

COMMUNIQUÉS

Workshop on Embeddedness and Embedding
Conference of the Polish Sociological Association,
the University of Gdańsk and the Kashubian Institute.
Gdańsk, 14–15 May 2012

This was the second conference on concepts from economic sociology and sociology of law organized by the Polish Sociological Association in collaboration with the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Journalism, the University of Gdańsk. In comparison with the previous year—when the focus was on unintended consequences of action, a more sociologically universal topic—this year’s proceedings were framed mainly in the fields of economic sociology, sociological theory and economic geography. Regarding the latter subdiscipline, the consideration of the entrepreneurship and spatial scales was encouraged by the local and spatial orientation of part of the organizing committee represented by, in addition to the above named institutions, the Institute of Geography (University of Gdańsk) and the Kashubian Institute. Observably, the composition of the organizing and scientific committees was meant to represent the areas where the problem of embeddedness had the most significant research progress within the last three decades.

Apart from the specific disciplines coverage, the workshop also aimed to address the “problem of embeddedness” (see Mark Granovetter) in its two current conceptual manifestations: embeddedness and embedding. The former pertains to the structural characteristic of being entangled in various domains (as the one of systems of social relations at Granovetter), while the latter pertains to moments in a process (a practice-oriented approach emerging as a sequel to the initial Polanyian treatment of disembeddedness and embeddedness of market economy). When it comes to the social sites under investigation, the intention was to replenish the exploration of strategic research areas for embeddedness treatments (such as exchange types, ethnic and local entrepreneurship), while also opening and testing new empirical possibilities. The workshop agenda concentrated on several points, of which at least three themes are commonly associated with embeddedness and embedding research: exchange and market types, entrepreneurship and migration. The discussions analyzed several manifestations of the embeddedness phenomenon, ranging from formal and recognizable processes to what might be termed as the “dark side” of this process—Martin Hess (University of Manchester) and Rafał Wiśniewski (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw).

The workshop debuted with a critical review of the embeddedness assumption, advanced by mainly two spokespersons: Sebastian Nagel (University of Jena) and An-

drea Maurer (University of the German Federal Armed Forces). Nagel reviewed the theoretical potential of the embeddedness notion in the context of distinct framings of the relation between the economic and the social in contemporary sociology and found that these render the embeddedness problem either impracticable or redundant. The employment of the “embedding” notion was suggested instead as a possible way out of this theoretical impasse. Maurer on the other hand, reconsidered the economic sociology agenda from a Weberian perspective. Her paper drove close to similar contributions in economic sociology, which try to decentralize the embeddedness assumption by “bringing in” other topics, such as the one of interests for instance (see Richard Swedberg). The two other contributions in the theoretical stream—Grażyna Skąpska (Jagiellonian University) and Maie Kiisel and Triin Vihalemm (University of Tartu)—have been built on empirical case studies. The former investigated the social re-embedding of constitutionalism in post-communist societies, while the latter explored the embeddedness of information and risk processing in the perception of the communicative environment in Estonia. Aside from the empirical case-studies, these two contributions emerged as highly theoretical because the embeddedness assumption was decoupled from debates in economic sociology while integrated in a whole new conceptual vocabulary linked instead with the sociology of law and public sphere.

The part on exchange, market types and firms—i.e., the site of the “paradox of embeddedness” (see Brian Uzzi) par excellence—was comprised of case-studies from emission and rural ecological modernization to market exchanges and competition in the retailer-supplier sector in Russia. Aleksandra Lis (Central European University) discussed the construction of the emission markets as a process of embedding climate action in economics, while Michiel de Krom (Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research, Merelbeke) analyzed mechanisms of negotiated and disputed enrollment of actors in three Flemish agri-environmental schemes. Both of these case studies might be considered as direct and indirect contributions from a treatment of embeddedness *à la* Michel Callon. The Russian case studies advanced by Vadim Radaev and Zoya Kotelnikova (National Research University “Higher School of Economics”—Moscow) on the other hand, came from a large-scale market analysis and were well grounded in the quantitative stream of embeddedness research in economic sociology.

The following session on financial market services considered several types of embeddedness of firms and organizations, such as social, ideational and institutional. Building on the analysis of financial service firms in the UK and Chile, Javier Hernandez’ (University of Edinburgh) paper presented an interesting and original puzzle: the embeddedness of financial firms in social and financial environments and the mechanisms they put forward of dealing with the complexity and uncertainty of these domains. Kiwamu Ando (Nagoya City University) followed and discussed the cultural and structural embeddedness of the feminization of the life insurance market in post-war Japan, while Maciej Huculak (Institute of Urban Development—Krakow) measured the hypothesis of spatial and institutional embeddedness of firms against the relocation or closure practices of chosen manufacturing facilities operating in Poland.

The session on networks and market strategies followed up with closely related inquiries—this time in relation to the social embeddedness of economic activities. Social embeddedness was mainly conceptualized as entanglement in systems of social relations with a strong ideational component. Tetiana Kostiuchenko (National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”) researched the network ties that bind members of political, business and non-profit sectors together on state and regional levels. Following, Natalia Karmaeva (Bielefeld University) analyzed the institutional and ideational embeddedness of the academic labor market and the process of narrating individual career development by junior teaching academics.

The cluster of papers on innovation and entrepreneurship tilted the theoretical balance of the discussion in favor of the geographical component—somehow neglected by the foregoing presentations. Arnt Fløysand (University of Bergen) discussed the relational based analytical framework to the study of innovations based on the concept of social fields. From the several aspects in which this approach is innovative, we should mention the stress on embeddedness as an overlapping entanglement in various social fields. This is an element which was further taken up in Adriana Mica’s (University of Gdańsk) discussion of integral and intermediated components of the overlapping embeddedness of the formal and informal diffusion of innovations. Furthermore, it also provided an alternative reading to Michał Dudek’s (University of Warsaw) study of the political embeddedness of discourse over public support to entrepreneurs in Poland by framing it as embedded in political and ideational systems alike.

The last stream on migration consisted of a panel focusing on social capital and social networks, and two autonomous studies on the concept of neighborhood embeddedness and the embeddedness of immigrant businesses in a simultaneously transnational and local social context. The panel discussed the embeddedness of highly skilled migrants in London—Louise Ryan and Jon Mulholland (Middlesex University); strategies of valorization of cultural and social capital as revealed by the biographical narrative of a female migration pioneer to Germany—Umut Erel (Open University—Milton Keynes); and, by focusing on the UK scenario, explored the often ambivalent role of migrant community organizations in urban spaces—Alessio D’Angelo (Middlesex University). In relation to the broader stream of migration and embeddedness research, these papers brought in the element of researching the dynamic aspect of embedding and the strategies of dealing with its temporary effects. As far as the last two papers in the workshop are concerned, we encountered essential theoretical refinements of two notions of the embeddedness vocabulary in migration studies: the neighborhood embeddedness and mixed embeddedness respectively. The former was re-conceptualized by Philipp Schnell and Ursula Reeger (Austrian Academy of Sciences), who also discussed the variations in the degree of neighborhood embeddedness across different types of neighborhoods and along ethnic lines as registered by the 2010 “Generating Interethnic Tolerance and Neighbourhood Integration in European Urban Spaces” survey (GEITONIES). Östen Wahlbeck (University of Helsinki) on the other hand, showed that the mixed embeddedness theory of ethnic and immigrant entrepreneurship needs to be extended

to take into account the transnational dimension of ethnic minorities and immigrant communities. He analyzed the experiences of male Turkish entrepreneurs in Finland.

Observably, the embeddedness part of the workshop was more developed than the embedding one. This is due to the fact that the embeddedness assumption was conceptualized mainly in relation to Granovetter's work (favoring a structural perspective) and not to Polanyi's (where the concept is power related and more dynamic). On the other hand, in spite of recent developments in economic sociology and economic geography favoring an "embedding turn," the authors present at the conference did not seem convinced that the gerund form will resolve the theoretical problems associated with the "embeddedness assumption." Probably, the most skeptical in this regard was Vadim Radaev who warned against the tendency of changing the iron cage of embeddedness for the one of embedding—yet another iron cage for the same theoretical problem.

The same also pertains—contrary to the organizers' expectations—to the sociological profile in comparison with the geographical dimension of the conference. As a matter of fact, the input from the economic geography side was more visible in the discussion following the presentations than in the papers as such. Here, it has often built on the "spatiality" (see Martin Hess) of embeddedness in relation to the case studies having a local and regional compass. In addition to the economic geographical critique of sociological approaches to embeddedness, there are two more unintended gains of the workshop. First, it had an overall regional character. Second, it had confirmed the research progress of embeddedness not in the direction of "embedding" (as might have been expected) but in one of overlapping and often contradictory tensions of embeddedness and permeation of the social and economic action with specific domains.

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