

Introduction

In this Part, we shall be arguing for a different approach to the study of economic activities. We shall suggest that if one begins with neither the problem of how to conceive what is essential to economic activities nor how to explain their distinct form, but rather with the problem of providing a description of particular sets of economic activities as they are carried out in business life, then the prevailing schemas are less than adequate. Indeed, it will be our contention that despite what may be said about their purposes, for one reason or another they resist being brought to bear upon empirically garnered materials. This being so, a novel and distinctive approach such as the one we suggest, is called for. We must be quite clear what we are saying though. We are not suggesting that our proposals and the analyses which are based upon them stand as a refutation of all existing accounts of economic and social life and the relationships between them. Neither are we claiming that the investigations we detail provide the basis of a fully fledged analytic paradigm or disciplinary matrix which can be slotted in to replace those presently in use. What we offer are explorations of a possible line of investigation and analysis together with some documentation of the distinctive slant which it provides and some of the advantages which it confers.

From what we have just said, it would seem obvious that we feel a new way of approaching economic activities is required simply because the existing ones do seem to resist being given what we might call empirical reference, especially as that is usually provided within sociology. That is to say, they do not seem designed to encourage their use as the organising framework for descriptions of actual economic practices in business life (and, indeed, elsewhere). Two obvious questions arise at this point. The first is "Why do we think they do that?". Isn't there any way in which conventional accounts of economic activities could be given an empirical basis? The second is "Why do that anyway?". What is the purpose/value/

point of bringing actual business practice under the rubric of theory? Answers to this second question can be pitched at a number of different levels and take a plethora of different forms. A vast number of economic and sociological treatises have been written outlining and defending them. We will offer two related and very simple answers. The first is, straightforwardly, that this is what these theories claim about themselves. Even the most analytically pure exposition has at least part of its purpose in what it might tell us about actual economic behaviour. The connection may be very indirect and, even, obscure, but some sort of link will be envisaged. The second draws on the place and distinctive purpose of the case study in the social sciences. As explanatory disciplines, particularly causally explanatory disciplines, the social sciences are somewhat underdeveloped. In large measure, we feel, this is the consequence of a lack of attention being paid to descriptions of naturally occurring social activities. Whatever the reasons why this might be so (and they are numerous and interconnected), it remains our view that progress towards the goal of explanation can only be achieved (if at all) through the utilisation of theoretical terms and concepts in the description of cases.

This much being said, what of the first question? Why do the prevailing theories resist empirical reference? Here our answers are more complicated and, perhaps, more contentious. What we are concerned with are ways of characterising what are usually thought of as the economic and social aspects of activities. Thus, to take a familiar example, the purchase of a piece of kitchen equipment might be seen as having economic and social aspects (or factors). These are, of course, conglomerate terms which could be further analysed out. Thus there is the calculative rationality of weighing utility against price. There is the perception of needs or desires and the availability of goods in the market place to satisfy those needs and desires. Then there are the economic mechanisms by which the transaction is facilitated. Alongside all of these are placed social and peer group pressures for conformity; class and socio-economic backgrounds as determinants of expectations; and, of course, the relationship between the economy as a social structure and other social structures such as the state, the family, law and so forth. As the various strands in this skein of relationships are teased apart, the question of the relationship between economic and social aspects of particular activities turns into a question of relating social and economic explanations of those activities. That is, it turns into a question of relating Economics and the other Social Sciences. Each of the disciplines is associated with, or defined in terms of a cluster of relevant aspects and their explanation.

When considered in this light, the proposal which often follows has a sort of natural inevitability about it. It seems intuitively obvious that what is required is a rapprochement between the disciplines, a synthesis which will enable both a full, complete or more extensive description of the activities in question and hence will encourage a closer empirical tie between theory and real world activities. It will be our contention that at least in the case of the organisation of economic activities, this intuition is badly misleading. Further, we will claim that the degree to which it is misleading can be gauged by the numerous attempts at synthesis and integration which have been already offered. We will argue that it is only by disregarding what we might term the internal logic of the disciplines, their modes of reasoning, that any attempt at integration or synthesis can be achieved. The result is unified but emasculated theories.

Because we can see no way just now to achieve the unification within a viable synthesis of

theories extracted from Economics, Sociology, Psychology, and elsewhere, we have been drawn to the conclusion that if we want to describe real world economic and business activities, we have to begin in some other way. The possibilities are, of course, endless and each provides its own set of interests and orientations; things to look at and things to disregard. The choice between these problematic possibilities cannot be simply arbitrary, a matter of whim or fancy. Instead, it must be governed by some methodological or investigative principles. Without such principles no claim to systematicity or rigour could ever be made. But it also follows that no such choice could ever be justified as logically necessary or foundational or more realistic. They are each equivalent. The principle which we have chosen is visibility in the materials we have gathered. That is, we will begin with what those who engage in the activities are concerned with: what matters to them and what they orient to, as far as that can be determined from what we have learned as fieldworkers about the setting and what can be seen in the materials we present. And, in our view, this means accepting that while actors engaged in business life are concerned with economic (i.e. calculative) rationality they are also concerned with what we will call organisational relevances. The interplay and interpenetration of calculation and organisation provides the place from which we wish to start. The analyses presented in the second part of this book are the exploration of what is made available when investigation is formulated with this as the departure point.