

After Markets: Researching Hybrid Arrangements

April 23, 2010

The Institute for Science, Innovation & Society
Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

Speakers:

William Davies, University of Oxford
Emmanuel Didier, EHESS, Paris
Noortje Marres & Linsey McCoe, University of Oxford
Fabian Muniesa, École des Mines, Paris
Marsha Rosengarten, Goldsmiths, London
Bron Szerszynski & Larry Reynolds, Lancaster University
Scott Vrecko, University of Exeter

Commentators:

Jacqueline Best (University of Ottawa), Javier Lezaun, Marc Ventresca and Steve Woolgar (University of Oxford)

This workshop explores different approaches to the study of heterogeneous arrangements - assemblages in which economic relations are always already entangled with social, political, technical, ethical and material ones. We ask how this research can engage with the current context, in which the 'free market' is becoming a less secure and more openly contested category.

The workshop is open to all, but spaces are limited. To reserve a seat, contact: Esther.Vicente@sbs.ox.ac.uk



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<http://www.insis.ox.ac.uk/past/Pages/aftermarkets.aspx>

Workshop report

April 2010

Institute for Science, Innovation and Society (InSIS)

organised by Noortje Marres and Linsey McGoey
with sponsorship from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Governance,
Accountability and Innovation (GAIIn) at InSIS

On Friday, 23 April 2010, the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society hosted the workshop ‘After Markets’ at the Saïd Business School (SBS), University of Oxford. The meeting was attended by over 80 participants ranging from students and faculty at SBS, the wider University, and numerous academic institutions and policy institutes throughout the UK and Europe.

The aim of the workshop was to bring together scholars from science and technology studies, economic and political sociology and related fields to foster an exchange about approaches developed in these fields to the study of heterogeneous arrangements: arrangements in which economic, social, technical, governmental, material and ethical relations are always already entangled. These approaches have long questioned the plausibility of economic ideals of autonomous and self-regulating markets, and have questioned the usefulness of a simple opposition between ‘market’ vs ‘state’ in the analysis of political economic arrangements. The workshop asked how the commitment to hybridity is affected by, and may provide ways of engaging with the current context, in which scepticism about the ‘free market’ is increasingly widespread, and attempts to ‘move beyond’ narrow

definitions of the market, to include its social, behavioural and ethical dimensions, are becoming more prominent.

Noortje Marres opened the meeting by offering introductory remarks. She drew an analogy between the sociological approach of actor-network theory and recent social studies of markets, noting that, in the early 1990s, the popularity of the concept of the ‘network’ led some actor-network theorists to abandon it. Would something similar happen with social studies of markets, she asked, now that the idea is widespread that markets are constructs, which are propped up by political, social and technical institutions? Referring to current debates about the ‘limits’ of the ‘free market’ in the media and elsewhere, she argued that these could also be seen as opportunities to investigate again the ‘heterogeneity’ of political economic arrangements. Social researchers and theorists have long argued that the ‘performance’ of political economies involves a whole range of technical, social, moral, regulatory, material, bodily, political and so on practices, devices and arrangements. But Marres made a distinction between a constituting and a constituted heterogeneity of political economies, suggesting that today the hybridity of market arrangements is increasingly recognised. This raises the question of how the hybridity of market arrangements is today itself ‘enacted’. In an ‘after markets’ context, we should then examine not just how different kinds of entities participate in the performance of supposedly pure markets, but how the categories of the social, the economic, the political and the ethical are themselves inter-articulated in empirical practice.

Will Davies (InSIS, University of Oxford) was the first speaker. Drawing on Max Weber and the work of Boltanski on the cultural “spirits” animating people’s faith in capitalist economies, Davies suggested that two spirits could be considered central to current modes of neoliberal economics and governance: conservationist and colonial. In the conservationist strain, externalities are seen as distinct from ‘pure’ economic calculation, and there is a political and technical imperative to police the border between economic and non-economic goods and processes. In the colonial strain, exhibited by the Chicago School, questions that were once resolutely excluded from orthodox neo-classical analysis – normative and psychological questions such as: are you happy? Why don’t you pursue what you want? – are brought into the realm of the economic. The growth of neoliberalism then extends calculation into reaches of society that previously employed their

own separate variety of utilitarian calculus. His paper concluded by suggesting that a new 'spirit' is emerging in the wake of the crisis of neo-liberalism, namely a 'guilty' mode of economisation. Pointing to the rise of happiness and behavioural economics, Davies noted that economists are now questioning some of their core methodological and ontological assumptions, re-admitting psychological and normative questions to their field. Governmental strategies to improve wellbeing, support prosperous and healthy behaviour and measure economic “progress” then suggest a new recombination of the “economic” and the “social.”

The second talk, by Fabian Muniesa (Mines Paris Tech), considered markets as computational phenomena, noting that they are increasingly defined as such both in economics and by market actors themselves. He proposed the concept of the “trial of explicitness” to make sense of such enactments of markets by technical means. Muniesa traced this concept back to Peter Sloterdijk’s idea of explicitation (“according to him, it is the new word for revolution”). But it can also be taken to mean “actualisation” (drawing on ANT and Deleuze): in some ways similar to the ANT’s concept of the trial of strength, a trial of explicitness poses the challenge to articulate what is at stake. Noting that the concept can be applied to devices from contract law to the New Public Management, Muniesa then turned to an empirical case, that of the Arizona Stock Exchange, an early example of an electronically enabled stock exchange. This project to move a stock exchange onto an electronic platform can be understood as a trial of explicitness, insofar as the algorithmic implementation of the market forced a specific enactment of it, namely as a single point (where demand meets supply at the right price). But while this explication was widely considered a solution, Muniesa emphasised that this solution generated a set of further problems. He concluded by suggesting that the notion of a trial of explicitness may be extended to markets themselves: in an “after markets” context, the question can always be posed, what do you mean by “market”? And: after markets, we have fewer principles, and more trials.

To open up the discussion, Marc Ventresca evoked the distinction between markets and hierarchies, asking what happened to this distinction in an “after markets” context. In response to Will Davies talk, Steve Rayner noted that the social scientific concepts currently being introduced into UK economic policy are those of behaviour and mental disposition, which are individualist, and in that sense precisely not social concepts.

After the break, the third speaker, Scott Vrecko of the University of Exeter, took as his starting point a pre-modern understanding of markets, which propose there is a thick sociality to markets, which must then be understood as places of gathering. Drawing on these ideas, Vrecko argued for a “promiscuous” approach to the study of markets and market processes, one that is intentionally ambiguous and non-prescriptive about what phenomena should be considered on the “inside” or the “outside” of market studies. Such an approach also raises a particular question: “do markets have feelings?”, and this he went on to explore in the empirical case of the development and marketing of Accomplia, an anti-obesity drug marketed by Sanofi-Aventis. In doing so, Vrecko asked how capital and fat come together in such a ‘market arrangement,’ and argued that this question cannot be answered by considering only classic sociological dynamics, such as that of the ‘economisation’ or ‘medicalisation’: of how forces of economic or medical rationality here come to ‘colonise’ social life (or being fat). He noted that in interviews, users of the drug talked about something different, namely about their changing relation to the environment. That is, they evoked a particular idea of craving, as induced through geographies of temptation, composed of fast-food restaurants, ice cream shops and large bowls of candy. Vrecko concluded by describing the drug as a technology of detachment – which produces indifference vis-à-vis the environment, and involving the transformation of the latter into something requiring ‘taming,’ intervention and control.

Bron Szerszynski and Larry Reynolds, both of Lancaster University, gave a joint paper on the concept of co-existence. They brought two different versions of this concept into conversation: its use in the sociological theory, and its uses in regulatory discourses, those surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMOs). In social theory, Bruno Latour has used the term to denote the end of what he calls “the age of succession”: as linear notions of time and totalising understandings of space are increasingly problematised, Latour argues, we must learn to accommodate – in our theories of society - the heterogeneity of arrangements, unfolding along multiple axes of space-time. But the term “co-existence” is also used by the EU to connote a regime for the governance of GM crops and foods: here it comes to refer to a ‘pluralist’ arrangement in which non-GM and GM agriculture are enabled to exist side-by-side. Under this banner, Szerszynski and Reynolds argued, the EU sought to institute a “pseudo-market”, in which

individual consumer choice – enabled by product labeling - was supposed to settle the controversy over whether or not to allow genetic modification of crops. The regime, however, proved susceptible to distortion. Asking ‘Where did labeling go?’ Reynolds answered “It went into the cow”, noting how GM crops are now principally used as animal feed, which is exempt from labeling requirements. In their conclusion, they evoked the activist slogan “we live in one world”, pointing out that the regulatory enforcement of pluralism is bound to fail. And this suggests that a more serious commitment is required, on the part of social theorists, to the ineradicable commonality of what exists.

In the discussion, Daniel Buena suggested that more precision is needed as to how we define hybridity. If sociological research has shown one thing, it is that there are many different ways of drawing borders, and of framing hybridity. And one of the things at stake in the hybridity debate is the question of whether hybridity is conceived of as something that limits choice and renders it impossible, or whether hybridity is seen as enabling controversy and debate.

The talk by Emmanuel Didier (École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris) carried the provocative title “A theory of consistency”, and concentrated on the role of statistics in the organisation of economies and societies. Didier began by situating statistics along three axes, as producing a specific connection between society, science and politics: Statistics is 1) a tool for describing, or “expressing” social aggregates, but 2) in doing so, it turns them into objects of knowledge, and 3) it thereby seeks to enable action upon society. Didier then turned to a specific historical context, that of the Great Depression in the United States, pointing how here the tools of statistics proved less and less capable to render the social economy as a coherent object. This situation is especially interesting, insofar as it forces sociologists to consider the failure of statistical instruments and the resultant loss of consistency of the social aggregate. This is not the focus usually chosen, Didier argued, by authors in social studies of science. They have been especially interested in innovation, in the construction and establishment of new entities, and as a consequence have neglected the question of how things fall apart. To address this question, we must turn to critical theory, as critical sociologists can be considered specialists of destruction (they either want to destroy things or they want to document processes of destruction). Didier then went on to consider specific statistical devices deployed during and after the Depression in the US,

such as the statistical ‘shingling’ of questionnaires. On this basis he developed a typology of different ways in which societal relations and aggregates either come to gain or lose consistency: Deliquescence, fragilisation, consolidation, among others.

Linsey McGoey delivered a joint article that she prepared together with Noortje Marres. This paper, entitled “experimental failure,” is concerned with the multi-faceted ways in which political-economic arrangements can fail: the ways that failures can alternatively restrict opportunities for contestation, or encourage the articulation of new claims. McGoey began by noting that this question of the failure of political economic arrangements is neglected by ‘performative’ studies of markets. These studies have been criticised for being biased towards the successful performance of the economy, and she argued that this critique is especially applicable to proposals to develop more ‘inclusive’ concepts of the market, in which critiques of market arrangements are understood as contribution to “market experiments.” Discussing a number of empirical cases, McGoey then went on to present a three-fold typology of experimental failure - entropic failure, generative failure and performative failure. In the first case, the alleged failings of systems of accountability and surveillance lead to a consolidation of these very systems, as in the case of the regulation of derivative markets. In other cases, however, the demonstration of things not working – e.g. non-renewable energy sources in sustainable living experiments – provides opportunities to articulate alternative claims, such as the need for new skills or community initiatives. Finally, in discussing performative failure, McGoey argued that calling an arrangement “experimental” in nature, may easily limit the capacities for critical inquiry into that arrangement. She argued that if experiments are to work as devices of problematisation, this is likely to require a critical intervention on the part of social science.

The paper by Marsha Rosengarten (Goldsmiths, London) was read by Noortje Marres, while afterwards Marsha answered questions from Italy via an audio link. Her contribution focused on the field of HIV/AIDS drugs, and discussed the role of ‘fringe’ or ‘marginal’ interests in the ‘performance’ of drug markets. Rosengarten proposed that such interests play a more prominent role than is acknowledged when the HIV market is said to be dominated by big pharmaceutical companies. But she also proposed that such interests are more

fluid than often assumed, and must be understood as outcomes of market dynamics. Rosengarten then showed how the role of marginal interests is affected or organised by ‘biomedical’ framings of HIV drugs. In the first case study, of the anti-retroviral drug combination, Trizivir, Rosengarten noted how this drug explicitly targeted patients with alternative lifestyles. This created opportunities for interventions by patient groups and social researchers, but they were not taken, in part because of their own *expectations* that they could not intervene in the biomedical composition of the drug. Rosengarten then discussed a controversy around a HIV-prevention drug called Prep, in Cambodia and elsewhere. Here, she focused on the claim by a marginal interest group, a Cambodian sex workers association, that the Randomised Controlled Trials testing this drug were unethical. These claims, however, came to be enlisted in an international campaign to organise public consultations and thus to ensure the ethicalness of trials. Here too, Rosengarten argued, “marginal interests” could be seen to adopt a dominant distinction between the ethical and medical aspects of drug markets.

Javier Lezaun and Steve Woolgar, both of InSIS, offered closing remarks, followed by an open discussion, where attendees offered views on the scope and themes of the workshop. Steve Woolgar wondered how exactly we should read the slogan of “after markets”, asking whether it is possible to imagine a world without markets. He then suggested that the workshop papers could be read as proposing a move from a weak to a strong programme in the study of markets. The importance of such a move, in his view, would be to nurture a methodological scepticism about notions like the economic, the global, the social and so on. In his comments, Javier Lezaun pointed out a problem with notions of failure, as they presuppose norms by which to judge events. He also observed that the concept of experimentation is overused: there is a loss when world events are described as experiments. One of the most provocative questions of the day was posed by Dawn Lyon from Kent University who remarked on the lack of attention throughout the day to how labour processes are being affected by the crisis. Her question called upon social scientists to better examine and interrogate the gross inequalities compounded by the ongoing economic crisis. She also asked how sociological approaches that accommodate the heterogeneity of markets relate to debates in economic sociology, which are precisely concerned with the specificity of markets as opposed to other social arrangements.