

## A Note on Smuggling Sennett into the Economics Workshop

Daniyal Khan\*

Department of Economics  
The New School for Social Research  
New York, NY

### ABSTRACT

This short note employs Sennett's domain shifts with the sole purpose of illustrating the way in which concepts and tools from sociology can be employed by economists in a way that yields insights which are interesting and relevant to economics. Three domain shifts are attempted. Each attempt emphasizes a different view of economists: economists as makers of institutions, economists as makers of models and theories, and finally, economists as makers of their own original scholarly voices. The use of these three domain shifts serves as a case in point about how the economist's methodological domain can be enriched through engagement with sociology.

**Keywords:** methodology, sociology, craftsmanship, domain shifts

### Introduction

Drawing on a wide historical landscape and written in the tradition of pragmatism, sociologist Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008) is a masterful study of "what the process of making concrete things reveals to us about ourselves" (Sennett 2008: 8). This brief note makes what I hope will be a humble but focused attempt to smuggle sociological insights from Sennett's study of craftsmanship into the economist's workshop. Specifically, I will attempt three domain shifts in each of the three following sections of this note, where a domain shift "refers to how a tool initially used for one purpose can be applied to another task, or how the principle guiding one practice can be applied to quite another activity" (Sennett 2008: 127). It is hoped that these three attempts will clarify the relevance of domain shifts to economic methodology.

The first premise for my argument is that economics and sociology are like estranged siblings which share a rich intellectual lineage including but not limited to key figures such as Smith, Marx, Weber, Schumpeter, and Lowe. My second premise is that the fundamental task of economics is to make sense of the overwhelming

---

\*I'm grateful to two anonymous referees for their constructive feedback, as well as everyone who has provided critical comments on previous iterations of this work. The responsibility for any and all flaws and shortcomings lies with me.

detail of human experience—more specifically, the detail of human experience under capitalism. This is a task which economics shares, broadly speaking, with sociology as well as the other social sciences.

Why attempt domain shifts as an economist? As Sennett says, “domain shifts reach across borders” (2008: 127). As an institutionalist Post Keynesian who sees the affinity between his own methodological foundations and those of comparative historical institutionalism in sociology, it is my conviction that domain shifts, effectively employed, can help reach across the borders between social science disciplines. In doing so, the borders of social scientific disciplines may in time be transformed. In particular, the boundaries of economics may be redefined to accept many if not all of sociologists’ insights as a legitimate part of the economics discipline.

At the same time, such a process may also lead to tools, concepts and models which have long been a standard part of the economist’s toolkit ending up well beyond the redefined boundaries. Such a realignment is not just desirable but essential for economics to become a social science that is more incisive in what it teaches us about capitalism. Furthermore, the efforts of heterodox economists in governing the relationship with sociology can and ought to be a key factor driving a redefinition of the boundaries of economics.

### **Economists as Makers of Workshops and Institutions**

From a comparative case study of the design and construction of two different houses, Sennett (2008: 261-262) draws principles for the good craftsman. These are then adapted as principles for building institutions:

Imagine that building an institution is like building a house. If so, you would want to build it in the manner of Loos rather than of Wittgenstein. Instead of generic perfection all at once you would want to make a particular structure that started as a sketch, capable of evolving. Inside this institution, you would want to solve the problem of enfilade as Loos did, inviting movement from one domain to the next. You would engage with difficulty, accident, and constraint. You would avoid resolving specific duties of people in the institution to the point where the duties, like rooms, became self-contained. You would know when it was time to stop institution building, leaving some issues unresolved, and you would leave intact traces of how the institution grew. You want an institution that is alive. You could not build this institution through the relentless pursuit of perfection; this pursuit, Wittgenstein knew, had rendered his house lifeless. Whereas building a school, a business, or a professional practice in the manner of Loos would make an institution of high social quality. (Sennett 2008: 263)

Why should we care about these guidelines on building institutions? Because crafting institutions is essential to doing economics. First, the economics discipline itself is an institution which is organized in a certain fashion, which in turn directly affects how it functions, including the choice of ideas that it teaches and transmits to future generations, and how it does so. Economics departments, doctoral programs, and even relations between faculty and aspiring scholars are organized in a manner which directly contributes to the transmission – for better or for worse – of theory, ideology, technique, patterns of reasoning and habits of thought. We thus may ask ourselves as students of economics: how can we apply Sennett’s insights to the crafting of our departments and the discipline in general as institutions?

Furthermore, how might economists and sociologists be reconciled? Placing economics in the context of the communal nature of science in the tradition of Kuhn and Lakatos is merely a starting point. Lakatos (1978) did not go far enough in explicitly bringing power as a variable into his methodology of scientific research programs. Sennett’s definition of a workshop is helpful and instructive at this juncture. For Sennett (2008: 54), a workshop is “a productive space in which people deal face-to-face with issues of authority.” We should be able to recognize immediately that by this definition our own graduate departments in the social sciences are in fact workshops, just as the social sciences are guilds. In these workshops, there is the potential for, as Sennett says, “inviting movement from one domain to the next”, and to “engage with difficulty, accident, and constraint” (2008: 263).

Running with Sennett's aforementioned definition of workshops, we should also be able to see how this definition, with its reference to authority, may help introduce power into our understanding of the relationship between scientific communities and their research programs. Power, that all-important variable, is missing from the Lakatosian methodology of scientific research program. If we were to view graduate departments in the social sciences through the lens of Sennett's definition of workshops, could we come up with a more helpful framework for understanding the relationship between economics and sociology, namely, a methodology of scientific research workshops? To be more specific, could this new methodological framework yield insight into the relationship between heterodox economics and economic sociology? If so, how might we as economists employ the insights of this new methodology to transform our graduate departments for the better?

The second reason that we should care about Sennett's guidelines for building institutions is that capitalism's institutional foundations give it distinct and recognizable patterns – patterns without which it cannot be understood, let alone controlled. Understanding the institutional foundations that shape capitalism is essential to understanding capitalist economies, and crafting them is essential to the transformation of capitalism. It helps to recall, for instance, the importance of institutions (such as money) in quelling uncertainty and in being a policy variable which can affect the state of financial fragility (Minsky 1978: 21). Of course, some institutions might be more central to capitalism than others, and hence more difficult to change (e.g. private property). Nevertheless, other institutional arrangements may still be flexible and more easily transformed through regulation (e.g. monetary, banking and financial institutions). Beyond regulation and reform, there is the prospect and even specter – sometimes more imposing, sometimes feeble – of post-capitalist societies. Indeed, one part of the birth of post-capitalist economies and societies is the creative task of crafting new institutional arrangements and social relations. Thus we may ask ourselves: how can we, as economists situated within capitalist institutional frameworks, apply Sennett's insights about building institutions to (1) the transformation of capitalist institutions to deal with problems such as inequitable distribution, unemployment, crises, etc., and then (2) the creation of post-capitalist institutions?

## Economists as Makers of Theories and Models

Sennett's chapter on machinery contains another insightful discussion, this time on models.<sup>1</sup> According to Sennett, “[a] model is a proposal rather than a command. Its excellence can stimulate us, not to imitate, but to innovate” (Sennett 2008: 101). Furthermore, “[t]he machined object, like the parent, makes a proposal about how something might be done; we ponder the proposal rather than submit to it. The model becomes a stimulus rather than a command” (Sennett 2008: 103). Here we may ask ourselves: what might it mean for us to consider economic models as proposals and stimuli rather than commands? Proposals are meant to be pondered, discussed, questioned, engaged with critically, qualified, modified – they are mere starting points or points of reference in a story, not the story itself. Similarly, as stimuli, mathematical models might get us thinking about given economic problems in ways which are useful to addressing them.

I have inferred from my reading of Sennett that our ability to use a tool, or our skill with a tool, depends on our conviction or confidence about its power. In other words, our belief in the tool or our commitment to the idea that the tool at hand is powerful. If we employ a domain shift and bring this insight over to economics, it tells us something very interesting about the importance of vision and ideology and their relationship with economic models and theories in as much as models and theories are the tool of social science. For example, consider Solow's remark that Post Keynesianism is “more a state of mind than a theory” (Solow 1979: 344). I suggest that this is accurate though not sufficiently nuanced. Post Keynesianism (henceforth synonymous with Post Keynesian economics) is indeed a state of mind, but it is also much more than that; it is certainly much more than just a theory, just as the phrases “growth theory” or “monetary theory” refer to much more than just *a* theory. And because it is not just *a* theory or *a* model, it is better equipped to analyze real world economies compared to isolated, decontextualized theories.

---

<sup>1</sup>This section uses the words model and theory synonymously.

Solow's remark is at best a jest and a red herring. At worst, however, the remark is typical of the way most of the economics profession treats economic theories as isolated constructs disembodied from economic history and from scientific communities, with no historical evolution of their own, no ideological basis, and ungrounded in social dynamics of power. The reality is quite the opposite. Any school of thought or research program in the social sciences, whether it is pragmatism, monetarism or Post Keynesianism, is always more than just a theory or a state of mind. Following Schumpeter ([1954] 2006) it must have both a visionary basis and an analytical structure. The "state of mind" may refer to visionary aspects, pre-analytic commitments, including value judgments and ethical commitments.<sup>2</sup> At its worst, therefore, Solow's remark is an attempt to draw attention away from this visionary basis of scientific thought, and hence to draw attention away from the pre-analytic commitments, value judgments and ethical commitments of mainstream economics, e.g., its commitment to a self-clearing market as a natural state of affairs. Consequently, he also draws attention away from mainstream economics as a tool to justify the balance of power or status quo under capitalism. As Robinson (1964: 7) observed, "economics itself . . . has always been partly a vehicle for the ruling ideology of each period as well as partly a method of scientific investigation."

Solow's remark indicates a certain disdain for something that is more a state of mind than a theory, but it is not clear why a theory or a model in itself is more valuable or insightful than a state of mind. It would be misguided to think that a theory or a model, decontextualized from a research program and from the scientific community undertaking that research program, offers anything of substance in terms of an analysis of real world economies. Tools of a trade are not equally useful and powerful in the hands of people who differ considerably not just in their familiarity with the tools, but also in their conviction about how powerful the tools are (and hence lack the motivation to explore the power and use of the tools).

Thus, the analytical tools (i.e., theories) of Marxian economics and neoclassical economics lose their analytical power in the hands of neoclassical and Marxian economists, respectively, because the people wielding them are neither skilled in their use nor confident in their analytical power. This is because they do not share the underlying convictions which make the tools powerful in the first place. A tentative, half-way use of an analytical tool by someone lacking confidence both in the tool and in their own ability to use it is not effective in yielding insight into the functioning of an economy. Both skill and confidence are essential for the use of theories as tools which help us analyze real world economies. An entire research program situated in a self-aware scientific community which has a strong sense of its historical roots, evolution, core beliefs and convictions, touchstones and exemplars, institutional context – in sum a self-aware state of mind – is more likely to employ theory effectively to probe and explore problems of real world economies, and then to craft possible policy solutions. A standalone theory, no matter how coherent, is unlikely to offer insight into the functioning of diverse real world economies.

Post Keynesianism is able to hold its own on that criterion (see Palley [1996], and Fontana and Gerrard [2006] as examples of this self-awareness), and is arguably able to tell far more convincing stories about real world economies than the sort of economics in which Solow might be considered an exemplar. It brings not just theories to bear on real world economies, but the inherited skill in the use of those theories – skill that is arguably passed from generation to generation in the Post Keynesian community – as well as the convictions that (1) full employment is both possible and desirable, and (2) that capitalist economies do not inherently tend towards an equilibrium, whether that is the equilibrium of the classical political economy in the sense of a long term tendency, or in the sense of market clearing equilibrium at a price where supply is exactly equal to demand. Without the skills and the conviction to employ them, theories are powerless. Our state of mind, vision, pre-analytic categories, and pre-analytic convictions will together determine the quality and incisiveness of the questions we will ask and the problems we will identify when we approach real world economies. If the questions and problems are of poor quality and ill-defined respectively, the analysis will be as well. Therefore, just as Solow is drawing attention away from the visionary basis of mainstream macroeconomics which makes it unsuitable for the analysis of real world economies, he is also drawing attention away from the visionary basis of Post Keynesian economics which makes it a much better

<sup>2</sup>As I see it, feelings including but not limited to anger, awe and discontent may also be included in the broad categories of vision and pre-analytic commitments.

alternative for studying real world economies. He is, as it were, pulling the rug from under the feet of Post Keynesianism, because if a model is a stimulus and a proposal, then vision and ideology are the source of the stimulus and the motive behind the proposal.

### **Economists as Makers of their Original Scholarly Voices**

For the third domain shift, I will bring a toolbox for finding one's original voice from the domain of music to my practice as a social scientist. The toolkit in question consists of a few ideas outlined by Trey Gunn (2012), who plays touch guitar and in his own words has been "coaching artists in the creative process," in a talk on original (creative) voice. His toolkit consists of the following questions: (1) what do I notice/what do I like? (2) anti-notice: what is missing? (3) what are the big, burning questions that motivate me? The point of the toolkit is that once you have articulated answers to these questions and hence developed a toolkit of your own, its continuous use in guiding one's work will lead to the development of an original voice and an original body of work. So while in the case of a musician one might like or notice, say, a particular rhythm, or one might prioritize improvisation, some of my own answers to these questions, which in turn may constitute an important part of my social research toolkit, are as follows.

As an economist interested in developing an original scholarly voice, what do I notice and what do I like? I like it when typologies, stylized facts, periodization and heuristic devices are used to make sense of and to organize the overwhelming amount of historical detail of human experience available to social scientists. (The reference here is not to "big data" as, funnily enough, it is very narrowly conceived currently.) I notice a social researcher taking a risk with an idea, proceeding to unpack it in their work, and presenting the messy unpacking rather than just presenting the final form of an idea being posited or rejected. I also like it when I am unable to tell which discipline the author of a paper or book was trained in. I notice it when the answer to the question "is this scholar an economist, political scientist or sociologist?" isn't obvious. I notice rhetoric used sparingly but sharply, to give the argument an extra edge. I also like when a social scientist is able to draw out the unintended implications of an intellectual position and show how they conflict with their stated or implicit values. Lastly, I notice when a metaphor is used intelligently to illustrate or clarify something about capitalism. Some of the metaphors that may be used are of the machine (is an economy like a machine?), the human body (is money to capitalism what blood is to the human body?), a battlefield, a landscape/terrain, dance and music (where the build up of uncertainty, as in February 2019 around Brexit, may be likened to the build up of a slow, discordant crescendo), navigation on the ocean (navigating and exploring capitalism as an ocean requires anchors and navigation tools), psychological trauma, and even fashion (where we talk about the social fabric, and may ask if society is the cloth from which the economy is cut).

What do I think is missing? As a committed institutionalist Post Keynesian, one of the things I think is missing in economics is acceptance of the principle of fundamental uncertainty, which in practice means that prediction as a task for social science is off the table. I also notice the absence of historical and institutional context from questions of policy, especially in the class room setting. For example, when we ask the question of how to control inflation or how to reduce unemployment, nobody ever asks whether a monetary authority, central bank or anything of the sort is in place. This is not trivial. It is also not obvious. The existence of a central monetary authority cannot and should not be taken for granted. First, because the question what monetary policy means in the absence of a central monetary authority remains an interesting one. Second, because to take it for granted would undermine what I have called the fundamental task of economics noted in the introduction.

What are the big, burning questions? Is capitalism beyond redemption? To what extent can social scientists also be politicians? What do we lose and/or gain from expanding the self-definition of economics? What, if anything, do we lose by considering the work of Peter Evans, Frank Dobbin and Richard Sennett to be within the domain of economics? If central banking is a subsystem and subprocess of capitalism, how does

it expand and transform in relation to capitalism, and does it do so with the same organizing principle at play, i.e. the profit motive or the acquisitive drive?

## Conclusion

The point of the three examples of domain shifts explored in this paper has been to illustrate how a specific conceptual tool from sociology can be smuggled into the methodological domain of economics, and be put to good use. The domain shifts explored here, because they are grounded in Sennett's philosophical pragmatism, suggest to us how engagement between sociology and economics can help us cut through the Gordian knots of philosophical synthesis and consciously transform social science by taking hold of the interplay between ideas and practice, between teaching and research, and between the creation of new scientific research programs and the organization and culture of our departments. Given the close relationship between the work of economists and the future of the economy, the implications are many and significant. While this brief note has been written with a specific purpose in mind, it has also been motivated by a desire for more open-ended, dialogic conversation (Sennett 2012: 18-24) between economics and sociology, and to draw attention to the idea that inasmuch as an economist is "an engaged human being" (Sennett 2008: 21), an economist is also a craftsman.

## References

- Fontana, Giuseppe and Bill Gerrard (2006). "The Future of Post Keynesian Economics". In: *BNL Quarterly Review* 59.236, pp. 49–80.
- Gunn, Trey (2012). *Trey Gunn Speaks on Original Voice*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ii5zyu6B01g> (visited on 02/21/2020).
- Lakatos, Imre (1978). *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*. Ed. by J. Worrall and Gregory Currie. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press.
- Minsky, Hyman P. (1978). "The Financial Instability Hypothesis: A Restatement". In: *Can "It" Happen Again?: Essays on Instability and Finance*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 90–116.
- Palley, Thomas I. (1996). "The Emergence of Theoretical and Institutional Coherence in Post Keynesian Economics". In: *Post Keynesian Economics*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 8–24.
- Robinson, Joan (1964). *Economic Philosophy*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. (2006). *History of Economic Analysis*. Ed. by Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter. Routledge.
- Sennett, Richard (2008). *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- (2012). *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Co-operation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Solow, Robert M. (Aug. 1979). "Alternative Approaches to Macroeconomic Theory: A Partial View". In: *The Canadian Journal of Economics* 12.3, pp. 339–354.