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Comment on Richard Swedberg/5. Material economy, embodied agents and situated commodities

(doi: 10.2383/26572)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, maggio-giugno 2008

Ente di afferenza:

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/5

Material economy, embodied agents and situated commodities

by Roberta Sassatelli

doi: 10.2383/26572

Claiming that materiality should be central to social science analysis, Richard Swedberg joins an ever more crowded and quite heterogeneous chorus of voices. An relevant variation on this theme which increasingly resonates within contemporary social theory considers that we should abandon textual models and conceive action through the model of practice [Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Savigny 2001]. Variouslly nuanced, the notion of practice portrays action as an ongoing embodied and situated social process, which is inevitably confronted with the temporality and spatiality of social experience, networks and structures. A model of practice appears to be particularly useful to study economic processes, and especially economic agency without relying on the primacy of individual rational choice [Sassatelli 2001; Warde 2005]. To be true, Swedberg's concern is clearly more internal to the scope of economic sociology, a sociological speciality which has often worked as a (more or less critical) footnote to mainstream economics. He claims that economic sociology has special needs to embrace materiality: after all, as the starting point of much contemporary economic sociology, Polanyi's notion of "embedment" is a cry against formalistic models. Given the weight that economic sociology has placed on social networks, Swedberg's suggestion that Actor Network Theory helps conceiving social networks as comprising both of people and material things is both apt and telling, showing which approach may be more congenial to the research interests of economic sociology as Swedberg understands it. Yet, the economy is larger than what is conventionally understood as economic sociology, and other specialisms have much to say about how to approach its material dimensions sociologically. Materiality has indeed become more visible in contemporary social theory: still, this has happened not only

through the development of Science and Technology Studies, but also thanks to works on consumption, material culture and embodiment – whose many useful insights Swedberg quite surprisingly bypasses [here I randomly mention just a few: Gronow and Warde 2001; Shove 2004; Slater 1998]. Institutions (including the market) and people (including economic agents) have a material dimension. Very true – but, how to study it sociologically? Starting from a re-appraisal of Simmel's work, in my brief note, I will draw on the scholarship on consumption in order to explore how we can address “materiality” when studying economic life from a sociological viewpoint. Studies about consumption show that to address the economy as a ‘material’ phenomenon a theory of practice, considering consumers as embodied agents and objects as situated commodities, is quite helpful.

Swedberg begins and ends the paper with a lamentation concerning the lack of materiality in classical sociology: *homo oeconomicus* and *homo sociologicus* are distinct, yet they are both removed from the material dimension of life. Durkheim and Simmel are offered as prime examples of the fallacies brought about by sociological abstraction, whereas Weber figures as a precursor of material sociology. While I believe that Weber's remarks on discipline are of much use to those who study economic processes from a cultural, embodied perspective, I must confess that I was surprised to see Simmel's contribution reduced to his formal sociology. Simmel had much to say on the sociology of the senses and civilization, his remarks on the effects of the metropolis on individual embodied identity are quite astute, his discussion of the money economy famously deals with the emotional changes which it brings about, and so on. What is more, he considers that the growth and differentiation of material culture is crucial to understand modern economic and cultural processes [Simmel 1990]. While often using a neo-kantian vocabulary, Simmel made it very clear that it is through material culture – through the objects that people have defined in previous interactions via the entire spectrum of economic action (exchange, consumption and production) that social and economic processes take place [Sassatelli 2000]. He addresses the peculiarity of material culture in commercial modernity in its own terms, rather than reducing it to productionist concerns as Marx did and, with different emphasis, even Weber was tempted to do.

Let me briefly recall Simmel's position. According to Simmel, the development of money economy pushes for the growth and multiplication of material culture: “our everyday life is surrounded more and more by objects;” we have to face a phenomenal growth of “objective culture” (or “culture of things,”) as well as a continuous acceleration of such growth [Simmel 1990, 448-449]. The social actor is not only faced with more objects, but also with objects of a larger variety demanding a widening of the subjective circle of interests. The growth of material culture is therefore not

only accompanied by its standardization as the Frankfurt School would have it. On the contrary, such growth entails a progressive specialization which has to be actively sustained by individuals acting as consumers. Highly specialized forms of consumer differentiation are possible with a more “adequate realization of every individual complication” and a more “complete freedom for individual reorganization” [*ibidem*, 319]. Emphasis is placed on the creation of individual styles as well as on the multiplication of lifestyles. Still, consumer practices with their necessary plasticity do not provide a definitive route to individual self-constitution: material culture no longer bestows a difference on the individual, leading to perverse effects such as excessive spending and sterile property. Conceived as a whole, material culture corresponds to a public domain of indifference which becomes meaningful only in the difference made by subjective valuation. Thus, structural aspects of (late)modern material culture both require and work against the capacity of the individual to bestow deep meanings onto goods.

Similar concerns are perhaps present in heterodox economics, such as in Scitovsky's work. Scitovsky [1992] considers that the economy has been organized as to boost a trade off between comfort (i.e. goods that save time, effort and skill) and pleasure (i.e. goods that promote creativity, require time and enrich one's own faculties); he envisages a possible conflict between standardized goods which provide novelty by obsolescence and individualized pleasure which may grow slowly as consumption competences develop in a free, non commercialized fashion; and, finally he posits an insidious gap between generalized knowledge which is needed for everyday consumption and specialized skills which are required in the work environment. Such an approach shows that revealed preferences and tastes are not simply coterminous and points to structural factors – including the form taken by material culture – that can trigger their divorce.

Simmel clearly addresses the economy as a system of objects from the point of view of consumption, trying to consider how the transformation of material culture via processes of commoditization has changed our relations with goods and therefore our possibility of self-constitution. While economic sociology has mainly concentrated on production, anthropology, cultural sociology and cultural studies have concentrated on consumption. It is a pity that Swedberg does not address this lamentable division of labour [see Zelizer 2005]. Still, his reconstruction of the ancient, classical and neo-classical scholarship on the economy clearly shows that the economy as been “spiritualized.” He notices that prices have taken centre stage while commodities in their specificity have largely been excluded as trivial. This, it seems to me, has created problems to economics itself, especially when quality has to be factored in. Needless to say, the qualitative innovation of goods is a phenomenon of particular

relevance in markets where goods or better commodities multiply also and above all through the continual refinement of pre-existing variants. Neo-classical models – including Kelvin Lancaster’s work – fail to take seriously quality largely because they are atomistic: goods are not seen as systems of relations as much as people are still portrayed as isolated utility maximizers. Quality can only be understood when we consider the complex web of relations (between people *and* objects) that produce it as non-reducible and meaningful difference. To explore this further I would like to stress that spiritualization has been accompanied by a concentration on forms of production which are formalized, rationalized and public rather than informal, ritualistic and private. As a by-product, consumption – which is arguably the more obviously embodied side of economic life, entailing an intimate relation between people and things, typically mediated by one’s own body capacities – emerges as progressively defined in opposition to production, as leisure rather than labour, as feminine rather than masculine [Sassatelli 2007].

Ever since their development in the seventies, empirical studies of everyday cultures of consumption have stressed that what goes under the label of “consumption” could better be defined as “informal creativity” [Willis 1978], a form of labour “embodied” and “symbolic” at the same time. In this light, consumption is an embodied form of value production [Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987]. As a form of production, it still remains conceived as opposed to organized commodity production. The latter is “rationalised, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous and spectacular;” instead, consumption is an ordinary “poaching” with which subjects re-appropriate, sometimes subversively, goods officially intended for other uses: it is “devious, it is dispersed, but insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” [De Certeau 1984, xii]. While earlier works on consumption stressed resistance, contemporary studies generally emphasise ambivalence: clearly, individual creativity is limited even when acting in a practical sphere like consumption which appears to be less rigidly prescriptive than the sphere of paid work. Consumption can be one of the ways in which global brands can be passively taken up as well as successfully confronted [see the works on the home as a space where commodities are re-framed and organized as to facilitate constructive relations Gell 1986; Parr 1999; Wilk 1989]. Likewise, it is certainly through certain forms of “alternative” consumption (green, fair trade, local, traditional, etc.) that people may oppose the homogenisation promoted by capitalist production and global business. Yet whether this resistance is effective (and which structural effects it may have) it’s a question which can only be addressed when the situational specificity of practices and the structural specificity of the relevant

commodity circuit are taken into consideration – that is when “material” differences which are inscribed into commodities via the commodity circuit and are re-worked by consumers in their practices are factored in.

Let’s go back to the notion of practice mentioned in the opening. Here I must mention Bourdieu. As it is well known, Bourdieu’s work has been seminal to apply the notion of practice to consumption as a fundamental aspect of economic and cultural agency. While Swedberg knows Bourdieu’s theory of taste [see Swedberg 2003] he does not mention it here. Perhaps we should explore this omission. Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* is an attempt at conceiving human experience in terms of mimesis and embodiment, and thus appears as a prime candidate to bring economic action back to materiality. Still, the way Bourdieu formulates *habitus* gives primacy to the standardization of taste in relation to forms of social capital (economic, cultural) which are not enough sensitive to the specific, creative and situated nature of the encounter between objects and subjects [Sassatelli 2007]. There is the risk to lose sight of the differences between goods as too much emphasis is put on the social differences expressed through them. Closer to Network Actor Theory are perhaps those approaches to practices (of consumption) which focus on the organization of practices as relatively separated worlds, considering their internal differentiation without imputing differences to external, transposable dispositions or structural determinants such as class. This is in line with a micro-sociological tradition which considers that relatively separated cultures and their internal rewards, constraints and hierarchies [as we find in amateur circles, fan cultures, sub-cultures, sport cultures, music cultures, i.e. Fine 1998; Hennion and Teil 2004; Thornton 1995] be as important as external determinants. Indeed, the works which have conceived of consumption as a form of appropriation looking at sub-cultural styles have largely responded to a similar research agenda, which tries to give its due both to locally generated forms of capital and to the constitutive, creative role of the encounter between people and things. To start from economic actors as embodied actors, to consider that they are necessarily locally situated and yet globally connected via an increasingly multilayered world of goods, we could then sensitize micro approaches to structural configurations, via vertical approaches which look at commodity circuits [cfr. Du Gay *et al.* 1997; Fine 2002; Molotch 2003; Skov 2005]. This perhaps may help us to critically address issues such as well-being which were quite too easily worked out by mainstream economics by using wealth as a convenient proxy and by replacing wealth with purchasing power.

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/5

Material economy, embodied agents and situated commodities

Abstract: Swedberg joins the growing interest for materiality in contemporary social theory showing that economic life in particular needs to be conceived, yet again, as a material process. His paper is mainly deconstructive though, and in my brief note I start from a re-appraisal of Simmel's work on material culture and draw on the scholarship on consumption in order to explore how we can address 'materiality' sociologically. I suggest that to address the economy as a 'material' phenomenon we may resort to a theory of practice which considers consumers as embodied agents and objects as situated commodities.

Keywords: embodiment, consumption, practices, commodities, commodity circuits.

Roberta Sassatelli is Associate Professor of Cultural Sociology at the University of Milan. She has previously taught at the University of East Anglia, Norwich (UK) and the University of Bologna (I). She is author of *Consumer Culture. History, Theory and Politics*, Sage, London, 2007.