When the floor was opened for questions, the issue of field versus movement was raised. Now that the new economic sociology has become more mature and grounded, should the "new" be dropped from "new economic sociology", or should it be kept in order to distinguish between the new economic sociologists and those who do research in economic sociology but do not consider themselves part of the movement?

The following panels—all six of them—engaged in an exploration of new possibilities of research in relation to worlds such as financial processes, economic life, and accountability. Mikołaj Lewicki discussed the correlation between differentiated credit and lending policies and social stratification. Aleksandra Herman made the archeology of the field of short-term lending in Poland reveal its trends and contradictions. On a more theoretical note, Maciej Kassner differentiated three analytical framings of 'embeddedness' that find their cues in the theory of Polanyi, and he indicated the state of light theoretical rivalry and suspicion between these. José Ossandón weighed up two possible approaches to the study of market-related activities: one that starts with an a priori concept of market and weighs what is found in the field against this definition, and another that lets the case study say what the market actually is. Next, Markéta Sedláčková initiated the theme of brokerage

between the new economic sociology and other arenas of research, pointing particularly to the issue of trust. Marcin Serafin and Mateusz Halawa took a definite step in the direction of an economic sociology of time and temporal orders. On a related topic, Dan Ryjav and Roman Hoffreiter's distributed paper attempted to bring the critically charged evaluation of economic transformation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia toward a more theoretical and abstract analysis. Then Vaike Radauva engaged with a topic that has attracted much attention recently, namely accounting practices, with her investigation of accountability in Estonian social work. Drago Čengić explored strategies of legitimation of entrepreneurship in Croatia. The topic of accounting was eventually linked with the phenomenon of interlocking directorates in the Polish system of two-tier corporate governance in the presentation authored by Joanna Szalacha-Jarmużek, and then linked with Islamic finance in the input delivered by Hideki Kitamura.

Hence, as can be inferred from this brief review, there was an evident theoretical and conceptual consistency in the presentations. The common background and research interests were also evidenced in the discussion that animated the workshop, wherein it was clear that the new economic sociologists speak the same language. But some contradictions, ambiguities, and even inconsistencies were revealed, especially during the two roundtables that summarized the state of the workshop at the end of each of the two full days of discussion. The first roundtable, on the relation between sociology and new economic sociology and hosted by Salvatore Babones and Katarzyna Wyrzykowska, would have evolved into a serious clash between two clearly divided parties had it not been for the conciliatory intervention of some of the more experienced new economic sociologists in the room. One party, a stubborn adherent of a system-theory approach related to North-American school of sociology, asked about the place and input of the new economic sociology in the modernization debate. The other party, taking a perspective that was more qualitative and friendlier to European new economic sociology, was reluctant to close the field in an old-school debate and preferred to envision a social movement instead. The second roundtable, a more informal wrap-up session led by Mateusz Halawa, revealed that some newcomers to the field discovered the new economic sociology by accident while conducting empirical research only loosely related to economic life. For this new blood coming into the new economic sociology, the theory has proved to be productive, as it offers analytical tools and concepts that are applicable to particular research projects, especially to those framed on a microscale. Yet, the discussion concluded, the development of the bigger picture is still pending, hence it is imperative to collaborate and to conduct comparative studies if these newcomers wish to move to the next level.

The first roundtable revealed that, despite being relatively open to new research sites and conceptual experiments, the new economic sociology—and, for that matter, any social movement—still cherishes certain modes of thought and framing, and it might put in motion exclusionary mechanisms if challenged on its own territory. The rejection of the North American-inspired system theory, for instance, signaled that at least the European-oriented economic sociologists do not engage in riddles about the place of the new economic sociology and, even if they do so, they prefer challenges from within their discipline. It also showed that the distinction between the North-American and European streams of the new economic sociology has finally begun to be visible not only in theory but also in the conference room and in the classroom.

The second roundtable indicated that the new economic sociology recruits fresh contributions not only from sociologists interested in economic behavior but also from sociologists who find the new economic sociology vocabulary and mode of thought more appealing. Though there is still room for discussion as to why sociologists who discover the new economic sociology by accident decide to stay and develop the field, suffice it here to note that these sociologists seem to be doing what this series of workshops aims to do—that is, to mobilize around bringing the new economic sociology back to sociology. However, as the discussions revealed, the relationship of mutual give-and-take has yet to be established. Some concepts are facing barriers when being incorporated into general sociology, while others, such as studies of finance, are more easily exported due to being linked with the everyday experience of uncertainty shared by the general public and academia. Thus,

irrespective of whether the desire to reorient the theoretical debate in the new economic sociology toward sociology will be fulfilled, the phenomenon of universalization of the new economic sociology is already under way. What remains unclear, however, is who the engine of this process will be: the established new economic sociologists or the new sociologists?

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