INTERVIEW WITH DONALD TOMASKOVIC-DEVEY

Can you tell us a bit about your background?

Originally from Queens, New York, my family moved around with my father's corporate jobs, finally settling down back in a suburb north of New York. My education through college was in Catholic schools, but I eventually left the fold and did a Ph.D. at Boston University. During graduate school I worked on a series of papers and a monograph on what is now called neoliberalism. The book, which I wrote with my mentor S.M. Miller. was called *Recapitalizing American: Alternatives to the Corporate Distortion of National Policy* (Routledge 1983). It is now a largely forgotten work of scholarship, but when I return to it remarkably prescient (if I do say so myself) about how the U.S. has turned out since. My dissertation was on the impact of changing racial and gender employment segregation on the quality of jobs. Practically nothing was published from that dissertation, but I have continued to explore that topic ever since.

What are your plans for Socio-Economic Review?

I don't know that I have plans for SER, so much as I have preferences for certain intellectual work. I have my own strong theory project around the rubric of relational inequality theory. From that position I prefer theoretical accounts that recognize agency in relational contexts that see durable inequalities as produced at the intersection of categorical distinctions, organizational resources, and institutional pressures. I am particularly concerned with mechanisms of closure, exploitation and claims making both within and between organizations and the role of legal and cultural institutions in facilitating or muting these mechanisms. But all papers need not be about inequalities in the tradition of my work. On the other hand, I do expect papers for SER to have some strong relational or institutional component as they grapple with the social production of economic action.

First, I would like to attach your 2015 testimony before the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as well as your written statement. I found both very interesting. Second, what factors drive change to reduce inequality in the workplace?

Until quite recently most of the attention in my work and that of others has worried about employment inequality through the lens of meritocracy and discrimination. The focus has been on the failure of merit-based selection in the face of ascribed statuses such as gender, race or migration. Much of my work in this area has been historical and there the evidence is clear (to me at least) that ascribed status inequalities need to be challenged by social movements pressuring firms and finding footholds within firms to dislodge past practices. I have also looked more closely at specific organizational practices and there I am convinced that one tool that organizations can use to achieve these goals is the formalization of personnel policy, such that clear skill- or education-based criteria take precedence over informal comfort and familiarity in the selection decisions. Neither social movements nor formalization, however, are foolproof solutions. Movements create counter-movements and when they achieve initial goals often loose the power to mobilize. Equal opportunity in the face of durable categorical status distinctions is a constantly moving target. Formalization can be used to justify exclusion.

Today I am very concerned with the general pattern of rising inequalities. Earnings inequalities are growing in many countries and my most recent work with the Comparative Organizational Inequality Network (COIN) shows that much of this is being driven by firm-level polarization. Firm boundaries are being reconfigured, such that powerful market actors are externalizing as much of the labor cost as possible to subcontractors, dependent suppliers, outsourced vendors, and independent contractors. The income associated with market power pools in these dominant firms and everyone else becomes a cost, with limited claims on the surplus of society.

You are active in the Economic Sociology section of ASA – what did you come away with after the recent meeting in Montreal?

This summer the Economic Sociology and Organizations, Occupations and Work sections had a joint meeting just prior to the main ASA conference. It was quite exciting and brought together the focus on inequality in the OOW section with the questions about markets prominent in Econ Soc. I have always been frustrated with the lack of attention to inequalities in U.S. economic sociology. There has been more work done on the status attributed of wine labels and corporate stock ratings than on people. At this point my disappointment seems increasingly misplaced, as younger scholars are using the conceptual tools of economic sociology to interrogate human inequalities in markets and organizations directly. The mini-conference was called "Fellow Travelers on Different Roads", but it feels to me like the roads are converging nicely now.

What did you present at SASE/Lyon?

In Lyon I presented a paper with twenty co-authors. The author list was longer than the abstract. The paper was one of the first products from the COIN project. In that project, which now includes fourteen countries and twenty-eight social scientists, we are using national linked employer-employee data to ask and answer questions about the levels, trends and causes on employment inequalities. Previous work in both economics and sociology has relied on data on individual earnings or family income. We are reframing the issue at the source – the workplace-level generation and distribution of income. The SASE paper focused on the gender wage gap, how it varies across countries in both its levels and the degree to which workplace, occupational and job segregation are in play. That paper shows a great deal of national variation in segregation mechanisms as well as inequality levels. I describe the COIN project in much more depth in the forthcoming European Economic Sociology Newsletter.

I was interested to read in a past issue of ACCOUNTS that you share the opinion that the economics profession bears partial responsibility for the global crash.

I have a love-hate relationship with the economics profession. Some of this is probably academic envy, but some is a deep disquiet with the easy complementarity between the neoclassical synthesis that controlled much of US academic economics until recently and the neoliberal political project of business elites. In this way some economists and economic thinking in general became the scientific ideology on which public policies to increase exploitation and ignore our societal interdependence was based. This was true of the crash, but even truer of the impulse to solve all public policy dilemmas with "market-like" solutions. Economic theory was performative in Michel Callon's sense. But all of economics was not like this. There are valuable strains of heterodox and feminist economics I have learned a lot from. Contemporary labor economics, the field I read the most, is moving away from neoclassical orthodoxy, and embracing a more catholic empiricism. I sense that the boundaries between socio-economic thinking and these economists' models are weakening.