
books in REVIEW

THOMAS STORCK

ECONOMICS IS NOT CHEMISTRY

The Handbook of Economic Sociology, 2nd ed. Edited by Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg. Princeton University Press. 736 pages. \$49.95.

Although the foundations of Catholic social teaching lie much deeper than concerns about economic justice, economic questions do loom large in any consideration of the Church's social doctrine. Unfortunately, many Catholics are predisposed to a negative view of Catholic social teaching because the discipline of economics, as it has largely developed since the late-18th century, has constructed a world-

view that believes that human behavior operates according to quasi-mechanical laws. These "laws" find their purest expression in a free-market economy. Thus, any attempt to challenge these laws — even by one's Church — is met with hostility.

But free-market economists have not been content solely to defend their hegemonic worldview. Rather, they have sought to morph their discipline into an architectonic "science" of human behavior, and at least since the 1960s have tried to explain such diverse behaviors as marriage and divorce or childbearing with the tools and techniques borrowed from their analysis of man's buying and selling. In so doing, economists have consciously tried to escape from the category of the social sciences and emulate, as much as they can, the natural sciences. They have tried to present economics as a science that is able to *predict* human behavior, not simply describe it. To be counted with physics and chemistry — and not with sociology — has been their goal.

But there are those, including some of the most well-known writers of the 20th century, such as Max Weber, Richard Tawney, Karl Polanyi, and Christopher Dawson, who see economic activity as a *part* of man's life. While most economists view economic conduct as a separate department of human behavior with its own laws or, even worse, see all of human life as simply an extension of economic behavior, these sociologists and historians have looked upon economics as a descriptive discipline, more akin to sociology or history than physics, and understand economic activity as embedded in man's social life. Their vision is known as *economic sociology*. The present volume, consisting of 30 chapters presenting various aspects of economic sociology, is an

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up-to-date synthesis of this field.

Economic sociologists apply “the frames of reference, variables, and explanatory models of sociology to that complex of activities which is concerned with the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of scarce goods and services.” According to “mainstream economics, actions are constrained by tastes and by the scarcity of resources, including technology. Once these are known, it is in principle possible to predict the actor’s behavior, since he...will always try to maximize utility or profit. The active influence of other persons and groups, as well as the influence of institutional structures, is set to one side.” So while “the analytic starting point of economics is the individual; the analytic starting points of economic sociology are typically groups, institutions, and society.” Thus, contrary to free-market theory, economic sociologists argue that individuals rarely act alone to maximize their personal utility. Rather, we all act according to certain group norms, some of us more than others. As one of the authors in this volume puts it, “Whether you are running a farm in Croatia or in Sicily matters quite a bit for how you will behave. We cannot predict much about how you will run a railroad in Cleveland without knowing whether the year is 1880 or 1980.” More pointedly, another author, discussing economic change in post-communist Europe, notes, “Devising new formal rules to institute market economies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has had only limited success; this has pointed to the intractable nature of social arrangements embedded in interpersonal ties, cultural beliefs, norms, and old regime institutional arrangements studied by

economic sociologists.”

Economic behavior is always conditioned by society’s laws, as well as by cultural preferences and traditions. There is no such thing as purely “natural” economic behavior. This is not to say that such economic dispositions as the desire to maximize gain or the tendency toward price equilibrium between buyer and seller do not exist. But such dispositions exist *within* the framework of laws, customs, institutions, and other factors that shape how economic motives and tendencies express themselves.

I commend the editors at Princeton University Press for one particular thing. In the two essays that discuss the economies of the ancient world, the authors use the abbreviations B.C. and A.D., instead of B.C.E. and C.E. To find the traditional usage in a secular academic text is so unusual today that it calls for congratulations. Apparently, political correctness has not yet won a total victory!

In sum, this volume demonstrates that defenders of the Church’s social doctrine need not run for cover whenever economists

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tell us that human society functions more or less like a machine. Rather, both human freedom and institutional complexity allow ample room for adjusting economic regimes to harmonize with the Gospel. The sooner Catholics understand that the worldview of most free-market economists is incomplete, the sooner we can rededicate ourselves to the Church's social apostolate without any lingering fears that we are attempting something unnatural and inherently impossible. ■

briefly reviewed

While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West from Within. By Bruce Bawer. *Doubleday*. 256 pages. \$23.95.

Menace in Europe: Why the Continent's Crisis Is America's, Too. By Claire Berlinski. *Crown Forum*. 288 pages. \$25.95.

Appearances can be deceiving when dealing with those who invest great energy in constructing a façade of sophistication to cloak over the approaching darkness in their own corner of the world. The Europe that so humbly sees itself as the hallmark of civilization is collapsing into the void of its own emptiness. Two books document how Islam is rising to fill that void: Bawer's *While Europe Slept* and Berlinski's *Menace in Europe*.

Both books hit on the same theme: Europe is unable to deal with militant Islam. The post-modern

doctrine of tolerance that self-proclaimed "enlightened thinkers" have subscribed to is found impotent in the face of Muslims who actually believe something.

The Christian Faith is barely existent on the Continent, much less capable of handling a foe like the one now on its doorstep. Nationalism has been shoved underground and repressed. While many nations — notably Germany — have tragic histories with nationalism, this is a force of human history that can't be suppressed. It will emerge in either a healthy way or a pagan way. By choosing their current path of suppression, Europe has all but ensured it will be the latter. Europe cannot turn to the Faith it has spurned, or to a healthy nationalism in its hour of crisis.

Europe's rejection of the Christian Faith has placed it in a terrible bind. Its population is dying due to the birth dearth, its declining workforce incapable of supporting expansive welfare-state policies. With Muslim immigration the only viable alternative, Europe's choice is to either slash its welfare state and risk major civil unrest, or import more immigrants who have no intention of assimilating — and risk major civil unrest.

Muslim immigrants have already made a political impact. Bawer, an active homosexual, writes disapprovingly how the British Parliament dropped "gays" from an anti-discrimination bill that included Muslims. Parliament feared offending Muslims with such an association. Given that Britain's estimated "gay" population still outstrips the Muslims, Bawer wonders what will happen once Islam inevitably catches up. Furthermore, the Islamic rise has led to a renewal of anti-

Semitism. The Continent's record on this is not exactly sterling, and both books document the renewed outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence.

It's been said the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result. By this measuring stick, Europe has lost its mind. Even though appeasement has never worked before, Europeans are determined to try it again.

Bawer's book exposes an irony in the European landscape. The author left the U.S. for Europe primarily to live in a culture "tolerant" of his homosexual lifestyle — and instead found something quite different developing. The irony is that after decades of militant homosexuals proclaiming everyone opposed to their lifestyle as "homophobic" or "hateful," with militant Islam they're finally staring the real thing in the face. Even Bawer was forced to concede that whatever distaste he had for Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and the rest of the Religious Right, they'd never actually advocated *executing* him.

Bawer's prescriptions also point to the Catholic conundrum. He recognizes that tolerance itself is an empty vessel — or "self-extinguishing," to borrow a phrase that Berlinski uses. Bawer places himself behind strong assimilative measures that involve recognition of same-sex relationships as acceptable. When one considers this in light of the fact that it was support from Muslim nations that helped John Paul II ward off Clinton Administration-led efforts to make abortion an international human right at the 1994 UN conference in Cairo, it's enough to make one wonder which side really represents the bigger threat to the Catholic world.