**Economic and Financial Sociology Group Assignments – Proposed General Themes**

**1 – Gray and Illegal Markets under Scrutiny**

“The very limited attention to illegal markets in economic sociology is (…) an important failure because of the theoretical insights that might be gained from the study of these markets. Ignoring illegal markets excludes an important source of variance from scholarship on markets, foreclosing theoretical advances in the understanding of legal markets. Most importantly, illegality deprives actors of the legal protection of property rights provided by the state for legal market transactions and limits their access to business strategies and organizational forms. ‘In the absence of a stable legal framework and credible enforcement of contracts, longterm productive investment becomes impossible’ (…). What consequences for the functioning and organization of markets arise when there is a lack of legal protection for market actors, the threat of legal prosecution of market participants due to their market activities, and the absence of social legitimacy for the exchange? Answering these questions by investigating illegal markets helps us to understand more fully the significance of property rights and law enforcement in the operation of markets and to identify ‘which informal institutions effectively motivate relevant economic outcomes’”. (Jens Beckert)

Possible Axes to Explore: Characterization and analysis of some gray or black markets, namely organs, children, counterfeit goods, prostitution, protected species, drugs, weapons.

**2 – Creating Value as a source of Marketization**

“Recent studies of social and economic life have exhibited a renewed interest in questions of value and valuation (…). One reason for this is the perception that the economic value-form now incorporates and depends to an ever greater extent upon communicational and relational as well as formally productive forms of work (…). Such ‘immaterial’ forms of labour are recognized to extend to consumer or public activity, making social relations and practices outside the sphere of paid employment a potential source of economic value (…). At the same time, observers have noted an intensification of the integration of ethical or social concerns into the operation of capitalist organizations. In this view, the rise of ‘socially sensitive’ accounting procedures (…) and an alleged ‘economization of morality’ (…) are understood as part of a tendency for critiques based upon non-instrumental or anti-capitalist values to be absorbed into, and used to reinvigorate, capitalist economies”. (Liz Moor)

Possible Axes to Explore: How commodities are created and given value. Regimes of value based on variables not strictly economic. Connections between gifts and commodities. Auctions as instruments for the establishment of value.

**3 – Making Ends Meet – Credit to the Poor after the Crisis**

“Now, one might ask why should pawnshops be of any (…) interest? You get a loan and you pay it back with interest: basic economics. Yet, despite seeming boring for economists, on closer inspection the pawnshops do turn out to be interesting for anthropologists – and this for at least two reasons. Firstly, the pawnshop is a place where some of the radical conflicts (…) are played out openly and where the adversities facing people in this environment are evident. People who are often in financial difficulty, the customers, interact with people who are relatively well off – i.e. the pawnbrokers – in a direct face-to-face encounter at a particular place. The potentially tense nature of this encounter makes the pawnshop a privileged place to gain insights into the new tensions within (…) society and, most importantly, into the ways in which such tensions are handled and perceived locally or, if you wish, ‘culturally’. Secondly, and not unrelated, the pawnshop provides us with a possibility to explore a classic theme within anthropology: the ways in which persons, things and intentions are bound up with each other through exchange. At the pawnshop, people might leave what are very personal belongings, such as inherited jewellery, and they might never see these belongings again. While some people try to sustain the idea of pawnshop activities as business-as-usual, it is also a business where the separation between monetary flow and ‘personal flow’ cannot easily be sustained, and where the energy of souls and the spirit of things – even money – easily get entangled”. (Lars Højer)

Possible Axes to Explore: How the economic crisis affects the credit to the poor. Analysis of different means, instruments and institutions involved in granting credit to the poor. New forms of pawning in modern societies.

**4 – Cultural Industries in Contemporary Capitalist Societies**

“Both sociological and economic approaches to the arts have encouraged the conception of fine art as a ‘‘commodity’’ no different than popular culture. But in fact, it has a far different audience (smaller, more elite), and a greater capacity to accurately estimate its costs and the flows of incoming revenue. Although the fine arts (fortunately) fall short of meeting my definition of cultural ‘‘products’’ and ‘‘industries’’—as the most entrepreneurial, speculative segments of the industry, and far more committed to the size of the financial return than to the quality of the productions which yield it—the same rolesets are analytically operative: artists and managers at the input stages, and organizations producing and distributing their output (classical music, monographs, art films). With the understanding that maximal profits reign less as the organizational goal in these settings (for nonprofits breaking even is cause for celebration), and that aesthetic content has clearer standards (which are taken more seriously than for pop culture), I am pleased to see the cultural industry concept extended to the nonprofit (more elite) sectors of the study of cultural organization. For consumers, the key feature common to both sectors remains the greater aesthetic value of the cultural productions than for more utilitarian commodities, such as Band-Aids. The extension of the cultural industry concept in this way suggests a continuum from cultural to utilitarian usage of many consumer products, enabling its extension to such additional settings as gourmet food, professional sports, and symphony orchestras”. (Paul Hirsch)

Possible Axes to Explore: Analysis of particular cultural industries (opera, ballet, museums, pop music, etc) marking the specificities and the commonalities with other more traditional industries.

**5 – Emotions as Framing Devices of Economic Activities**

“Emotions, rather than gone from sociological and economic analysis, have been more aptly in disciplinary exile. Multiple signs suggest that emotions are re-entering sociological and economic analysis. In the last few years, interest in emotions has flourished among sociologists who usually place their work on the macro rather than the micro level of analysis**.** In his classic article, Collins (1981) argued that interactions on the ritual and social level were marketplaces where emotional and cultural resources provided the media of exchange. Repeated positive interactions within a group produced emotional solidarity and positive currency; conversely, negative interactions devalued currency. Collins was theorizing the emotional mechanisms that bridged the micro and macro level of analysis. He was among the first in a theoretical field that others are joining The return of emotion is, in part an attempt to counter the growing salience of rational choice and formal economic models in both political science and sociology; and in part, fueled by real world problems such as ethnic cleansing, addiction, greed, altruism. Theories that exclude the affective dimension of social life have difficulty explaining individual or collective behaviors that rationality does not seem to govern”. (Mabel Berezin)

Possible Axes to Explore: How emotions may connect with moral panics and runs to the banks. The role of emotions in the creation of product hypes. How fear, anguish, disgust or revenge can help to create economic trends and movements in supply and demand.

**6 – DIY, Maker Revolutions and Prosumption**

“First, there is the blurring or implosion of consumption and production, what has been termed ‘prosumption’ (…). Examples include consumers doing work previously done by paid employees in self-service restaurants and supermarkets, such as clearing tables and selecting food. In digital worlds, prosumption includes consumers and producers co-creating value for products through self-generated content (what Castells (2010) calls ‘mass self-communication’), such as videos posted for free consumption or paid for by adverts and consumer reviews of music, film and books written on retailer sites for free. Because of these multiple examples, Ritzer (2014) refers to the Internet as the natural ‘home’ of prosumption today. He also weighs up whether we can interpret prosumption theoretically as ‘the eternal return of the same, a revolutionary new development, or. . . continuous with earlier developments’ before concluding that it is all three, being ‘simultaneously, something that is primal, ancient, recent, new, and even revolutionary”. (Sally Eden)

Possible Axes to Explore: The blurring of traditional boundaries between producers and consumers. Crisis in professions. Declines of trust in professional bodies. A new set of individuals that switch roles easily. Consequences for the Economy.

**7 – Crypto Currencies and the Emergence of New Ways to think About Money**

“In October 2008, a username on the Cryptography Mailing list posted a white paper detailing the workings of a new peer-to-peer, pseudonymous digital currency called Bitcoin (…). The username Satoshi Nakamoto – most probably a pseudonym itself, for one or more persons – posted the code for software that would enable the production and trade of bitcoins1 in January 2009. At first, it seemed mostly like an interesting novel way to apply certain cryptographic techniques. One BTC cost €0.0005, and new ones were introduced rapidly and easily for home computation. By early September 2013, 1 BTC was worth around €100 – two hundred thousand times the initial worth.2 The currency had already been through several cycles of boom and bust (but with a clear upwards general trend), and the market cap of the Bitcoin trade had grown to more than €1.2 billion.3 Even if this is measly compared to the €3 trillion of more established currencies that is traded daily (Bank for International Settlements 2010), this new currency has received a lot of attention and is garnering interest from traders, technophiles, and utopian anarchists alike. Meanwhile, the creator(s) disappeared without ever revealing the actual identity behind the moniker of Satoshi Nakamoto”. (Henrik Karlstrøm)

Possible Axes to Explore: Relating money with state sovereignty. Possible effects of digital currencies. Social dimensions of alternative currencies. Designing new forms of money.

**8 – Affiliation, Status and Quality and other Industry Creating Mechanisms in Advanced Societies**

“It is well accepted that consumers' expectations about the quality of a producer's products determine-at least in part-the flow of payments and resources that the producer receives, but what determines such expectations in the first place? The quality of past offerings certainly provides one source of expectations. Economic models of reputation, for example, often emphasize the importance of past quality (…), as do some sociological models (…). Expectations about quality also derive from affiliations that market actors develop through their exchange relations. As market actors enter into exchanges with other actors, they often become identified with one another. For example, when a firm enters into an ongoing exchange relation with an auditor, the auditor's status affects how others perceive the firm (…). Similarly, when a hospital establishes and publicizes relations with a well-respected agency or do-nor group, it increases the perceived quality of its services (…). And when a young firm affiliates with a more established community group or other well-known organization, it may increase the perceived legitimacy of its activities and thus its chances of survival (…). One conception of the market that draws attention to both past demonstrations of quality and affiliations as a basis for expectations is the status-based model of market competition (…). According to this model, a market actor's status has a dual foundation in both its past demonstrations of quality and the status of its exchange partners. The actor's own status, in turn, has a positive impact on a number of market outcomes, such as market share (…), the spread between costs and price (…), influence over the direction of technological innovation (…), and the reactions of the financial community“. (Joel Podolny)

Possible Axes to Explore: Debating quality issues in modern markets. How affiliation, social capital and status may overcome the intrinsic categories of products in a market. The roles of counselling, therapy and litigation in contemporary markets.

**9 – The Triumph of Debt – The Homo Debitor**

“In the wake of the global financial crisis, governments have mainly relied on one response: pushing forward the neoliberal agenda (…). Facing a crisis of private debt, public authorities have provided enormous subsidies to corporations (i.e. bailouts) while pursuing what is now known as ‘austerity’ through tight fiscal policy, tax reductions and privatization as well as reforms and in some cases dismantling of welfare programmes. Over only a few years, the fundamental interplay between private debt, public finance and sovereign debt has come to the forefront of public debates. At the same time, the political economy of these processes and their subjective and moral roots remain poorly understood. With *The Making of the Indebted Man*, Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) redresses this neglect via a stimulating essay which provides a powerful historical and theoretical analysis of the indebted condition. Recently translated from its 2011 French edition, this book reveals the nature of the power relation between creditors and debtors as well as the processes through which the subjectivity of the indebted is produced. According to Lazzarato, the pervasive power of credit depends on the creation of a subject – the ‘*homo debitor*’ – morally invested in the promise to repay debt and the guilt this requires. While the long-term genealogy of the creditor–debtor relationship dates back to the early history of Christianity and the emergence of capitalism, *The Making of the* *Indebted Man* suggests that the creditor–debtor relationship gained its structuring power with the birth of neoliberalism in the 1970s”. (Mathieu Charbonneau)

Possible Axes to Explore: Causes and Effects of an Economy of Debt. The role played by the ideologies of leverage and shareholder valuation. Projecting credits and debts into the future.

**10 – From Property to The Economy of Free**

“Property is ubiquitous. The idea of private property suffuses classic liberal thought. Property rights lie at the intersection of law, economy, the state, and culture. For example, intellectual property rights (IPR) concern leading-sector industries like biotechnology and computers; property constitutes the foundation for many kinds of inequality; and property rights preoccupy scholars studying the transition economies of Eastern and Central Europe. And yet contemporary sociology has said much less about property than its centrality warrants, largely ceding the topic to economics and law. Ownership involves socially recognized economic rights. Property is that over which such rights obtain, and owners are those who possess the rights. In a sense, property concerns the dyadic relationship between people and things. Sir William Blackstone famously defined property as: “. . . that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe” (…). His definition poses private ownership as an individual’s exclusive control over property. Yet despite its ideological power, this dyadic conception misses the social and political dimensions of property (…). The right to control, govern, and exploit things entails the power to influence, govern, and exploit people (Roemer 1989). Owners of productive assets can prevent nonowners from using them, and thereby shape nonowners’ life-chances. Furthermore, what separates ownership from mere possession is the fact that others recognize ownership rights, either directly or through a formal legal system. If private property appears to be dyadic, in reality it always involves triadic relationships.” (Bruce Carruthers)

Possible Axes to Explore: The centrality of Property in Modern Capitalism. Threats to the property regimes (mainly in the areas of IPR). What would be the consequences of the generalization of the idea of free?

**Other Topics**

* **Mpesa and the Revolutions in the uses of Money**
* **The Funeral Industry**
* **Luxury Goods and Conspicuous Consumption**
* **Ratings, Rankings and Lists**
* **Programmed Obsolescence**
* **The Market for Organs**
* **The Gift Economy and the Economies of Celebration**
* **The Cultural Wealth of Nations**
* **Auctions and the creation of Value**
* **The Socio-Economy of Happiness**
* **The Doping Markets**
* **The Porn Industry**