

Patricia H. Thornton.

Markets from Culture: Institutional Logics and Organizational Decisions in Higher Education Publishing.

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As academics and intellectuals we live in a world of books but seldom think systematically about the social and organizational dynamics that produce the tools of our trade. Patricia H. Thornton's *Markets from Culture: Institutional Logics and Organizational Decisions in Higher Education Publishing* is the most rigorous and theoretically sophisticated book available for those interested in the sociology of the book publishing industry. Thornton also provides Canadian sociologists with an outline for an important theoretical agenda in the broad areas of sociology of culture, knowledge, professions and organizations. This book is first rate scholarship, and the larger issues it raises for Canadian sociology are perhaps even more important than the specific findings. Despite some very real limitations in the approach taken in *Markets from Culture*, the theoretical issues it addresses are crucial for the sociology of culture, organizations, higher education and broader intellectual life in Canada.

The basic argument is compelling and is tested with an enormous amount of careful research. Rooted in the sociology of organizations theoretical traditions of neo-institutionalism and the Carnegie school of "bounded rationality," *Markets from Culture* is a detailed empirical study of the transformation of the American higher education publishing industry from the late 1950s to the early 1990s. During this period, the industry was transformed from one dominated by what Thornton calls an "editorial logic" to a "market logic." In the first "ideal type" period of the industry, publishing was a "personal" type of capitalist business, the industry had an identity as a profession, and its legitimacy was based on the intellectual reputation and networks of its owner-editor. The firms stressed a strategy of organic growth through increased sales. Sometime in the middle of the 1970s, this form of academic publishing was transformed into market capitalism with a CEO form of leadership. This new publishing was oriented to a strategy based on market position, acquisition growth and increased profits.

This analysis effectively uses the theoretical perspective on "institutional logics" that comes out of the influential neo-institutional school within the study of organizations. Building on the analysis of Friedland and Alford, Thornton reminds us that institutional logics refer to "axial principles of organization and action based on cultural discourses and material practices prevalent in different institutional or societal sectors." This perspective stresses how higher level societal logics partly shape and often conflict with the actions undertaken in the major institutional sectors of society such as "the market, the state, the corporation, the professions, religion, and the family." Modern academic book publishing can be seen as a site of contestation where market and professional logics collide in the context of organizational decisions regarding the production of books. Engaging economic theories of the firm that stress efficiency as the core decision making criteria for organization, Thornton painstakingly shows the ways in which "institutional logics" are an independent source of organizational decision making, beyond what traditional economic and

market processes would predict. Thornton shows “that when, whether and how leaders deploy their power to affect succession in organizations is conditional on the prevailing institutional logic in an industry” (p. 83).

While economists often operate at the level of abstract theoretical models, scholars in the emerging field of economic sociology pride themselves on their meticulous concern with data gathering and methods. Thornton’s work is extremely strong methodologically, and *Markets from Culture* provides an inspiring model for young scholars committed to testing, not simply “spinning” theories. Thornton’s conclusions are based on a range of measures taken at the level of individuals, organizations and what organizational researchers often call the “environment.” This includes data about the individual characteristics of the founders and editors of various presses, measures of the size, structures and organizational forms of various firms, information about press strategies at different periods, and detailed examinations of successions, acquisitions, foundings and disbandings. The larger business environment book presses operate in is measured by data on marketplace context, supply and demand characteristics and information about resource competition. Alongside these multivariate measures, Thornton did extensive qualitative interviews, allowing her to produce an impressive multi-method confirmation of the independent effects of differing institutional logics on the decision making of firms. The result is an impressive contribution to the development of a larger theory of organizational attention, a powerful critique of traditional economics models of organizational efficiency and the most detailed empirical examination of the academic book publishing industry we have available.

The book is not without its flaws, particularly with regards to its historical-comparative blindness. That is to say, the book is really about academic book publishing in the United States not in general, and the text does not really pay serious attention to this fact. The American higher education system is rather exceptional in international comparative terms, with its private and public mix and steep competitive institutional hierarchy. It would be unfair, I think, to ask the author to gather more data than the immense amount she has already assembled, but the author could have shown more awareness of the limits of her historical-comparative imagination. Neo-institutionalism, in this case at least, could be improved by more attention to the specific institutional arrangements in different countries, as well as a concern with the cultural norms around ideas, intellectuals and books that are quite different in France, Germany, Japan or the United States, for example. In the Canadian case, at least, does not the state logic compete with the market and professional logics in the production of academic texts and monographs? The same is surely true elsewhere.

Thornton’s book is an excellent example of a certain style of academic work that is particularly influential within the American academy. This approach has its flaws as well as its considerable strengths. Thornton is more concerned with developing a general organizational theory of attention and making methodological advances over earlier organizational studies than she is saying something substantive about books in today’s universities and society. This is a disappointment to those of us who remember the elegant style, thoughtful insights and rigorous analysis in Lewis Coser, Walter Powell and Charles Kadushin’s *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, published over 20 years ago. Does there exist possibilities for quality ideas as well as space for sophisticated cultural production in our corporate dominated university environments? What might be the fate of independent presses in the coming period? What are the political and social

implications of a US-dominated global academic book market? Thornton, to her credit, clearly understands that her analysis has implications for the consideration of these wider public issues. But she has little to add to these discussions herself.

One could further say that the market logic has entered just a little too deeply into the text of this book itself. The author, for example, tells us that “anyone interested in publishing’s inner workings will enjoy reading the many interviews and thumbnail histories.” And the uniqueness of the study is stressed in the author’s own text just a little too often for this reader’s taste. In addition, we are told by the author herself that the analysis in the book “revitalizes” the earlier sociology of organizations approaches of Selznick and Blau and Scott. Even when the book really is original, as is the case with *Markets from Culture*, the old fashioned editors in the “world we have lost” would surely have asked Thornton to cut these plugs. Stanford University Press should be applauded for publishing such a technical and specialized monograph, but they could have done more to make sure that book reviewers, press publicists and blurb writers can do their jobs without professional competition from the author herself.

These quibbles aside, Canadian sociologists interested in books, culture and all types of organizations would learn much from *Markets from Culture*. This type of approach could easily be adapted to social analysis north of the border in numerous ways. It makes sense, it seems, for there to be a certain division of labour, where some scholars provide us with rigorous academic analysis, and other intellectuals, writers and activists draw out the larger meanings and political implications. Those of us concerned with preserving a space for meaningful cultural production and consumption could learn much from *Markets from Culture*. Thornton provides evidence that professions and larger cultural frames can shape organizational behavior in ways not totally determined by the all-powerful market. One could, to be sure, add more concern with the specifics of the organizational environment of Canadian higher education, as well as more attention to political and cultural values that differ across national boundaries. With these modifications, the theoretical approach of “institutional logics” gives us a very useful way to think about book publishing today. In addition, the fact that Thornton is concerned with developing a broader and general theory of attention, not simply an account of book publishing, is a valuable aspect of the work. The theoretical approach she develops and the methodological tools she offers could easily be applied to debates about market reforms in health care in Canada today, discussions of institutional reforms in higher education itself, and in any institutional setting where the logic of the professions comes in conflict with the logic of the market or the state. The potential applications of this type of work in the Canadian context are numerous and exciting. This is made all the more important by the fact that the discipline north of the border has neglected the potential of this type of mainstream organizational analysis. Canadian sociologists often view organizational analysis as narrowly sociological and politically conservative, when in reality the literature is broadly interdisciplinary and is very open to critical perspectives. Much radical social science draws on the “institutional logic” theoretical approach, and Thornton’s analysis builds upon recent work in cognitive science, social psychology and the best sociology of culture as well as mainstream organizational and administrative theory. It would be a shame if Canadian sociologists allowed sophisticated organizational analysis to become the exclusive property of business schools, for the theoretical and methodological tools put on display in *Markets from Culture* are powerful and compelling. This book is too technical for some, no question, but few recent works show as clearly what sociologists have to offer to economic debates, why culture

matters and how sophisticated theoretically driven empirical analysis can illuminate the institutional basis of the world of ideas we live in.

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