
ACCOUNTS

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

A Call for Papers from SASE:

The Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) is pleased to announce the call for papers for its 34th annual conference, “Fractious Connections: Anarchy, Activism, Coordination, and Control,” hosted by the University of Amsterdam from 9-11 July 2022.

Please find [the call for papers](#) (as well as SASE’s [research networks](#) and 2022 [mini-conference themes](#)).

The hard deadline for submissions is Tuesday, 25 January 2022.

Request for Proposals for entrepreneurship researchers, opening Jan. 18, 2022

This January, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation will launch the 2022 Kauffman Knowledge Challenge Request for Proposals (RFP).

The goal of this RFP is to support research that improves our understanding of entrepreneurship and

generates practical, actionable, and rigorous evidence to inform decision-making and change systems.

There are two focus areas that applicants will be asked to choose from:

- **Systems and structures to support inclusive prosperity:** This area will explore the infrastructure needed to support entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.
- **Equitable opportunities and the future of work:** This area will explore how entrepreneurial activity might be structured as the economy emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research findings will be shared with entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial support organizations, community leaders, and policymakers.

The RFP opens Jan. 18, 2022, and closes Feb. 28, 2022.

More information about this RFP is available [here](#). ■

PAWNSHOP ECONOMY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANYA DEGENSHEIN



Anya Degenshein is an Assistant Professor of Social and Cultural Sciences at Marquette University. She is interested in law and society, punishment, surveillance, racial and economic inequalities, discourse and narrative, and social theory. Her research focuses on the scope and consequences of the U.S. criminal justice system, particularly its relationship to social inequality. Her ethnographic research on pawnshops, “Strategies of Valuation: Repertoires of Worth at the Financial Margins” (2017)” published in *Theory and Society*, received ASA Sociology of Culture Graduate Student Paper Award, Sociology Open Access Recognition Award (SocArXiv), and Winch Prize for Best Paper Published or Presented in Northwestern Sociology.

Ya-Ching Huang, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Anya Degenshein about her recently published article, “The Object Economy: ‘Alternative’ banking in Chicago” (2020).

Ya-Ching Huang: What was the initial spark that led you to study the pawnshop economy in Chicago?

Anya Degenshein: During my first year of graduate school, I was having dinner with a couple friends and one brought up an interesting NPR segment he had just heard about pawnshops. This was around the same time several TV shows about pawning were airing. My friend began explaining how pawnshops weren’t *primarily* a place to buy and sell used goods, although they do that. Instead, pawnshops make most of their money by offering high interest, secured loans (via used objects) to individuals who either don’t want to use or aren’t eligible for more traditional lines of credit, such as credit cards. I was immediately fascinated because my primary area of research is in law and punishment, and I knew that individuals who are ensnared within the criminal justice system often have no credit or very bad credit, as even an arrest can affect one’s credit score, let alone conviction or incarceration. It was like a lightbulb suddenly went off: Oh, this is where justice-impacted folks could go for a loan, for a financial lifeline. I couldn’t get the subject out of my head for the next few weeks, and I discovered there was very little written on pawnshops,

so I decided to study them myself!

Y. H.: Could you walk us through the operation, clientele, and social interactions in pawnshops?

A. D.: As a financial institution, pawnshops assess objects—laptops, jewelry, bicycles, kitchenware, etc.—for value. In the shop I studied, if the employees found the object acceptable after inspecting it, perhaps doing a little online research, too, they offered half of its used value as a cash loan. To maintain ownership of the object, customers would have to pay monthly interest and fees on the loan. At the shop I studied, the combined monthly interest and fees was a whopping 20 percent of the loan, the equivalent of a 240% APR on a credit card. This is actually fairly average nationally. To retrieve the object, a customer had to pay both the interest and the principal loan back in one lump sum. Defaulting on interest payments—at any time—meant the shop got to keep the object, in addition to any prior interest payments.

It turns out that pawnshops serve a diverse cross section of people, some of whom may not be eligible for traditional loans, some of whom just prefer the more

laidback atmosphere of pawnshops and other fringe banking outfits (e.g., payday loan centers, check-cashing stores, etc.), and some of whom just need access to very fast cash, including business owners coming up on payday. Thus, I saw people of all ages (well, 18 and over), financial means, and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

That said, we know from national-level data that fringe banking customers are disproportionately people of color, women, without high school degrees, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, although not the very lowest, as one still needs an object of value to pawn and the ability to make interest payments on that item each month. Customers who default on their loan lose their object, but the shop would much rather have indefinite interest payments rather than a new object since the interest is so high. And I saw many customers who had items in-pawn for several years. These individuals were considered “good” customers because they had the means to pay interest each month but not quite enough for the principle, the most lucrative situation for the shop.

The pawnshop I observed had a really convivial atmosphere with music playing and jokes flying. A local blues musician who was a regular customer came in and gave an impromptu performance on the guitar he pawned. The shop, which wasn’t a national chain, really leaned into being a banking “alternative” where customers could relax and feel comfortable sharing their financial hardships rather than hiding them because the hardship was not a barrier to service. The employees were all very friendly too. They largely came from the same socioeconomic backgrounds as the customers, so there was a lot of empathy, although not always. The employees did judge some customers they thought were financially irresponsible, like those who used loans to buy TVs or jewelry in the shop, or those who couldn’t afford gas for their luxury SUVs. But those judgements were always reserved for after the customers left.

Y. H.: Your work challenges the prevailing tendency to contrast the fringe economy with the mainstream banking economy. Could you elaborate on why “fringe” is a bit of a misnomer? How would your argument facilitate our understanding of alternative financial services?

A. D.: Well for one thing, pawnshops and other fringe banking outfits do serve a diverse clientele—folks of all ages, education levels, financial means, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. For another, they use the same financial reasoning as mainstream banks and credit lenders to assess who is a good customer and should be extended more loans, namely, someone who can make monthly interest payments, but doesn’t have the means to quickly pay down the principal. As such, pawnshops may not use credit reports to determine credit eligibility, but they might come to very similar conclusions as banks using such reports do. Finally, by mapping pawnshop locations across Chicago, I found that pawnshops do not serve residents equally. Pawnshops are located in low-moderate and mixed-income neighborhoods, as well as ethnically and racially diverse neighborhoods. But in Chicago, they are not well represented in majority-Black neighborhoods, even those that have mixed incomes. Thus, they appear discriminatory in their provision of services, as we know “mainstream” banks have been.

Y. H.: You mention an aggressive expansion of pawnshop chains in the early 2010s, following the Great Recession. I wonder if the COVID-19 pandemic fosters or impedes the usage and growth of pawnshops. How does the COVID-19 economic impact reshape the financial lifeway of Americans?

A. D.: That is a fascinating and important question, one I hope someone takes up! But yes, as income bifurcation grows in the United States, now accelerated by the pandemic, we would expect pawnshops and other fringe economies to become more important for even larger swaths of residents. This, in turn, will only exacerbate economic inequality given how high the interest rates and fees are for fringe banking outfits. That is, unless and until fringe banking, particularly pawnshops, receives more regulatory attention.

Y. H.: Your article vividly portrays the pawnshop setting, interactions between employees and customers, and owners’ perceptions. Could you tell us about the method(s) that you used to collect data? What are some strengths or limitations of your methodology?

A. D.: I am a qualitative scholar by training, with a par-

ticular interest in narrative and discourse, so my work is generally small-N, highly descriptive, and specific to the context I am investigating. For the pawnshop project I used ethnography, primarily because I really wanted a feel for what happened in the shop, day in and day out, how value was negotiated and created between customers and employees. The FDIC collects national-level data on fringe banking, which was incredibly helpful to contextualize my own findings, but those data alone don't give any sense of the social interactions within the shop. During my study, I also conducted a few pilot interviews with customers. I was interested in learning why customers were using the shop, how frequently they used it, and which other kinds of loans they used, but getting folks to be forthcoming about their finances is really difficult. I realized it would make for an entirely new project, or a much bigger one than I was conducting at the time. The storeowner was willing to provide me with some of his business records, though, which was a huge help in just seeing the bigger picture for the store itself, absent information on individual customers. I was also able to create some original maps using GIS with city-level data I found on pawnshops and the assistance of a GIS librarian. That was really gratifying and allowed me to conceptualize new puzzles. It's always worth going out of your comfort zone if you have interesting data!

Y. H.: What are you working on currently, and

what are your future research plans?

A. D.: Currently, I am working on my first book manuscript, which examines the narrative construction of prospective, or future, criminality in the adjudication of domestic terrorism stings. Crime “prevention” has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, but almost exclusively within the realm of law enforcement. I look to the courts to see how these forward-looking cases are adjudicated in a justice-seeking process that is inherently backward-looking, ultimately tying law enforcement practices to punishment outcomes.

In my next project, on which I will begin a pilot wave of research this summer, I will marry insights gained from both the current book project and the pawnshop project to investigate the creation and use of new surveillant apps in the criminal justice system. Historically, the people being monitored eat the costs of court-mandated surveillant devices, creating a financial burden in addition to the punishment. Meanwhile, the emergence of surveillant apps is creating new business opportunities for tech entrepreneurs, not to mention public-private partnerships. This, in turn, is raising new questions around punishment beneficiaries, data collection, and privacy—not to mention alternative forms of punishment as incarceration faces increasing scrutiny due to both the Black Lives Matter movement and the global pandemic. ■

SECTION OFFICE-HOLDERS

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THE INTERN ECONOMY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDRE FRENETTE



Alexandre Frenette is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at Vanderbilt University and Associate Director of The Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy. His research draws on intersecting interests in arts and culture, work and occupations, and social inequality. Specifically, he studies how workers attempt to launch and sustain careers in the precarious economy using the cultural and creative industries as a case study.

Elif Birced, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Alexandre Frenette about his current book project, *The Intern Economy*, and his future research plans.

Elif Birced: What sparked your interest in studying unpaid interns, particularly in cultural industries?

Alexandre Frenette: This study was sparked by a graduate ethnography course, though it also came out of my involvement in the record industry prior to starting graduate school. As part of an ethnography course, drawing on my business relationships in the industry, I gained access to a music promotion company as an unpaid intern with the aim to study how promotion and PR firms help shape consumer tastes in music. However, during fieldwork I was quickly struck by the abundance of interns at this site. The department where I was an overt participant observer had four full-time employees and was hosting five part-time interns who spent the bulk of their time doing mundane tasks such as preparing mailings, doing inventory, photocopying, and running errands. The company also hosted a full-time unpaid intern who essentially did the same work as paid employees, though he handled the least important accounts. The abundance of interns as a free, often poorly treated

source of labor, and the conditions under which interns accept or contest their low status, drew me to studying this type of worker.

Although I was encouraged by classmates and professors to pursue this research as a dissertation project, I must admit I was hesitant. Years before attending graduate school, I founded and eventually co-ran a small independent record company. Based on my involvement in the music industry, and contact with colleagues at various other companies, I considered the intern economy problematic yet “normal.” Still, during fieldwork I connected my observations to sensitizing episodes that helped me question and better understand the significance of these arrangements. For example, three years after I founded a record company, we hosted our first and only intern. The intern was a very good, albeit somewhat recent friend, but the relationship temporarily changed into an asymmetrical joking relationship. By then I had never been an intern nor consciously thought about the intern economy, and yet we joked about our intern running personal errands and doing other me-

nial tasks (and the work we assigned was not much better). After a few months, our friend applied for a job at the largest record store of the city and listed me as a reference. When I received a call from a store employee, I praised him vehemently and admitted that his loss would be significant. He landed the job and he continued to offer help, though less frequently, and unambiguously as a friend. While I was doing fieldwork, looking back at sensitizing episodes such as these helped me understand the significance of internships as a way for individuals to enter occupational communities, and eventually I decided to pursue this research as my dissertation project.

In terms of why I focused on the cultural industries, in glamorous fields like music, film, and publishing, there is a consistently large oversupply of motivated people enticed by the symbolic rewards of “cool” jobs. The cultural industries are widely seen as the worst abusers of intern labor, eagerly exploiting students’ efforts and cultural knowledge while offering little training, mentorship, or true career opportunities. Every major record company has been the subject of a lawsuit from former interns demanding back pay. I decided to focus on this extreme case because I hypothesized it would illustrate broader transformations in education and work.

E. B.: Could you please describe your research and the main implications of your book project, *The Intern Economy*?

A. F.: The in-progress manuscript draws on participant observation as an unpaid intern at two music industry firms in New York City and 120 interviews with 102 key informants in and around this social world (i.e., record label employees, college personnel, labor rights activists, and the interns themselves). The book will also draw on data from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), a comprehensive, cross-sectional national survey of over 200,000 arts alumni, including responses from nearly 10,000 arts alumni to a 17-question module I designed on internships. The book will map out the structures, individual efforts, and barriers to transitioning from college to career, which I argue have shifted signifi-

cantly with the emergence of the intern economy.

The intern economy has exploded over the last two decades. Historically, this type of experiential learning was mostly prominent in vocational training and education for the professions but is now common in nearly every sector of the economy, with nearly two-thirds of recent college alumni (pre-pandemic) graduating with internship experience. I argue that the proliferation of internships is indicative of transformations in higher education and labor markets: While a degree was once enough to secure long-term employment, college students of all stripes must now also demonstrate their employability through practical, hands-on experience.

In the race to become employable, many young workers feel they must intern to get ahead, but I found from interviews and SNAAP survey data that they often report not getting much out of their experience. How are both facts true? Because internships, as experienced, are rife with ambiguity. *The Intern Economy* argues that the three key actors engaged in the intern economy—employers, educators, and interns—have not yet addressed the built-in, fundamental challenges inherent in these arrangements. Notably, employers are not trained nor rewarded to educate; colleges are ill-equipped to oversee learning in the workplace; and students sink or swim without receiving much guidance. Because of these challenges, almost every internship begins in such a high state of ambiguity that all parties are working at cross-purposes from the start. As a result, particularly for unpaid internships, there is little consensus about what interns should be doing and getting out of their experience, which often leads to disappointment.

The book will contribute to multiple sociological areas, especially work, culture, and higher education. Existing theories about labor market entry stress the importance of human capital and until recently such research assumed a relatively tidy transition from college to career. Much of the career mobility literature has been theorized and situated empirically within standard employment arrangements. My book will develop a new model of breaking in regarding a seg-

ment of the labor market that is riddled with precarious employment arrangements.

E. B.: What are the major insights your current research can offer for economic sociologists? And how can economic sociologists build upon your work?

A. F.: Two contributions I see as especially salient for economic sociologists relate to the social construction of what is deemed work, as well as how we understand compensation. The study of interns further exposes the social construction of traditional work vs. nontraditional work (e.g., care work); by looking at the meaning interns attribute to their role, and how the role is negotiated with paid employees and higher education personnel, I find that the intern's role ambiguity stems from their dual standing as "student" and "worker." The contested view of interns as workers ultimately leads to exploitation, legal disputes, and inequalities. As new forms of work emerge in the precarious economy, economic sociology is fruitful in analyzing how various actors construct, and may contest, an activity as work.

My research also shows how creative workers make everyday compromises about the forms of compensation they consider worthy of their labor. When is it "normal" to do something for free? What is the value of free or low-paid work? Several of my publications explore emerging ideas about how free and non-free work intersect in the new economy. One article in *Research in the Sociology of Work*, with Richard Ocejo, compares how music industry personnel and cocktail bartenders construe nonmonetary rewards and derive meaning from their jobs at the expense of higher paid and less precarious employment elsewhere. This research connects to recent work on passion by Erin Cech, Lindsay DePalma, Megan Tobias Neely, Aliya Rao, and others. I hope to see further integration of sociology of work and economic sociology to address how workers pursue, maintain, and lose passion as a form of compensation.

E. B.: Lastly, could you tell us a little bit about your future research plans? What is next for you

research-wise?

A. F.: While the book project engages questions of social inclusion/exclusion, my studies of labor market entry are transitioning to questions related to inequalities in outcomes that result from the process of breaking in. Notably, Gillian Gualtieri (Vanderbilt University), Nathan Martin (Arizona State University), and I were recently awarded a National Endowment for the Arts research grant to analyze how the uneven distribution of an emerging credentialing resource (internships) by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status impacts labor market outcomes.

In addition to my research on how aspiring workers *break into* occupations, I am increasingly studying how workers *stay in* occupations. While the rise of precarious work, proliferation of educational credentials, and relative decline of internal labor markets within bureaucratic organizations have transformed the structure of early careers and prompted various agentic efforts by aspirants, these shifts have also transformed how individuals sustain careers over time. Due to the erosion of standard employment arrangements, workers must continually reestablish their employability, which may involve proving their commitment to lines of work, occupational generalism (taking on multiple roles or working in several fields), reskilling (or combatting the *perceived* depreciation of skills), and related shifts to educational programs and policy contexts aimed at facilitating "staying in." I am using interview and survey data to interrogate these changes while considering how workers' efforts to stay in occupations are shaped by processes of social exclusion, and whether workers departing fields is subject to inequalities. ■

TEACHING ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALYA GUSEVA

Alya Guseva is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Boston University. She specializes in economic sociology and medical sociology and with a particular interest in money, finance, morality, and biomedical markets. Her published books, *Into the Red* (2008) and *Plastic Money* (2014) with Akos Rona-Tas, focus on the emergence of credit card markets in post-communist countries, and her published articles with Dilyara Ibragimova examine the management of household money in Russia. She is currently working on the gestational surrogacy markets in Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan. She teaches Economic Sociology, Medical Markets, and Sociology of Health Care.



Ya-Ching Huang, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Alya Guseva about her experiences in teaching economic sociology with different models during the pandemic.

Ya-Ching Huang: Could you tell us about how you approach syllabus design? How do your research interests inform the topic selections?

Alya Guseva: Like other courses in established sociology subfields, both my undergraduate lecture and the undergraduate/graduate seminar in Economic Sociology always cover three or four key theoretical approaches—the structural/network approach, the institutional approach, the cultural approach, and sometimes, performativity. Following the reading and the discussion of key works illustrating each of these approaches, I then offer “applications”—interesting empirical case studies built around certain key concepts or mechanisms central to each of the approaches, like strong vs. weak ties, strategic action fields, relational work, or valuation. Finally, the last half or third of the syllabus is focused on a selection of economic sociology topics that I find particularly interesting at the moment, often because of my own research or writing.

A few times, that last portion of the class was dedicated to money, financialization, consumer finance, indebtedness, predatory lending, credit scoring, and consumer (credit) surveillance. This was a particularly big hit with

my undergraduate students, most of whom sensed the importance that accesses to credit would play in their adult lives, but few of whom felt sufficiently prepared when it came to using financial services. Another time, I dedicated the last part of the class to exploring economic inequalities, wealth, and precarity. More recently, when my own research took a turn from consumer finance to contested commodities and moralized markets, I added readings on markets for assisted reproduction, intimacy, and carework. I like to rotate these readings in this part of the class, and it is often how I get to read recently published work in economic sociology.

Y. H.: What topics do you think used to be less discussed but are now essential to incorporate into the course? How do they advance our understanding of economic sociology?

A. G.: Thank you for asking this question. I have thought about this before: How are my current syllabi different from how economic sociology was taught in the early 2000s, and in what directions should we consider taking economic sociology syllabi in the future? Twenty years ago, it was common to start the course in economic sociology by first reading and critiquing

neo-classical economists. This was a way to make sense of the “origin story” of economic sociology as a subfield. But I do not think it is necessary today. I certainly don’t do it. What I do instead is emphasize the differences between economic and sociological approaches to understanding economic action.

We tend to think of syllabi as lists of readings representing a certain subfield: work done by economic sociologists, who cite and are in a dialogue with other economic sociologists. But the boundaries of subfields are permeable (and the most innovative work may in fact be happening on the boundaries). And while some longstanding affinities between economic sociology and other subfields are reflected in what economic sociology courses have been typically teaching (sociology of culture and organizational sociology/sociology of work are good examples of subfields with a considerable degree of overlap with economic sociology), ties with other subfields, such as crime and law, urban sociology, race and ethnicity, sociology of health and medicine, to name a few, are more attenuated and have not yet been adequately explored. I start my syllabus by stating: “Economic sociology is concerned with all aspects of material life. This includes the organization of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.” This is a very broad definition that can include many settings and topics beyond the subfield’s traditional focus on markets! I already incorporate readings and discussions of production, distribution, and consumption inside or between households, but I would also like to have students read and reflect more on the economic lives of neighborhoods and communities, on municipalities and the criminal justice system as economic actors, or on prices and profit-making in healthcare.

Y. H.: How did you adapt to the online teaching due to COVID-19 in Spring 2020? Are there some tips or innovations that you find helpful for class facilitation?

A. G.: I was lucky to teach a small Economic Sociology seminar with about 10 students in Spring 2020. By the time all classes moved online, I had managed to establish great rapport with my students. In fact, the last thing we did as a class before going on spring break was attending a play at a local theater. I am a big fan of live theater, and frequently get email notifications about upcoming shows. One that caught my eye was called “The Treasurer.” It was about the challenges faced by

an adult son caring for his aging mother who was losing grip on both her mental and financial reality. This sounded like a perfect venue for exploring intergenerational relational work around money and caregiving. (I did not know it at a time, but this was my last live theater performance for the next 16 months!) When the class reconvened on Zoom after the break, I did not feel that I struggled to draw students in. The connection and trust we established earlier in the semester helped us going forward. The only adjustment I had to do for that semester was shortening the class from 3 to 2 hours (I just could not fathom being on Zoom for 3 hours straight!) and having everyone, including myself, contribute their questions and thoughts related to assigned readings to a shared Google document. This way more work was done in between once-a-week classes, and the students could also download and save the collective notes for their records.

One additional innovation that I usually do in the Economic Sociology seminar is leaving the last two or three weeks of the semester open so that the students collectively select the readings. I usually include a long list of recently published monographs from which they can choose, but also ask them mid-semester what topics they would like to read about, and supplement the list given their requests. Everyone votes, and we end up reading 3 or 4 finalists. The students like this feature because it gives them a sense of ownership of the class.

Y. H.: You also taught the economic sociology lecture and seminar in a hybrid format in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, respectively. Could you provide some pedagogical insights on this teaching model? What are the challenges and benefits of navigating and practicing hybrid education?

A. G.: The biggest problem with remote teaching in my opinion is student engagement. During the 2020-2021 academic year, many of my students were taking classes at home, sometimes that meant they were 14 hours ahead or 5 hours behind Boston. The need to accommodate asynchronous students meant that lectures had to be recorded. This made it hard to ask synchronous students to keep their cameras on because it essentially meant inviting everyone into their private spaces in a permanent way. In the end, I did not insist on students keeping their cameras on during most of the lecture, which I recorded for the asynchronous students, but stopped recording in the end and asked all synchronous students to turn their cameras back for

the discussion. This was tricky, and I would never want to teach a hybrid class again, particularly since half of the lectures over the course of both semesters I was conducting from a classroom with three or four in-person students, twenty-five or more students connecting via Zoom, and another two or three only watching recorded lectures.

So, I put my foot down and did not accept any asynchronous students in my spring Economic Sociology seminar. This would not make any sense anyway. How can one take a seminar in an asynchronous manner? Moreover, my first attempt to teach a seminar from a classroom, in which I was masked, two more in-person students were also masked, and eight more students were on Zoom, was a complete technological failure: Remote students could not hear in-person students, so they also had to hop on Zoom too; remote students could not see me because classroom camera was installed right above my desk, and all they could see was the top of my head. But once I decided to move the class entirely on Zoom, this class became the highlight of what was otherwise a very long, bleak, and dreary COVID semester.

First, I arranged the seminar to be a twice-a-week 1 hour and 15 minute class, rather than a once-a-week 2 hour and 45 minute one, because I was wary of Zoom fatigue. Second, I have adopted a wonderful platform called Perusal. At BU it is integrated into Blackboard. Perusal allows the instructor to upload assigned readings and invites everyone to annotate them collectively. Students can highlight passages and attach comments or questions to them. Students can upvote questions that others asked to signal they would also like to know the answer or can respond to questions. Perusal tracks the amount of time students spend on the platform, and the number of comments they make (those can also be weighted to be scored differently, but I did not grade on the quality of questions and comments, only on the volume of engagement). These collective annotations replaced the usual individual writeups of the assigned readings, and the work of reading and thinking together was particularly impactful because of the unusual circumstances of that semester. Looking at students' annotations before class gave me a sense of the work they did in preparation and was an important source of feedback for me. It helped make class discussions more tailored to what the students found most interesting or most confusing in the readings. Perusal

enabled me to give students mid-semester feedback on their participation, and a couple of them subsequently stepped up their game. In fact, I was so impressed with their sustained effort—pretty much everyone engaged in consistent work to annotate and showed up on my screen twice a week without fail throughout the whole semester—that for the first time in my almost 20 years of teaching I told students that they did not have to take a final exam if they were happy with their provisional grades.

Y. H.: What do you enjoy the most when teaching economic sociology?

A. G.: Economic sociology is a theory-intense course: Students learn the key theoretical approaches to analyzing economic phenomena. I enjoy equipping them with the tools that help them gain insight into economic exchanges; the workings of markets, including labor and consumer credit markets; the pressures of financialization; and the challenges of cultivating their financialized selves. Adopting an economic sociology lens can have immediate relevance for their daily lives, and the biggest joy for me is to engage them with the theories and the concepts in a way that will resonate long after the class is over. One of the exercises I did in the pre-COVID era was to ask students to share something that struck or troubled them the most after we had finished reading about and discussing consumer credit and credit scoring (including their off-label use and the proliferation of consumer credit surveillance). I asked them to write their thoughts anonymously on a piece of paper, collected their responses, shuffled them, and gave them back randomly. Everyone had to read what others wrote, and some shared the responses with the whole class. Some of these were very personal, and one was heartbreaking, detailing the family's financial struggles and fears to take on more debt to pay for a master's degree. The student who got this note came up to me at the end of the class and asked to keep it. I was surprised but allowed it. She explained that she could relate to what was written, and it made her feel less alone in a private university with a lot of students from financially secure and well-to-do families.

The biggest joy is to run into or hear from my former Economic Sociology students who tell me that they revisit the concepts and theories we discussed in class while they pursue other degrees or in their professional careers. ■

SPOTLIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS OCCHIUTO

Nicholas Occhiuto is an Assistant Professor of management at [EMLYON Business School](#). He is an economic sociologist and qualitative researcher whose interests include corporate political activity, work and occupations, and public policy. His research has appeared in [Social Forces](#), [Work and Occupations](#), and [Annual Review of Sociology](#).

Elif Birced, a Ph.D. student at BU, talked to Nicholas Occhiuto about his journey to sociology, dissertation, and ongoing research.



Elif Birced: How did you become a sociologist and come to specialize in economic sociology?

Nicholas Occhiuto: I'm from New York City, and I did my undergraduate at New York University, where I was a double major in sociology and philosophy. I really wasn't the best student, at first. I was a first-generation college student, and I think that at the beginning of my college experience, I was in over my head. I really didn't understand what it meant to be a college student, or the demands that were being placed on me, or how to allocate time or energy to meet those demands. And, initially, I really did suffer. Then, in my sophomore year, I took an Introduction to Sociology course with Professor Gerald Marwell. I really found a mentor in Gerry. He challenged me, and he changed the way I both approached college life and the academy. I ended up taking several classes with him while I was at NYU. I really don't think that I would be where I am today, and I don't think I would be in the Academy, if not for the guidance and mentorship of Gerry. And, for that, I'm forever grateful to him.

Perhaps it is because I worked a lot of different low-wage service jobs in high school and in college, I have always been interested in work and trying to understand what motivates people do the work that they do. And, as I was doing a master's degree at Columbia University, I was reading all these ethnographies of work and the workplace, and I was dissatisfied with their representations of work and, in particular, low-wage service work. So, I started looking for a field site where I could ex-

plore work in the contemporary economy. And I decided to take on this occupation of taxi driving. On the one hand, the Yellow cab is an iconic symbol of New York City. It has been immortalized in all these cultural spaces: There have been movies and TV shows made about it; books have been written about it; there are yellow taxi trinkets sold in Time Square souvenir shops. Everyone knows the New York City Yellow taxicab. But, on the other hand, it's also a job that is characterized by economic precarity. Taxi drivers are contract workers with low earning potential who lack health insurance, pension benefits, and formal job ladders for promotion. I thought it would be a good field site to explore how workers navigate work in the contemporary economy. So, I became a taxi driver, and that started me on my trajectory of becoming an economic sociologist.

E. B.: In your previous research, you focused on the corporate political activity and regulatory change in the highly regulated taxi industries in New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, and Austin. What sparked your interest in studying taxi industries in these different cities?

N. O.: When I started driving taxi, in 2011, Uber was not yet a thing—or, at least, it was not the big industry disrupter that we know today. But, as I was doing my field work, Uber entered and gradually started attracting passengers and, importantly, drivers onto the platform. And they were doing it without asking anyone for permission to operate. They just kind of showed up and started operating.

My experience in the industry led me to believe that there was no way that they were going to be successful in this industry. I thought that the Yellow taxi incumbents were too politically powerful in the city and that they had “captured” regulators at the Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC). I figured the TLC was going to regulate them out of existence. And when that didn’t happen, it really forced me to challenge my assumptions. I started to examine the relationship between these industry regulators and these disruptive platforms.

What I came to realize is just how important political actors—legislators, regulators, mayors, and judges—are in enabling market disruption. You know, a lot of the literature focuses on the market actions that entrepreneurial firms, or startups, take to disrupt industries. What, I think, my field work revealed was the important role that “the state,” or the nonmarket and political environments, plays in enabling market disruption.

Of course, New York City is an outlier. It’s the most populous city in the United States, with the largest taxi industry in the in the country. So, I wanted to include additional cases that would enable comparative analysis and allow for more accurate and elaborate theory. I included other cities that were like NYC in terms of their taxi industries. I chose Chicago and San Francisco because they each had a medallion taxi industry, powerful industry incumbent, and dedicated taxi regulator, and because they were among the first three cities in which Uber and other Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) operated. Then, I also chose Austin because it was an important negative case. Uber had been quite successful in influencing the political and regulatory environments in many cities in the United States but was unsuccessful in Austin.

E. B.: Could you please describe the main implications of your comparative research on the corporate political activity and regulatory change in the taxi industries?

N. O.: I think that this project has three implications. First, the “gig” or “sharing” or “platform” economy, and a lot of the contemporary economy, more generally, is characterized independent contract work. And one of the major findings of this research is that what is often most attractive about independent contract work to workers is the ability to control one’s work schedule. So, the first implication is that to understand why work-

ers take on economically precarious work, and consent to independent contract work that produces that precarity, we must understand the personal aspirations and familial and social relations beyond the workplace that make those work arrangements attractive. We must examine how this schedule flexibility enables workers to meet the day-to-day demands of life outside of the workplace. And we must think about how we can build work arrangements that afford workers those freedoms and flexibilities, but ones that are also free of economic precarity.

The second implication, as I said earlier, is that “the state” plays a really important role in market disruption. This means that to truly understand market disruption, we need to examine not just the market environment and the market actions of start-ups but also the non-market environment and corporate political actions of entrepreneurial firms. We need to pay more attention to the role that the regulators, elected officials, and judges play in enabling or constraining market disruption.

The final implication is that corporate political activity, or the actions that organizations or firms take to influence their political environments, can be a double-edged sword for organizations. What I mean by that is that the same actions that make an organization successful in one context might be their undoing in another context. So, there is a need to understand how local contexts influence organizational outcomes. Most of the empirical work on corporate political activity has focused on national or state levels in the United States. Yet, we know that a lot of regulation and public policy is either written or enacted at a local level, thus firms must engage with politicians and regulators at a local level. We also know that the perceptions of corporate political activity, and its role in the political process, vary across those local contexts. What this research shows is that to understand what makes organizations successful at influencing their political environments, we must consider the local sociopolitical context in which those organizations are operating.

E. B.: Could you please tell us about your on-going research project on the work of federal lobbyists in the United States?

N. O.: One of the major themes that emerged from my dissertation research was the role that lobbyists played in influencing the public policy process. Lobbyists were

routinely identified by my respondents as one of the primary mechanisms that made Uber so successful in influencing public policy. And the research in sociology, political science, and management supports this belief. Scholars from across the social sciences have shown that lobbying is primary and one of the most effective means through which firms influence government officials. However, when I would ask my respondents what they think the lobbyists did to influence policy makers, they were much less certain in their responses. In this, my respondents were also not alone. Social scientists also do not have good answers for how lobbying or lobbyists influence their political environments.

So, like my work on the taxi industry, I decided to immerse myself in the lobbying industry to try and understand what the day-to-day work of lobbyists look like. Because the production of public policy is relational, I pursued what I refer to relational interviewing. Drawing on Matthew Desmond's notion of relational ethnography, relational interviewing is a sampling procedure that incorporates actors who occupy different positions within a given social field. For lobbying, that social field includes contract lobbyists, in-house government relations professionals, staffers for Members of the House of Representatives and Senators, as well as fundraisers for those Members. To fully immerse myself, however, I

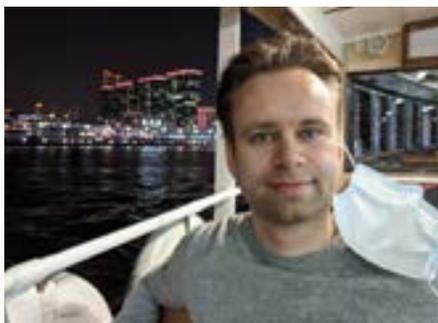
also engaged in participant observation. I began accompanying lobbyists as they made their way around Capitol Hill and took meetings with staffers. Unfortunately, this fieldwork was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I'm hoping to reenter the field in Spring 2022, as the Hill begins to open again.

For those of us who care deeply about policy outcomes, we really need to focus on the actual process of policy production. The goal of this project to unpack what that process actually looks like and the role that lobbyists play in that process.

E. B.: As a junior faculty in the field of economic sociology, what lessons do you think that you have learned that might be valuable for those who are doctoral students, on the job market, or at earlier stages of their careers?

N. O.: I guess, the biggest piece of advice that I would give to all graduate students—and particularly those graduate students who are on the job market—is to be kind to yourself. You know, the job market can be tough. There are a lot of things outside of your control. My advice is to try and be kind to yourself in the process and to remember that the academy is better characterized as a marathon than a sprint. ■

ON TECHNOLOGY AND CRIME: AN INTERVIEW WITH ISAK LADEGAARD



Isak Ladegaard is Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is interested in economic sociology, technology and social change, and crime and deviance. In most of his work, he uses a mixture of computational and qualitative research methods.

Meghann Lucy, Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Isak Ladegaard about his recent research on illicit online markets and managing uncertainty and safety in the sharing economy.

Meghann Lucy: Your work on illicit cyber marketplaces tests whether shutting them down and publicly punishing their founders functions to deter future crime. Contrary to what we might

expect of rational economic actors, you find that media coverage of the Silk Road founder's maximum sentence was followed by increased trade of drugs on these marketplaces and subsequent

development of measures to strengthen the marketplaces. Why might this be the case?

Isak Ladegaard: In a way it's not too surprising that a highly publicized trial led to more trade, as many people learned about darknet markets by reading about them in the news. The Silk Road trial was, for a while, front-page material! What's more surprising perhaps is that existing market participants weren't deterred by the trial outcome. I found that many felt a strong commitment to the darknet "community," and that the crackdown united them. And because they had the technology to communicate openly and securely, while maintaining their pseudonyms, they could collaborate effectively on problem-solving. They made a bunch of new combinations of existing technologies and introduced new practices that eventually made the darknet economy stronger and more resilient.

M. L.: To what extent do you think your findings might apply to other forms of illegal marketplaces (e.g., those that are in-person) compared with those existing in anonymous virtual spaces facilitated by cryptocurrencies?

I. L.: My research on digital drug trade is really a big case study of how difficult it is to control highly motivated and tech-savvy groups who operate in cyberspace. I'm currently adding other cases to develop this point. So yeah, I definitely think that at least some of my drug-trade findings apply to other kinds of markets and communities. My sense is that existing policing strategies assume that cyberspace operates in pretty much the same way as "meatspace," and this has some potentially sobering unintended consequences, not just in crackdowns on drug markets like Silk Road, but other domains as well. For instance, we don't have an effective way of dealing with digital far-right communities. Attempts to slash their ability to receive donations by credit cards have fast-tracked the shift to cryptocurrencies, which are much harder to track.

M. L.: Some of your recent work explores risk in the sharing economy. How do gig workers cope with uncertainty and the threat of danger in their work? And do you have a sense about how their

strategies may have changed in the current context?

I. L.: I'm broadly interested in how technology provides new economic opportunities and challenges, and in the platform economy, some workers are both burdened and dependent on digital tools.

In a recent piece with Juliet Schor and Alexandria Ravenelle, for example, we find that Uber drivers face electronically mediated threats from both passengers and managers, as poor reviews, even if inaccurate, can lead to immediate platform deactivation. To protect themselves, some drivers install video cameras, in part to record erratic and even violent passengers, but also to collect data in case they need to dispute poor reviews. We argue that these and other practices amount to a form of "defensive labor" that workers need to do to make a living. I'd think that workers do even more "defensive labor" during the pandemic, especially ride-hail drivers! Ravenelle is writing about gig work during the pandemic, so she probably has more to say about this.

M. L.: What are you working on now? What is next for you?

I. L.: At this moment I'm trying to wrap up data collection on the digital far-right, so that I can expand on some of the technology and social control ideas I mentioned earlier. I really think that the capability of operating secretly (e.g., by using encryption technology) and openly (e.g., by communicating and collaborating in public) is a new cocktail that we still don't know how to deal with. ■

BOOKSHELF: REBECCA ELLIOTT ON UNDERWATER

Rebecca Elliott is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests span economic sociology, political sociology, environmental sociology, and knowledge production and science studies. Her book *Underwater: Loss, Flood Insurance, and the Moral Economy of Climate Change in the United States* came out from Columbia University Press in 2021. In addition to her academic research, she has published in the *New York Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and *Harper's Magazine*.

Gökhan Mülayim, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, spoke to Rebecca Elliott about her new book and future research plans.



Gökhan Mülayim: Let me first congratulate you on the publication of your new book. Could you please tell us a bit about the story of this book? What inspired you to go into this field of research?

Rebecca Elliott: I'd be lying if I said I always knew I'd be writing at length about flood insurance. But I've always been interested in the intersections of environmental change with economic knowledge, techniques, and institutions. The big question here, for me, is: How, and with what effects, are the costs of climate change defined and distributed? Put more plainly: How do we know how much climate change is costing, or will cost in the future? Who is paying for climate change, and how much are they paying? And how are those arrangements politically determined?

It turns out that insurance is a key and lively terrain for taking up that big question. Insurance institutions economize natural hazards, like those we associate with climate change. Insurers produce information about risk and its cost in order to put in place financial arrangements that protect against anticipated losses. This economization also ostensibly helps people to make decisions about those hazards and losses in terms of dollars and cents. And in setting the terms upon which peo-

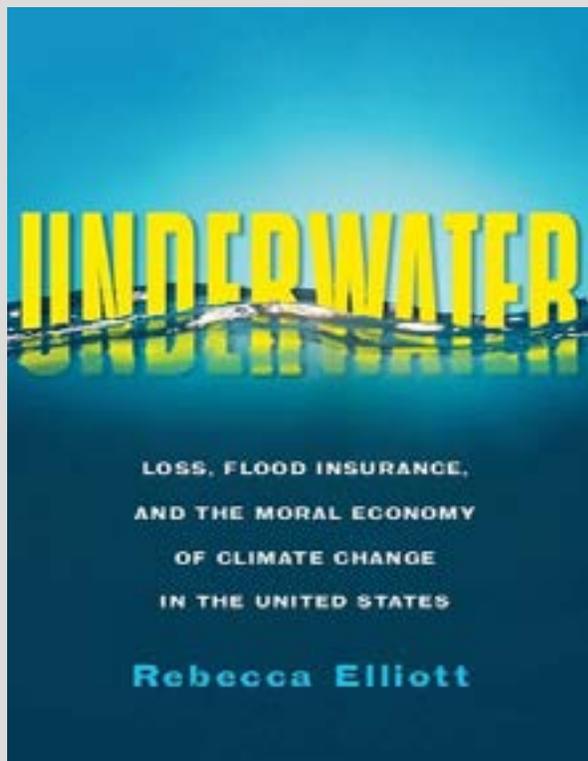
ple share risk, insurance also establishes what the legal scholar Tom Baker calls a "material constitution," defining the boundaries of individual and social responsibility, reflecting and enacting conceptions of fairness and solidarity, and mobilizing often implicit ideas about what individuals, governments, and markets can or ought to do. However arcane on its face, through discussions and debates about insurance, people actively try to sort out thorny technical, political, and moral issues surrounding how societies respond to the uneven and destabilizing losses of climate change.

I came to the case of US flood insurance specifically in large part through an accident of timing. I was mulling these questions over in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, which hit in the fall of 2012. In the months after the storm, I started seeing reports about homeowners who had survived the flood and rebuilt their homes only to learn that they may no longer be able to afford their flood insurance premiums. It turned out that the assessments of local flood risk had changed, as had some of the rules for setting premiums through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), the public federal program that provides virtually all flood insurance for America's homes and small businesses. Residents were facing the prospect that they could be priced out of their

neighborhoods. So, the “natural” disaster had passed, but then this economic and political readjustment was creating a new kind of disaster for people. I set off for New York City to see this unfold, and the project grew from there.

G. M.: You offer an engaging account of the politics around the National Flood Insurance Program. Could you please tell us how and why the NFIP is the object of such contentious politics among different stakeholders?

R. E.: The National Flood Insurance Program is contentious largely because it is perceived to be a failure. The program is tens of billions of dollars in debt to the US Treasury and has been since Hurricane Katrina. It was established in the late 1960s, in part, to disincentivize further development of US floodplains by attaching a price to the risk. But development of floodplains has continued nonetheless. It was launched with the expectation that the federal government could and would maintain updated maps of the nation’s flood risk, to make risk-based premiums possible. But maps for some localities are five to ten years out of date, and even new maps are criticized for failing to use “state-of-the-art” risk assessment techniques and models. Premium subsidies and other forms of discounts, put in place at the start of the program and expected to be temporary,



have persisted to the present day. Properties that have been repeatedly flooded have been repeatedly rebuilt. In light of all this, the NFIP looks ill-equipped to absorb the intensifying risks and losses of climate change.

While many policymakers, constituents, and interest groups seem to agree that the program is not doing much of anything well, they advance often competing ideas about what needs to change. Some favor a stricter regime of actuarial rating, even if that creates financial hardship for policyholders—in their view the point, indeed, is to price people out of risky areas. Others insist that flood insurance needs to remain broadly affordable, that the government needs to protect the investments of people who may not or could not have known about the flood risk they faced when they purchased their homes, or who are simply experiencing the world change around them in ways they can’t control.

One of things that makes the politics here so remarkable too, is that Democrats and Republicans live in floodplains. So even in a context of high partisan polarization, there are often bipartisan initiatives to deal with the NFIP. In recent years, we’ve also seen strange bedfellows in the form of coalitions between conservative or libertarian think tanks and environmental organizations, who end up wanting the same things for the NFIP but for very different reasons. The claims and strategies can often confound expectations in ways that might apprise us to new alignments in the politics of climate change adaptation.

G. M.: The work of flood maps is not limited to a mere representation of flood plains; rather they are actively acting on the social universes in these landscapes. Could you please tell us how these maps as sociotechnical devices work in the field?

R. E.: Underwater tries to complicate the conventional wisdom that the problem with flood maps is a purely representational one. In other words, that the issue with the maps is that they do not measure or visualize flood risk well enough, and it’s this lack of sufficient (or sufficiently high-quality) information that is preventing flood insurance from discouraging continued (re)building in floodplains. This is the most common story about the maps in both academic research and in public discourse.

But as other sociologists have argued, when it comes to risk, “information deficit” theories can only ever be partial. These theories also tend to prevent us from seeing

the politics of knowledge protection that allow some variables, data points, models, etc. to be considered relevant to a calculation, while excluding others.

Through my ethnographic and interview work, I found that, when updated flood maps grafted a new visualization of risk onto New York City, residents understood they faced high flood risk (this is backed up by survey data as well). The maps served their informational purpose. But residents didn't necessarily take ostensibly "rational" steps to mitigate their risk because of the ways the maps themselves also exposed them to multiple, interacting risks unfolding along different timelines, as well as seemed to threaten both financial and nonfinancial values. The decision to move away from the water or to elevate a home could not be made solely on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation related to flood risk and insurance premiums, but instead had to encompass consideration of, for instance, plans to pass on a home to children, the possibility of continually changing local and national regulations, the social and emotional connections to a place, and the ambiguous question of whether or how to factor climate change into next month's mortgage payment, next year's insurance renewal, or the next property sale.

Better, more up-to-date and technically sophisticated flood maps won't vanquish these concerns; they are more likely to intensify the pressures. And even where they work to format risk mitigating action, people may feel less secure, less resilient in a more holistic sense, if taking that action involves considerable social dislocation and atomization. The objective is to keep people safe and economically secure as flood risks change. A narrow focus on risk communication via maps does not address many of the things that people fear losing, and that they take steps to protect, when they are deciding what to do next.

G. M.: You identify three trends that will possibly be characterizing the future of floodplains: climate gentrification, retreat from floodplains, and continuation of development and protection in these areas. Could you please tell us a bit about these trends?

R. E.: It's common in discussions of insurance and climate change to hear a lot of claims about what pricing risk will do, or how markets more generally will respond when risks are fully internalized. But insurance isn't one

"thing" that always works in one particular way. It can be designed to achieve diverse ends and the precise effects it has on lives and landscapes will depend on how it gets harnessed to other kinds of interventions and political projects. So, in the book, I outline a handful of trajectories we already see unfolding in America's floodplains, and specify the role that insurance plays in each of them. In the greater Miami area, researchers have found that higher-elevation homes are surging in value. Gentrification is taking place in lower-risk areas that have been home to Afro-Caribbean and Latino residents, who were historically excluded from once-enticing beachfront areas. Insurance maps and prices may be directing more affluent buyers to lower-risk areas, as well as pushing out lower-to-moderate income families who can no longer afford to stay put where they are.

In other American floodplains, for example in parts of New York and in Gulf Coast Texas, communities are pursuing buyouts, in which homeowners take some amount of money from a government program and agree to leave their flood-prone neighborhoods for good. Sometimes that land is redeveloped in more "flood resilient" ways; sometimes it is "returned to nature." In these contexts, the individualized pressures of insurance can give rise to collective demands for resources and new articulations of shared public problems in need of redress.

Another trajectory we're seeing around the country is investment in protective infrastructure, if and where money can be found to create the conditions—physical and economic—that will allow people to stay where they are, at least for a while longer. New sea walls and flood walls, dune replenishment, berms and levees, and various other forms of "coastal armoring" are financed through varying configurations of local revenues, state and national funding, and private financing. Building and real estate development can then continue. Here again, insurance can play a role by motivating efforts to lower collective flood risk, behind this infrastructure, making areas appear safe once again and economically viable. The work of Zac Taylor in the Florida context has also outlined the role global reinsurance is playing in securitizing new buildings at risk, actually encouraging continued building in some of the most storm-exposed parts of the country through an "underwrite to securitize" dynamic.

G. M.: What did you learn while working on this

research that most surprised you?

R. E.: I write about this in the introduction to *Underwater*. When I first set out to start collecting data, I didn't anticipate flood insurance would be such an emotional thing for people. I had been thinking of it as an institution that people would certainly have opinions about, but I hadn't considered it as an experience that people go through and live with. I didn't expect homeowners to cry about it, or pastors to lead prayers asking for strength in dealing with it, or city officials to say they'd lost sleep over it. But of course, as soon as you start talking about insurance premiums and flood zones, you're talking about security, about thwarted plans for and shifting expectations of the future, about the fates of neighborhoods, about home. I hope that the book succeeds in taking a topic that sounds very dry on the surface—flood insurance—and reveals it as, for lack of a better term, a profoundly human story. Not just because it's more interesting that way, but because I think that emotion clues us into the extremely high stakes here, stakes that are often buried in more technical conversations about the “right” or “accurate” way to price climate risks.

G. M.: Climate change has recently entered onto the agenda of economic sociologists. What do you think about the state of the field, and the future directions in climate change research in economic sociology?

R. E.: I've always been of the view that research on climate change ought not be siloed in environmental sociology; we need theories and frameworks from across subfields of the discipline to grapple with what climate change is and does. I've tried to demonstrate this in *Underwater* and my other work. What's more, given the prominence of economists, economic reasoning, and economic techniques in policy responses to climate change, I think economic sociology should have particularly important things to say. I've derived a lot of inspiration from economic sociologists who have looked at issues of market design (e.g. for carbon offsets/trading) and the valuation of nature. This work has developed largely at the intersection of economic sociology and STS. But I'd love to see (and do!) more work at the intersection of economic and political sociology, for instance research that probes fundamental questions about the relationships between states and markets, as the climate crisis intensifies. How will the state be drawn in, in po-

tentially new ways, to buoy or direct (housing, labor, commodities, insurance, and other) markets facing perturbations and strains?

G. M.: What is on the horizon for you? Could you please tell us about your future research plans?

R. E.: *Underwater* focused on loss and letting go; now I'm thinking more about staying put and holding on. I'm studying infrastructure for climate change adaptation (e.g., seawalls) as a way to build what I'm tentatively thinking of as a sociology of “incumbency.” With incumbency I'm referencing an often-implicit commitment to preserving present arrangements of people and property and the familiar land uses, skylines, nebulous “character” of place, routines of life, and identities those arrangements generate. People assert claims of incumbency and seek to defend that status in the face of climate change, and infrastructure both makes and expresses incumbency's possibility. I'm in the early stages of this project and benefited tremendously from beginning to workshop these ideas on a panel about infrastructure at this past ASA, organized by Amanda McMillan Lequieu.

I also have a couple of collaborative projects in the works: one about the charisma of Dutch water expertise in the context of climate change adaptation (with Kasia Paprocki, LSE Geography & Environment), and one about regional inequality and the net zero agenda in the United Kingdom (with Leon Wansleben and Ned Crowley, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, in Cologne, Germany). ■

BOOKSHELF: MICHAEL SICILIANO ON CREATIVE CONTROL

Michael Siciliano is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Queens University. He is broadly interested in work and occupations, culture, and science and technology studies. His research explores theoretical issues related to power and control over labor and the aesthetic dimensions of work and technology in the context of “cognitive” or “informational” capitalism.

Elif Birced, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Boston University, talked to Michael Siciliano about his current book, *Creative Control: The Ambivalence of Work in the Culture Industries* which was published by Columbia University Press in 2021.



Elif Birced: What sparked your interest in studying control over the labor process of creative workers?

Michael Siciliano: Well, I think there are two things. First, I’m just broadly interested in labor and, more particularly, the conditions under which people work for a wage under contemporary capitalism. “Cognitive” or “creative” workers—what people like Hardt and Negri call “immaterial” laborers, Richard Florida’s “creative class,” or Reich’s “symbolic analysts”—are the supposed motor of contemporary capitalism. But, more specifically, I had been working in a record company’s warehouse for an MA project on status and value—that’s going back quite some time. Something I kept asking myself while I was working there was, “Why am I working so hard in this warehouse?” What makes it so compelling for me to show up on time and be really concerned with doing a good job counting up and shipping vinyl LPs or shrink-wrapping CDs? One day I was really excited to have moved a full ton of LPs. So, that came up during fieldwork. I had had other bad jobs before, and I didn’t really care about them all that much. I would do things like go take a nap in the bathroom or lie down on a shelf in the file room when I was a file clerk at a corporate attorney’s office. So, I was kind of wondering what that was all about, and I noticed that the owner was trying to build a connection between employees and the company’s products. He

would lend out music that people were unfamiliar with and say: “Oh, hey, you never heard of this band that we sell here? Check it out!” And, he was doing that, even for people who are packing up boxes full of CDs or vinyl records. This is like 10 or 12 years ago. Then I also kind of thought, well, we also have a lot of control over what it is that we listen to at work, and I got this feeling that those different things going on there amounted to something I wanted to explore in a project about labor and work. So, that’s kind of where the roots of my recent book occurred. Then I moved to Los Angeles, changed field sites, and things kind of evolved from there. So, there’s that story of how the project emerged from doing fieldwork.

On the other hand, there’s this quote from a book that I have tried to remember the title of for at least 10 years. The quote is something like: “Never has the ruling class treated their familiars so poorly,” and I think that really kind of sums up the book (and if anyone recognizes that quote, please tell me where it’s from). So there’s that quote that might not even be a real quote, it’s just something I vividly remember reading about creative workers or culture workers. I think it reflects what really interested me about the creative labor process. People in creative jobs are, if you think globally, they’re an elite of sorts. Especially people who are working in Los Angeles or New York or Boston or any major American city. They’re relatively privileged folks

who are also complicit in the circulation of very troublesome media, yet they're also quite precarious and often earning very little. I think that's something that's highlighted quite clearly in my book. That quote from the unremembered (and perhaps nonexistent) book, I always think of that. I can never find that quote and so I can't use it anywhere, but I think it highlights the situation of creative labor quite well. Creatives are both in this very privileged position but also precarious and complicit in doing something that many of them find problematic. By calling the workers the "familiar" of the ruling class—like Renfield to Dracula—the quote that I've been chasing for a decade likens business owners to the undead who prey on the living.

Fieldwork and vampires, perhaps even what Julio Cortázar called the multinational vampires, at least in the case of Google, are things that kind of got me going. But at the same time, I think the questions I ask—Why is it that people can work so hard in these precarious jobs? And how do the familiar of the ruling class experience their work?—emerged in dialogue with classic labor process research by Vicki Smith, Michael Burawoy, and Ching Kwan Lee, whom I studied under as a Ph.D. student. Labor process theory is something I draw upon quite directly. It's really focused on power at work or control over the labor process. I found that most of the research about knowledge workers or creative workers just doesn't give a lot of thought to power or control, whereas labor process theory is all about that. Conversely, labor process theory doesn't really have a lot to say about workplaces that aren't factories or call centers. There are some more recent studies that move outside those places, such as Ashley Mears's recent work on control in which she engages with labor process theory, yet for the most part it's all about factories and call centers.

To go back to your question, this project emerged from my overarching concerns with how people come to be affectively attached to capitalism and from seeing interesting things in the field and thinking, "What is this affective relationship that's being built in the workplace? What's going on there?" At the same time, I was looking at existing theories and saying, "Well, these don't really give me much to say about what I'm seeing here," and so I think that's where I'm coming from with my research.

E. B.: Could you please describe the main implications of your book *Creative Control: The Ambivalence of*

Work in the Culture Industries?

M. S.: I think there are two major implications of some of the findings that are discussed in *Creative Control*. The first one is that all work, including creative work, is increasingly embedded within digital infrastructures or what we're calling platforms. The embedding of work within these infrastructures shapes workers' orientations when it comes to trying to earn a living. They're orienting towards metrics and various ways of valuing labor within those infrastructures. I think that gives the owners of those infrastructures a lot of power over workers and organizations who use them. So, I think that is important to show in a context outside of Uber or Mechanical Turk, which are two notable sites of research on digital platforms and labor. Even the "creative class" is subject to the sort of algorithmic control and quantification that we find on these platforms. That is one major contribution, the implication being that there's more similarity between creative workers and other kinds of platform workers than we may think. I think there are policy implications about who should be classified as a worker and thus how we think about regulating platforms. I've written a little bit about this on my Medium blog and New Critics, which is a media sociology blog.

Second, the book demonstrates how much affect and aesthetics play a role in getting us to be complicit in our own domination. On one hand, we should listen to our bodies and our sense of the situation, but on the other hand, we also need to be careful when we listen to our feelings. Sometimes things that feel good may turn out to be bad for us. I think that has implications for workplace sociology. I think we, as sociologists, tend to focus too much on what Weber called instrumental rationality and value rationality among workers, so we don't consider feeling or embodied experience as relevant when we talk about the economy or work. I am, of course, not alone in arguing this point. Still, it's something I think I show quite clearly and quite forcefully in the book as being relevant; maybe even more important than belief or ideology in explaining why it is that people feel compelled to participate in precarious, uncertain employment. I think the broader implication of that is capitalism's power over us is affective or aesthetic just as much as it is physically coercive or ideological. To paraphrase my partner who works in the art world, "We're all chasing a feeling," and chasing that feeling is why we members of the creative class tolerate or even learn to enjoy precarious, deeply troubling

work conditions.

So, that sums up the sort of power that's at play in different kinds of workplaces in the book. More broadly, this has implications for how we study lots of different kinds of economic interactions in a society where objects or things are increasingly designed to elicit particular feelings.

E. B.: In your discussion of creative control, you compare two organizational contexts: a recording studio, which employs a more conventional mode of organizing creative labor, and a YouTube management network, which uses a relatively new mode of organizing creative labor because of its dependency on a social media platform like YouTube. How does the increasing role of platforms in creative industries affect the control over creative labor differently than managerial control in more traditional creative industries?

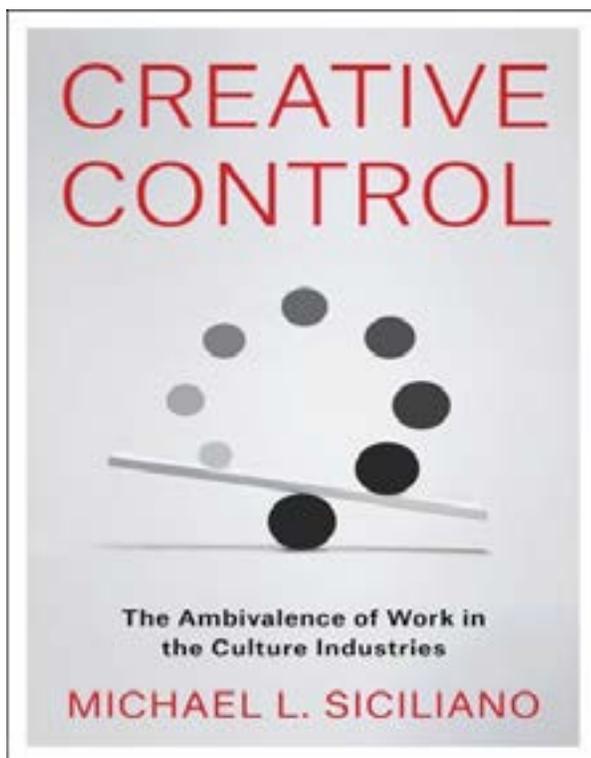
M. S.: So, like I mentioned, a lot of creative work is increasingly constrained by the demands of platforms. There's starting to be some resistance to this, but circulation of a lot of cultural products is controlled by platforms. I just picked up a zine written by Joe Steinhart at Drexel's College of Media Arts and Design who also runs Don Giovanni Records, which is a punk

rock record label, and he's writing about "how to resist digital platforms" through refusal, but mostly circulation remains dominated by platforms. Now, I'm sure some economic sociologists will get anxious about that statement. They hem and haw, and say, "Oh, is it really control?" Or "Do they really have power?" But platforms do exert a lot of power over creative work and by extension cultural production. Perhaps now more than ever before, corporations control the circulation of cultural products. Everyone's chasing clicks, everyone's chasing views, and they're all concerned about their watch time and these sorts of things. In this context, you have some communication scholars saying absolutely insane things like, "Oh, but there's so much entrepreneurial agency." To me, those kinds of statements just propagate neoliberalism under the guise of scholarship. They're just ideology. They're just scholars humming along to the tune set by these companies.

So, what do we have? For me, what you have with platforms is subordinate entrepreneurs who perform quantified, heteronomous creativity—a market-oriented creativity. So, how does that differ from conventional creative labor? Conventional creative labor may be aesthetically enrolled or enchanted through interactions with people and technology at work. In that context, management invites workers to express themselves within socially determined constraints that are set by management or clients.

In contrast, platformized creative labor, which is represented by YouTubers in the book, is disciplined by metrics and engaged or aesthetically enrolled by the design of the platform: the way it looks, the way it feels. But they're also subordinate to that digital infrastructure rather than the social relationships as in the other case. For me, the difference between these two cases is how control operates. Between conventional and platformized creative labor, the difference lies in the social structure of the two situations and the quantification of creativity, which is illustrated by the widespread orientation toward metrics rather than alternate valuations of creativity.

E. B.: In your book, you show the important role of affective dimensions of labor process in shaping managerial control through shaping workers' perspective of work. Could you elaborate on what you mean by "affective dimensions" of labor process and how are they crucial in the context of creative industries? Also, as my final question, how



can a focus on affective dimensions of labor process contribute to our understanding of managerial control outside creative industries?

M. S.: When I use the term affect, also aesthetics or aesthetic experience, I'm gesturing toward what's called affect theory in cultural studies or cultural theory. I'm referencing work by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, Patricia Ticineto Clough in sociology, and then Lawrence Grossberg. Here, I'm thinking of an affect not as emotion or not synonymous with emotion, but more as "impingement upon the body" or "the capacity to affect something and to be affected by it." So, more of a feeling or a sense experience, rather than something strictly codified like emotion: A sense. A vibe. If you compare that with certain organizational scholars, mostly Italian organizational scholars, like Antonio Strati or Pasquale Gagliardi, affect theory's approach to affect is very close to how they define aesthetics in their research. They define aesthetics as sense experience in relation to objects. So, in the book I use those words almost interchangeably to refer to the felt, embodied experiences of the workplace vis-à-vis both people and objects.

In bringing up affect and aesthetics, I'm attempting to engage seriously with workers' embodied experiences in a way that doesn't dismiss what they tell me and, instead, attempts to bridge their experiences with my experience of the job when I'm doing participant observation. So, for me, a lot of explanations of creative labor tend to focus on ideology or the guiding belief or illusion in a field of cultural production. I found that a lot of my data didn't really show that. Ideology in my fieldwork seemed too conflicted to say, "Okay, this is just ideology. What they're telling me is just an illusion." I also didn't really think that the people I was talking to were quite as calculating. I didn't think their actions could be explained as simply weighing their options the way a lot of writings on the subject might lead you to believe. What I did find was a lot of people talking about how "cool" things were or these embodied absences in which they lost themselves in the job. "I lost track of time and didn't know where I was, and so I ended up working for an extra two hours" or something like that. It struck me that those sorts of embodied experiences, something that they were experiencing at the level of affect or aesthetics (when it's in relation to an object) struck me as really being absent from economic sociology or workplace sociology. But we should have something to say about that, right?

I guess this gets to your second question, which is, Why should sociologists care? I think there's at least two reasons. On one hand, you know we're increasingly involved in an economy in which, for example, business consultants tell businesses to focus on how workers feel and to use technologies that are designed to get workers to work harder or be more productive based on design or aesthetics. That's what the whole field of UX or user experience research is about, right? And so, along with those consultants, we also exist in an economy in which businesses directly attempt to shape our felt experience through the design of stuff, especially interfaces. On a grand scale, Facebook tries, to borrow from Andrew Ross, to "fix how we feel" or aesthetically enroll us in their project of data collection. That's why UX work is a booming industry for many people who are going into that either from our field—you know, defecting and going into UX—or, if they're design students, going straight to into UX. And you know, it's a huge part of the digital economy. The goal there is to get people to feel at home in a website or software so that they'll work harder and be willing to provide unpaid creative labor, as in social media platforms, or so that they'll part ways with their money as consumers.

As such, I think having some language or some theoretical insight into what's going on there—to actually pay attention to how interfaces and other mediations in our daily lives affect us or enchant us—is really important if we want to understand contemporary social life. In some ways, we already have a bit of this in Karin Knorr Cetina's great work from the early 2000s on updating symbolic interactionism for the digital age, in which she discusses the interface as a gestural face of the market. That is great, but economic sociologists need to pay more nuanced attention to these interactions between humans and non-humans and human-to-human interactions mediated by technology. I think being attentive to work's affective and aesthetic dimensions help us to understand these emerging parts of the economy.

On the flip-side—and this is zooming out from creative work—understanding economic life affectively or aesthetically helps us to understand why it is that people feel so deeply attached to environmentally devastating industries. I'm thinking of where I grew up on the Ohio river right on the Ohio–West Virginia border. There, people still love the idea of the coal and the steel industries. Many people are still deeply excited by those industries, which seems to defy a strictly economic

explanation and also seems to defy an ideological explanation. There's this deep attachment that they have. So, we could ask: "How is that attachment maintained through interactions with humans and non-humans?" Or, "How does that attachment emerge?" I think approaching it in this way, which isn't strictly about belief, isn't strictly about calculation or value rationality but, instead, is about asking how that belief comes to feel true or real. Which materialities enable that belief or that feeling? How do we understand these things at the level of mundane, everyday interactions and embodied experiences? Also, another example is capitalism. Capitalism doesn't really help a lot of people, and yet, the people who are most hurt by capitalism are also among those most willing to defend it. You could glibly say that they're operating under some sort of "false consciousness" or "cynical reason" (or some other equally untenable explanation) or you could take seriously what they're telling you and ask what material circumstances make that point of view possible. So, how is it that the economy or capitalism becomes affectively compelling? Why is it that people feel so attached to that which holds them down? From there, the question, is, again, how do their interactions with humans and non-humans make that belief feel real or true?

I think being attentive to affect and aesthetics, embodiment and materiality, provide economic sociologists or workplace sociologists with a really full-bodied, sensually rich, and ultimately more social way of understanding of workers, organizations, and economic life—one that takes seriously people's experiences, while still maintaining a critical point of view. That's my thought on that. ■

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE



Gökhan Mülayim is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University. Working at the intersection of economic and cultural sociology; organizations, occupations, and work; and urban studies, he studies how the so-called extra-economic is being translated into the economic. He looks specifically into how peculiar goods and services are being economized, and how the markets for those goods and services are being constructed. Using ethnographic research tools, his dissertation examines the economization of security as a political, social, and affective good and service in the market for private security in Istanbul. He received his B.A. with honors in political science and international relations, and his M.A. in sociology from Bogazici University in Istanbul, Turkey..



Dr. Ladin Bayurgil received her PhD in Sociology from Boston University and will be joining KU Leuven's ResPectMe Project as a postdoctoral researcher. The project, supported by the European Research Council, studies precariousness at the paid and unpaid work continuum across eight European countries. Ladin's work spans urban and economic sociology, sociology of work and occupations; particularly asks questions around urban precarious labor. In general, her research looks at intersections of urban and economic sociology by examining the ways in which intimate ties generated by community relations in the city get infused into economic exchange and employment relations.



Meghann Lucy is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Boston University. Her interests are in inequality, consumption, economic sociology, cultural sociology, and medical sociology. A recent project examines the roles of overconsumption and divestment in discourses of the self, class, and gender through a case study of "Tidying Up with Marie Kondo." Other research investigates the medicalization of overconsumption or overaccumulation, that is, of hoarding disorder. In this work she evaluates the extent to which socioeconomic status of individuals and neighborhoods influences how cities define, detect, and either treat or punish hoarding behaviors amongst residents.



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Elif Birced is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Boston University. Her research interests center on economic sociology, sociology of work and occupations, and cultural sociology. In her dissertation, she analyzes how expertise is constructed in platform economies with a particular focus on Youtubers. Using qualitative methods, she seeks to explore how jurisdictional boundaries are determined in the Youtube ecosystem in Turkey. In her previous work, she analyzed economic and political precariousness of academic labor with a particular focus on social scientists at foundation universities in Turkey.