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Comment on Richard Swedberg/3

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Saggi

Comment on Richard Swedberg/3

by Trevor Pinch

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Richard Swedberg sets out an important and ambitious project in his paper. He notes that the notion of materiality in economics and sociology is impoverished. By paying proper attention to materiality (including using ideas from my own field of Science and Technology Studies) the hope is that at last we can “say good-bye to the object-less world of *homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus*.” Rather than offer a new approach to sociology or economics that would properly account for materiality, Swedberg is mainly concerned in this paper to examine the role of materiality in the economic thinking of the past. He starts with Aristotle and Xenophon in antiquity and then moves on to Adam Smith at the dawn of the industrial revolution in Britain and Karl Marx, writing as the impact of that revolution unfolded, before finally segueing into the Twentieth century to Upstate New York where at Cornell University, Frank Knight was preparing his 1916 Cornell dissertation which became his book *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, and where a new school of Home Economics was also being formed at Cornell University by Martha Van Rensselaer. The story Swedberg sets out to tell, what might be called “the mystery of the vanishing materiality” is a compelling one. As he notes “one can follow in broad lines how economics has become increasingly spiritualized over the centuries.”

We learn that the Greeks were concerned with running households, with agriculture, the appropriate relationship between men and women and slaves, and so on. In antiquity, trade and commerce mattered less than a properly run household. Swedberg shows that a rich notion of materiality in terms of objects, bodies, the tools used to grow and prepare food and even the earth itself can be found in the economic thinking of Xenophon and to a less an extent Aristotle. Swedberg is surely right that

we should read the Greeks and their notion of economy in their own terms rather than as “predecessors to modern economics.” There are of course some problems in making this sort of historical claim. One subtlety is an extensive argument in historiography as to how to read these translated texts from ancient times.¹ While the argument may work well for household objects, the meaning of which have remained fairly constant over time, it may work less well for technology. Part of Swedberg’s overall goal in the paper is to “pay special attention to the role of technology in the analysis of economy.” But the word technology did not even exist in Greek times – the closest rendition is something like “the mechanical arts.” As Leo Marx [1993] has shown the modern term technology grew out of the Nineteenth century large technological systems, such as railroads, and the meaning of the modern term encompasses also the administrative and management aspect of such systems. One marker of how late the term technology with its current meaning comes into being is the founding of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1861. My quibble is not with materiality per se but rather with the use of the word technology. Marx also did not use the term “technology” preferring nearly always to talk about “machines.”

Another way of thinking about Swedberg’s project is not to focus on what is missing from today’s *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus* but to note that the success of many economic and sociological approaches in their day drew upon the very material conditions that concerned these analysts. For the Greeks it was the household that mattered, for Marx it was the new machines of production, and for today’s economists it is commodity exchange and markets. This does not mean that the work in each historical era is wrong but as Swedberg notes, there is a material aspect to the work. For today’s economists obsessed with markets it is the very material machines and instruments which render up the market, such as computers, faxes, and telephones. The project becomes to understand how sociology and economics have depended upon this materiality – a materiality which has often gone unnoticed.

One last example comes from Erving Goffman [1961, 96] who famously studied what he called “situated activity systems” defined as, “a somewhat closed, self compensating, self-terminating circuit of interdependent actions.” Examples included the playing through of a game, riding a merry-go-round, surgery, the execution of one run of a small group experiment, or getting a haircut. Goffman was interested in situations where people do things together in a circumscribed environment for a period of time which has a beginning and ending. In his classic essay on role-distance, he

¹ This issue has surfaced in debates over what it means to read the category “homosexual” back into the Greek literature – namely what the word homosexual means for us today is very different to that shared in Greek culture. See Hacking [1986].

described the different ways the situated role of riding horses on a merry-go-round is performed by children at different ages and how at a certain age children ride in the nonchalant way that he calls performing “role distance.” But this example and many others of Goffman (e.g. the revolving door between “front stage” and “back stage” in the restaurant) involve technology at their heart. The merry-go-round is a technological system (of motion, sound and light and provides an administrative apparatus for extracting money from its riders) – the whole staging of the role is allowed by the nature of the technology and in particular the possibility of replication of the same ride, which can be viewed by on-lookers time and time again. Indeed Goffman notes in passing himself that: “As is often the case with situated activity systems, *mechanical operations* and administrative purpose provide the basis of the unit” [*ibidem*, 97, my emphasis].

It is not that this classic work in the sociology of interaction is wrong, but rather that it is the invisible materiality which allows the sociological analysis to work [see Pinch 2008].

With the examples Swedberg offers I was unsure as to whether he is saying that we need a totally new sociology and economics or rather that we can understand better how these sociologies and economic analyses really worked. The rub of all this is that by being aware of the material grounding of sociology and economics we can better hone such tools for the future and better understand their strengths and limitations. This becomes crucial when more and more social interaction is mediated by technologies such as the internet.

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2008 “Where is the Goffman of the Internet?” Paper under submission.

Comment on Richard Swedberg/3

Abstract: In this response to Richard Swedberg's paper I raise the historiographical issue of whether technology meant the same in previous times, such as the Greeks, as it does today. While broadly sympathetic to Swedberg's project of reintroducing materiality into economics I suggest that embedding the work of the different economists examined into their historical periods can help us understand how their approaches were persuasive given the context within which they each worked.

Keywords: technology, economy, sociology, historiography, materiality.

Trevor Pinch is Professor of Science and Technology Studies and Professor of Sociology at Cornell University. He holds degrees in physics and sociology. He has published fifteen books and numerous articles on aspects of the sociology of science and technology. His studies have included quantum physics, solar neutrinos, parapsychology, health economics, the bicycle, the car, and the electronic music synthesizer. His most recent books are *How Users Matter* (edited with Nelly Oudshoorn, MIT Press, 2003), *Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer* (with Frank Trocco, Harvard University Press, 2002) <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/pinana/> and *Dr. Golem: How To Think About Medicine* (with Harry Collins, Chicago University Press, 2005). He is currently researching the online music community ACIDplanet.com. His most recent book (coedited with Richard Swedberg) is *Living in a Material World: Economic Sociology Meets Science and Technology Studies* (MIT Press: in press).