9 "Cultural Economy" and "Cultural Economics"

Epistemological and Political Consequences of a Fatal Intertwinement

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The Autonomy of the Economic System

As Anthony Giddens puts it, reflexivity is one of the main traits of modernization. Each of the systems that operate within modernity reproduces itself in a reflexive manner, which means that thought and action are constantly refracted back upon one another. More precisely: "the reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character."[1] Not differently from what happened to other systems that constitute modernity, economic activity too has undergone the scrutiny of the actors involved in it and has become the target of a specific form of reflexivity that tries to capture its cultural significance. For reasons that I am going to explain later, the discipline that had – and, of course, still has – the scope to reflect upon economy never showed a peculiar interest in analyzing economic facts as the result of choices that are also determined by the fact that the agent belongs to a specific cultural tradition. Here, I anticipate that the effacement of cultural embeddedness of economic activity pursued by economics is part of the performativity of the latter. What is at stake, however, when one looks at economic facts by considering them as a part of a more general cultural system, does not rest on the willingness to compensate a patent deficiency of the economic discipline. The point is rather that by showing how the preferences of the economic actor are related to her own attitudes as a member of a given cultural tradition, it becomes possible to question to which extent economic transactions are *somehow* tied with the political frame within which the members of a given collective operate. Crucial is, of course, how one understands the meaning of this tie.

At first glance, there is nothing "cultural" in an action whose meaning and scope can be defined as "economic." What does an observer see when she looks at two individuals who are engaged in an economic transaction? The first one gives an amount of money to the second.

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A different choice could be observed as well: the first individual saves the money and keeps it, for example, under the mattress; in that case, the action observed could be, too, defined as "economic," because not to pay and to save the money has anyhow economic relevance. But the decision to pay – or not to pay – the stipulated sum of money in order to acquire the object that the buyer wants cannot be defined as "economic." The fact that an object can satisfy a specific need has per se nothing to do with the economic sphere. What turns the interaction between the two observed individuals into an economic one is only the fact that an amount of money moves – or does not move – from the pocket of the first to the pocket of the second.

Given how crucial payments are, in his work on the system of economy Niklas Luhmann[2] comes to the statement that the economic system is a closed one: if payments disappeared, the economic system would collapse. If it is highly unlikely that it collapses, this is due to the fact that all those who are involved in the economic process maintain the faith that everything will work out as they hope it does. In this sense, the economic system works as every system works, namely autopoietically: each component – or, better, constituent, if we are talking about social systems – does precisely what he or she is expected to do; by the same token, his or her actions are the result of a specific set of expectations with regard to the actions accomplished by other members of the system. The idea that one day the mechanism of payments will – or could – disappear is thus excluded.

As Luhmann points out, the economic system exhibits resilience, a high degree of autonomy, the capability to encompass almost all forms of transactions, in short, a tremendous power of attraction vis-à-vis neighboring systems because money is the medium it uses in order to reproduce itself. Once money had imposed itself as a symbolically generalized medium within most human collectives, its power as a tool to reduce complexity did not allow any more the search for different media that could offer a viable alternative to it. Two of the main issues human beings have to cope with as living systems can be, in fact, easily handled, thanks to the overarching capacity of money to subsume under itself every form of bargaining, namely the issue of human needs and the issue of scarcity. Money is what motivates a possible payment in the future: if one needs something, one has, first of all, to envisage if the amount of money necessary to satisfy one's needs is available. This does not mean at all that human needs have, per se, economic relevance. The perception of a need simply elicits, and motivates, a specific orientation toward the future: now I do not have something I would like to have, sooner or later, in order to satisfy my need, totally or at least partially. And the achievement of what can hopefully satisfy my need can be gained by paying for it. Of course, there are many circumstances where human beings perceive the pressure of a need whose nature is such that it cannot be fulfilled by simply paying. Love, for example, cannot be bought. But if one is thirsty, in most of the cases one has to pay in order to get water to drink. Strictly related to the issue of human needs is the issue of scarcity. The shortage of a good does not amount to a set of circumstances whose nature can be defined as economic. Scarcity is, in fact, the consequence of appropriation: if one takes hold of a good, no matter how, what is grasped in this way becomes immediately a scarce resource from the standpoint of those who are then deprived of it. The point Luhmann makes here is crucial, above all if we compare the perspective disclosed by his system theory with other ones: scarcity does not mean that a given set of goods is limited with regard to its quantity; scarcity is to be seen rather as the result of specific social interactions, with some actors being able to access a given resource and take hold of it in a permanent way. From this conception of scarcity we can gather the notion of accumulation: the perception that – no matter whether well-grounded or not – the quantity of the possessed good could fall off leads to its accumulation. Accumulation, in turn, causes scarcity to increase. Understood in this way, accumulation helps explain the emergence of ownership, which is – once again – an element of the social system and not of the economic system. In fact, it is the difference between owners and not owners that induces the latter to participate in the economic game in order to acquire the goods they lack.

The market is usually defined as the stage where the economic game takes place. But the idea that the market constitutes the quintessence of the economy deserves a reassessment too. According to Luhmann, the market is the site where production, consumption and concurrence interact with each other. Metaphorically, the market is a sort of mirror in which economic actors reflect their own expectations with regard to the continuous and instable ebbing and flowing of the prices of the goods produced, sold and bought. Each actor observes what others do when they buy or sell, but at the same time she is observed by others as a buyer or seller. Further, by looking at what consumers are willing to pay in order to buy a good, producers and suppliers can build a rough representation of possible future scenarios and act consequently. In sum, the market is an environment created by the economic system in order to give all social actors – individuals or organizations – the opportunity to observe themselves whenever their action has economic relevance. To put it differently: the market is not a part of the economic system, but it is the point of intersection between the economic system and other functional systems – firms, organizations, states, religious groups, families and so on – that differ from it. Each of these systems is closed in itself, but each of them opens itself to the market in order to act as an economic agent, namely in order to pay for what is supposed to satisfy one's needs.

An example can better clarify how, according to Luhmann, each functional system participates in the economic system while remaining closed in itself. If one decides to give money to a religious community or if one pays taxes to the state, the action has an economic meaning (in both cases, in fact, money is involved), but the goals that one pursues as a donor or as taxpayer are external to the economic system.[3]

Karl Polanyi's Notion of "Embeddedness"

The idea that the economic system is a closed one becomes much clearer if we consider the role of money: money is nothing but a means of payment. Further, what the observer finds out is that those who are engaged in interactions that consist in paying constantly look at the fluctuations of prices – which are strictly related to the occurrence of payments. But, if we follow Luhmann, we can perceive how the closure of the system is, at the same time, the condition of possibility of its openness.[4] The use of money allows for a transaction of economic nature, whereas the scope for which one uses money refers to a grammar of motives[5] whose nature exceeds the economic realm. Thus, it is the interplay between closure and openness characterizing the autopoiesis of each system that allows for an understanding of the "embeddedness" of economic interactions that is not limited to the acknowledgment that every economic transaction has also a "cultural" meaning. This does not amount to diminishing the relevance of Polanyi's groundbreaking attempt to articulate an anthropological perspective on economic interactions. The point is nevertheless that the cultural significance both of the exchange of goods and the possession of them is more evident within a social formation that has not undergone the functional differentiation that distinguishes modernity.[6] What has cultural meaning is neither the exchange per se nor the value of the goods exchanged but the uninterrupted flow of sensemaking associated with every form of exchange.

Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944, launched a severe attack on both the current economic system and the cultural framework that underpins it.[7] First, Polanyi wanted to make clear, by supporting his thesis with a reconstruction of European economic history since the industrial revolution, to what extent the creation of a social system based on the free market has endangered the quality of life of the working class. According to Polanyi, when land, money and labor are reduced to goods as a result of the establishment of the free market society, individuals who participate in production suffer from a severe shrinkage of what we now tend to call "agency." In order to act as a member of the collective who can both safeguard an autonomous room for maneuver with respect to one's life project and contribute to the making of collective decisions, an individual must enjoy something more than the freedom to sell oneself in the free market of labor. Second, Polanyi's historical reconstruction aimed to show that the historical process that led to the establishment of the free market society was the result both of political decisions and specific changes in the structure of feeling.[8] Led by the idea that the free market could sustain itself without needing any external support, the European political élites of the 19th century steered the policies of the nation where they could have a consistent voice in order to impose those rules that allowed for the transformation of land, money and labor into goods. But, precisely the fact that the visible hand of nation-states had to step in the economic process in order to modify it according to the principles of the liberal doctrine proves that, for Polanyi, the self-developing free market has never existed. What can be observed is rather the victory of a political idea against concurring political alternatives, like those inspired by the socialist utopia, for example.

The strong point of Polanyi's reconstruction consists not only in underscoring that a free market society always depends on specific political decisions, but above all in showing that the very idea of a free market society is a cultural construct, which rests on a specific set of conceptions concerning both human nature and the role that justice and liberty have to play as overarching values within a given society. Moreover, showing a perspicacity worth mentioning, Polanyi is able to capture the religious character (and not the ideological one!) of the idea that a self-regulating free market can not only exist, but must also become the core of a desirable social formation.[9]

Two weak points, however, affect his reconstruction. The first regards the hypothesis that exchange is a recent construct (or achievement, depending on how one evaluates it); contrary to Polanyi's assumption, some forms of exchange took place in societies within which reciprocity and redistribution were dominant (shells work as well as gold or silver coins as a form of money). Second, it is far from self-evident that the alternative to a liberal society should be a society in which the highest value shared by all members is a strong form of solidarity. Even if it is important to test the presence of solidarity as an anthropological invariant[10] whose roots must be evaluated by means of an evolutionary approach,[11] it is doubtful that the prevalence of solidarity as a grounding factor of the social asset will ever solve the ethical and political problems of modern collectives. The exchange of goods in a regime of reciprocity and redistribution that characterized premodern societies, which became the object of Polanyi's historical and anthropological investigations,[12] operates as the model Polanyi needed in order to ground his critique of classical liberalism. If we also consider Polanyi's sympathetic attitude toward Owen's utopian project, we can then have a clear picture of the – not so much hidden – assumptions that drove him to deem the world issued from the liberal revolution to be a world where no organic social ties were possible any longer, and to consider this as an untoward loss. Even if he was not Marxist, he seems to partake Marx's view of capitalism, according to which the latter ushers in a human condition characterized by the fact that all that is solid melts into air, whereas Marx, it must be added, was prone to consider the dissolution of premodern forms of sociability operated by capitalism as a necessary and thus not deplorable element of a historical process that entails capitalism only as a temporary phase.

What must interest us in Polanyi's work is, in sum, his analysis of how the economic, the cultural and the political spheres are intertwined to each other. However, what needs correcting is the assumption that economic actions are always "embedded" in a broader cultural frame: this is surely true for a premodern society, whereas the complexity that characterizes modernity invites us to consider the economic realm as a closed system, whose interaction with other system needs investigating thanks to conceptual tools different from the notion of "embeddedness."[13] We can make the point more perspicuous if we consider the question of gift. The practice of giving and receiving gifts still exists; the presence of gifts, nevertheless, cannot be understood as the "total social fact" that Mauss identified when studying the gift exchange within non-modern societies.[14] The disenchantment that modernity conveys through the reflexivity that characterizes every social practice cannot leave untouched the attitude toward the exchange of gifts: the awareness that a countergift will follow a gift implies that even the gift exchange is part of a social practice that spreads utilitarian values and is, at the same time, sustained by the presence of these values.[15]

Anthropology and Economic Behavior

The acknowledgment that economic actions take place within a sphere that enjoys a peculiar autonomy, which Luhmann's system theory helps analyze rigorously, should not prevent us from appreciating what we can learn from an anthropological investigation that aims to assess how much individuals invest in possessing specific goods, whereas it must be clear that questioning the desire to achieve something does not mean to question an economic phenomenon. As Bourdieu puts it,[16] belonging to a certain class finds its expression in how an individual moves in the social space he or she occupies. How one goes across this space is crucial: the care of the self and the image of one's own body that results from it play an important role as well as the set of gestures that witnesses a certain education. As important as the signs that the body elicits is how one spends leisure time, the latter is always part of a specific lifestyle, which is not an object of choice and is, rather, somehow inherent to class membership. Objects fill the social space too, but what matters is neither how flamboyant is their exhibition nor how much they cost; much more expressive of their social significance is the fact that they allow the taste of their owner to be immediately perceived by the observer. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the relationship between social distinction and judgment of taste works as an ethnography of the Western world that intersects with Mary Douglas's investigation of how consumption rests on decisions that do not simply give expression to a set of needs, but above all make visible how individuals participate in that play of sensemaking that we usually term "culture."[17]

After Bourdieu's and Douglas's pathbreaking works, the anthropological gaze directed toward objects became more and more attentive to the weight of their shape, consistency and manageability – in a word, their affordance[18] – in the relation human beings entertain with those objects. Some archeologists[19] went so far along this path that even the term "agency" was revealed to be appropriate to describe how artifacts are not the simple products of human imagination or creativity, but represent a fundamental component of the landscape around us just as much as natural objects. Even if we are not prone to use the notion of "agency" in order to explain how artifacts in general and goods in particular affect the self-fashioning of individuals who use them, it is important to consider how much the social life of things and the stories things tell through their presence are part of the intersubjective construction of social reality. Insofar as goods are culturally encoded, they elicit the knowledge that is necessary to use and appreciate them – in other words, to confer value on them. Moreover, goods bear, encoded in themselves, the knowledge that has been necessary to bring them about. According to Arjun Appadurai, by taking the social life of things seriously, it becomes possible to shed light on the whole logic that governs consumption. Appadurai suggests that "consumption is eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic or passive." This means "looking at consumption (and the demand that makes it possible) as a focus not only for sending social messages (as Douglas has proposed), but for receiving them as well. Demand thus conceals two different relationships between consumption and production: On the one hand, demand is determined by social and economic forces. On the other hand, it can manipulate, within limits, these social and economic forces."[20]

Even money, which makes possible the commodification of all the things we use and exchange, did not remain unquestioned from an anthropological perspective. Viviana Zelizer, in a series of essays aimed at reconstructing the cultural attitudes toward money throughout modernity,[21] has shown to what extent the money individuals spend on life insurance, childcare, welfare services, sex, gift exchange, is not a neutral tool, but is closely intertwined with the social relationships in which individuals are involved. Zelizer, in other words, did not want to hold that "money is cultural." The sociological and historical data she has been analyzing for decades show that the use of money – and, as a consequence, the "cultural meaning" individuals attach to it – depends on the kind of social relation within which the money transfer takes place. The point is crucial: money is and remains a means of payment; what changes with regard to the different forms of social interaction is the ritual frame that encompasses this or that form of monetary transaction. The alternative to the analyses of individual choices that are based on the neoclassical model is clear – and, strategically speaking, is more persuasive than the argument according to which "everything is cultural" with regard to human action: if we assume that buying and consuming goods is as important as producing and distributing them, then we have to take into consideration how much of the human activity of sensemaking is expressed in consumption. Individuals never want just to use what they consume; they also want to include the things they possess into the broader context of their social relations. Meanings are bargained as well as the goods that are the object of a transaction. What Luhmann terms "interpenetration" of the economic system with other systems, I suggest, can thus be fruitfully translated into Zelizer's proposal to look at consumption as an activity that stands at the crossroads between economic transactions and those social processes in which individuals are involved when trying to make sense of their lives.

Economics as a Cultural Artifact

If it is not really persuasive to hold that economic transactions simply "depend" on cultural factors, it is much more interesting, on the other hand, to analyze how much the bulk of knowledge produced by economics is related to attitudes and assumptions whose meaning is to be found outside the field of pure theory. This is true, of course, with regard to every discipline: a scientific model may be appropriately questioned only with regard to the results it offers in terms of growth of knowledge, but this does not mean that the historical, cultural and institutional contexts within which scientists act can be left unquestioned. To put it in Popper's terms, the context of discovery and the context of justification are two poles whose interplay ought to be considered as an uninterrupted oscillation. Not surprisingly, however, many of those who participate in the debate about the philosophical foundation of science are still afraid of embracing a perspective aimed at examining the historical and cultural dimension of the context of discovery. What they fear, more precisely, is that such a perspective would usher in a sort of relativism whose consequence would be the destruction of the meaning of science as a cognitively relevant undertaking. Fortunately, the burden of proof has become more and more heavy for those who deny that, first, the bulk of knowledge produced by scientific disciplines is the result of a construction and that, second, recognizing this fact is not to dismiss the realistic assumptions that are supposed to underpin the scientific undertaking.[22]

It should be remembered that the history of economics as a discipline is far from homogeneous: economists conquered their place within the encyclopedia by legitimizing their scientific practice in opposition to other disciplines, and how they succeeded in doing that depended on the peculiar feature assumed by the system of knowledge production in the different countries where they were active as scholars.[23] At the beginning, the power economists could exert over national policies was rather limited. The scenario changed radically when economics turned into a "natural science."[24] This process culminated in Milton Friedman's momentous essay on positive economics,[25] which, in a certain sense, "hallowed" economics as the sole discipline that could allow for scientific explanations concerning human conduct. Economics, no matter how well grounded its assumptions are, can claim to be an "exact" science insofar as it is able to make predictions about the behavior of human agents. Its basic assumptions may be generated by loose generalizations and may be totally unrealistic. What counts is the soundness of the argument that leads to reasonable predictions about the rationality of human agents. The latter are just supposed to behave as maximizing actors, namely as actors that follow the rules of economic doctrine. Some weak points of Friedman's argument could not go unnoticed. As Ernst Nagel, for example, remarked in his review of Friedman's essay,[26] if a theory uses unrealistic assumptions just for the sake of constructing models that allow for predicting observable events, then this theory cannot pretend to be a scientific one, namely a theory that is able to offer models of human behavior whose truth value can be questioned. If, on the contrary, Friedman's intention is to bring about a theory whose function is to explain why human agents behave as they do in any given observable contexts, then his theory should consist of something more than a set of vague generalizations about human behavior.

The problems to which Friedman's essay gave rise can be generalized. The core of the model economics has been developing for decades (since the second half of the 1950s, to be more precise), namely the Rational Choice Theory, has undergone several forms of criticism, most of them coming from scholars who work within the disciplinary boundary of economics.[27] This theory is not simply intended to explain how human beings effectively behave, but is supposed to offer a normative frame that seizes the very nature of rationality. It explains, in fact, what an agent ought to do in order to achieve an aim as efficiently as possible. It must be assumed however that the agent knows what he or she desires, and that a sufficient amount of information is available to the agent with regard to the circumstances in which the action will take place. Even if it is a fairly demanding theory, which has moreover a limited field to which it can be properly applied, no valid alternative has been found to it. But, beside the ongoing discussion about the epistemic status of economics, what attracts the attention of the observer is the fact that the Rational Choice Theory, despite its claim to being a normative theory of human behavior, is also a discursive machine that conveys a specific anthropology. The latter does not simply consist in a sort of absolutization of *homo oeconomicus*. What is at stake in the claim that an economic explanation of human behavior is self-sufficient and does not need, therefore, to be framed by referring to alternative explanatory models is the idea that economics can shape both a political theory – by absorbing the latter into itself – and the most rational policy a democratic state requires. In his unsurpassed work on the origins of contemporary economic doctrine, Philip Mirowski has shown the extent to which there was a strict relation between the political scenario marked by the Cold War and the emergence of the neoclassical model of rationality. Economists shared with all the other members of the American scientific community a peculiar concern, namely the necessity to bring about scientific models that could help the Western world win the war against communism. In that context, economics was just one discipline among others, as important as cybernetics. The point was not to bend the contents or the scientific data collected by a single discipline and make them work within an ideologically pre-oriented frame. At stake was rather the attempt to offer a model of rationality that could encompass different approaches to human behavior. The final aim was to create a common epistemic ground for those disciplines that had to understand human subjects not as conscious actors but as calculating machines. So it is no surprise that economists had – and still have – scarce or no interest at all in considering which cultural factors contribute to shape their preferences: if the aim is to explain which relation between means and goals is relevant in each individual's choice, then the inquiry into those features of human motivation that eschew a rational explanation is deemed irrelevant. And the success enjoyed in describing complex interactions by means of a very restricted but efficient set of conceptual tools demonstrates to which extent the simplified worldview purported by economics contributed to reduce the complexity of the social world: decades have passed since the time when economists, mathematicians and those who gave birth to the scientific program of AI worked together, and we can state that the old set of ideas that sustained the liberal conception of society has been replaced with a different theoretical framework[28] that, to put it simply, contributed in a massive way to govern Western societies by numbers.[29]

To better understand this point, it is crucial to keep in mind that – as said above –the boundary of a discipline is porous. This porosity is to be seen not only with regard to what a scholar shares with the members of the collective she lives in, but also with regard to how a scientific discourse can affect the social space far beyond the restricted realm of the academia. As Michell Callon has pointed out, economics, together with other devices, work as a prosthesis that helps the *homo oeconomicus* to calculate, that is, to act within a market. The latter is, of course, the outcome of a complex construction,[30] which requires the interactions of states, firms and transnational organizations.[31] But the frame offered by economics in order to explain what it means to be a rational agent is as well the frame that enables agents to represent themselves as successful calculating machines. By adopting this perspective, the problem of embeddedness discussed above receives a new feature: "economy is embedded not in society but in economics, provided one incorporates within economics all the knowledge and practices, so often denigrated, that make up for example accounting or marketing."[32] In Luhmann's terms, as we have seen above, the market is the mirror in which each economic agency looks at other agencies well knowing that they are behaving the same way; this means that each agency is able to integrate the calculations of the other agencies into its own calculations. But this state of affairs rests on the fact that the calculations of all the agencies that participate in the market are framed the same way, in the sense that these calculations are shaped by a frame that is common to all calculating agencies. This frame is given by economics, meant as a discourse that performs the reality it describes.[33] But can we assume that the performativity of economics remains confined to the market, meant as the site where economic agencies operate? If Luhmann's analysis of modern society is correct, the following question obviously comes up: which kind of transformation does an institution like the nation-state undergo when decision makers share mental models whose shape and consistency derive from economics? There are good reasons to say that decisions of last resort in the realm of domestic economy rest on geopolitical considerations.[34] Nevertheless, it is worth questioning the tacit knowledge that spreads among institutional decision makers insofar as the latter construct their representations of the world they live in according to the model of rationality – and, implicitly, the model of mankind – that the discourse of economics has brought about. If political decisions take place within a frame whose primary function is to allow for value-free calculations, then it is arguable that there will not remain much room for discussions concerning redistributive justice, access to services and public resources, equality and so on (here I restrict the list to those points that belong to the classical liberal agenda). Given the interpenetration of the political and the economic system, the embeddedness of the policies that steer nation-states in the discourse of economics deserves particular attention – unless one is prone to take up the discourse of economics as the only one that can offer a thorough and persuasive definition of human happiness.

Notes

1 Giddens (1990), p. 38.
2 Luhmann (1988).
3 Luhmann (1988), p. 233f.
4 "Interpenetration" is the concept Luhmann uses to explain how a closed system interacts with its environment, which consists of other systems. On this, see Luhmann (1995).
5 I refer purposefully to Burke's work, which Luhmann quotes on several occasions; see Burke (1945).
6 See Luhmann (1980).
7 See Polanyi (2001).

8 I take the term from Williams (1977).
9 In a short text written in 1921, which has been published posthumously, Walter Benjamin too envisaged the hypothesis that capitalism can be better understood if one recognizes the religious character of the principle of accumulation. In a capitalist society, according to Benjamin, individuals are related to each other only in force of the fact that everyone is at the same time the creditor and the borrower of everybody else; but this generalized system of debt is not so much different from the system of culpability (*Schuld* means, in German, both "debt" and "guilt") on which rests a traditional religious system; see Benjamin (2004), pp. 288–291. And on this text, see Hamacher and Wetters (2002).
10 On this, see Henrich et al. (2004).
11 A pathbreaking work in this direction has been Sober and Wilson (1998).
12 Particularly relevant is Polanyi (1977), which has been published posthumously.
13 It is however worth mentioning Granovetter (1985), which represents an interesting attempt to bring back the heuristic reach of Polanyi's notion of embeddedness.
14 See Mauss (1990 [1925]).
15 In the fifth chapter of Bourdieu (2000), this point is made clear with arguments I find rather persuasive.
16 See Bourdieu (1984).
17 See Douglas (1979); coincidentally, Bourdieu's work on distinction has been published in 1979 as well.
18 The term comes from Gibson (1979).
19 See, for example, Knappett and Malafouris (2008) and Malafouris (2013).
20 Appadurai (1986), p. 31.
21 See, among others, Zelizer (1979), Zelizer (1994) and Zelizer (2010).
22 The discussion on this topic is enormous and has a long history (I would suggest that the starting point can be seen in Fleck [1979], a work published in 1935, one year after Popper's masterpiece). Without claiming any completeness, I limit my references to Bourdieu (2004) and Knorr-Certina (1999). Bourdieu has shown that a sociological inquiry of how scientists work does not threaten the commitment to truth that characterizes scientific practice, while Knorr-Certina's notion of "epistemic culture" helps understand how each discipline, understood as a community of experts, works as a machinery that constructs knowledge – a machinery that is sustained and delimited by the setting of specific practices, shared mental models, attitudes and conventions. Knorr-Cetina's approach, in other words, saves the autonomy of the practice of science vis-à-vis other social practices without underestimating how porous is the boundary that separates each scientific community from the broader social context in which it operates.
23 Fourcade (2010).
24 Both Mirowski (1989) and Mirowski (2002) still remain the best accounts of the process that led to the self-affirmation of economics as a hard science.
25 Friedman (1953).
26 Nagel (1963).
27 See, among many others, Cook and Levi (1990), Zey (1992) and Friedman (1996).
28 "Neoliberalism" is the label commonly used to define this framework. Such a definition, however, turns out to be fruitful only if one is aware of the fact that "neoliberalism" is not the prosecution of liberalism with other means. On this, see Becchio and Leghissa (2017).
29 See Miller and Rose (2008).
30 On this, White (1981) remains a seminal contribution.

31 The bibliography on the topic is huge. See, for example, Fligstein (1990) and Fligstein (2001), Chorev (2005) and, for a general reconstruction attentive to the historical dimension of globalization, Held et al. (1999).
32 Callon (1998), p. 30.
33 MacKenzie (2006), MacKenzie et al. (2007) and MacKenzie (2009).
34 See, for example, Wade (2003). On the subordination of domestic affairs to foreign affairs, see Waltz (1979). Other positions in political science, like Rosenau's or Jervis's, which take into considerations elements neglected by Waltz, would recommend a cautious approach to Waltz's classical work. Here it is not possible, however, to elaborate this point.

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