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# For What It's Worth

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**Abstract.** This essay takes its point of departure from the intellectual milieu in the mid 1980s that gave rise to Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's book, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. It shows how exposure to ideas and concepts in that book came to take varied forms as they were elaborated and modified in the work of an American sociologist across several decades of research in diverse empirical settings.

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# For What It's Worth

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## Introduction

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's influential book, *De La Justification. Les Économies de la Grandeur* (*On Justification. The Economies of Worth*) (1991, 2006) was published more than 25 years ago. But the ideas and concepts of that important work were already having an influence even before the book's publication, first through the PhD seminar that Boltanski and Thévenot taught together at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and later as the manuscript circulated among their Parisian circles, including economists of the "Conventions" School and sociologists in the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (GSPM) which they founded in 1985.

I was one of those sociologists. And (adopting a phrase from the technology community) it is as an "early adopter" that I write this essay. Being an early user of the concepts of "les économies de la grandeur" (economies of worth) does not mean that I write from a privileged position. My understandings and misunderstandings (more on this, elaborated below) are no more worthy than the initial insights of a reader who has just now been inspired by reading *On Justification* for the first time. They are neither better nor worse. They are valuable because they are different.

My misunderstandings come with a history – having heard the concepts being worked out while taking written form, and having used them as theoretical reference points (even while departing from them) for several decades. They are valuable because they have a history; and there are limits to their usefulness for the same reason. Perhaps someone less familiar with their genesis could see the connections among the concepts more clearly and be less likely to misinterpret. Certainly the acolytes will complain that I have not been true to the original text. It is for the reader to be the judge. For me, science means that my first and last fidelities are to be faithful to my research materials – not because of some positivist belief in the "facts" but because I find that the constraints posed by data (whether ethnographic, comparative historical, or network analytic) are likely to be more interesting, challenging, and potentially creative than those posed by theory. For good or bad, that is my disposition. And it is from this disposition that I write an essay in which the reader can see how a set of ideas to which I was exposed in my formative years came to take varied forms as they were elaborated and modified across several decades of research in diverse empirical settings.

## Early Adoption

I was fortunate to meet Luc Boltanski in the Spring of 1982. Luc was visiting at Harvard's Center for European Studies where I was a graduate research associate completing the last phase of my dissertation. We became fast friends, solidified when I saw him nearly every day for several months in the spring/early summer of 1983, having been invited by Pierre Bourdieu to be a fellow at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne in Paris. Let's just say it was tremendously exciting: talking with Bourdieu and Boltanski; meeting Laurent Thévenot, Alain Desrosières, Bruno Latour, and others; and experiencing the energy around *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* (probably the last moment of real innovation in the field of non-digital social scientific journal publishing). From Paris, I took the Orient Express to Budapest where I spent the final months of the summer doing the field work which, continued over the next three years, would become the basis for my paper, "Work, Worth, and Justice."<sup>1</sup>

That paper was drafted in the Fall of 1986, while I was a visiting fellow at the newly founded GSPM,<sup>2</sup> where Boltanski and Thévenot were beginning to write *Les Économies de la Grandeur* (the working title of the manuscript first published in 1987).<sup>3</sup> During those months I was literally moving back and forth every couple of weeks from field work in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first published in French by Bourdieu in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* in 1990 (Stark 1990a). The original English version circulated as a Working Paper from Harvard's Center for European Studies (Stark 1990b). Because Viviana Zelizer assigned the unpublished paper for many years in her economic sociology seminar at Princeton it had a readership larger than that of some other published papers. I'm grateful to her for giving it an audience during its long hibernation before it eventually appeared as Chapter 2 of *The Sense of Dissonance*. For a more detailed account of the nearly 20 year delay from draft to publication see the Preface in Stark (2009, pp. xi-xv).

<sup>2</sup> The formation of the GSPM was an institutional marker of Boltanski's separation from Bourdieu, his mentor, co-author, and friend. The resulting conflict was acrimonious. During this time, I did what an American sociologist was supposed to do: I talked to people in camps who weren't talking to each other and, in fact, forbade even their students from doing so. I break no confidences (their personal affection for each other famous for running much deeper than their temporary professional antagonism) when I report that Bourdieu's first question at lunch was always "Tell me. How's Luc?" and Boltanski's first question at dinner "How's Pierre?"

<sup>3</sup> *De la Justification. Les Économies de la Grandeur* originally published in 1991 is actually a reedition of a prior book, published in 1987 by the Presses Universitaires de France in its "Cahiers du Centre d'études de l'emploi" series and titled *Les Économies de la Grandeur*. The 1991 version had a new postface, a longer title including the term "justification" as well as a slightly changed terminology. Some elements of the theoretical foundations of *On Justification* were developed by Luc Boltanski in parallel in another book published in between (1990), *L'Amour et la Justice comme Compétences. Trois Essais de Sociologie de l'Action* (translated in 2012as *Love and Justice as Competences. Three Essays on the Sociology of Action*). The empirical material used by Boltanski and Thévenot to develop their ideas between 1987 and 1991 is a series of empirical studies conducted by various sociologists and grouped in the collective book they edited in 1989 and titled: *Justesse et Justice dans le Travail* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, not yet published in English to the best of our knowledge).

Budapest to seminars at the GSPM in Paris. That ethnographic research was conducted in several Hungarian factories (the paper eventually focused on one) where groups of workers inside state-owned enterprises had been allowed to form “intrapreneurial” units that subcontracted to produce goods or services on the off hours and on weekends. “From 6 to 2 we work for them,” so the saying went, “from 2 to 6 we work for ourselves.” The situation was an organizational sociologist’s dream: in the same setting with the same technology and the same employees, workers operated in two different forms of organization, shifting within a single day from work that was bureaucratically organized to work that they non-bureaucratically organized themselves (electing their own representatives, pricing their products, and distributing their earnings).

The Hungarian “experiment” was also the perfect setting to put in play the ideas that Boltanski and Thévenot were hammering out in Paris. “Yes, they’re right!” you could almost hear me shout, “There’s not one economy, but many. And I can find them in one factory.” The same for the concept of worth as inextricably economic and moral, which I could elaborate by reuniting the notions of value and values that had been disciplinarily separated to economics and sociology in “Parsons’ Pact.”<sup>4</sup> Or similarly with their useful notion of tests or “proofs of worth” which I could see markedly enacted in the Budapest machine tool makers painful (and never entirely successful) efforts to construct internal payment systems that would fairly allocate their earnings while affirming their self-identities.

If these concepts helped me to analyze the research materials from my ethnographic field work (with János Lukács) in Hungary during the 1980s, they would also serve me well in New York City in the 1990s and early 2000s. With Monique Girard I studied a new media start up in Manhattan’s Silicon Alley, analyzing how its daily functioning and its dynamics over time could be understood as the repeated interchange among distinct orders of worth as programmers, interactive designers, information architects, merchandising specialists, and business strategists disagreed about what was valuable. Similarly, with Daniel Beunza we showed that the search for value in the derivatives trading room of a major international investment bank on Wall Street was organized by the discrete principles of valuation within and across the various arbitrage desks (merger arbitrage, statistical arbitrage, index, convertible bonds, etc.). Hungarian factory, new media startup, Wall Street trading room – each was a setting where multiple economies of worth were at play.

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<sup>4</sup> With the notion of “Parsons’ Pact” I refer to Talcott Parsons’ conversations with his colleagues in Harvard’s Department of Economics when he launched his grand scheme to colonize the social sciences – with the exception of economics. As I expressed it colloquially: You, the economists, study value; we sociologists study values. You study the economy; we study the social relations in which economies are embedded. (Stark 2009, p. 7). Similar to the move in Science and Technology Studies to shift from the Mertonian problem of studying the institutions in which science is embedded to studying the actual practices of scientists at work in the laboratory, I argued that economic sociologists should shift to studying the actual practices of valuation in the economy. The concept of worth is interesting because it connotes values and value, esteem and estimation. See Stark 2009, pp. 7-10.

But as this brief accounting indicates, while I was utilizing the concept of orders of worth, at no point did I operationalize them as instantiations of the famous sextet – market, inspiration, civic, industrial, domestic, and fame – elaborated in *On Justification*. My account of the Hungarian tool makers, for example, naively referred to the three economies inside the socialist factory using the Polanyian triplicate – market, redistribution, reciprocity. That was the formulation I used when I first presented “Work, Worth, and Justice” at the GSPM in December 1986. I remember it well. My field notes were hardly dry (no laptops in those prehistoric times), my text was littered with brackets “[to be completed],” and my voice doubtless conveyed my enthusiasm at the opportunity to give living shape to the ideas that were being discussed in the seminar. Laurent took the floor immediately as I was to take questions. The message to the PhD students was not subtle: I had not understood the theory, my eclectic efforts were misleading, and I should not be emulated. Yes, I was an early adopter. But the first user, it seems, was also the first abuser.

### **Coordination**

It would be a safe estimate that my subsequent conversations with Luc and Laurent numbered in the dozens. Not hundreds, but numerous nonetheless – in Paris or at Wisconsin, Cornell, and Columbia where I was affiliated, as well as at various seminars, workshops, and conferences where we met over the years. I had not given second thought to my abuser status; and, besides, there was work to be done to make the book available to the English-reading audience. After suffering a botched translation, we found an excellent translator (Catherine Porter), and *On Justification* was published in 2006 by Princeton University Press for which I wrote the jacket blurb:

"Boltanski and Thévenot's *On Justification* is one of the most important contributions to the field of economic sociology in the past decade. It does not fit neatly into any of the major theoretical perspectives that currently dominate the field – institutionalism, organizational ecology, network analysis, rational choice, or transaction-cost economics. But precisely because it is so original, it has great potential to chart new territory and enliven debates. The book has already had an enormous impact in France, where it is one of the founding documents of the 'economics of conventions' school. It is sure to have a big impact in sociology in the United States and Britain too. I could list at least twenty major sociologists who have asked me when the book will be translated."

Ten years is not really enough time to make something an historical document, but it is interesting to look back on these remarks in light of what transpired. Rational choice and transaction-cost economics did not have a major influence in sociology (few these days would consider them perspectives contending with the other approaches), and *On Justification* no longer looks like a founding document of the “conventions” school –

because its impact has been so strong that we think of it now as founding something of its own. As my remarks correctly anticipated, it has charted new territory outside the conventional approaches, even while researchers working within the institutionalist, organizational ecology, or network analytic perspectives draw on its insights.

My book, *The Sense of Dissonance: Accounts of Worth in Economic Life*, is rightly regarded as a contribution to the theoretical path outlined by Boltanski and Thévenot. Its introductory chapter, for example, explicitly acknowledges the influence of *On Justification*. But Thévenot was right to warn his PhD students that I was a less than faithful follower – but not because I had misunderstood their argument or because I had failed to construct my argument in terms of their canonical “economies.” Instead, as I also make explicit in *The Sense of Dissonance* (Stark 2009, pp. xiii-xiv and 10-15), the findings from my field research were leading me to take issue with parts of the theory.

For Boltanski and Thévenot, the principles of justification that comprise an order of worth matter because they make it possible for actors to coordinate their actions. In a world of uncertainty,<sup>5</sup> we confront situations. What’s going on here? When the situation is not just any old setting but a *set up* – in which the principles of one order of worth are those most readily available for action – then uncertainty is dispelled and we can act. No longer uncertain about what counts, I can act and, most importantly, we can coordinate our actions. Agreement about which order of worth is operative (typically unstated, but with the means for justification immediately to hand) facilitates coordination. That is the argument. But the field research that forms the substantive chapters of my book and subsequent network analytic research have given me reason to think differently.

There is not much about which economists and sociologists agree. But there is one notion that they hold in common: Friction is bad. In economics, “friction” is the problem to be overcome by “lowered transaction costs” (Williamson 1981). In sociology, coordination is made possible by what is shared by the members of a group or organization – shared values, shared norms, shared expectations, shared understandings. Here too friction is bad. Impediments to coordination can be resolved, in the pop sociology vernacular, “if we all just get together and iron out our differences.” Just as economists emphasize smooth transactions, so organizational theorists of whatever disciplinary stripe laud the smooth transmission of information (Borgatti and Cross 2003; Coleman 1988).

But as my tire dealer and I know, friction is not always a bad thing. On a snowy, icy road I don’t want things to be smooth. Widespread agreement in an organization or in a market can lead to conformity and calamity. Price bubbles, for example, are the market equivalent of a too smooth, icy road. With Sheen Levine and other colleagues, we designed an experimental market to test the effect of ethnic diversity on price bubbles.

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<sup>5</sup> The preoccupation with uncertainty stems from their close involvement with the French group working on the economics of convention. See Stark (2009, pp. 10-15). For more on the Conventions School see Jagd (2007).

Our findings showed that markets where traders were all of the same ethnicity (whether in Singapore or in Texas) exhibited considerably worse bubbles and mispricing. Ethnic diversity, we concluded, disrupts conformity and leads to better information processing (Levine et al 2014).

But friction is not only important for error detection. Across very different settings, the field research for *The Sense of Dissonance* found that action – and, in particular, innovative action – was facilitated not by convergence or agreement on a principle of justification but by the divergence of evaluative principles. In fact, more than the simple coexistence of orders of worth, innovation is promoted by the collision of evaluative principles. It is when things do not fit together comfortably that novel recombinations become thinkable. Disagreement about what's valuable can make for new value propositions. Organizations create wealth when they support dissonant principles of worth.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, whereas the Introduction of *The Sense of Dissonance* opened with the principles of *On Justification*, by the concluding chapter I was considering the idea that we can act in concert when we do not agree about why our actions are valuable. Whereas much sociological thinking holds that coordination is possible because of shared understandings, I wondered whether a kind of innovative coordination was possible *because of our misunderstandings* (Stark 2009 pp. 190-5).

Can misunderstanding be a means of coordination? The question is deliberately provocative. What I intend to provoke are further research questions. What are the limits of dissonance? Can dissonance be managed? What are the social structural (or organizational) conditions under which the friction of misunderstandings can become a productive tension?

This last challenge was the animating research question of a project I recently conducted with my former PhD students Mathijs de Vaan and Balazs Vedres. As in the three ethnographic case studies in my book, here, too, the problem was to study the factors that facilitate innovation when the unit of creativity is a team. But for this study, instead of ethnography we used the tools of historical network analysis.

Our goal was to understand the sociological factors that explain why some creative teams are able to produce a cultural product that is not only inventive but also critically

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<sup>6</sup> The organizational form that promotes this reflexivity is a heterarchy. I take the term from McCulloch (1945). Heterarchy is not simply the absence or flattening of hierarchy but involves, just as importantly, the organized dissonance of rivalrous evaluative principles (see especially, Stark 2009: pp. 19-31). Heterarchies are not necessarily themselves organizations; and, as a social form, they can be quite stable: The U.S. Constitution encribes a heterarchical form in the relationship among the branches of the federal government. Their multiple principles of justification are not an organizational or conceptual hierarchy (Stark 2009, p. 31).



successful. In cultural fields where the difference between “exciting” and “weird” can be razor thin, a product can be innovative without being successful and can be successful without being innovative. To be a game changer, the team must make a product that is not only distinctive but also highly regarded. It must stand out and be deemed outstanding (de Vaan, Vedres, and Stark 2015).

To study this problem, we collected data on every commercially released video game in the global video game industry from 1979 to 2009. The dataset we analyzed comprised approximately 12,500 video games and the career histories of some 140,000 video game developers. Because we had data on every video game we were able to reconstruct, for each team, the histories of all of the developers who worked together on it. Two variables were of greatest interest: one measuring cognitive distance, another measuring group structure. For the former, we could reconstruct for every member on the team the complete set of cognitive (or stylistic) elements to which that developer had been exposed. With this we could compute the cognitive distance among the members of every team. Teams whose members had worked on very similar games would have little difficulty communicating and could understand each other easily; teams whose members had worked on games in the past with very different elements would have greater difficulty understanding each other.

For the social structural variable, we were interested in exploring how a team is not just composed of individuals but is made up of groups, analyzed here as members who had worked together in the past on a prior videogame. Once we had identified the various groups in a team on this basis we could then compute the cognitive distance across groups as well as move to analyze the patterns of ties connecting them (again based on prior co-participation). In the more familiar network analytic terms, groups could be “isolates” or they could be brokered across a “structural hole.” But we also identified a third topographic feature in which groups could be “structurally folded” (Vedres and Stark 2010) where cohesive groups overlapped.

Our findings indicated that game changing success was most likely when cognitively distant groups were structurally folded. Such teams were held in tension: cognitive distance was pulling the groups apart while structural folding was binding them together. The combination was a productive tension that helped to mitigate the two greatest threats facing creative teams with dissonant patterns. On the one side there is the problem in which the initial moment of misunderstanding results in quick dismissal. On the other side is the problem of reaching agreement too quickly – but at the level of the lowest common denominator. Cognitive distance impeded the smooth flow of information, and the resulting eddies and pools were opportunities for departures from existing routines. Meanwhile, the pockets of trust established by structural folding created an atmosphere in which the operative mode was “hold tight” – be patient, tolerate the ambiguity, look for new openings. Teams with these characteristics produced game changing products that were innovative and critically acclaimed.

Returning to the broader theme of the importance of principled agreement, there will, of course, be those who say (as I caricature): It's good to think about alternative views, but when all is said and done, for a group to function effectively it needs a common purpose. There needs to be agreement. A for-profit company, for example, has to be looking to the bottom line. You can't have people acting like it's a kindergarten or an art school.

To this, we can make the rejoinder that companies that pay exclusive focus to the bottom line do so at their peril. It needn't be a kindergarten, but shouldn't inspiring its employees and caring for their well being be important objectives? Similarly, short term profits that interfere with making a great product or that scoff at civic virtues can lead to ruin. Moreover, what's the value of a great product if no one is paying attention? Rather than agreement within a market monoculture, the heterarchy of such evaluative principles can be the course to long term viability.<sup>7</sup> Notably, we can re-express the statements in terms of orders of worth – in order as they appear in this paragraph: market, inspiration, domestic, industrial, civic, and fame – precisely the canonical economies of *On Justification*.

## Valuation

The brevity of my summary of *On Justification* (page 6 above) necessarily did violence to the nuances of its argument. But it had the virtue of focusing on two or three core premises. When discussing Boltanski and Thévenot's views on coordination I pointed to their emphasis on the situation. Although I turn now from coordination to valuation, the emphasis will remain on analyzing the situation. Valuation takes place in situations.

What is the situation? What's going on here? The questions are interesting because they are ones facing the social actors. How do I size up the situation? For the social actor this does not mean just accepting the situation as a given; it can also mean the attempt to make the situation one in which the scales of valuation will measure in units in which my value is sizable (Stark 1996, pp. 1013-14; Stark 2009, pp. 68-72). The questions are also interesting because they are ones that *the analyst* should be asking. In fact, whereas too much of the field of organization studies sees a *methodological institutionalism* as the only alternative to methodological individualism, in fact, there is alternative to both: *methodological situationalism* (Knorr-Cetina 1981; Stark 2009, pp 9-10, 31-33, and 185).

This emphasis on the situation is the key theme running through the chapters in *Moments of Valuation: Exploring Sites of Dissonance*, a volume I recently co-edited with Ariane Berthoin Antal and Michael Hutter. As Michael Hutter and I argued in the introductory essay, valuation always takes place in situations – by which we mean that valuation is 1) spatially localized and 2) temporally marked (Hutter and Stark 2015). Thus,

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<sup>7</sup> The same argument applies not only at the organizational level but at the societal level as well (Stark, 2009, "Reprise," pp. 204-212).

studying valuation *in situ* requires, first, detailed accounts of how the setting is setup as an *assemblage* whether this be in the stagings, equipments, and protocols of public situations such as the court room, the concert hall, or the wine tasting or in the specialized tools, devices and materials of the less public assemblages such as the laboratory, the architectural studio, or the perfume counter.

Second, studying valuation in situations requires detailed analysis of how it takes place in discrete moments of time when evaluative attention is particularly acute: the attentive moment when a dinner guest first sips a glass of wine (Hennion 2015), the instant when a luxury perfume is sprayed into a special device allowing the customer a sense of its *sillage* (the scented trail left by a fragrance wearer) (Trébuchet-Breitwiller 2015), or the moment when the professional art appraiser is cross-examined in the courtroom witness box (Brewer 2015).

Such attentive moments, I want to stress, are critical moments. They are critical, not only because they frequently involve a critic (and, of course, many moments of valuation do not have critics, judges, juries, and reviewers). They are critical, more importantly, because they are moments when the outcome is not fully set up in advance. Critical because outcomes depend on what happens, on who does what when in the critical moment. They are critical moments, above all, because they can be contested. For all its emphasis on *logics of action*, methodological institutionalism has lots of logics but seldom has *action* – and even less *dispute*. A program of methodological situationalism, by contrast, will pay attention to those moments that John Dewey called “troubling and perplexing situations” (Dewey 1998, p. 140) – in the vernacular, “Uh, oh, we have a situation on our hands here” – as it highlights the sites and critical moments of dispute and contestation.

For the further study of valuation, two inter-related research problems seem particularly promising. Let’s refer to the first question as *pricing or prizing*. About pricing economists have written much, and sociologists and anthropologists are now contributing new insights (Beckert, 2001; Guyer, 2009; Muniesa, 2007; and Velthuis 2005). But I turn immediately to “prizing” for it is likely to be more surprising. By prizes one might think first of the Nobel Prizes, Pulitzer Prizes, and Oscar Awards (and more on such competitions below). Here I want to expand the notion of prizing as an activity of appraising (comparable to but different from pricing) even when it does not literally take the form of an award.

Merchants price items in their stores. Reviewers prize a movie by awarding it 3 stars; Robert Parker awards prizes to wines when he scores some higher some lower; and colleges are prized when ranked highly by *US News and World Report* (Sauder and Espeland 2009). Prices might or might not correlate with such prizings, but the important point to note is that the modality of denoting value is not the same in prizing as in pricing. We are surrounded by such ratings and rankings. And they need not be performed by institutionally recognized actors. Consumers issue value judgements when they rate

products; students evaluate their professor's lectures on a scale of 1 to 5; and Airbnb guests and hosts can punish their counterparts by withholding a prized rating. Much prizing is ordinal: take the ubiquity of Top Ten lists. But it need not be. We praise, we appraise, we prize in formats as simple as a binary up or down – like, dislike. We do so often, some of us many times in a day. And as millions and millions of us do it in ways that can be digitally captured and analyzed, such prizings offer new means to register value judgements in the economy.

With the growth of a vast digital repository of prizings and appraisings, much of it time-stamped data, it is now possible to chart these activities of valuation in real time. Whereas economists have long had time-sensitive data on price movements, we now have alternative (not separate but complimentary) data bases on the movements of prizing and appraising that register consumer attachments. These “valuemeters” will need new measures and metrics (Latour and Lepinay 2009: 16). They can be quantified, but these metrics of personal value judgements need not be expressed in terms of money. In fact, we will need to avoid the quick temptation to assess how prizing and appraising translate to pricing. That is the work for corporate (and startup) research departments. The task for economic sociology will be to develop new metrics of what's valuable (the prizings and appraisings that give us access to value judgement) – valuable precisely because they are metrics that are alternatives to prices.

If pricing and prizing is the first promising area for further research in the field of valuation studies, I suggest that we think of the second problem as *competition and competitions*. Like pricing, competition is well-studied as a means of determining value. But increasingly we find organized competitions as an alternative means of addressing the question “What's valuable?” Whereas I stressed that it was important to study situations as potentially contested moments, here I propose that we pay attention to actual *contests*. Thus, alongside market competition as a coordinating mechanism of valuation in the economy we also find organized competitions.<sup>8</sup> In the first type we find actors competing on markets. In the second type, we find contests with entry rules, judges, and prizes granted to the announced winners. On one side, *competition* is an ongoing, seamless, and seemingly endless process; on the other, *competitions* are discrete, bounded in time and location.

In this line of thinking the overarching research questions would be: What is the role of competitions in a competitive society? Does competition need competitions? Are market

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Kreiner's (2012) study of architectural competitions. His finding that judges first select winners and *only then* formulate selection criteria is a valuable insight applicable to an important subset of competitions. Solaroli (2015) studies the World Press Photo Competition, showing that the competition does not simply judge contestants according to stable criteria but instead consecrates evolving standards. McCormick's (2009) study of international music competitions points to the mixed character as contests and rituals.

competition and organized competitions mutually reinforcing or do they express alternative (we might even say “competing”) logics?

Take, for example, the notion of *winning*, so fundamental within the logic of a game or contest. Is winning operative in the logic of the market? Perhaps so, but less because one competitor defeats the other than because one of the rivals has won the customer. Markets, in this view, are not so much a head-to-head battle among contestants or a dyadic matching of buyer and seller but rather a triadic relation in which two compete for valuation by a third. As Georg Simmel observed, “Modern competition, which has been called the struggle of all against all, is after all the struggle of all to gain the attention of all” (Simmel 2008).

This insight, in turn, might prompt us to think about competitions varying according to whether they are head-to-head contests or of the triadic form of winning the favor of judges, jury, or audience. We could also consider whether the organized competition is economic or non-economic. The resulting 2x2 table – head-to-head vs triadic along one axis, economic vs non-economic along the other – is a good start for a research agenda. Whereas one might conventionally map competition to economic activity and *competitions* to the non-economic, research should be attuned to social forms that are migrating from one domain of social life to another. When competition takes place in traditionally non-economic realms (such as hospitals and universities), does this entail the introduction of a market logic? On the other side, we need research that examines the historical patterns and the contemporary effects of the emergence of organized competitions (sustainability rankings or “green” prizes) inside the economy. For example, what is the historical process whereby the notion of a *score* moved from the field of sports to the domain of business? Credit scores are an interesting case, suggesting that price itself is not always a sufficient indicator of value. More generally, what is the social meaning of scores and rankings in business settings where the market logic is overtly dominant? Are rankings simply one more form of market competition? Or do they introduce yet another, perhaps differently configured, social form as a way of introducing alternative values into the market? If rankings are ordered according to revenues or market share or capitalization, perhaps not. But what if the scores and rankings concern environmental and social sustainability? Such rankings could be configured as the introduction of alternative forms of valuation into the economy (see, e.g., Déjean, Gond, and Leca 2004).

Will Davies addresses some of these issues in his recent book, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty & the Logic of Competition* (Davies 2014). Davies points out that early proponents of neo-liberalism such as von Hayek looked to competition as the key principle of justification, and strongly believed that decentralized markets were the best means for promoting a free, competitive society. But Davies does not equate neo-liberalism with advocacy of market competition. He suggests that neo-liberalism evolved as it developed responses to a challenging question:

“[I]f the critical market principle is competition, might there be other, non-market institutions, policies and interventions which might just as easily deliver the specific virtues of competitive practices? For example, in the era of applied neoliberalism, sport very often served as a better manifestation of the market ethos than markets themselves, with politicians and business leaders defending economic inequality through analogies to sporting contests and ‘talent.’ League tables are another way of giving empirical and technical form to the competitive market ideal. Is market competition necessary to deliver competitiveness? (Davies, 2014, pp. 43-4).

Davies argues that later neo-liberals such as Ronald Coase and others answered this question by separating markets and competition. Competition remained the legitimating principle, but it could be found in social and organizational forms that were not markets. In Davies’ view, for these later economists and policy advocates, the key analytic concept was neither market competition nor organized competitions but a more generalized notion of competition as *competitiveness*.

In which direction will sociology move? One course has already been taken. It finds competition in every domain. Not as a principle of justification, competition nonetheless becomes the key to analyze social dynamics because any field can be assumed to be one of competitive struggle whether that be the economy, law, science, politics, or the arts. Pierre Bourdieu was certainly not a neo-liberal, but among social theorists he went the furthest to place a generalized notion of competition at the center of his theory. My suggestion to examine the complex relationship between market competition and organized competitions steps back from Bourdieu’s approach. In place of assuming competitiveness as a part of the human condition and of competition as occurring in every field, it proposes to examine the changing historical relationship between competition and competitions and to study variation in the specific and discrete practices of contest and contestation.

## **Conclusion**

The reader now faces a “critical moment” not unlike those moments of judgment I discussed earlier in this essay. I mean, of course, how do you assess the value of this essay as a contribution to a volume, *Justification, Evaluation and Critique in the Study of Organizations*? Was it worth it? Some readers might read the essay itself as a critical moment, an opportunity to pass critical judgment about *On Justification*, the book from which it takes its point of departure. That was not my intention.

But who am I, who earlier championed misunderstanding, to object to that misunderstanding? Accepting that misunderstanding for this critical moment, we should reflect on the explicit or implicit order of worth that the author was attempting to mobilize in his assessment. Reflecting on the essay, we can see that the proofs of worth were in the order of the generative as I pointed to ways in which *On Justification*

stimulated several decades of work and continues to provoke my research practice. It is in such a pragmatist spirit that I invite you to use the same frame in assessing this essay. I can only hope that your misunderstandings will be fruitful. That is, the proof of its value will be in the questions it provokes.

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