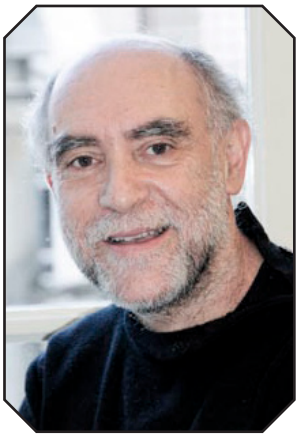
INTERVIEWS

"Organic" Gift-Giving and Organ Transplantation, the Development of Economic Sociology and Morality in a Super-Monetized World: An Interview with Philippe Steiner



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Philippe Steiner, Professor of Sociology at Paris-Sorbonne University, was interviewed by Chris Swader, Associate Professor of Sociology at the Higher School of Economics. This interview was conducted during the international conference "Embeddedness and Beyond: Do Sociological Theories Meet Economic Realities?" (Moscow, 25–28 October 2012), at which Prof. Steiner co-chaired the mini-conference "Market Society and Moral Order".

In the interview, Prof. Steiner described his background and the professional trajectory that led him to economic sociology. He explained how his research interests in organ donation and transplantation developed. Prof. Steiner devoted several comments to plans for future research. He was primarily interested in two topics: (a) organizational gift-giving and (b) how gift-giving and markets co-exist in the same spaces.

Additionally, Prof. Steiner depicted the process of institutionalization of economic sociology as an academic discipline in France and noted several peculiarities of French economic sociology compared with the US and Brazilian versions.

Finally, Prof. Steiner discussed the Polanyian perspective and Zelizer's research and clarified his own view of the super-monetization of the modern world. According to Steiner, Zelizer's fascinating depiction of a world dominated by commodification and money may have evaded political issues that were central to Polanyi and decisive for understanding contemporary markets.

Keywords: gift-giving; market exchange; organ transplantation; morality; benchmarking; money; commodification; Karl Polanyi; Viviana Zelizer; economic sociology.

— Thank you very much for sacrificing the time to talk about your research, and welcome to Moscow. You are here for the second time, I understand. My first question is about your background. I've seen that you have a Ph.D. in economics and two habilitations: one in economics and one in sociology. Some social scientists have difficulty applying particular labels or subfield labels to themselves. I was wondering which labels you are most comfortable with in describing yourself and your research?

— Thank you for this opportunity to have this conversation about my trajectory. Basically, my training was in economics. At the same time, I was trained with a minor in sociology when I was at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Cachan at the end of the 70s. I graduated in econometrics and mathematical economics, and then I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in the history of economic thought. This was the first big change. At that time, it was very difficult to enter a university in France. Therefore, I was appointed as a lecturer in sociology at the Université Paris-Dauphine. I began to read again the classics in sociology, and I noticed that there was a good deal about economic matters. I began to collect all of this information regarding the economic aspects of classical sociology. And then, finally, I began to teach economic sociology at my university. I think it was one of the first lecture courses on economic sociology in France at that time.

— And when was that?

— I think it was at the end of the 1980s. The head of the department was smart enough to say, "OK, do it. Do it". It was something completely new. I was fortunate in that respect to have such a liberal colleague. It began that way, and it's true that because of my background, it (the course) was primarily on the history of ideas. I began with the study of the classics, and then, after some work on those classics, including my book on the sociology of economic knowledge based on Max Weber, I was interested in the functioning of markets — the large number of new markets created at that time. I began thinking about why in some instances there are no markets. In my mind, this is a very specific moment, which I can describe in the following way. On route to Cambridge, I stopped by the London School of Economics library, and I picked from the shelves the new edition of the book by Richard Titmuss *The Gift Relationship* [Titmuss 1997]. It came as a surprise to me, because as you know there are a lot of people in France who discuss the gift economy, gift versus market exchange, the so-called Maussian movement, with Alain Caillé, who was and who still is the leading thinker in that field. And I said: "Wow, they never talked about this kind of modern gift, modern biological gifts." I read that book immediately, and it was something very important for me. Then, I decided to study the issue of gift-giving in the bio-medical field. I decided to focus on the issue of organ donation because the connection between blood and organs, which was my primary idea, seemed too complex. Kieran Healy did something in that direction first, and reading Healy and reading my own documents and data, I thought that it was better to focus on one specific element basically because blood is produced by the body all the time. But when you donate a kidney, a kidney is not reproduced by the body — that makes a substantial difference.

— And that's the project that you are working on now? You are still writing on this issue of organ transplantation in the market of human body parts?

— Yes. I'm still working on that point. I hope to enlarge the inquiry in certain respects, and this is the topic of my next book. The reason is the following: when I studied the issue of organ transplantation, in full agreement with Healy's approach, the organizational setting appeared to be very, very important. Accordingly, organ donation is a gift that individual actors provide to organizational actors. And then, with this gift, the organization conducts an extensive and very important process to ensure that the kidney does not convey illness, AIDS, cancer. In addition, the degree of compatibility between the organ and the body is checked. And they do this very rapidly. Then, they allocate the gift to a new individual actor. However, the important thing, in my opinion, is that between the first individual actor and the second one there is a large organization. More precisely, a plurality of organizations. This is something that I refer to in my present book as "organizational gift-giving". To parallel the Durkheimian distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, I would call this "organic" gift-giving and thus draw a distinction between the usual story about people in Melanesia who give gifts according to Malinowski and Mauss.

— In which way do you think this organizational aspect changes the function of the gift in terms of reciprocity? Does it break the chain of reciprocity? Or do these gifts represent something like a pure gift?

— I'm not so sure that this is a pure gift because many people are expecting something. When people donate the organs of a dead relative, the primary situation is this: when family members donate the organs of a dead relative, they are managing to give death some meaning because usually these dead individuals were healthy. They were young. The average age of the donor is 50 in France. They were healthy. Because if they were not, the gift cannot be given. For example, if you have cancer, you may not donate a kidney tainted with cancerous cells. That is, they are young, healthy, and suddenly they die. Therefore, this situation is very difficult to handle for the family members, and at least one element they expect from this situation is to receive a feeling that something positive came out of this death. This is one type of reciprocity, and we can experience this feeling, which is completely different from the usual reciprocity documented by Mauss or Malinowski. The fact that people say, "We give this to humanity." Similarly, we encounter individuals who are definitely going to die from cancer. And these people say, "I cannot expect anything from the drug that you are putting in my body. However, I allow it thinking that maybe it could help you medical professionals find a drug that will save people in the near future". Therefore, this is a type of societal giving, or "organic gift". This is not the usual, direct, reciprocity but a type of — I would say — expectation that something good will follow from my gift, reciprocating the help that I have received from the medical organization.

— You spoke just now a little about the internal narratives used by organ donors, for example, making sense of death and the idea of working toward a better society. What about the social meaning of, for example, individuals who indicate that they are organ donors? Recently, in the US, most likely for technical reasons, these organs are quickly harvested. Thus, "Organ donor" is even written on the driver's license. Do people tend to publicize this willingness to donate an organ in order to try to gain some type of social capital or clout?

— No, I don't think so. We have to go into the details. I discussed that point with the people in charge of the supervision of the transplantation domain in France. And they say that it is impossible to gain social capital in this manner for the simple reason that according to the law any French citizen is presumed to be a donor. This has been so since the end of the 70s. Therefore, you cannot earn some type of symbolic capital only by obeying the law.

Certainly, in the US, people are pushing in this direction, with the aim of providing a symbolic reward to the families who have donated to medical organizations because in the US, medical organizations must obtain explicit consent. In this case, you can earn some type of symbolic capital. However, as far as I know, it also doesn't work so much in this way in the US. Recently, there was a paper by Alvin Roth (an economist at Harvard, Nobel prize winner in 2012), who is a specialist in matching donors and recipients. He has done wonderful work on this point. He published a paper based on experimental economics in the *American Economic Review* [Kessler, Roth 2012]. According to his research, individuals are more eager to participate in the field of donation if the organization provides them priority if they should need a kidney in the future. Thus, there is a type of "exchange": "I'm ready to give you something if I die under the relevant conditions, and reciprocally, if I need a kidney, I would receive priority because I was ready to donate body parts." This is a further example of a situation in which individuals are interfacing with organizations and not exactly with human beings in terms of individual actors. Therefore, this is a point that I would like to study.

— On this subject, it must also be interesting how individuals imagine the intentions of the organizations, that is, if the organization's intentions or values match those of the individuals.

— Yes, you are right. When you return the organization within the field of gift-giving, you can understand that someone donates something to the organization and then a different organization will eventually provide the donation to the recipient. However, between the organizations, you may have market exchanges. So, the issue also concerns the mingling between market exchange and gift-giving. One of my topics would be to follow

according to this view individual and organizational gift-giving and — I would say — market exchange or organizational exchange. To proceed further, perhaps in direction established by Viviana Zelizer when she spoke about circuits of commerce. I think that Zelizer noted an important aspect of transactions. However, I would like to focus not only on the point when people must converge and agree on whether what they are doing is, for example, a gift, a payment, or a bribe. Certainly, they must agree on that. If not, the transaction is difficult to implement. This is one point. However, another point is the following: there are examples (let us say in charity organizations) in which on one side individuals arrive to donate furniture, clothes, or old toys from their children. They donate to the charity organization, and they know that in the other part of the building the charity organization will sell these gifts to other individuals. And in certain instances, individuals are going to donate something, and then they go to the other part (of the building) and buy something that was donated by others. Thus, gift-giving and some type of market are not truly separate fields. In certain examples, like this one, they occur in the same building. This type of thing is also of interest to me. In other example, I may buy something on eBay that I know someone received as a gift. This is also a subject that I would like to study because I think that the modern ideas set forth by Zelizer could be expanded on. This is the second aspect of my next work, which I am working on now.

— Thank you very much for this response. Now, I would like to question you a little about economic sociology more broadly. Specifically, I read one article you wrote, which was published in 1995 [Steiner 1995], which states that economic sociology was "in fashion," of course like any subfield may be. It was 1995, and no doubt that characterization remains true today. And I was wondering if you could describe how these fashions within economic sociology have changed since then.

— I will base my answer on the French case so I can answer your question more precisely about this fashion that was characteristic in France with respect to economic sociology. Out of this trend, a type of success developed for economic sociology in France. There are approximately 80 French universities across France. With one of my students, we collected information from these 80 universities. We discovered that in approximately 60% of these universities, lectures on economic sociology were offered in the economics or sociology departments, occasionally in both. Furthermore, these lecture courses in economic sociology were offered as basic-level or for advanced, graduate courses, for instance for master's degrees. Thus, there was and there is today significant amount of economic sociology, which is now considered to be – I would say – a normal element of the education of economists and sociologists. So, from this fashion, I think there is now in France a genuine movement in which economic sociology is now part of the curriculum. Thus, a success. I think that this is one point. The second point is that the community in France also succeeded in a second sense: we have constructed a network and meeting points at which economists and sociologists conduct discussions, debates, and communal research together. We succeeded in making everyone attend this type of event. When I say "One," I mean that we are diverse in France because there are some interesting directions: Weberian approaches, network analysis, or research grounded on Durkheim's, Bourdieu's, or Latour's viewpoints. There is a large diversity. However, we are still able to discuss together to proceed further. And I think this is a pretty good way to achieve something in that field. In this respect, paying due respect to the differences in size, visibility and prestige, I think we are more or less in the same trend as in the US. Because in the US as well, economic sociology is being well represented by the American Sociological Association.

— May I also ask if within economic sociology there would be — I'm not asking you to outline particular "more fashionable areas" — but I'm wondering if there are areas that are perhaps overlooked as a result of particular trends within the sub-discipline, if there are dark corners on which you think need more light should be shed.

— If we look at given society in France, for example, we could note certain dark corners, as you say. However, if we take a broader view, it is different, and what I have in mind is what is occurring now in Brazil. The issue

of NGOs and the cultivation of soybeans or the issue of ethanol made from sugar cane are neglected in France. However, such issues are of the utmost importance to Brazilian economic sociologists. On the other side of the coin, in France, economic sociologists are interested in art markets. The art market and the labor market, for example, in the case of groups performing 17th-century baroque music. When I mention that to my friends and colleagues in Brazil, they say, "Wow, you are really doing that in France?" Because for them, this is perhaps, I'll not say useless, but strange (or "baroque") because for them, poverty, corruption, sustainable development and the issue of de-forestation in the Amazon are highly important. Both things are interesting. So, I say to them, how do highly skilled workers perform their jobs? How do they find new positions? Is this something similar to the creative work of artists? Aren't they both creative workers? Therefore, I'm not sure that there are truly dark corners at present. Finally, I would like to stress that one success and one important thing that is emerging from economic sociology and the development of economic sociology is that at present economic sociology is much more than a sub-discipline of sociology. It is a constitutive part of general sociology. I think that good sociologists, even if they specialize in cultural sociology, political sociology, gender analysis, or whatever, should have some knowledge of economic sociology because economic activity is central in our society. This is the important point.

— I have only two more questions, I think. They are related to Polanyi. I found your comments in relation to Polanyi and Zelizer and Granovetter intriguing. I was reading how you discussed the collapse of Polanyian thinking and how in France Polanyi is underappreciated. There is one particular quotation that I want to read to you. You were referring to a truly fascinating feature of Zelizer's work regarding a "super-monetized world in which no social interaction is without monetary benchmarking; a world in which social distinctions and social considerations are nothing but an amount of cash. In this sense, Zelizer's works explore a fascinating side of the world that Polanyi did not consider, since he believed that such a world could never exist, for it would be a world dominated by a catalytic order able to monetize and sacralize by the same token [Steiner 2009: 106]." Aside from Zelizer's critique of Polanyi, I was wondering whether this particular world that is described, a "super-monetized world" let's say, is that something that you would believe in? How would you address this?

— This is a big issue, and I have no direct answer. It was a type of question that I raised to obtain if possible an answer from Zelizer. In my view, she is doing something that Polanyi did not do. In a very important paper published in 1947, Polanyi was toying with the idea that when labor is sold and bought on the market, the human being becomes a fictitious commodity ruled by the "law of supply and demand [Polanyi 1947]." To earn their livelihoods — I use the Polanyian concept intentionally — they enter the world of formal economics, in the sense that they are expected to act according to the optimization behavior that is at the root of economics. Polanyi never tried to understand how such a world would function and what the consequence would be of the domination of "human livelihood" by commodification and money. Zelizer is precisely doing that, and she discovered an intriguing situation: money becomes a way to sacralize human beings (those receiving stratospheric remunerations) and things (high-priced commodities), a situation that was noted by Georg Simmel. This is intriguing because it means that in such a super-monetized world, money is endowed with a symbolic power that is usually located in morals or religion. However, for the moment, I am not directly seeking to proceed further in this direction. In contrast, I am trying to map gift-giving, inheritance, and the exchange of symbolic goods, which are at the frontiers of usual market exchanges, to provide a broad view of what exchange at large means in our present society. Considering market exchange as a limited element of all the transactions in the world is my way to escape this super-monetized world.

— Thank you. When I read this citation, the implication that there is a moral or political neutrality embedded in this type of research that you are contrasting with Polanyian thinking it very striking. I was also wondering how you would view this issue, that is, political or moral neutrality in relation to Granovetter's embeddedness, because I have not read this type of comparison from you yet. However, I was wondering how you would

compare Granovetter's embeddedness and Polanyi's in terms of, for example, the questions of politics and morality.

— Yes, this is definitely important of course, and I think this constitutes a substantial difference between Granovetter's research and Polanyi, that is, the issue of politics. Let us continue with the issue of gift-giving. There are three different conclusions to Mauss's essay on the gift. One concerns political economy and economic sociology. The second concerns morals. The last concerns the political and anthropological view of the world. Thus, the political dimension is important for French sociologists who read Mauss. The gift economy contrasts with and opposes market exchange. Because of this background, I was a bit uneasy when I read Zelizer's books. I am very impressed by what she achieved. However, it seems to me that she evades the political issues. Perhaps she is correct in the sense that we are moving in the direction of a new world characterized by this super-monetized situation. However, for the time being, I still believe that this is a political issue open to what Polanyi termed "the double movement thesis". Social forces are pushing in the direction of a full-blown market society, whereas others are resisting and devoting their energy to maintaining a frontier between market exchanges and other forms of exchange. In that sense, political issues remain central, as in Polanyi's time. To return to my research on organ transplantation, I would like to stress that the last chapter of the book concerns what is usually referred to as transplant tourism — is it good to have transplant tourism? Should it be fully legalized? Is the creation of a biomarket in India for Americans suffering from final-stage kidney failure a good thing? You must say yes or no. You cannot escape a political decision. And my answer was "Definitely, no biomarkets". However, of course, this is not an easy position because as you know there are individuals who are dying because of the lack of kidneys. Therefore, this (response) is uncertain, difficult. However, in the end, not giving an answer is a boon to those pushing for the commodification of body parts. So, finally, I decided to stay on the Maussian–Polanyian side — "limit the market."

— OK. Thank you very much for this talk. I think the readers of the journal "Economic Sociology" will very much enjoy reading it. I hope you return to Moscow again.

— Definitely, with great pleasure.

Interviewed by Chris Swader

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