CHARTING A NEW DISCIPLINE*

IN TIMES of boundary-busting creativity, new disciplines, schools, and programs compete for scholars' attention. Most of them dissipate like a big ship's bow wave, settling back into the sea after their moments of turbulence. It remains to be seen whether the field of economic ethnography advocated by Caroline Dufy and Florence Weber will found a school or discipline, or simply disappear into the existing disciplines of economics, sociology, and anthropology without shifting or dissolving those disciplines' boundaries. But its subject matter certainly deserves attention. Their small book captures a moment of ferment and a set of common concerns in scattered scholarly conversations that have bubbled up at the edges of economics, sociology, and anthropology.

Dufy and Weber have great ambitions for economic ethnography, the first-hand observation and analysis of human economic activity. They call it "méthode sans frontières". They hope it will break down barriers between economics and other social sciences; dissolve distinctions between the study of advanced and of backward societies; eliminate the parallel distinctions between formal and informal economies; most ambitiously, replace the search for necessary and sufficient conditions with a science based on description, interpretation, and explanation of how economic actors, closely observed, actually think and behave.

Skilled economic analysts and ethnographers – Dufy a specialist in the Russian economy, Weber a specialist in the French – they combine observations on general theory with a wide range of concrete studies from Europe and North America. They see Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, and (more surprisingly) Gary Becker as their field's theoretical pioneers, with Weber's comparative-historical sweep providing an escape from the teleology of seeing fully developed capitalist firms and markets as the culmination of human economic history, Polanyi's historicism as drawing anthropologists and historians into the search for both connections and distinctions between contemporary capitalism and all other economies, and Becker's economic imperialism paradoxically inviting sociologists and anthropologists to join in the analysis of economic activity outside of firms and markets.

Within this context, Dufy and Weber place five well documented chapters, each one presenting a field of application for ethnography: 1) the anthropologically classic double phenomena of gifts and non-market exchange; 2) markets and money; 3) consumers and entrepreneurs; 4) work; and 5) great transformations (note the Polanyian phrase) including transitions from state socialism and globalization. Each chapter covers an impressively wide range of material, from general theories (e.g. Marcel

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Viviana A. ZELIZER, Department of Sociology, Princeton University [vzelizer@Princeton.EDU].

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Mauss on gifts) to current controversies (e.g. does unpaid personal care count as genuine work?) to concrete studies (e.g. how people distinguish different sorts of money and their social uses).

That variety constitutes both a strength and a weakness of the book. On the strong side, it reinforces two of the book's major claims: first that the basic principles of economic life, as experienced by participants, remain the same across all economies; second, that artificial distinctions and ideological biases keep observers from recognizing those common properties. On the weak side, packing so many bright small items into a book of only 106 pages leaves a reader dazzled, breathless, and longing for at least one sustained example of how economic ethnography improves on current understandings of economic processes. The extremely well informed review of work on post-socialist economies, for example, proves that the authors have the means of showing exactly how first-hand observation of Eastern Europe challenges and improves upon theoretically motivated macroeconomic analyses of transition from socialism.

Perhaps Dufy and Weber judge recent ethnographic research as still too thin for support of a general theoretical reformulation. Perhaps they are too modest. Still, scholars who work productively within the existing boundaries of economics, sociology, and anthropology can draw from this book a vision of a new program for integrating ethnography and other approaches to social processes. Those of us who are already dissatisfied with current understandings of economic processes have plenty to gain from a close reading of these innovative, ambitious, and wide-ranging authors.

VIVIANA A. ZELIZER