

Book: Stark, David, 2009: *The Sense of Dissonance. Accounts of Worth in Economic Life*. Princeton University Press.

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David Stark's *Sense of Dissonance* is an important attempt to catch the core of the economy in the information age, from both a perspective of sociology of markets – since it deals with one of the most under-invested topics in the field, values – and of organization theory. Search and innovation are the thematic nodes of the book (how is search to be conceived, how is innovation to be produced), and help linking the two fields of research: according to Stark, both search and innovation relies on *dissonance*, i.e. on the existence of multiple evaluative principles and on the frictions following their mobilization by the actors involved in economic activity. Dissonance is therefore crucial to understand both the way values are evaluated (several scales of evaluation being mobilizable to assess the worth of the same good) and produced (Stark underlies the importance of these multiple evaluative principles in the most innovative and/or profitable activities). Since dissonance is so important, explains Stark, it comes to be a crucial asset for organization – and an important part of the book is devoted to the characterization of an organization whose main characteristic is not its ability to manage dissonance, but to produce it. Together with the superb case studies based on ethnographic fieldwork and devoted to very different settings – a factory in late-communist Hungary, a start-up in Silicon Alley in the late 1990s', and an arbitrage room in Wall Street, one of the many interests of this dense, smart and ambitious book lies in its attempts to match together theoretical traditions that mainly ignored each other until now. More precisely, one could present Stark's work saying that he attempts to discuss mainstreams in U.S. economic sociology and organization theory (neo-institutionalism, network theory and ecology of organization) using European (mostly French) theoretical insights, especially actor-network theory of B. Latour and M. Callon and economics of convention – especially in the recently translated formulation of Boltanski and Thévenot, *On justification*.

Innovation is central to the new economy, Stark explains, but innovation is a somewhat paradoxical process: drawing on Dewey, he proposes to characterize innovation as a process of "recognition of the incognita", therefore involving "a curious cognitive function of what is not yet formulated as a category" (p. 4). In order to succeed in this un-

certain quest, one has to be confronted to perplexing situations – and these arise especially when there is no evident consensus about what counts. There are many ways, Stark recalls, to appreciate the value of a good – because several principles of evaluation can be used to evaluate it. Boltanski and Thévenot have developed a whole theoretical framework to describe the scales that can be mobilized to evaluate a situation, a service or a good – and how frictions can emerge from the confrontations of these evaluations (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006). But while Boltanski and Thévenot (and with them the whole school of the *économie des conventions*) are mainly interested in the way the orders of worth are used to reduce uncertainty and therefore make action possible, Stark's focus is much more on the way the mix of evaluating principles creates uncertainty and yet opens profitable opportunities for action.

And here comes what could be presented as Stark's second main hypothesis, which links him to organization theory: if what is relevant to produce innovation is this coexistence of evaluating principles, then organizations may try to promote this coexistence. Stark suggests that in contemporary economies, specific forms of organization have emerged – Heterarchy – whose main purpose is to promote uncertainty through the gathering, in the same organizational space, several scales of evaluation. "Heterarchy", Stark explains, "represents an organization form of distributed intelligence in which units are laterally accountable according to diverse principles of evaluation" (p. 19). It may not be with the characterization of the specificities of this form of organization that the book appears to be the most original: heterarchy shares many characteristics with other innovation-devoted forms of organization (Dougherty, 2006). But what remains original and extremely insightful is Stark's hypothesis that these characteristics should be conceived as related to the production of dissonance inside the organization or, to put it with his own word, with the "organization of diversity".

The three case studies Stark presents in chapter 2, 3 and 4 are fascinating examples of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in very different organizational settings, even if their links with the theoretical framework are not always obvious, especially in case of the superb analysis of the socialist factory. When Stark describes how Hungarian workers got committed in a kind of capitalist experiment, being allowed to use equipments of the state-owned company during their off-hours in order to produce for an "enterprise work partnership", one faces a wonderful example of

coexistence of evaluating principles in the same setting (one socialist, to put it roughly, the other capitalist) – yet the way this dissonance is linked to search and innovation, and even to the creation of value, is not completely explicit. Be that as may, these fieldworks seem to be conceived much more as examples of the heuristics of the framework, than systematic attempts to prove the whole model: in the last pages of his book, Stark explains how his framework should be used to study wider settings, bigger firms and networks, and organizations whose main goal may not be to accumulate profits. David Stark's book surely appears to be very ambitious, since he draws on his idea of dissonance to discuss some of the main concepts of contemporary organization theory and economic sociology: he provides particular insightful discussions of the idea of institution as it is developed by neo-institutionalists (and especially its characteristic of taken-for-grantedness) and, using Dewey's pragmatism, outlines provocative remarks about the way action should be conceived in a world where dissonance plays such an important role. Elaborating on this powerful and general intuition, it

clearly appears that Stark's ambition is to sketch the main lines of tomorrow's economy – and of tomorrow's economic sociology: after Fordism whose bureaucracies were accurately described by old neo-institutionalism, after post-Fordism whose network-organizations were analysed by new neo-institutionalism and network theory, the information age needs a new theory. This theory Stark aims to provide. Books have their destiny, the Romans used to say. It is too soon to anticipate the fortune of David Stark's *Sense of Dissonance*. But there is no doubt it constitutes an important contribution to the most cutting-edge debates of contemporary economic sociology and organization theory.

References

- Boltanski, L./L. Thévenot, 2006: *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dougherty, D., 2006: Organizing for Innovation in the 21st Century. In: S. Clegg/C. Hardy/T.B. Lawrence/W.R. Nord, (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage, 598-618.