

**Review of *The economics of economists: institutional setting, individual incentives, and future prospects*, edited by Alessandro Lanteri, and Jack Vromen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 374 pp.**

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It is distressing these days to be a book reviewer. And no, I am not bemoaning the fact that no one under the age of 40 reads books anymore, due to having the attention span of a cocker spaniel after having spent their life surfing the Web. Rather, it seems that publishers do not care anymore to constrain the titles of books to have any bearing on the actual topics covered therein. Here—case in point—one might reasonably expect to find a gaggle of economists applying microeconomics to the behavior of economists, perhaps to praise the rational virtues of that most sagacious of agents, the model of a modern economist. That is what I expected when I agreed to review it. But no: what we have here is a jumble of disjoint exercises attempting to conduct a scattershot armchair *sociology* of economics, almost exclusively carried out by economists who have little time for or background in real sociology. If I wanted to sample a random selection of people spouting off on what is wrong with economics, I could always just turn to Google or the *Real world economics review* or blogs such as *Nakedcapitalism*. It is not clear to me why these particular papers warranted being collected together between these covers, lumbered with its misleading title, especially since so many of them had been published elsewhere previously.

Let me try to make the point about sociology in a terse manner. The only article in the book which really sets out to explain the shape of the modern economics profession is the superb chapter by a real sociologist, Marion Fourcade. That chapter, along with some more recent work, presents a plausible account of the global rise to power of the modern economics profession, in conjunction with the extraordinary intellectual contempt for other social sciences and parochial standards of argument so characteristic of its members. Fourcade adopts a comparative approach to the structures of epistemic authority and

power, founded on data relevant to her thesis, as captured by this table from her paper “The superiority of economists” (Fourcade, et al. 2014).

Table 2 Response to the statement “In general, interdisciplinary knowledge is better than knowledge obtained by a single discipline” (in percent)

American university professors in	Agree, strongly agree	Disagree, strongly disagree	No answer, don't know
Economics	42.1	57.3	0.6
Sociology	72.9	25.3	1.8
Political science	59.8	28.0	12.2
Psychology	78.7	9.4	11.9
Finance	86.6	9.6	3.8
History	68.2	31.7	0.1

As one can observe, there is something different about American economists: they are more likely to disparage neighboring fields, and much more likely to enjoy an overweening confidence in their own epistemic legitimacy. After the global crisis, this really is quite extraordinary, and deserves to be a subject of inquiry. But what we find instead in the current book is further exemplification of that very hubris and insularity: various economists light upon some random aspect of their profession, and proceed to ‘explain’ it using the folk sociology of the natives. They ignore the work of people like Fourcade, as if she were not right there, in the book. Standards of evidence are lax; the big interesting questions are mostly evaded. And by this, I do not mean that they do not conform to a few stylized standards of hypothesis testing; rather, in most cases they write as though the economics profession were not embedded in the larger predicament of the modern university, nor reveal any interest in the more general sociology of knowledge.

I do not usually do this, but I am going to list the authors and topics, just to provide some feeling for how tone-deaf many of these contributions are. Arjo Klammer suggests that economists do not behave like self-interested agents, because they are really engaged in some sort of Habermasian ideal speech community. Perhaps things are different where he lives. Margit Osterloh and Bruno Frey list some ‘disadvantages’ of academic rankings in economics, hinting that it is encouraged by some modern regime of New Public Management. They seem oblivious to the large literature which traces the imposition of metrics in the modern university to the neoliberal imposition of stunted notions of ‘competition’ and ‘quality’ as a prelude to a marketplace of ideas, often spearheaded by economists. David Colander bemoans the imposition of

American metrics and standards in so-called ‘reforms’ of European economics departments, fearing the spread of mediocrity under the banner of standardization and competition. He should read some Fourcade, to begin to comprehend how power and epistemic authority have been operating since the 1960s; maybe even a little Foucault on neoliberalism. Wendy Stock and John Siegfried report on a survey of attitudes of 207 economists who earned their PhDs in 1996/1997. No surprise: they are a pretty smug and self-satisfied bunch. Wade Hands asks why economists do not experience the kind of priority fights that one observes in the natural sciences; reaching back to Mertonian sociology, he suggests that such flare-ups are rooted in emotions of moral indignation, and economists seem somehow devoid of collective notions of professional morality. This thesis is countermanded by the chapter by Deirdre McCloskey, who ascends the pulpit to condemn the various ‘sins’ of the economics profession from within the catechism of the seemingly amoral (but deeply neoliberal) stance of one D. McCloskey. Donna Ginther and Shulamit Kahn document that women economists fare worse in their academic careers than in other disciplines. Here identity politics blocks any consideration that the bigger immunities enjoyed by orthodox economists might also extend to immunities from social movements towards gender equality. Alessandro Lanteri and Salvatore Rizzello attempt to argue away the experimental literature which has found that undergraduate majors and graduate economists are more selfish and experience diminished solidarity with others. The authors suggest that students in such experiments are just telling their economist overlords what they think they want to hear. I think they should let some real psychologists have at the question, or at least read some Leon Festinger.

There are two interesting papers included herein that do not really seem to fit into even a broad conception of what this book purports to be about. Robert Frank reprises his theme song about what it means to teach the unwashed about how to ‘think like an economist’: mostly, it involves shoehorning some sort of cost-benefit analysis into the most unlikely of everyday situations. Jack Vromen takes the time to read Frank very carefully, and, in one of the better takedowns of the whole ‘economics is just common sense’ literature, he insists that, “the cost-benefit principle lacks specific content, [and] can be interpreted and applied in widely different ways, and therefore the first cost-benefit explanation that a student can think of need not be the only possible

cost-benefit explanation that can be given” (p. 283). In other words, most of applied microeconomics is effectively empty, which is why it can be extended to any human experience. This is a salutary philosophical lesson; but I still fail to see how it contributes to an understanding of the modern economics *profession*.

I was thinking of ending the review by proposing that the next time Cambridge wants to put together an anthology of work about the shape of the economics profession, perhaps they should place it in the hands of a sociologist. But then I remembered that the latest hot thing in economic sociology has been Michel Callon’s notion of ‘performativity’, which, crudely stated, says that economists reshape the world in the image of their theories, which explains their epistemic power in modern life. That whole program has turned out a bust, primarily because it retailed economists’ own stories about their purported close coherence of theory and empiricism as if it were a ‘radical’ thesis, when in fact the target economic theory had rarely described how the constructed markets actually functioned ‘in the wild’.

Interdisciplinarity in and of itself is no free-standing virtue. It is not that sociologists would naturally see the economists more clearly than (by the evidence of this volume) they see themselves; it is rather that a powerful sociology of knowledge requires the analyst to toggle back and forth between a number of competing perspectives. It would seek to render strange and precarious what the denizens believe is cozy and unexceptional.

The panoply of images and beliefs that support the dominance of the economic orthodoxy runs much deeper than simplistic notions of ‘rationality’ and ‘cost-benefit analysis’; it is a regimen extending across many disciplines. What might be required is a weaving together of forms of knowledge, relations of power, and techniques of the discipline of the self (Foucault 2011). Where is Foucault when you really need him?

## REFERENCES

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