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Between Ignorance and Knowledge: Studies on the Sociology of Finance

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Introduction of the special issue *Between Ignorance and Knowledge: Studies on the Sociology of Finance*
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This Special Issue brings together some qualitative studies on finance and financialization conducted at the intersection between expert systems and «non-expert» people. These analyses aim to contribute to the field of financial studies by bringing to light the «relational work» (Zelizer, 1994) that underlies financial practices and exchanges. Each contribution illuminates the ways in which power, the sharing of information, moral judgements, differing expected behaviors, representations of the future, and the structuring of inequalities - among other dynamics - both shape these practices and are shaped by them. From this perspective, finance is not only a crucial field of analysis per se, but it also represents an important entry point for understanding wider societal issues: it is through the study of financial relationships that we can further our knowledge of social processes of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary societies.

The aim of this opening article is to introduce the reader to the topic by offering a compass for navigating contemporary academic debates on the sociology of finance, on the one hand, and, on the other, for placing these in relation to broader societal issues such as the social construction of the boundary between ignorance and knowledge.

The financial market as a social structure became the focus of social science research in the 1980s, when several authors began to include social dynamics in their explanation of financial processes (Adler, Adler, 1984; Abolafia, Kilduff, 1988; Uzzi, 1999). However, it was only in the following decade that the social and cultural embeddedness of these markets was analyzed from different perspectives (Swedberg, 2005). Studies conducted in France and the UK showed the performative nature of economic theories, revealing the far-from-neutral character of financial practices (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie, Millo, 2003; Callon

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et al., 2007). In this context, in the late 1990s and early 2000s emerged the Social Studies of Finance (SSF) research program, whose aim was to «address a diversity of financial fieldwork and related theoretical questions» (Chambost *et al.*, 2019). The program developed an interdisciplinary approach based on the idea that the social sciences have much to contribute to a field that appeared to be dominated by a single paradigm based on economic rationality, logical structures of thought that bring objectivity and neutrality to financial transactions, and self-regulation, i.e., functioning without the need for political intervention. Drawing on years of empirical analysis of financial practices, SSF scholars have debunked two key assumptions of this paradigm: the objectivity of financial markets and their independence from politics and policy.

The SSF approach looks specifically at cultural embeddedness of contemporary finance, aiming to denaturalize it and to reveal how it really works. The SSF perspective dismantles the prevalent stereotypes and representations found in established narratives, and focuses instead on practices, instruments and cognitive dimensions of finance, which owes much to, and interconnects with, the Sociology of Science (Knorr Cetina, Preda, 2001). Additionally, the approach has a strong ethnographic sensitivity, as Karin Knorr Cetina recalls in a recent interview:

The idea that it was important to go to a lab, for example, and not to simply interview scientists, somewhere, you had to go to the site where things are happening (...) you are not approaching finance from a political economy or critical theory standpoint, but from a standpoint of more detached observation and that you investigate participants' actions and practices (Preda, Knorr-Cetina, 2021, p. 193).

These are analyses that, due to the nature of the research questions, can only be approached from a theoretical and methodological standpoint that gives value to micro dynamics:

The fascinating combination we have here is that we have something going on that's very large scale, not in terms of numbers of people involved, but in terms of effect and impact and volume of trading as well as geographical scale, that's very large scale and really global, but it can and should be studied from a micro sociological perspective because that's uniquely adequate. With macro sociology, you shift the perspective (...) but as long as you are interested in the market as a system of practice and as a particular structural form in society, you need micro sociology to study that both methodologically and theoretically (Preda, Knorr-Cetina 2021, p. 195).

This analytical perspective is interested in capturing the intersubjectivity among actors involved in financial exchanges: the market is understood as an epistemic object. The focus is on the construction of a shared reality among actors involved, not only in face-to-face interactions, but also face-to-screen interactions, as they are connected through ICT (Knorr Cetina, 1997; Knorr-Cetina, Bruegger, 2002).

Technology also plays an important role in another way: technological devices connect stock traders from one side of the globe to the other, but they also allow a bank employee to connect to databases and gather digital information

about the customer in front of him, particularly his financial record. In this hybrid reality, blending the analogic and the digital, human action must juggle the possibilities and limitations imposed by the software. Moreover, since such software is designed by human actors and is situated in time and space, the way it is programmed incorporates norms and values, as well as stereotypes and prejudices, of dominant social groups, continuing to perpetuate inequalities already present in the contexts where they are embedded.

Following this approach, European studies over the past twenty years have shown how financial tools and devices are social objects and often represent ideologies supported by power groups in the contemporary contest of global markets (Sassen, 2014). In the case of finance, the critique of neoliberal economic theory is of greatest interest. Embodied in tools, devices and rules, economic theory influences financial practices and justifies the unequal distribution of wealth, both in the case of financial markets and in other spheres. Mathematical and statistical tools are presumed to be the best political and moral methods for guaranteeing market efficiency; these include how prices are formed in the market, the evaluation of default risk, and the assessment of people creditworthiness, based on standard applications of algorithms in decision-making processes. Therefore, financial crises are often explained by mainstream economic theory as disruptions caused by the misapplication of devices and standard procedures, or by individual «irrational» decisions. In contrast to this view, SSF analyses have shown how different rationalities, emotional, and moral elements come into play in financial exchange, not «dirtying» their mechanisms but rather supporting their successful outcomes (Godechot, 2001). SSF have also shown that financial operators are not atomistic economic agents, but rather social actors embedded in social and cultural contexts in which their actions have to be situated to be fully understood.

In this direction, alongside the SSF approach, studies have developed from French critical sociology as early as 1963, when Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, and Jean-Claude Chamboredon coauthored a pioneering work on the moral and social dimension of financial relationships. In the last decade, recent studies, especially from the French school, have made significant contributions to the study of forms of social inclusion and exclusion through financial dynamics. These studies, alongside technological tools and architectures of the markets, (re)discover the role of power and privilege in financial interactions:

(these studies) underlines the importance of understanding intersecting lines of difference and inequality – of class and rank, race and status, gender and sexuality, education and family background – that unite and divide the persons who populate financial markets (...). For a field that still, at times, takes financial calculation for granted, it remains important to remember that the seeming neutrality of the particular knowledges that ground such calculation is itself a product of patterned relations of power and privilege (Godechot, 2016, p. 410).

Moreover, the denaturalization of financial techniques and discourses that enable the foregrounding of cultural, material, and political dimensions, is relevant for focusing on the so called financialization of everyday life (Langley, 2008; Martin, 2002). This refers to the impact of finance on people's daily lives, which can be understood both in terms of resources, such as the need for supplementary pensions schemes for new generations and the increase in private debt, as well as in cognitive terms, such as the making of instrumental calculations even in spheres of life that are not strictly economic (van der Zwan, 2014). Analyses in this field draw upon Foucauldian approaches to «governmentality» by focusing on the ways in which institutions govern social actors under neoliberalism. On the other hand, ethnographies of domestic accounting practices have brought to light the everyday practices of household management of financial instruments, taking into account «financial cultures» and presenting very interesting insights on the so-called «lay knowledge» possessed by non-expert actors (Perrin-Heredia, 2011; Lazarus, 2009; Pellandini-Simányi *et al.*, 2015; Ossandón, 2017; Villarreal *et al.*, 2018).

The most recent proposals in the European scholarship on the relationship between individuals and finance emphasize the need for an integrated look at different elements, including the role of technology, ethnographies of expert and nonexpert practices, and the study of «governmentality» mechanisms (Ossandón *et al.*, 2022; Lazarus, 2022). This is a field where the dialogue between empirical analyses and literature is expected to be particularly lively and of special interest. This special issue stems from the observation that the issue of knowledge is central and needs to be revived and deepened in order to capture the dynamics involved in the relationship between financial system, expert and technology-intensive systems, and citizens understood as nonexpert actors.

Within this general frame developed by the contributions of the social sciences to the study of finance and processes of financialization, the production and the effects of socially produced knowledge play a crucial role. The social construction of both knowledge and ignorance is indeed a crucial theme in contemporary scientific and public debate more generally (Eyal, 2019). It is enough to recall that the last decades have been characterized by important and extensive debates on the relationship between *truth*, *science* and *policy* –from the U.S. Secretary of State showing a false vial «proving» the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003, to the periodic disputes around vaccinations, from the technocratic utopias of «algorithmic governance» to the contested Covid-19 governance, up to Trump's denial of his electoral defeat in 2021 – an «epistemic crisis» appears to be characteristic of our societies (Jasanoff, 2004). The issue is not new in the social sciences: it is the foundational issue of the Sociology of Knowledge and the basis of philosophical debates throughout history in different cultural contexts, according to a great variety of epistemologies (de Sousa Santos, 2014). It is therefore no surprise that it has been discussed and analysed in the field of finance studies as well. As we have already said, its relevance for understanding contemporary financial practices has been especially explored, from different angles, with the aim of tackling the idea of financial markets as a space governed by perfect rationality and political

neutrality. It is worth mentioning that this contestation has not been limited to the scientific field, but, on the contrary, has produced major social and political crises. All over the world, social and political movements have questioned the link between financial institutions (and their financial knowledge) and economic and political power, while political and financial elites have fought for protecting financial markets from new regulations that would force big financial players to enact higher transparency and accountability, and/or be affected by increase fiscal pressure (Mirowski, 2013). This historical context has therefore greatly contributed to the increase of scientific interest in finance in general, and in the link between finance, knowledge, and ignorance in particular.

The theoretical approach introduced in this Special Issue and which argues for the relevance of issue of knowledge/ignorance in finance studies is that of Ignorance Studies, which has been developed in the last fifteen years from the seminal work of historians of science Proctor and Schiebinger (2008), even if their genealogy can be traced to the history of social science, from Simmel's (1906) reflections on secrecy to the debate triggered by Beck's work on uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992). The main theoretical purpose of Ignorance Studies is an attempt to overcome the dominant, *negative* conception of ignorance, according to which ignorance is (a) in descriptive terms, fundamentally connected to absence and lacking (namely to a lack of knowledge), and it is therefore an empty object in itself; (b) in normative terms, essentially problematic and disempowering, producing negative effects on individuals and on society in general. As we shall see, according to Ignorance Studies scholars, ignorance should be looked at in descriptive terms as a complex, diverse phenomenon in itself, and, in normative terms, could even present emancipative potential.

In the literature, ignorance is defined in very different ways, which risk making it too broad and vague an object for theoretical and empirical research. Although most of studies cited here are empirical in nature, often collected in edited volumes and/or special issue (Bovensiepen, Pelkmans, 2020; Kelly, McGoey, 2018; Hair *et al.*, 2012), and a handbook on the approach has been published (Gross, McGoey, 2015), a recent contribution in the field of Anthropology helps to identify three strands of literature (Barbier *et al.*, 2021).

First, they find works that have followed the above-mentioned foundational book edited by Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) and have developed the conceptual framework of *agnotology*, conceived as the reverse of *epistemology* and devoted to the study of the «willful production and transmission of ignorance» (*ibidem*). Here we find the greatest number of contributions, focusing on conflicts of interest in the production of knowledge and on the ways in which ignorance is willfully produced. Abundance and redundancy play here a crucial role. In particular, authors show and discuss the redundant production and dissemination of intentionally biased research aimed at contesting and discrediting existing consensus within the scientific community on a given issue. We have here what has become known as the «merchants of doubts» strategy, popularized by historians of science Oreskes and Conaway's (2011) research on how powerful multi-national companies have funded research aimed at weakening the wide scientific consensus around the impact of their activities on human

health and the environment. Authors in this strand of literature therefore use concepts like «strategic unknowns» (McGoey, 2012) and «strategic ignorance» for «any actions which mobilize, manufacture or exploit unknowns in a wider environment to avoid liability for earlier actions» but also those which «magnify unknowns in an offensive, rather than defensive ways, to generate support for future political initiatives» (McGoey, 2019, p. 3).

Agnotology has informed both studies on the financial sector (Davies, McGoey, 2012; Mirowski, 2013), but also on bureaucracy (see Graeber, 2012, for an anthropological perspective), policymaking (see Paul, Haddad, 2019, for a political science perspective), and urban studies and planning (see Slater, 2021, for a geographical perspective).

Slater's work is particularly relevant for our argument because it brings a focus on the academic production of ignorance, its origins and consequences, and on the significance of developing critical perspectives on highly relevant societal issues. On the one hand, it offers a brilliant critique of the class – and racially – biased categories through which contemporary urban complexity and transformations are framed in mainstream urban studies; on the other, it shows the social origins of such biases, offering interesting insights for our focus on finance. The author denounces the extensive and superficial use of notions of «urban regeneration», «placemaking», «neighborhood effect» as a consequence of the dominance of policy-driven research dominated by a small number of university departments and think-tanks at the expense of creative research-based ideas and policies, often offering «scientific» cover to partisan politics and policies. On a theoretical level, this leads Slater to connect agnotology to the Bourdieusian notion of *heteronomy*, i.e., the growing influence of external agents on the field of knowledge production. These can be both market and/or State agents, imposing their own problems and languages over those of social sciences and social scientist. This imposition is made possible by the structurally unequal distribution of power in society and, more specifically, by the decreasing financial capacity and autonomy of public universities. The *oracular power* of experts, criticized by McGoey (2019), is echoed here by the Bourdieusian notion of *symbolic power*, i.e., the power to describe and performatively transform social reality (Bourdieu, 1982). These two declensions of power are helpful for understanding the actions performed by algorithms in supporting decision-making processes that have the power of drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (see Moiso, 2023, *infra*).

This approach can also be usefully applied to the Italian context, where heteronomy proves to be very strong in the field of welfare policies and research (Caselli, 2022), and is also relevant in the sub-field of financial education, where policy-driven, mainstream approaches have increased their influence on the academic field after the formation of the National Committee for Financial Education in 2017, a governmental committee enhancing a hyper-individualized approach to the consequences of the global financial crisis and to the more general and long-term crisis of welfare (see Lazarus 2022; Dodaro, 2023, *infra*).

Developed in different empirical fields of research, agnotology has proved useful for highlighting how structural power relations influence the ways in

which the boundary between knowledge and ignorance is drawn. In particular, environmental studies have extensively used it to focus on conflicts and violence in the management of polluting waste (Alexander, O'Hare, 2020; Lou, 2022), the hierarchy of scientific and local knowledges in the protection of natural areas (Mathews, 2005), and the management of «uncomfortable knowledge» regarding agricultural pesticides (Dedieu, Jouzel, 2015; Dedieu, 2022). Important contributions to the field can be found in studies on the pharmaceutical industry (Geissler, 2013) and on international relations (Galison, 2004). In the field of welfare, psycho-sociologist Pascale Molinier (2013) has used Charles Mill's notion of «white ignorance» to read conflicts between white management and racialized social-health care staff in a care home in the Parisian region, while anthropologist Lisa-Marie Borrelli (2018) has analyzed the role of ignorance in relations between migrants and street-level bureaucrats in Switzerland.

Crucially, these works often call into question the relationship between micro- and macro-ignorance, i.e. individual ignorance and the ignorance that is embedded in social and cultural systems, with the latter working as an active force in producing and reproducing the former. In this direction, McGoey (2019) insists on the institutional embeddedness of ignorance, pointing to the ways in which both internal conformism and the quest for external approval push institutions to keep a blind eye on non-conforming practices and experiences, confining them to the blindspot of ignorance (see also Dal Maso, 2023, *infra*).

Finally, the general scientific and political value of agnotology must be stressed. Slater's call for a critical approach «that guards against the subordination of scholarly to policy agendas and weds epistemological critique with social critique, with a view opening up alternatives and formulating research-driven ideas, as a counterpoint to mainstream, policy-driven approaches» seems to us to be a significant idea for social research on the role of finance in contemporary society and, more specifically, on the hegemony of its language, knowledge and interests over public policy. As the works of McGoey emphasize, this policy-driven orientation is coupled with a selective criticism of «ignorance». While ruling classes' *strategic ignorance* is generally overlooked, poor and lower-middle class groups are easily sanctioned and exposed to public shame when they show a lack of preparation on key topics. This has further consequences in public and political debate, as «poor people's ignorance» is increasingly targeted as the cause of significant societal problems, with solutions that can go as far as undermining universal voting rights in favor of an «epistocratic» political system, as in Georgetown University Professor Jason Brennan's (2017) position «against democracy» (see McGoey, 2019, for a critique).

A second strand of literature identified by Barbier and colleagues (2021) is the «political sociology of science» (PSS). The focus of this research is on a different strategy of ignorance-making. While agnotology sheds light on the redundant production of intentionally biased knowledge, PSS brings attention to the knowledge that has been intentionally avoided: *undone science* (Frickel *et al.*, 2010; Hess, 2009; 2016). Developed within the debate on *lay expertise* that animates the field of Science and Technology Studies since the 1990s, studies on *undone science* look at the data that has not been collected and the knowledge

that has not been produced in the interest of preventing the societal check of specific practices and behaviors and the verification of their consequences. As in the case of *agnotology*, the scholarship insists on the societal and institutional mechanisms that structure the ways in which legitimate research questions emerge in the academic world. Heteronomy is again the fundamental issue here, with the cumbersome influence of private industry on academic and non-academic research agendas through their funding. Complementary to this, part of the PSS literature is devoted to the study of the spaces of co-production of knowledge involving (often subaltern) *lay* and *experts* actors, to their possibilities and the obstacles they face in gaining scientific legitimation.

A third line of research has focused on the institutional production of ignorance. Clearly, this approach partially informs the first two strands, but what is specific to it is an attention to the forms of ignorance about which it is not possible to demonstrate intentionality and which therefore must be explained through ordinary institutional and organizational mechanisms (Frickel, Edwards, 2014). In the growing field of Ignorance Studies, another concept that is sometimes associated with ignorance is that of uncertainty. This association can take two different forms. On the one hand, some authors like anthropologist Valeria Procupez (2012) have inquired about the condition of squatting movements of migrants in Argentina and the uncertainty to which they are forced by the long and politically disputed temporality of public institutions that regulate their access to housing. Procupez considers this uncertainty as a form of forced ignorance and focuses on the ways in which political engagement and collective strategies help migrants to avoid the passivation of welfare recipients to which public administration seems to direct its action. As we will see, this approach can help to grasp some of the complexity of financial education programs targeting the poor in France (see Perrin-Heredia, 2023, *infra*). On the other hand, Barbier and colleagues (2021) identify the relationship between ignorance and uncertainty as a promising avenue for future research, especially for examining situations where scientific controversies emerge with different and opposed expertise playing an important role. Indeed, while *agnotology* proves useful for analysing cases of manufactured controversies in situations where scientific consensus is actually established, uncertainty remains a genuine condition in a number of contentious situations, where shared scientific knowledge, even when co-produced by *lay* and *expert* actors, must face radical uncertainty (Schoones, Stirling, 2020).

We suggest that Social Studies of Finance and Ignorance Studies can help build a critical approach to the multi-scalar and multi-faceted processes of financialization by showing that, far from being characterized by abstract rationality and moral and political neutrality, they are constitutively enmeshed within social relations and inequalities. In particular, financial rationality itself should be reconsidered and the rigid boundary between competent («knower») and incompetent («ignorant») actors must be overcome both towards recognizing a plurality of rationalities and competences rooted in the experience of specific social groups and classes, and towards questioning the relationship between subaltern individuals and groups' ignorance at the micro level, and the structural and elite ignorance at the macro-level.

The articles in this Special Issue are located at the intersection of Social Studies of Finance and Ignorance Studies. Grounded in a perspective of micro and ethnographic studies of financial practices, they focus on the tensions provoked by the encounter between expert and nonexpert knowledge in order to bring out attempts at disciplining inclusions and exclusions, and they highlight new axes of inequality in financialized society¹. These axes have to do with the power to establish the boundary between knowledge and ignorance, with the effect of concealing the moral judgment and discriminatory effects of ongoing processes. The ethnographies on which articles are grounded make visible the expertise acquired by people facing particular living conditions, as the problems they have to cope with are unknown to those who do not have similar experiences. These are objective difficulties that are often forgotten or disregarded by those involved in regulation and policy design. In a hierarchical social space, knowledge of singular living conditions, expertise and strategies of the most disadvantaged social groups makes possible to reassess, and reframe, situated forms of knowledge and practices: the aim is to study and bring to light the complex dynamics that characterise financialisation processes, and more generally the transformations of contemporary society.

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¹ Italian sociology has been relatively warm while in Europe interest in the topic has begun earlier (see Moiso, 2011), but in recent years the interest is growing with analyses of the phenomenon of financialization and its consequences on society, with some journal special issues that have focussed on finance and welfare (*Quaderni di Sociologia* 76/2018; *Autonomie Locali e Servizi Sociali* 2/2018), finance and city (*Meridiana* 103/2022), and how finance is framed with respect to its role and contribution after the global crises (*Cambio* 12/2022).

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