

## Interview with SASE President Marion Fourcade

**Q:** *Could you tell us a bit about your intellectual journey?*

**Marion Fourcade:** I grew up in the South of France and went to college in Paris. I was in a "social science" program, truly multidisciplinary, throughout my undergraduate and the beginning of my graduate studies. My first intellectual heroes were all economists, but I was especially attracted to those economists who, to paraphrase Keynes, possessed that "rare combination" of mathematical, historical, philosophical, and practical sensibilities. I wrote my French MA thesis on Albert Hirschman, who in many ways exemplified this broad-minded intellectual ambition, and was also unusually reflexive about the practical power and moral responsibility of his own discipline.

Although my sociological training in France had a profound influence on me, I did not truly specialize in sociology until I came to America, almost by accident. My husband, an engineer by training who had taken a liking to economics, had been advised to go study in the United States, and so I decided to apply for a PhD program, too, with a project about the margins of the economics mainstream. This topic, however, was now more than a pure area of intellectual interest: it had become embedded in my own personal life, and it has remained that way to this day.

My dissertation, and then my first book, *Economists and Societies*, explored the institutional forces that have shaped the professional identities, practical activities and disciplinary projects of economists in the United States, Britain, and France in the twentieth century. This work bore the mark of the scholars who trained me at Harvard, but also at Stanford and Princeton, where I spent the final years of my PhD: Orlando Patterson, my adviser, and also Theda Skocpol, Libby Schweber, Yasemin Soysal, John Meyer, Frank Dobbin, Michèle Lamont and Viviana Zelizer. My interest in cross-national differences comes from

them, as does my predilection for a cultural approach to economic institutions and knowledge development.

**Q:** *Could you tell us a bit about your intellectual journey?*

**Marion Fourcade:** My first SASE conference was in Amsterdam in 2001. I was presenting a paper on the internationalization of economics. I met a group of wonderful people there, some of whom have become friends since then. I think I especially valued the multidisciplinary and the internationally diverse membership, including the large contingent of European scholars. I immediately felt at home in this group, and was stimulated by its eclecticism. Being reminded of the necessity to de-center American scholarship and society, being exposed to unfamiliar conceptual frameworks and to the relentless variety of the economic world across social contexts was a precious gift. Every SASE conference delivers this gift, unfailingly.

Soon after Amsterdam Greta Krippner and I were recruited to run the socio-economic theory network, which also started off our friendship. We did that for a while, then we both joined the executive council. And now this, the presidency. It is a true honor to serve this intellectual community, but also a humbling responsibility. I am working hard to make this year and the 2016 conference a success. Fortunately I have a great team of co-organizers (Neil Fligstein, Heather Haveman, and Anno Saxenian) and wonderful graduate students and staff members to help.

**Q:** *Why did you choose the theme Moral Economies, Economic Moralities for the 2016 SASE meeting at UC Berkeley?*

**Marion Fourcade:** Of course the theme is a nod to Amitai Etzioni's *The Moral Dimension*, whose concerns were, in part, a catalyst in the founding of SASE itself. The purpose there was to contest the neoclassical assumption of a self-interest maximizing

individual and to incorporate other motives into the theory of human action, such as altruism. There was an explicitly normative dimension in this position, which does have its place in the context of a discipline that is often criticized for celebrating selfishness. Now human motives and actions need not be high-minded to have a moral dimension, that is, to be saturated with normativity. And it is up to us --the analysts-- to understand the foundations of this normativity in social relations, to describe its shape, and to analyze its consequences. As Frank Dobbin's work has shown us, the means to pursue self interest (but also altruism) are learned, not innate, and they vary across societies and cultures.

Second, and reflecting this resolutely constructivist understanding, there is the obvious reference to EP Thompson, the great historian of the English working class, who famously coined the concept of "moral economy" in reference to the deep emotions that pertained the marketing of food in time of dearth, and prompted eighteenth century workers to demand, through various types of violent actions, what they felt were "just" prices. All great social struggles operate against a background of feelings and representations about legitimate and illegitimate practices, social relations and obligations in the economy.

Finally, the theme of morality, and its intersection with economic processes, is also an homage to Viviana Zelizer and to my colleague at Berkeley, Arlie Hochschild. Sadly, it is probable that neither Viviana nor Arlie will make it to SASE this year! But most their intellectual preoccupations have entered the common sense of economic sociology and political economy, particularly among the younger generations. I think that there is an increasing realization that moral dynamics --divisions between right and wrong, good and bad, high and low, profane and sacred, fair and

unfair, and their associated emotions-- must not be treated as separate from economic processes. In fact these representations and feelings, and the practices they sustain, do a lot of economic work, too. We see this, for instance, in the existence of taboos and moral struggles against the commodification of many goods, in the place of money in social interactions and the working of institutions, in the role of deservingness and conditionality in the implementation of social and economic policies, in the righteous indignation against austerity, or in the explicit role that religion sometimes plays in the organization of economic exchange.

**Q:** *With studies ranging from environmental valuations to the microsociology of courtroom exchanges to the politics of wine classifications to information dragnets, what is it about the conjunction of classification, valuation, morality, politics, and technology that interests you? How does it all fit together?*

**Marion Fourcade:** I am working on it! Seriously, it sounds a bit scattered, does it not? Let me try to give an ex-post (and thus heavily rationalized) account of my own recent *cheminement*, as we say in French, or intellectual path. I think that what unites my work is my interest in classification, which I regard as a sort of (mostly) French atavism. Quite simply, understanding the world supposes that we understand the lenses that we apply to the world, and how these lenses vary over time (roughly, that's Foucault), across societies (roughly, that's Durkheim and Mauss, but also Tocqueville), and depending on people's social situations (roughly, that's Bourdieu but also, in a different way, Goffman). We can study these lenses in --for instance-- language (the things we say and those we don't), in institutional rules and divisions (the things we allow, implicitly or explicitly, and those we don't), and in practices (the things we do and those we don't). Finally, classification is closely connected to the question of moral valuation: dividing the world into categories almost inevitably means arranging the categories into a hierarchy, so the study of classification systems is, fundamentally, a study of the social order.

Now I firmly believe that abstract ruminations won't get me very far and that to say something interesting about classification, I would have to observe closely exemplars of classifying words and techniques, classified objects, and valuation practices across social contexts. So I started looking for a series of empirical terrains that would allow me to do that. I became interested in algorithms for sorting, ranking and scoring (much of this work I developed in collaboration with Kieran Healy), and in technologies of economic valuation, particularly as they pertained to the valuation of the natural world. Wine also presented itself as a fruitful object, because of the role of formal classifications and ranking systems in sustaining quality judgments.

As for explaining the real outliers in my broader theoretical agenda, I'd say they were developed in a fairly opportunistic manner. Doing empirical research often means following your object wherever it takes you, and my cases sometimes took me to places I had not anticipated. For instance my work on environmental valuation led me to analyze a large amount of court transcripts in oil spill cases, and the incredible richness of this material, where everything is transcribed verbatim, in turn offered an opportunity to observe up close a series of very peculiar courtroom exchanges. So my coauthor (Roi Livne) and I hurried ourselves in the literature on court experts; we found we had something to say, and so we wrote it up (this article is still unpublished).

**Q:** *Can you tell us a bit about your book manuscript in progress, *The Ordinal Society*? (co-authored with Kieran Healy)*

**Marion Fourcade:** Our purpose is to use the resources of social theory to analyze the new forms of data surveillance and digital fitness, and its impact on people's social trajectories, on the political economy of redistribution and inequality, and on the nature of moral hierarchies in society.

**Q:** *What are you reading these days?*

**Marion Fourcade:** In December I finished a book that I left unopened on my desk for far too long, Natasha Dow Schüll's *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*. (Princeton UP 2012). And I am glad I picked it up, because it's one of the best books I have read in a long time. It's about social marginality, exploitation, profit, risk calculation, the design of gaming algorithms, and the co-construction of people and machines. I am now reading James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish. Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Duke UP 2015), on the new political possibilities ("the politics of distribution") that are emerging around cash transfer programs, in the Global South first, but also elsewhere. Also a very stimulating read, also by an anthropologist. Next in line for me is the most recent book by economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller, *Phishing for Phools. The Economics of Manipulation and Deception* (Princeton UP 2015), which looks at the myriad profit-seeking techniques through which people are being cheated in the marketplace, and prompted to do things that might cause them tremendous harm --most of the time in spite of themselves. And, like everyone else, I am eagerly awaiting Matt Desmond's *Evicted: Profit and Property in an American City* (Crown 2016), which will come out in March.