

Todd Schifeling

David Knoke, "Economic Networks". Cambridge: Polity, 2012, 236 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/73721)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2013

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

David Knoke, *Economic Networks*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012, 236 pp.

doi: 10.2383/73721

This book is a primer geared toward students of economic sociology, organizations, and networks. The book starts with an overview of theoretical frameworks in economics, economic sociology, and social network analysis. It then proceeds through four chapters that summarize the literatures on networks in different empirical settings (markets, inside organizations, between organizations, and global), all while explaining various key network concepts. The book concludes with thoughts on how to advance the study of networks in terms of theory and empirics. It also offers a wealth of links to additional networks resources, including methodological primers, datasets, and references to the literature.

Economic Networks excels as a network generator in its own right. The breadth of topics covered and the integration of hundreds of empirical studies are truly impressive. Thus the book serves as an invaluable linker (and a big linker!) of diverse strands of research on economic networks as well as a refresher on past and recent studies across the strands. A few classic texts like Granovetter [1985] on embeddedness and Burt [1992] on structural holes are well known by all sociological network researchers but how much more would the field gain if contemporary studies were better integrated? For example, perhaps research on world city networks like airline travel and corporate branch locations would benefit from considering research on corporate alliance networks, and vice versa. Both seem concerned with the issues of whether links form between entities that are alike or different and of power. So *Economic Networks* is of great use to researchers in addition to students.

Additional strengths of the book are its clear presentation of important network concepts and its lively use of popular examples. All the key concepts – weak and strong ties, the different types of centrality, structural holes, *tertius gaudens* and *tertius iungens*, etc. – receive coverage. On the lively examples, each chapter begins with a compelling anecdote to preview the network ideas to come. I especially appreciated the networks account of how the dubious tactics of the travelling salesman in *The Music Man* succeed. Together with the book's breadth, these features make *Economic Networks* an excellent primer for students.

Of course, there are a few areas where the book could be improved. The numerous empirical studies that the book reviews can sometimes become a welter. Each study is a rich and complex project that navigates multiple theoretical and methodological issues in its execution. Reducing this complexity sometimes creates confusion and unanswered questions. For example, the one page summary of Burt's [2004] study on how workplace networks affect innovation is not completely clear on the concept of network constraint and on how networks affect the value of ideas [p. 93]. Also, as in any synthetic project of this scale, there will be apparent gaps or missteps to different readers. For example, the chapter on networks among organizations misses how economic rationality gets constructed through networks, as in the network transmission of ideas about how best to

manage corporate takeovers, acquisitions, and philanthropy [Davis 1991; Galaskiewicz 1985; Haunschild 1994]. Last of the minor objections are the hasty treatment of economics and the thin integration of political and economic networks in the final chapter. The economics approach to networks gets heedlessly dismissed for a lack of variance in explanatory theory [p. 188]. The topic of linking political and economic networks receives three pages that mostly sketch examples of corporate power over politics, when this should be a crucial topic in the area of economic networks, with causality going in both directions. The cursory treatment is especially disappointing given that the author has a unique command of literatures on both political and economic networks.

The biggest complaint I have with *Economic Networks* is that it offers only soft criticism of the networks approach. The debates that are presented are generally all from within the camp of networks researchers rather than including more dissenting concerns about how networks research can deal with issues of power and culture that may not map onto concrete network flows, or with enduring concerns about method versus theory. As a primer for students and as a resource for researchers, the book could only be stronger by confronting such issues.

Overall then, *Economic Networks* is a masterful integration of numerous and diverse projects pertaining to economic networks. It both informs and inspires the reader with its presentation of such a robust research area. I recommend *Economic Networks* for all who are interested in understanding economic phenomena.

Todd Schifeling
University of Michigan

References

- Burt, R.S.
1992 *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2004 "Structural Holes and Good Ideas." *American Journal of Sociology* 110: 349-399.
- Davis, G.
1991 "Agents without Principles? The Spread of the Poison Pill through the Intercompany Network." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 36: 583-613.
- Galaskiewicz, J.
1985 "Professional Networks and the Institutionalization of a Single Mind Set." *American Sociological Review* 50: 639-658.
- Granovetter, M.S.
1985 "Economic Action and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 91: 481-510.
- Haunschild, P.R.
1994 "How Much Is That Company Worth?: Interorganizational Relationships, Uncertainty, and Acquisition Premiums." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39: 391-411.