

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Patrik Aspers: “Since There Are So Many Theories, We Should Focus on Really Good Empirical Research Instead”



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Abstract

Patrik Aspers is professor of sociology at Uppsala University (Uppsala Universitet). Maya Shmidt conducted this interview in Uppsala, Sweden, in September 2016.

Aspers introduces readers to different academic paths by presenting his own experience of becoming a sociologist and comparing the structural and cultural differences between the American, British, and European academic contexts. During the conversation, Aspers discusses the field of economic sociology and highlights opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation. Particularly, he notes that sociology has exported certain ideas to other disciplines, and due to the field’s enduring tradition, extensive theoretical literature and ability to distinguish between and combine different research methods, there is no danger of “blurring” within cooperative efforts.

Influenced by Harrison White’s theory, Aspers develops a typology of different market forms. He argues that markets, when taken apart, do not look the same: they take different forms, and each requires its own construction of theoretical concepts that can account for the variety in the empirical reality.

Aspers emphasizes the significance of clarifying and reflecting upon knowledge as elements of pre-study (“vorstudie”) when it comes to qualitative research. He develops an empirical phenomenology method and presents it as a step-by-step procedure for conducting qualitative research.¹

Keywords: empirical phenomenology; theorizing in sociology; interdisciplinarity in economic sociology; markets; market forms; stock exchange; markets in fashion; organization studies.

— **Let’s start with a question about your academic path. How did you become a sociologist?**

— It wasn’t a decision, and it certainly wasn’t planned. At first, while attending university in Stockholm (1992), I started to study economics, and I did it for a

¹ For practical application of this method in sociological research see [Aspers 2006: 157–188; Aspers 2009].

year. I was disappointed and dissatisfied with the way my teachers and the texts I read presented human interactions and the conditions of being human. The simplified models seemed too restricted in terms of their empirical validity, as they were. Then I went over to talk to the Department of Sociology (like before the Internet, when you talked directly to people), and they said, “Okay, we have one person here, his name is Richard Swedberg, and he studies economic sociology.” I was given Richard’s text [Swedberg, Himmelstrand, Brylin 1987 (1985)], which he co-authored with two other people. Richard wrote it when he worked at Uppsala University. After that, I started reading more economic literature and sociology literature that focused, or at least potentially could have focused, on economics as a substantive matter. Then I started to do a bit of psychology, a lot of philosophy, and, at the same time, I took sociology courses. So it was sociology, philosophy and economics, and eventually I decided to study sociology. Richard supervised my undergraduate thesis; he opened up paths and introduced me to the “big” literature in economic sociology, which of course then wasn’t so big, as well as some classical thinkers and their roles in developing what was then considered classical economic sociology.

— **What kind of reading inspired you back then?**

— In those days, I started with review articles, and then I read a lot about economics. My undergraduate thesis examined Alfred Marshall from sociological perspective [later published as Aspers 1999]; that was quite inspiring. I could add some additional classical thinkers here: obviously, I’ve read Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel, and I also developed a key interest in Pareto because he stands between economics and sociology. And of course, some of the new things like Granovetter’s text [Granovetter 1985]. I think it was mostly classical things that kept me going in the early days.

— **Yes, Granovetter’s paper appeared in 1985. Would you recommend these readings as mandatory for scholars interested in the social analysis of markets? Or have things changed?**

— It is very good, but to get an idea of the field of economic sociology it is enough to look at one or two of these introductory texts, which can give you an idea of how new economic sociology was established in terms of ideas—not as form, but as an idea—and how it was so strongly related to economics in the beginning. Maybe, in a way, the only way it could have developed involved looking back at the classical ideas and starting all over again. But some Americans had already done empirical research, and this became the other road, so to speak, in economic sociology. I think “The Strength of Weak Ties” by Granovetter [1973] is still very useful, though I have always been more drawn to Harrison White’s work. White was Granovetter’s supervisor at Harvard, so in that sense, there is a natural link between the two. “Where Do Markets Come From” by White [1981], for me, was really the most important text I’ve ever read in economic sociology by far. I’ve used this work and the way he conceptualizes not markets but social interactions the most, and I’ve profited from it.

— **Throughout your academic career, you've had the opportunity to get in touch with academics in different scholarly circles—for example, in the UK, the US, Germany, and of course, Sweden. In the latter, you've been elected the President of the Swedish Sociological Association. Comparing your observations from these countries, what kind of similarities or diversity have you seen in the field of economic sociology?**

— I spent at least a year in all of the countries you’ve named, as well as a couple of months in France, so I have an idea of how the field looks in different countries. I should say that the academics, all in all, are very similar across different countries; that is the most important thing. I see the similarities in terms of how people think, how they work, what they like to do, and so on. However, there are both great structural differences and cultural differences between countries. Regarding structural differences, I would like to mention that in the US in particular, and to some extent in the UK, it seems harder to build research groups. Funding (at least in

the social sciences) mostly goes to individuals, so departments hire very skilled individuals; the goal is to get some kind of diversity into the departments. On the other hand, in Europe (in Paris, Germany, and Sweden), you can find fairly high concentrations of researchers doing one thing or very similar things. That's the structural difference that creates different academic environments. And obviously, there are cultural differences; I could add organizational differences to that as well. The American Sociological Association and its economic sociology section² in the US have been very important for the development of the field as a whole. In other countries, these associations have not gained such a strong position, compared to in the US. The European scene was important for economic sociology at the beginning, but the number of countries where research milieus like the Max Plank Institute³ in Cologne exist have increased. Paris has several centers as well, and here in Sweden, we're building the Uppsala Laboratory of Economic Sociology. In Moscow, too, a lot of people are doing economic sociology.⁴ There are research centers in Europe that nonetheless don't really measure up to the US scene, where individuals are more connected to one another simply because it's one country with one strong association. This covers some basic conditions that also play out in economic sociology. Of course, we can discuss differences in terms of focus, empirically and theoretically, in the field of economic sociology, and the research traditions it touches. But again, I think economic sociology is not so different from other fields. If you would have asked me about political sociology, the answer would be pretty much the same. This is why I like to stress structural and cultural variety as explanatory factors for what we actually see. Obviously, language is the other.

— **Let's talk about your research. Richard Swedberg mentioned your research not only as the example of high-quality sociological analysis, but also as an attempt to say something novel about economic phenomena. What is actually novel about your approach regarding the sociology of markets? Which of your projects do you consider the most important contribution to the field of economic sociology?**

— I think most of my work in economic sociology in one way or another deals with markets. That's where I would start. In many ways, I've been combining an American structural approach with perhaps a more European-centered phenomenological analysis. When it comes to my contributions, I think most of them are summarized in the book *Markets* [Aspers 2011], which Polity Press published in 2011, in which I made several distinctions between market forms. So, I think it was a contribution to speak not of the market but of *markets*, and their different fundamental forms. Again, I'm strongly inspired by White, and I think he wrote about this topic but didn't really develop a type of distinction. It seems to me that not many others have gone in this direction with their research, but rather they have studied markets and spoken about the fields of markets. Of course, this is all very fine, but to make it clear, identifying the distinctions between and combining status and standard markets and switch-role and fixed-role markets (which means that we have four different market types) is one way to clarify and distinguish the various market forms. To give an example, I think it has consequences when you want to explain how fashioning ("making") of markets occur; some markets are organized, whereas others have to more or less emerge out of actors' mutual adjustment. If you want to have a deeper understanding of market processes, make distinctions between market forms is a good starting place. So that would be a very specific contribution at the theoretical level.

— **Taking into account the distinction of actors' identifications, how can we clarify the social order in this typology?**

² The official homepage of the American Sociological Association's Economic Sociology section: <http://www.asanet.org/communities/sections/sites/economic-sociology> (accessed 15 October 2016).

³ Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies. Available at: <https://www.mpg.de/155280/gesellschaftsforschung?section=sw> (accessed 15 October 2016).

⁴ Laboratory for Studies in Economic Sociology. Available at: <https://ecsoclab.hse.ru/en/> (accessed 15 October 2016).

— The question of social order is central in sociology, and even if you don't focus primarily on the question of social order, it pops up. Peaceful economic interaction, as Weber called it, can take place in various forms, of which a market is one. What I try to do is to see the different market forms under which peaceful economic interactions take place so, for example, the order can be decided. Let's take the stock exchange, which is a very good example. It's extremely organized. A lot of decisions and rules, such as monitoring, as membership, essentially all elements of organization are present in the stock exchange. So, the stock exchange as a perfect market is somewhat counterintuitive: Although it is seen as the prime example of a perfect market in an economic sense and hence could be expected to merge as a result of mutual adjustment, it, in contrast, requires a lot of footwork, decision-making and control mechanisms, and other elements of organization in order to function well. In other markets, like status markets (I've been studying fashion markets), very few decisions about how the market should function are made. Firms establish identities, like high fashion or low-fashion, cheap or expensive, and so on. We deal with different styles. None of the various producers in fashion markets makes decisions for the others: you can't tell a producer what identity to have. So organization plays not a big role for their making or operation.

There is a huge difference between those markets where the order is established as a result of the mutual adjustment of producers on one side and consumers, reacting to that, on the other, and those organized markets in which it is decided what people can do and what they cannot do (see [Ahrne, Aspers, Brunsson 2015]). The stock exchange is still a market because actors have property rights which they control, but a lot of other things are controlled or decided for them, so the room for maneuverability is very limited, and products and stocks in each market are identical. Of course, you could flesh out these two types of markets very much more indeed, and the differences would be related to order. Order can emerge through completely different processes that have implications when one wants to change the market. Some markets can be tampered with by legal means in a meaningful way. Other markets may not be so easy to change because, for the large part, they're self-organized as a consequence of mutual adjustment.

— **What role do you attach to consumers? White's theory, which you reconsider in your study, is mostly focused on the producer side, leaving consumers anonymous to the producers.**

— I think the answer to this question depends on what you start with. If you start with different market forms, the role of consumers in them is very different. For example, take the stock exchange. There are no consumers, strictly speaking. In the stock exchange, you have stock buyers and stock sellers, but you can't constantly be either one.

— **So you switch roles...**

— You switch roles, so that you can only refer to yourself as a trader (not as buyer or seller). For example, in Mitchel Abolafia's study, there are different types of traders that act differently [Abolafia 2001]. This idea goes back to Pareto, who speaks of two groups of hardcore capitalists: speculators taking advantage of change and rentiers that prefer a stable order [Pareto 1935 (1915–1916)]. You can see the focus change. Some people, like day traders, would prefer the stocks to go up and down a lot. A long-term investor would prefer a very predictable, and perhaps slower-pace, economic development. In that sense, the market forms and the roles of consumers are different in different markets. In fashion consumer markets, consumers play a great role in establishing a commodity. A high-fashion product is only high-fashion because the producers are seen by the consumers as being high-fashion—and to some extent, vice versa. So, high-status consumers are important for firms to maintain their status as high-fashion companies. Another type of role can be seen in the Whitean market, where consumers are somewhat downplayed as an anonymous mass. Still, they play an important role in reacting to what the producers do. However, White has not developed or differentiated the markets by consumer type, which I have tried to do.

— **During the last decade, economic sociology has distanced itself from criticizing Homo Economicus, and its focal point has switched to the performativity thesis, formulated by M. Callon. How and where do you think we can we apply the performativity thesis to switch-role markets? How can we rethink market theory according to performativity theory?**

— It's an interesting question. If you look at it empirically, strictly speaking, all the studies made by researchers from the performativity tradition are similar, even if you take them together from the distance (either Callonian [Callon 2008] or MacKenzie [2006]). They always study markets that have been engineered, where the economic theory is part of the plan. There is always a process that eventually leads to the high similarity of the plan and reality. I'm very fine with this idea of organizing according to the theory. The neoclassical theory fits certain economic exchanges and products. So, for those cases, it is very likely (and it has been shown empirically) that performativity plays a role. But for other markets (and there are no attempts made to study this empirically, simply because it wouldn't make much sense to talk about performativity in, for example, fashion markets), there is no way to show that the market developed out of a specific design. Those who use the performativity approach are limited to a certain set of markets; the approach does not hold true for all markets. In many cases, they have nothing to say, so to speak, because the market forms are different, and conditions for fashion markets, to take one example, are also different. And there again the question about market forms comes back. It is important to make distinctions between types of markets, as it has consequences for what market theory you can and should apply.

Instead of talking about *the market*, you can start using some theoretical tools with which you can dive deeper into a specific market and empirically determine which type of market it is. Given that, you would also be able to analyze it in a certain way and understand what type of conflict it creates, what type of problems may occur, and so on.

We should treat markets differently. I've identified certain conditions that are true in all markets, but the point of distinction is rather to see that, given the fact that there is a market, there are also different market forms, and this idea basically comes from Simmel's forms of social interaction [Simmel 2011].

— **Let's now talk about your empirical material: fieldwork. The first question stems from my personal interest. Have you observed informal relations in fashion markets or in the market for photographers?**

— My first market study was on fashion photographers. It was clear that a lot of aspects of it were non-contractual. Almost by definition, many of relations I found were not seen by the state, or even necessarily legal. These photographers were not necessarily paid, or if they were paid, then certainly they were paid much less, but in most cases they had full access to photography resources. They could use cameras, get film, make prints, use computers, and so on, and so forth. That meant the person could be treated more or less as a free photographer. And of course, there's the partnership: the young photographer learns how to behave from the professional photographer. In the early days, the photographer could even give away a few jobs to a friend, colleague, or former apprentice as he or she set up his or her own shop. Gradually, the number of photographers' assistants grew, and thus the overall number of photographers grew as well. This provoked work shortages and less money for each individual. Photography is an open system, and the number of photographers and their assistants cannot be controlled.

There was a lot of exchange going on. Photographers help one another in many ways, and these practices are non-contractual and certainly unofficial. This is typical in many industries, but in smaller industries where self-employed people prevail, it becomes even more common.

— **Are the forms of employment in photography always formal?**

— I wouldn't say so. In many cases, you are not employed in the strict sense. Employment as an assistant thus means that a person receives some money, but he or she has to work many more hours. It is said that you're employed for 20% part-time, but you have to work full-time; an employer may perhaps cover your food. This type of solution is quite common in the aesthetic sector, where there is a lot of work that is not necessarily paid and activities that people do without full pay.

— **The question of employment is also related to the subject-matter of informality in the market because you can be employed in a formal sector, but some practices that you do are informal.**

— That's a good way of summarizing it.

— **Strauss and Corbin argue that the term “qualitative research” is confusing because it can mean different things to different people. Some associate it with Weber’s interpretative sociology counter to the positivistic approach. Anyway, qualitative methodologies claim to have a kind of reasoning, or a set of procedures. Grounded theory tradition made an effort to produce a “scientific” foundation of qualitative research, but still a proper definition is missing. How do you define ‘qualitative’ in qualitative research? What procedures do you follow while working with your empirical material?**

— I have formal training in quantitative methods, but I studied a lot of philosophy, and I was also not extremely happy with qualitative methods. In a way, I developed an empirical phenomenology approach that is definitely grounded in philosophy or phenomenology, but I also tried to present it as a kind of stepwise procedure for doing qualitative research. Quite recently, I have, together with Ugo Corte, my colleague, discussed a paper called “Qualitative in Qualitative Research” that is under revision now [Aspers, Corte 2013]. We try to define what is qualitative and how it relates to quantitative. If quantitative research is about working with numbers that are given for one reason or another, qualitative research is about creating new variables. Having an explanation grounded in the actors' own meaning was important for me. It is not a distant explanation, which you can always do in a sense because there are correlations. However, correlations have to be related to the meaning structure of the actors in order to fulfill the requirements of the explanation. One important element of qualitative thinking, I should add, is a kind of pre-knowledge, or pre-understanding. This is what Martin Heidegger was talking about and which was always a very important element for me: clarifying what you know and reflecting upon that. Thereby you realize what you do not know.

— **Could you please describe the stepwise procedure for qualitative research that you have developed?**

— For what I call the pre-study (sometimes called the pilot study), I use the simple translation of “Vorstudie,” taking it from phenomenological approach of pre-understanding. The first step is to try to be open about the research question and not to spend hours and hours thinking about it before you enter the field. I suggest going out in the field early on in the research process, to identify research questions, and to see which empirical methods, and what theories, you can use. Some methods may not be practically useful, or there may not be statistical data available, so be very open about that. And while you are in the field trying out methods, you of course learn a lot by talking to people, and you also start thinking about theories that might be either useful or not. In a way, you make all the decisions about the specific research question, the exact method, and the theory while you still are in the field, or after you have been in the field. If you have three years to do a Ph.D., you will probably spend one to two months in the field very early on, and then you can make more qualified decisions about the method. Thus, you can cut deeper by conducting a pre-study, and based on that, you can move to the second step, which is to refine your research question and make it sharper. Then you'll know that with this particular method and theory, you'll get some type of answer (this is not to say that you would not make

additional adjustments along the way), so there would be no risk that you will have to adopt a completely new theory along the way. I see this behavior in many doctoral students—they prefer to spend months and months reading up on new theories instead of going out very early on and to see what's out there.

I don't reject theory, which according to some is the hardcore phenomenological approach perhaps, at least in a Husserlian sense. I let it play a big role already in the beginning.

— So then, let's speak about theory. Scholars argue that economic sociology focuses too much on disputing neoclassic economic theory, while it is necessary to merge it with sociological theory. Following the ideas of Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, etc., sociology has always opposed political economy and neoclassical economic theory. Economic theory has changed under the influence of critiques brought by economic sociologists. For example, Granovetter was included in the list of Nobel Prize nominees in economic sciences, which means that economists recognize his contribution. Do you think it is necessary to stop arguing with the classical economists and take a look at contemporary economists' work? Does it work for us? What issues and whose ideas can we debate?

— In the past, many economists did not care about economic sociology, but I think increasingly they are realizing that there is an issue. Let's take networks, for example. With the Internet, people have come to realize that things are tied together and that these ties mean something. It's the basic idea of Bronislaw Malinowski when he was writing about ties [Malinowski 1922]. The idea was not novel, but it was Harrison White who reintroduced it and did so in a mathematical fashion in sociology. Today, network is a standard approach in economic sociology and in sociology, particularly in the US.

From my perspective on economic sociology, economists have been right about quite few things, for example how the stock exchange works. They have a perfect theory about the stock exchange, and there is no reason we should try to say it's all wrong. And that economics is right comes as no surprise, since the theory was developed by Alfred Marshall and Leon Walras, who both went to the stock exchange to see how the market operates. But it doesn't mean that this theory fits all markets, as we said before. There are limitations to be concerned about, and we should be very clear that there are many cases in which neoclassical theory doesn't do justice to reality. It is similar to the "either or" attitude: we have to be economists or we should never be thinking like an economist. I think that is a bad starting point. We should consider the situation and the variety of theories that are useful, given certain conditions. This attitude is more open-minded. Take game theory, for example. It's quite useful to think in game theoretical terms when you have a handful of actors. The more actors you have, the less sense it makes to apply a game theoretical approach. In situations when you have to apply the game theoretical approach for hundreds of actors, there will be no calculable outcome simply because there will be too many assumptions about other actors. What seems to be quite useful is to study very few actors empirically. Behavioral economics certainly has value in its empirical observations, but it is so empirically driven that it seems harder to see how it could be the leading paradigm, at the same level as neoclassic theory, which at least has the advantage of having strong assumptions that are easier to work with.

— Behavioral economic theory is applied in the sociology of financial behavior—for example, financial decision-making under conditions of risk [Kahneman, Tversky, 1979]. It is a theory, but not a paradigm.

— It works well because it shows how people behave in certain situations. This type of argument is often very concrete. It at least attempts to not just deductively argue that people will behave in the certain way or do they behave in complete different way in reality. It's more grounded.

— **Do you agree that the new economic sociology should cooperate more closely with sociological theory? What do you consider most interesting about this field?**

— I think that economic sociology has been deep powerhouse of network theory. If there is one export product of sociological theory in the last decade, it has to be network theory.

The economy has always been central; it is central and it's not likely to become less central in the future. In a sense, maybe it should be the other way around: Sociology in general should maybe look deeper into economics rather than economic sociology should also address all the other fields.

There are of course a lot of issues that could be important or could relate to economic studies. There is a long-lasting discussion about the role of the labor market, for example. The sociology of labor markets as an independent field, and not well connected with economic sociology, despite the fact that labor markets are the core of the economy. Family issues and the classical house-holding also tend to be outside of economic sociology. There is no rational plan in the field of what is today called economic sociology, or new economic sociology. Definitely, it can go both ways. The solution is to look more into practicalities and not be so focused on who is an economic sociologist, thus defining oneself in terms of belonging to a clique, but nonetheless study economic phenomenon in social life.

— **Can you mention some events, persons, or particular areas within sociological theory that you find interesting to orient to in economic sociology?**

— I would hesitate a bit to do that; perhaps a field that I find personally interesting is organization studies. It is a huge field, and certainly not everything is interesting, but there are pockets of great research, and the study of firms and organizations and the interaction between organizations is of great importance to the economy, though it has not been our focus.

Organization is central coordination form when you study the economy, in addition to markets and networks. Organization as the third main coordination form is still somewhat downplayed in economic sociology; a lot of people who come from organization studies are not really integrated into the field. Particularly, we still need research that considers how the three coordination forms play out with one another: in collaboration or in conflict. To do this economics and anthropology can be useful. Nonetheless, there are so many theories, so we should focus on doing really good empirical research instead. In the very end, it's what convinces people, and that's why Granovetter is mentioned as a candidate for Nobel Prize, not Harrison White: because Granovetter has done more applied, more empirically oriented work. But you cannot have the one without the other.

— **It's interesting about organization studies that in economic sociology we have two opposed pools of organization theories: the ecological approach, which answers a question why organizations are so different, and new institutionalism theory, particularly Powell and DiMaggio [1983]'s work, which answers why organizations are so similar.**

— I agree that these have been very important traditions, but in my view they today are not adding many new ideas to the literature. It's good to have an overarching perspective, but sometimes you have to get a bit closer to understand how things really work. I think that a more tangible type of organizational analysis may be useful; in my case, it would be used to study organizations in markets to see what ties they build. I've been working with Nils Brunsson and Göran Ahrne—really good organizational scholars—and the work we have done is about what an organization is, how it works as an economic unit, and whether they work together or in conflict with one another [Ahrne, Aspens, Brunsson 2015]. Industry studies and similar kinds of research would be very useful for us to understand the “ecological” questions (and how the institutional approach actu-

ally addresses it), which are somehow bracketed at a concrete level. In this sense, I would say we need more organizational studies, rather than “just” more institutional or ecological studies.

— **What do you personally mean by construction of theory? How is theorizing possible in economic sociology, except for the history of sociological thought and interpretations of classic works?**

— Obviously, I've read and been very much inspired by the works and ideas of Richard Swedberg, who worked more on the creative side of theorizing [Swedberg 2011]. My own work often starts with a critique and a deconstruction in relation to concrete empirical problems. This is the phenomenological approach. You don't start from scratch, but you start from your position and then take things apart and look at the pieces to see what you have in front of you. When you start to take markets apart, the “pieces” you find don't look the same. You realize that there are different market forms, and then you start to build theoretical concepts to account for the variety in the empirical reality. Theory for me is a system of interrelated prepositions that in a comprehensive way account and explain reality, and it's important that the theory is tied empirically to reality (i.e., tied to evidence). At least some of the concepts have to be empirically accountable. I wouldn't necessarily use the word verification, or any of those terms. Theory concentrates knowledge within a specific field. Epistemic and ontological assumptions are always part of the theory. I think to get to that, one needs to deconstruct an element and reflect on what you actually assume. Even when you build a theory, there are assumptions that are not part of the theory, so you can't look only at the theory if you want to understand a theory, if you see what I mean. This is a more philosophical, and an always a more phenomenological approach, to theorizing and theory construction. I would stress the “phenomenological” way of theory making.

— **What do you think about interdisciplinarity in economic sociology? What can interaction with geography, anthropology, history, etc. give us?**

— I think a lot. I guess when you start out in a field, when you gain the identity as a researcher, it is usually strongly tied to a discipline (like sociology). Increasingly, by becoming more mature as a sociologist, you also become able to see the shortcomings, but in particular the advantages of other disciplines, and you can perhaps more easily collaborate.

We try to further interdisciplinarity. This is the second year of the master's program in social analysis of economy here in Uppsala. It is run within the departments of economic sociology, economic geography, organization studies, and economic history. In it, we have four disciplines jointly trying to build the program. I wouldn't say this is an easy undertaking, but what we actually do in the first course (introductory course) is ask them to read Alfred Marshall. One hundred years ago, we didn't have these disciplines in the same fashion. Marshall [1919] is a good example of a person who studied industry and trade (the title of one of his books) and tried to cover a lot, to uncover and not departmentalize knowledge, but who tried to get a whole picture instead. That might be one way to go back, but we also need more specialists, which also means that some of us must also be generalists in order to make sense of the specialties and communicate between fields of knowledge. You have to have a combination. Our strategy is to go in the opposite direction to what most people do (i.e., to specialize). It is a strategy that I find useful. If a lot of people are specializing, why should I do it too? This program is an attempt to collaborate; it's an idea to advance a research-oriented international master's program.

— **Don't you think that the boundaries of the discipline are blurring in this collaboration with many other disciplines?**

— Both yes and no. Indeed, I think sociology has exported a lot of ideas, and I see this. A lot of theory in geography and a lot of organization studies (a subject that is very strong in business schools in Sweden now) come

from sociology. Sociologists are not in alien land if they collaborate with researchers doing organizational work in a business program, for example. I would say that social sciences have become more sociologically oriented. In this sense, the identity of a sociologist is somewhat blurred, since we export many more ideas than we import; others have become more like us, if you see what I mean. This creates some problems, but at the same time, in sociology we are trained to do research. We know how to use and combine theory and methods. I see that we're quite strong in this respect, compared to a lot of other disciplines, so we should be confident that we can continue to export ideas. The danger may be more for other disciplines, which have no tradition or theory to go back to.

Psychology and economics are somewhat separate but similar approaches in the sense that they are very individualistically oriented. One has been very deductive, and the other is very empirical.

And then we have sociology, which deals with structure, and anthropology, which deals with culture, and geography which looks at space, — that is a big divide in terms of approaches in social sciences, and then there are other disciplines with blurred lines in between.

— **My last two questions. The first considers your future plans—what plans do you have for the near future, both for research and for teaching?**

— The European Research Council starting grant I have had, which focuses on evaluation and valuation, in not only the economy but also in non-economic phenomena has come to an end. The idea is to write a book on that. This will occupy some of my time. Also, I've been the head of department for four years, which means that now I have much more research time. The new empirical research project which I am doing is on natural resources. Tomorrow we have the first workshop in the series that brings together scholars from sociology, natural sciences, and other social sciences. It's very much about scarcity and resource coordination from an economic sociological perspective. There is certainly an economic dimension to this set of problems, but it can't be reduced to purely economic reasoning, so to speak. This reasoning is deeply embedded in a Polanyian sense. You can't speak about something more embedded.

— **And in teaching?**

— Two of my doctoral students are now in the natural resources program. Also, there are 15 people in the Uppsala Laboratory of Economic Sociology, where we have several postdocs doing economic sociology. We work closely together, co-writing articles, one of which is on fashion markets. When it comes to teaching, we will continue to develop economic sociology, which currently has a very small presence in the first and second semesters in the sociology undergraduate program so that we can have a stronger connection with undergraduate students who have just come to Uppsala and to those who want to continue with a Ph.D.

— **Have you collaborated with any Russian scholars? Whom of the Russian sociologists do you know?**

— Everyone in Europe knows Vadim Radaev; he is very important for economic sociology in Europe, and he held several positions in the field of economic sociology, including chairperson of the Economic Sociology Research Network in ESA. That's an important task. He organized several very interesting conferences, and I attended the last big one in 2012.⁵ I also worked with Elena Bogdanova, who's now at Borås, and she has research money. She was (I was on her committee) in Cologne when she wrote her dissertation, and she

⁵ Embeddedness and beyond: Do Sociological Theories Meet Economic Realities? Joint Interim conference of ISA RC02 "Economy and Society" and ESA Economic Sociology Research Network with the support of ASA Economic Sociology section. Moscow, October 25-28, 2012. Available at: <https://esconf2012.hse.ru> (accessed 15 October 2016).

worked as a postdoc in my research department in Stockholm University. So these are the two people I come across often and have repeatedly had interactions with. Then, of course, one meets many others, such as Alya Guseva, as well as those, such as Nikolay Zakharov, who is working in Sweden.

— **That's all. Thank you for the talk!**

**Interviewed by Maya Shmidt
Uppsala, Sweden, September, 14, 2016**

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