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Article

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Carlo Trigilia answers ten questions about economic sociology

Carlo Trigilia is Italy's foremost economic sociologist. He holds a chair in economic sociology at the University of Florence, and has been Lauro De Bosis professor at Harvard University. He published widely on regional development within Italy. In 2002, he published the widely read as well as translated *Economic Sociology: State, Market, and Society in Modern Capitalism* (Blackwell Publishers)

1. How did you get involved in economic sociology?

I took my degree in sociology in 1974 from the University of Florence. In the 1970s Italian sociology was young and strongly influenced by Marxist approaches. There was a reaction against the first wave of sociological studies and emphasis was put on empirical research. I started working on social classes in Italy. This is how I became involved in a network of young sociologists who were interested in studying economic organization, labor markets and industrial relations. The basic idea was to study how the economy influenced society by affecting social inequalities and social conflicts. Later on, in the late 1970s, I started a research on small-firm development in the Central and Northeastern regions of Italy (the so-called Third Italy). At this time my perspective began to change. Initially, I tried to understand the low level of industrial conflict in small firms, but gradually we discovered the importance of cultural, political and social factors in shaping a more flexible economic organization capable of responding to changes in the market. In other words, while at the beginning economic sociology was a tool for me to analyze the influence of economy on society, later on I became more interested in studying the autonomous role of culture and social relations for the organization of the economy. This shift toward a more complex and interdependent view of the relationship between economy and society was also favored by the study of Max Weber, which had been an important component of my training at the Department of Sociology in Florence. Later on, I continued reading Weber and was involved in the preparation of the Italian edition of his "General Economic History". I wrote the Introduction to this volume, which summarizes Weber's view on modern capitalism.

2. Could you name books and articles that have profoundly influenced your own thinking within economic sociology in the early days?

I have already mentioned the importance of Max Weber's work, but in my training other classics have been influential as well, especially Marx and Polanyi. In the 1980s, I became involved in the foundation of a new journal: "Stato e Mercato". This is an interdisciplinary journal of comparative political economy and economic sociology which initially had in its board American and European political scientists, experts in industrial relations and economic sociologists. Through this initiative, I was influenced by studies of interest representation, public policies and economic performance. For instance, the studies by Suzanne Berger, Charles Maier, Philippe Schmitter, Gerhard Lehbruch, Colin Crouch, Wolfgang Streeck and others. This was the period in which the virtues of neo-corporatism versus the more traditional pluralism were discussed. Apart from that, I read the volume by Michael Piore and Charles Sabel on the "second industrial divide" when I was studying small firms and industrial districts. Giacomo Becattini's studies on industrial districts were also important, as well as Ronald Dore's works on Japan. Later on, working on transaction costs, Mark Granovetter's essays impressed me. His view of social networks - together with James Coleman's contribution - helped me developing a notion of social capital which differed from the "civicness" on which Robert Putnam constructed his work on Italy. I tried to use this relational perspective in the study of local economic development in Italy and Europe.

3. What do you see as the main differences between economic sociology in Europe and in the United States?

In the US, economic sociology is more micro and more sociological. The discipline is more institutionalized on the theoretical bases offered by the "new economic sociology" à la Granovetter. In Europe, I see more interest in the macro-economic dimension. In addition, there are diverse traditions that influence the field: a more interdisciplinary background. In this respect, I would consider comparative

political economy both at the macro and micro level an important component of the European economic sociology. Recent developments on the varieties of capitalism and on features and changes in welfare systems should also be included in the field. However, I have to admit that this wider view of economic sociology is not shared by the leading figures in the discipline. The new economic sociology strongly (shall I say too strongly?) influences the perception of the discipline.

4. What are according to you the most important debates within the field?

I don't see hot debates and strong controversies. Of course, there are discussions on specific topics, such as the role of weak and strong ties in network studies. However, there are more latent issues. One of these – which seems particularly important to me – concerns the contrast between the structural theory based on networks and the new institutionalism. Both contributed to the new economic sociology, and to a successful reaction to “economic imperialism”, but they entail significant differences in the conception of social action. The structural approach is more consistent with a rational theory of action, while this is not the case for the new institutionalism. This contrast would deserve to be more discussed because it has important implications for research, and also for the dialogue with economists. I also see a danger in current developments in network research: the tendency to invest in more complex and sophisticated models, but at the expense of sound and important theoretical questions. Younger economic sociologists are investing in new techniques, and this is fine. But this trend should not lead to neglect the most important substantial issues in economic organization and economic behavior. It is on this ground that economic sociology should challenge current explanations provided by economists. Another important issue that remains latent concerns the role of political factors in shaping economic organization and economic choice. The attention paid to networks at the micro level leads to neglect this aspect, but political institutions strongly affect economic organization and performance. That's why economic sociology and comparative political economy should be more integrated, as in the classical tradition, and especially in Weber's work. In my presentation of the discipline, I tried to emphasize this aspect. In his last book, Neil Fligstein has also stressed the importance of this relationship.

5. What are research topics within economic sociology that have so far been neglected?

There is a lot of work to do. Much has been done in the fields of industrial organization and labor markets. More recently, financial markets are being studied with interesting results. This latter trend should grow because it is clearly crucial to the operation of contemporary capitalism. Another important issue is consumption. Economic sociology might have much to say, but this topic has so far been left to cultural sociologists. Personally, I believe that the study of local development is also important, both in advanced and backward contexts. This topic should not be intended in narrow terms, as research on small firms and industrial districts. The most innovative activities are locally embedded while operating in a global market. The process of economic innovation, in the current forms of economic organization, has a strong relational component and is particularly suitable to be analyzed by the tools of economic sociology.

6. Is it important for you to establish dialogue with economists, and if so, what are feasible strategies to accomplish that?

It is certainly important because the economists' view is a continuous challenge that can help to improve the work done in economic sociology. Of course, not all economists are interested. But some are, especially those more inclined towards empirical research and institutional approaches. For the dialogue to be productive, discussing concrete research issues seems useful to me. Economic sociology should be able to demonstrate that it can provide more convincing explanations of specific phenomena than economics. This means that the old strategy based on a preliminary criticism of general assumptions on economic action shared by economists is not sufficient anymore.

7. Which countries/cities/universities do you consider to be contemporary strongholds for economic sociology?

I don't see single universities as particular strongholds. Of course, there are some places more suitable to study good economic sociology and where sound research is done as well. But these seem to me more related to the presence of leading figures in the field. In other words, I don't see real local schools, while the national dimension remains more important. From this point of view, the United States

is an obvious stronghold for the new economic sociology, but in Europe I see favorable conditions especially in France, Germany and Italy. This does not mean that there are not interesting figures in other European countries, but in these three countries there is a more mature perception of the discipline, together with a certain distinguished national style.

8. Last year you gave a keynote address in Crete titled: "Why is economic sociology stronger in theory than in policies": Does economic sociology have policy influence?

The new economic sociology has provided sound explanations for the variety of economic organization. This has been a significant theoretical achievement. However, there is an important potential for policies in the new economic sociology that has not been fully exploited so far. While the shortcomings in mainstream economics, particularly in the micro-foundation of economic behavior, have been clearly shown, policies to promote economic development continue to be largely influenced by standard economic thought. Current economic policies may vary from *laissez-faire* measures to state centered interventions. Both orientations, however, share the same attitude towards economic behavior. Economic action is about self-interested and socially isolated actors. In any case the role of social relations and social networks is not considered as a possible target for policies.

9. What are the policy implications of the social embeddedness of economic organizations?

We could hypothesize that the local availability of a rich network of social relations favors economic activity and development. It might help to tackle the problems of cooperation that are due to lack of information and trust; it might also help to develop favorable relations among the

leaders of collective actors, thus improving the provision of collective goods. If these hypotheses were reasonably confirmed, we would have important elements for new policies that go beyond the old dichotomy between state and market, by promoting cooperation among individual actors (firms and workers) and collective actors (local governments and organized interests) – in other words, policies to produce good social capital. I see important suggestions for this perspective in the work by Peter Evans. In my opinion, proceeding in this direction would require more attention to the study of local development and innovation, and to the role of policies (therefore more relationships with comparative political economy). A shift from the study of organizational variety to organizational performance seems necessary, as well as more investment in comparative research on case-studies of local developments. These may involve dynamic cities, backward areas that experience new growth, or local innovation systems such as new high tech districts.

10. Do you think economic sociologists are at all interested in having influence on policies?

I do not think that this interest is widespread, although it might be more shared by those who are involved in comparative political economy. However, I hope that a greater awareness of the policy implications of economic sociology will increase, especially among younger scholars. In any case, my conception of social sciences is based on the idea that they should actively contribute to the reflexive reconstruction of society, as James Coleman has strongly suggested in his last book.

For technical questions regarding this item, or to correct its authors, title, abstract, bibliographic or download information, contact: (ZBW - Leibniz Information Centre for Economics). General contact details of provider: <http://edirc.repec.org/data/mpigfde.html> . Content. 44-46 Carlo Trigilia answers ten questions about economic sociology by Trigilia, Carlo. 2005, Volume 6, Issue 3. 1-2 Note from the editor by Velthuis, Olav. Carlo Trigilia (born 18 June 1951) is an Italian academic and politician, who served as the minister of territorial cohesion from 28 April 2013 to February 2014. Trigilia was born in Syracuse on 18 June 1951. He graduated from the University of Florence with a degree in sociology in 1974. Trigilia taught at universities of Palermo, Trento and Harvard. He is professor of economic sociology at the University of Florence. He is a member of the Partito Democratico or Democratic Party. He was appointed Carlo Trigilia Professor of Economic Sociology Faculty of Political Sciences University of Florence Via Delle Pandette, 21 50127 Firenze, Italy. E-mail: trigilia@unifi.it In the last decades, economic sociology has made significant achievements in terms of theory and research, but that its influence on policies has remained weak. While this was inevitable in earlier decades, when scholars had to concentrate most of their effort on defining the role and contribution of economic sociology, it has since become a constraint for the institutionalization and recognition of the discipline. My answer is that a social science should care about its contribution to a reflexive reconstruction of society.