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Book Reviews

Book: Mary C. Brinton, 2011: *Lost In Transition. Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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In the comparative welfare state and varieties of capitalism literatures, Japan has played a curious role. Its rapid post-war growth entitled it to membership in the OECD and inclusion in purportedly widely-applicable theories about labor, industry, the (welfare) state and interlinkages between these elements that were assumed to constitute a "normal" developed market economy. Some elements of Japanese capitalism endured as distinctive features in many different middle-range theories and their application. The transition from school to work that Mary Brinton writes about with such depth of knowledge is one of these distinctive features.

Brinton focuses on the cultural, social, and human capital carried by organizations rather than individuals. The transition to work is highly structured and involves taken-for-granted understandings of the role of the student, school, and prospective employer. These understandings specifically emphasize the role of the school as a broker in placing students. The central question of the book becomes whether this brokering role has been made obsolete by the end of the labor shortages of the high-growth era and what the school-to-work transition looks like in post-industrial Japan. The surprising answer that Brinton provides is that the institutionalized roles of schools in brokering employment offers continues to serve students in vocational secondary schools well, but it is students at the middling to lower-ranked academic high schools that are turning into the "lost generation" that academics, commentators and policy-makers are increasingly concerned about in Japan.

The book makes a great virtue out of the fact that it resulted from a multi-year process of different research projects that were somewhat interwoven around the central theme of the school-to-work transition from the mid-1990s until the late 2000s. The evidence presented is

based on a multi-method approach that is not only convincing in providing readers a glimpse at similar empirical questions from different perspectives, but also in offering a portrayal of the contemporary situation that seems as complete as it could be in just under 200 pages.

The opening chapter sets the stage by discussing the Japanese discourse on the "lost generations" that resulted from several years of a very low intake of new employees into the most desirable and stable jobs in the Japanese economy. Because several cohorts of the mid-1990s faced general hiring freezes at their single point of entry to stable employment, these cohorts are moving through the lifecourse with a significant bulge of unemployment or underemployment, lower job security, fewer benefits and all the social, psychological, and economic challenges that attend the status of being a "lost generation".

The second chapter discusses the historical roots and institutionalization of the school-to-work transition as it emerged to address severe labor shortages during Japan's high-growth period. Chapter 3 focuses on the extent to which not just the transition to work, but the entire employment trajectory as it is experienced by men in Japan revolves around attachment to a specific context, or *ba*. The following chapters continue this focus on the institutional context of the transition to work and present data from a variety of angles including an extended argument for why participants place such great trust in the institutionalized employment system. Chapter 6 as the final empirical chapter presents the life histories of three young men as they have experienced their membership in the lost generation. The conclusion then refocuses insights about the school-to-work transition on the growing awareness of socio-economic inequality in Japan.

The great merit of Brinton's model is her ability to adapt prominent, predominantly North American theoretical concepts from the sociology of work and education to the particular context of Japanese employment relations. For example, she repeatedly returns to questions raised by Mark Granovetter's strength of weak ties argument and examines it in the Japanese context.

As I progressed (easily, for it is well-written) through the book, my anticipation continued to build as to what other

interesting data Brinton would be able to analyze. Data sources stretch from the census level to illustrate the portrayal of the “lost generation”, to smaller scale surveys that Brinton conducted jointly with some of the most prominent contemporary Japanese sociologists. Because her data collection and conceptualization of her analyses were interwoven with the social scientific discourse in Japan, and perhaps also because this book was originally published in Japanese and thus aimed to connect with this discourse more explicitly than many works, Brinton does an exceptional job at bridging scientific debates between the North American and Japanese contexts.

Brinton is not shy about “revealing” the sometimes haphazard routes by which data presented themselves to her. The story she recounts on pp. 55-56 of how she happened to come into possession of the entire trove of job offers in a local employment office was not only a light-hearted but telling insight into the difficulties of obtaining data. This will be a welcome pointer to some of the graduate students who will undoubtedly read this book that good things will come to researchers who engage a topic with in-depth fieldwork in the actual context of their chosen topic.

I found some aspects of Brinton’s argument less convincing than the overall thrust and structure of the presentation. For example, I am not sure that we need yet another version of what seems like a definition of “institution” in another context, namely Brinton’s use of the term “ba”. While this is a term with many complex connotations that I also encounter in my research on supplementary education in Japan, something as simple as “institutional context” would have served Brinton well. The life histories presented in Chapter 6 do round out the mix of methods employed by including in-depth interviews, but they seem to add very little to the overall argument.

I will be relying on the central empirical chapters of this book in an upcoming seminar on economic and social change to examine education(al policy) as a crucible of the organization of work and society in the Asia Pacific myself and recommend this book not only to readers interested in the specifics of the Japanese case, but to the broader audience of scholars working on employment systems and the welfare state. Brinton will provide you with an engaging overview of the Japanese employment system, but also many insights into the operation of social institutions and individuals’ choices in the context of this system.

Book: Philippe Steiner / François Vatin (eds.), 2009: *Traité de sociologie économique*. Paris : PUF.

Reviewer: Jacques-Olivier Charron, CNAM (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers), jcharron@magic.fr

The first question you may ask about this book is: well, we’ve already got the Smelser & Swedberg’s edited 748 pages *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, so why should we read another one? In French, and 816 pages long? The short answer is: because, compared to the *Handbook*, it’s completely new and original. Now, let’s try for a more elaborate one.

The *Traité* is indeed a little more French than the *Handbook* is American: among the 42 contributors of the 2005 edition of the *Handbook*, six had not obtained their PhD in an American university, whereas all the 21 contributors of the *Traité* have got it in a French university or grande école. More interestingly, six of them do not belong to the academic field of sociology (four are in economics, two in management). This illustrates an institutional peculiarity: in France, economic sociology is not always considered as just a part of sociology like, say, the sociology of work or the sociology of religion. The co-editors Philippe Steiner and François Vatin define economic sociology in their introduction as “the place of a fundamental questioning on institutions, representations and social behaviors in the modern society, dominated by the market”(p. 10). They also recall in their chapter on “Sociology and economics in France since 1945” that French economists have always took part in this questioning; clearly, the dividing line between the two disciplines is not the same as in the U.S., which makes for example Harrison White look like an economist (albeit an “heterodox” one) for a French reader.

This difference can also help to understand why this is not a handbook but a treatise. Whereas a handbook is primarily made for students, to provide them with what they need to know about a discipline that is already established and widely taught, a treatise is supposedly more formal and research-oriented. One of the remarkable features of the *Traité* is indeed the diversity of the theories exposed. Steiner and Vatin mention that four of them (namely regulationism, conventionalism, anti-utilitarianism, and the part of actor-network theory that uses the notion of performativity to study markets) had emerged in France in the 1980’s, before the American “new economic sociology”, mainly based on network analysis, had been really introduced in this country, which happened only in the 1990’s.

Each of these four theoretical frameworks is presented in depth in a chapter by leading authors (respectively: Robert Boyer, François Eymard-Duvernay, Alain Caillé, Fabian Muniesa and Michel Callon), but three other theoretical contributions (by Lucien Karpik on the economics of singularities, André Orléan on the economic sociology of money, Emmanuel Lazega on the cooperation between competitors) display other and/or newer perspectives. All of them clearly identify the way each theory contributes to economic sociology, illustrates it and supports it through a comprehensive set of references.

Among the other chapters

- three are clearly devoted to a specific topic: Frederic Lebaron (on the training of economists and its symbolic implications), Philippe Steiner (on organ transplantation), and Patrice Flichy (on how Internet became a market) present well-documented empirical studies.

- eight are review articles on various objects of economic sociology (management tools, economic calculation in everyday life, services to individuals, entrepreneurship, financial markets, uses of money, performance measurement at work, consumption as social practice).

The categorization of chapters we have established is not the one that is used in the book, that is divided in five parts (the Introduction and Chapter 1 set aside, these are: The economic fact as social fact, Economic representations, The social construction of markets, Competition as a social relation, The economy as ordinary practice), but ours simply seemed more logical and practical. Even this one, though, is not really clear-cut. For example, you'll find deep theoretical insights in Steiner's chapter, Godechot's one on financial markets clearly contrasts with the usual focus of social studies of finance on performativity by displaying a much wider array of theoretical and empirical approaches, and 14 of the 35 pages of the Muniesa & Callon's contribution are devoted to empirical studies.

Generally speaking, this edited book, which was and still is the first French one specifically devoted to economic sociology, presents a strikingly diverse, rich and stimulating approach of the field. If we get back to the 2005 edition of the *Handbook* we talked about at the beginning, we can remark none of the 7 theoretical approaches presented in the *Traité* is distinctively exposed in it. A significant part of the research reviewed or exposed in the other chapters was not mentioned in the *Handbook*.

If you read French, you probably already know the work of some of the contributors, but this book will give you a mind-opening view of economic sociology and may urge you to contribute to its renewal by giving you a set of tools and ideas designed for it. If you don't, you may exert some pressure on editors to get it translated. Let's just hope it won't take 15 years to read it in English, as it was the case for Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot's masterpiece *On Justification*.

Book: Rainer Diaz-Bone, ed., 2011, *Soziologie der Konventionen: Grundlagen einer pragmatischen Anthropologie*. Campus: Frankfurt/Main.

Reviewer: Arne Dressler, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, dressler@mpifg.de

While economic sociologists have started to engage with conventions in recent years, the sociological enterprise at large still awaits their reception, at least outside of France. For the German-speaking audience this could change with a new book whose title translates into English as "Sociology of Conventions: Foundations of a Pragmatic Anthropology." Released in the prestigious Campus series "Theory and Society," the collection of essays by members and affiliates of the *Économie des Conventions* (EC) will surely catch attention.

Edited by Rainer Diaz-Bone, the volume consists of nine texts, originally published between 1993 and 2007 mainly in English but also adding a few which were previously available only in French. The book relies on a set of translations, which was first produced for an issue of the French-German online journal *Trivium*. These four essays can still be downloaded for free (<http://trivium.revues.org/3557>). But those who look for a more comprehensive overview of the development and some applications of EC's core ideas will appreciate the editor's decision to commission the translation of five additional essays into German for the book.

"Sociology of Conventions" comes with two claims: Not only has the EC achieved for a sociological analysis of the economy in France what the new economic sociology has done in the United States. It has also developed a distinct contribution to the theory of action and institutions. For both claims, the book offers extensive textual evidence. The second one is perhaps most unrecognized. It opens up

the reception of the work of and around Boltanski and Thévenot in Germany *beyond* the current interest in a sociology of everyday criticism, spearheaded by the heirs to the Frankfurt School. For economic sociology, the claim to a distinct social theory may mean a caveat not to assimilate too quickly conventions *merely* as another explanatory variable and simply squeeze them in somewhere between institutions, networks, and culture. The book does not advocate against such use. But the selection of texts demonstrates that exclusively taking such a route could miss the larger social theoretical offer of the EC.

Diaz-Bone's introduction rightfully cautions against the potential misunderstanding to equate conventions with customs or *ad hoc* agreements. The intellectual project of the EC aims at a quite different layer of collective existence. It is concerned with the exploration of variable forms of intersubjectivity and their link to action. This becomes most visible in the notion of "orders of worth," explored in the opening essay by Boltanski and Thévenot. Orders of worth link action with different forms of justice through the patterns of valuation they respectively imply. The authors start from the observation that social action can be criticized for the relative size it recognizes in persons and objects as well as their ways of relating to each other. Any such criticism, they argue, will necessarily be based on a different order of worth, which is thereby introduced into the situation as a competing principle of justice. Because the presence of multiple orders of worth undermines the shared qualifications of actors and objects, radical uncertainty ensues, which disrupts joint action. It can only be restituted by making the diverging definitions of the situation accord again. This is done by putting criticism and justifications to test.

The essay written by Nicolas Dodier goes beyond a discussion of this neo-pragmatist action model and makes clear why analysts should pay attention to conventions. The key challenge for actors in a situation, the argument goes, consists in the adjustment to each other. Dodier shows how giving accounts and ethnomethods can serve as coordination devices. But the coordination allowed by them is bound to the here and now and depends on the continuous and unending production of order each time anew. Conventions, by contrast, extend the scope of coordination in time and space because actions can rely on the legitimacy granted by conventions. Together with qualified objects present in a situation, conventions serve as anchors for action, which, in turn, allow the relaxation of assumptions regarding actors.

This point runs through almost all texts. Actors are boundedly rational, yet the usual sociological solution of socialization is rejected as being too inflexible. Hence, common knowledge among actors, simply presupposed by neoclassical economics, cannot be sufficiently explained by referring to the immersion into a social group. It is rather the very achievement that is brought about by conventions. For it to work, actors need to be endowed with interpretive skills. This is made most clear in a programmatic essay collectively authored by almost all the economists who launched the research program of the EC more than twenty years ago – the most lucid and comprehensive overview of the intellectual project of the EC in the book. According to the authors, conventions foreground what is pertinent and what is to be neglected. Thus, conventions can be seen as interpretive repertoires serving cognitive and evaluative functions *at the same time*.

At the latest here, sociologists will be reminded of institutions. But the early writings on conventions, Christian Bessy helpfully recounts in his essay, have shunned institutions because of a skepticism that they cannot, by themselves, secure coordination. Institutions, understood as rules, were seen as incomplete. To bridge the gap between a rule and its conditions of application, the interpretive effort by actors was emphasized. Conventions were suggested to come into play exactly at this point, either as backing up or weakening the validity of institutions. In examining current positions within the EC, Bessy notes divergent standpoints over the relation between rules and action and separates an explanatory pole from an interpretive one. He points out that they may not be fully incompatible but unfortunately does not describe in detail how this could exactly be conceived. In many ways, his contribution is the richest and most intricate text of the book. It pursues a much needed debate about the relation between conventions and institutions. However, it is symptomatic that even in Bessy's treatment new economic institutionalists and Durkheim still remain the only critical reference points before turning to philosophy for alternatives. As conventions are now debated much wider, it will be important that all existing institutionalist variants from the social sciences be included in the discussion.

Towards the end of the volume two additional chapters are included by Thévenot. They extend the horizontal plurality of orders of worth by a vertical plurality of regimes of engagement. The proposal can be seen as EC's latest contribution to action theory, intending to denaturalize action as a fixed form of human activity: Engagement results from

the way actors relate to their environment, particularly to objects. Regimes differ in generality regarding the information format they allow, the constitution of the actor, and the requirements to be fulfilled for coordinating with others. The research projects, which inspired the regimes of engagement and which are shortly described at the end of the chapters, sound highly interesting and should be given a closer look. They also testify to the thematic breath of empirical work that is undertaken within French sociology in the wake of the conventionalist movement. Here, more than a few gems may be found!

“Sociology of Conventions” is a timely book. Even if partially a challenging read, it will undoubtedly spur the reception of the EC in Germany. By assembling dispersed key statements of the EC movement between a book cover, it provides the chance for a deep and comparative reading. To what extent its claims should be adopted, can now stand to an informed, hopefully productive and empirically grounded debate.