

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Marion Fourcade, *Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain, and France, 1890s to 1990s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 416 pp. \$US 35.00 hardcover (978-0-691-11760-7)

E*conomists and Societies* offers an institutionalist account of the national differences in the way economics is practiced, perceived, and institutionalized in the US, Britain, and France. It operates at the crossroads of several recently flourishing research areas: neoinstitutionalism, the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of the professions, and economic sociology. With the latter it shares the fundamental commitment to offer “a critique of economics’ universalizing discourse.” But in this case the usual critique of the economists’ alleged one-size-fits-all approach to the real world is extended to the discipline’s own supposed universalism. Fourcade’s main assertion is, simply put, that what it means to be an economist, how economics is practiced, what social status the economics profession enjoys and even the content of economic knowledge differs quite significantly between the three countries under investigation for reasons that have mostly to do with country-specific character of, and interactions between the educational, research, and state institutions.

The book is primarily based on 95 interviews with various “insiders” (mostly economics professors) in the three countries in question plus Germany, conducted between 1995 and 1997, plus what must have been a prodigious amount of archival, documentary, and secondary research on the economics profession in each of the three countries. The core of the book consists of three lengthy (50–60 pp.) chapters presenting the cases of the US, the UK, and France respectively. Fourcade’s story runs, roughly, like this. In the US the decentralized, competitive system of higher education in combination with the absence of a professional civil service led academic economists to pursue an early and successful strategy of “scientific professionalism.” They did this by presenting their expertise as objective and impartial, and built on a shared neoclassical paradigm and research program. The eventual formalization and mathematization of US economics was part and parcel of this campaign to turn economics into a value-neutral science. Once it had acquired a monopoly over the production and accreditation (through PhDs) of recognized economic knowledge, the US economics profession became

exceedingly influential in providing all levels of government with economic expertise and quite successful in profitably marketing its skills to the private business sector.

By contrast, the British tradition of “public-minded elitism” permeated both its university system, dominated by Oxford and Cambridge and their gentlemanly, humanistic traditions, and its professional civil service which drew its top personnel from the same social circles. This slowed the development of economics as a recognized form of specialized scientific expertise. As a result, economics long remained the province of gentlemanly amateur scientists whose influence on policy making was based more on school ties and social clubs than on academic credentials. While, due to the influence of the classicism of Oxford and Cambridge, British economists were early to adopt mathematical approaches, their substantive concerns, in line with their *noblesse oblige* ethos, focused much more on issues of distribution, poverty, and welfare economics than did their American *confrères*. Eventually, however, this gentlemanly culture gave way to a more American-style professionalism as the democratization of higher education loosened the grip of Oxford and Cambridge and policy makers felt an increasing need to consult economic specialists.

In France, finally, the principal factor was the long-standing tradition of a highly centralized, professional civil service, run by the *grands corps de l'État* recruited from among the graduates of the *Grandes Écoles*. Suspicious of the *laissez-faire* economics taught at the French universities, these state technocrats never accorded the discipline much autonomy or resources to develop on its own. Instead, as the need for more economic expertise in the civil service arose, the *Grandes Écoles* began to incorporate more of the economics deemed useful for future elite civil servants into their curricula and the state even founded new elite schools like the *École Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Administration Économique* and the *École Nationale d'Administration* for the purpose. In addition, it created a series of separate research institutes such as the CNRS and INSEE, which attracted engineers and mathematicians from the great engineering schools to conduct advanced economic research. As a result, French university-based economists remained relatively isolated from both policy making and fundamental research, while the more mathematically oriented researchers at the research institutes easily integrated themselves into the emerging, US-dominated international field of professional economics and came to dominate economics research within France itself.

This crude summary can hardly do justice to the impressive amount of detailed information about the rise and fall of associations, institutes,

advisory councils, styles of research, and so on, that Fourcade provides in this wide-ranging book. To cover so much material, much of it difficult to fully understand even for the most economically inclined sociologist, over such a vast geographical and temporal range is nothing short of a *tour de force*. But it does carry some obvious risks. One is that in the midst of the sequences of potted histories of this or that commission or institute or school one easily loses the thread of the overall argument. A second is that it is almost impossible to explore the *substance* of the various different approaches in any depth. As a result, while the American institutionalists, Cambridge Keynesians, French Marxists and *régulationnistes* all make cameo appearances, we learn little or nothing about the substance of their approaches nor about their positions within their national “fields.” A third problem is that, for all the book’s comparative pretensions, a truly comparative perspective is often oddly lacking. For instance, as I was reading about the institutional forces leading to the successful professionalization of US economics I kept asking myself “why couldn’t US sociologists, roughly facing the same institutional environment, pull this off?” Similarly, one has to wonder whether the story of national “styles” and “identities” of economists would work equally well for, say, physicists and if not, why not?

In the concluding chapter, Fourcade draws two major conclusions from her case studies: “that the social structures within which economists live are largely national” and “that the social structures of economics are also international,” consisting primarily of the dominant position of US economics (p. 243). This is a somewhat disappointing harvest for such a gargantuan piece of work. Moreover, the rather belated recognition of the importance of the emergence of the US-dominated international field of economics in the final pages of the book raises another disturbing question. Rather than proof of the enduring institutionally driven national diversity of economics as a discipline, practice, and identity, the evidence presented in this book could just as well be read as the story of how British and French economics shed their antiquated national peculiarities and adopted the superior American professional model. But such an interpretation would not be a very effective way of “contest[ing] the ‘naturalness’ or ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of intellectual and professional development in modern economics” (p. 29)

McGill University

Axel van den Berg

Axel van den Berg is Professor of Sociology at McGill University. His main areas of interest are economic sociology and sociological theory. His recent work has dealt with labour market policy in Europe and Canada and a variety of issues in contemporary sociological theory.

axel.vandenberg@mcgill.ca