

The Education of a Sociologist

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Published: July 26, 2018

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Marion Fourcade is Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley. She is the author of *Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain and France, 1890s to 1990s* (Princeton University Press, 2009) and numerous articles. Her current work focuses on the new forms of stratification, morality, and profit in the digital economy. A book from this project, *The Ordinal Society* (with Kieran Healy), is under contract with Harvard University Press.

An essay like this is an uncomfortable exercise. Sociologists, of all people, should be suspicious of the explanatory value of introspection. Perhaps the first, necessary, step therefore is to reflexively question why, of all the eminent sociologists out there, I ended up on this short list, and why I accepted the invitation. It is somewhat fitting that I started writing this piece on a plane, returning from a conference on moral economies. I gave a presentation on Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*. The wheels of the academic world, like all social worlds, are oiled by solidarity, solicitation, and reciprocal exchange. My name did not come up randomly. My selection was built on preexisting relations and mutual appreciation, deep enough for the invitation to have been extended, though shallow enough for me to feel that many others might have served in the role just as well. There is no right or wrong about this, just normal social life.

This particular invitation is a small honor, not only because the other writers in this issue are so distinguished, but also because the ostensible purpose of the exercise is to make my scholarly life and trajectory relevant to others. Both of these reasons are psychologically pleasing, in their way. But they remain uneasy to navigate. Sociological honesty requires one try, at a minimum, to avoid two common mistakes: the error of seeing one's life as a sequence of purposeful choices; and the error of seeing it as a succession of random events. It demands a sincere acknowledgement of the chance encounters and broader structural forces that made certain career and intellectual paths possible — in my case, everything from my family's devoted commitment to culture and education (my mother, as my paternal grandmother, taught in primary school) to my marriage, quite young, to a French engineer who would become an economist,¹ to the people I met in graduate school and ended up collaborating with.

I went into sociology almost by default. My passions in college (and my real strengths) were literature and philosophy, and I always assumed that this is what I would study if I succeeded the entrance exam to the *École Normale Supérieure*. But I worried about being confined to a teaching path if I did, and I made the somewhat more instrumental choice of a dual degree in economics and sociology. I thought it would give me more options.

I loved both disciplines. I was seduced by the beautiful mechanics of economic models, the ability to explain large-scale phenomena (I was particularly drawn to macroeconomics) with a few equations. I realize now that what I really loved, up to a point, was the maths. But even then I knew that sociology gave me much more plausible insights into the world around me, though they appeared in a less well ordered way. Economics was precise, but sociology felt accurate. Meanwhile, the man who would become my husband was studying physics. By the time he turned to economics, I had almost given up on the field. I had come to the realization that — unlike him — I was not well suited to the skills that would be required of me after undergraduate work. Instead, I started an interdisciplinary Master's program in "social science". It was there that I first put my knowledge and fascination for economics to work by writing a thesis on one of my intellectual heroes, Albert O. Hirschman. I admired (and perhaps felt a hopeful kinship with) Hirschman's iconoclasm, his lack of respect for disciplinary boundaries, and his personal and political commitments.

In 1992, I benefited vicariously from the established pipeline that routinely drafts French engineers into American universities. Had my husband not been advised to pursue his studies across the Atlantic, I would never have considered applying to a graduate program in the United States. Harvard rejected my initial application but my school in France had a visiting program there, and so I went anyway. We arrived in Cambridge on a hot and humid summer day. As a visitor I took classes with the first year graduate cohort and ended up re-applying to the PhD program the following year, with a project on fiscal sociology and the supply-side movement in American economics.

That year I was also pregnant with my first child. Some faculty members were oblivious to my growing belly, while others — none more ardently than Orlando Patterson, who later became my adviser — were generous and supportive. Harvard's offer of a full fellowship came the day after my daughter was born at a hospital in Boston. The following September, I formally started my PhD with a six-month old baby. Much of my stipend was immediately recycled back to Harvard, via the university's child care center.

Needless to say, as a young mother my years at Harvard were a bit of a blur, but through the training I received I did develop a tremendous fondness for the comparative and historical sociology practiced by Orlando Patterson, Theda Skocpol, Yasemin Soysal, and Libby Schweber. It is no doubt through their influence that I started to conceive of my dissertation as a three-country comparative study of the economics

1. He and I owe a lot to these social origins and to the French higher education system.

profession, using a mix of historical material and interviews with present-day actors. I wanted the project to address, as it were within the same movement, the institutions of the field and the intellectual content of economic knowledge. So I also read a lot of original texts by economists. The project was ambitious, and it would take me many years to complete my first book, *Economists and Societies*.² It is the kind of thesis that I would never have been able to write in France. But in the heyday of American macro-historical sociology, anything seemed possible.

And yet for some, that wasn't enough! When we moved to Stanford in 1996, John Meyer, who later became a sort of shadow adviser, encouraged me to think of my country cases as exemplars of the much more general phenomenon of the worldwide rise of economics. I still remember how he said to me: "but everyone goes like this", his arm making an ascendant move. I started methodically collecting data from around the world. I tracked the institutionalization of economics departments, economics associations, finance ministries, and central banks in every country, anything I could get my hands on. My article on "The Construction of a Global Profession" came out of that suggestion. My time at Stanford also produced a fecund collaboration with a graduate student there, Evan Schofer (now at UC Irvine), with whom I shared an interest in the articulation between global forces and national ones.

The study of economics has remained the strongest anchor of my work, however. It is through our common interest in the field that Sarah Babb (who had written an outstanding book on Mexican economists) and I started our collaboration on the "Rebirth of the Liberal Creed", drawing on our combined knowledge to compare the neoliberal policy shift in two mid-income and two high-income countries. It informs my recent publications on power relations in the social sciences ("The Superiority of Economists") and on the rise of business schools, as well as a newly-launched project (with Etienne Ollion) on gendered writing across the disciplines. My fascination with the field has not abated, perhaps because now I also see its workings up close. I can see Economics from my house. While the combination of closeness and distance is not always easy to navigate on the personal front, it comes with endless (and precious) opportunities to observe the tacit knowledge operating in the field, and to casually identify interesting topics. For instance, my project on the valuation of nature came out of an off-hand remark someone made at a social event I attended. If the French had hired the proper economists after the Amoco Cadiz oil spill, he said, they would have done just as well as the state of Alaska against Exxon. My curiosity was piqued, and off I went, interviewing people and exploring archives to study how courts in France and the United States had dealt with compensations for ecological damage in these cases. The research that came out of that project ("Cents and Sensibility") followed a very inductive approach, in an effort to understand my cases holistically and do justice to the sheer cultural density of the processes at work in science, the courts, and politics. I had started with economics, but it ended up being about a lot more than that.

Economics had provided me with a somewhat unexpected point of entry into "economic sociology", a field that had been formally re-organized in the late 1990s. This was an exciting time. By 1998 we had moved to Princeton, which was perhaps the center of the intellectual revival of the field, with a distinctive approach centered on the intersection between culture and economy and dominated by Viviana Zelizer, Frank Dobbin, Paul DiMaggio and Michèle Lamont. But the most decisive encounter, perhaps, was with fellow graduate students. At Princeton I met Kieran Healy, who became a friend and co-author. Perhaps the fact that we were both foreigners brought us closer together. Our common interest in morality, judgment and classification in the economy did the rest. To be sure, we came from two different universes but in a strange way the confrontation between his reflexive (in the French sense!) Anglo-empiricism and my spontaneous retreats into French theory made our collaboration more stimulating. Twenty years later, we are writing our first book together, after a series of theoretically oriented articles about the inescapably moral nature of economic actions and institutions ("Moral Views of Market Society"), the importance of classification processes in markets ("Classification Situations"), and the emergence of new forms of capital in the digital economy as technologies of scoring increasingly underpin the differentiated processing of individuals in market and non-market settings ("Seeing Like a Market"). While our approach to social stratification in the digital society builds upon two empirical projects, each of which is led by one of us — a quantitative project on how to think about the role of credit scores in inequality, and an interview-based project on the harvesting and circulation of digital data — in many ways our styles have converged so much over the years that every new piece feels a bit more like the product of one mind rather than two.

2. *Economists and Societies* was published in 2009, nine years after I finished my PhD.

I began my academic life as a comparative-historical sociologist. I continue to do historical work (on wine classifications in France and the United States) and my self-presentation on my website still says that “I am a comparative sociologist by training and taste.” But in many ways I have left comparative-historical sociology behind. Perhaps the comfort and peace of mind afforded by tenure at an American university has made me less dependent on sticking to my specialization. What I do know is that I never would have thought that one day my mind would be so obsessively fixated on the frontier of technological progress. From algorithms to killer robots, from fake news to virtual reality, from gene editing to trans-humanism, the industry that is bustling outside my door in Silicon Valley is compelling me not simply to ask sociological questions, but also to question sociology’s ability to comprehend, with the tools at hand, the world that is being made today. It is that sense of wonder and dread, I think, that is propelling my accidental, but quite determined, foray into developing a social theory of the present.