

## WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE PROJECT ON ECONOMIC REPRESENTATIONS?

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**To represent**, v.t. to serve to express, designate, stand for or denote as a word, symbol, or the like does; symbolize: *In this painting the cat represents evil and the bird, good.* 2. To express or designate by some term, character, symbol, or the like: *to represent musical sounds by notes.* 3. To stand or act in the place of as a substitute, proxy, or agent does: *He represents the company in Ashtabula.* (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, New York, Random, 1994, p. 1217).

There are several ways of looking at economic representations. The first is to take for granted that *economics* is a central, or perhaps the central, sphere in the modern world and that there are disputes about how we represent it. In this case we would have different and competing ways of looking at the economy. We could, for example, discuss the causes of inflation and unemployment, the effects of globalization on international trade, etc. Different schools of thought participate in this sort of debates: neo-classical, marxists, etc.

Another way of looking at economic representations is to analyze why is it that we tend to represent everything in economic terms. *Economy* in itself is already a representation. Simple societies don't think in terms of *economics*, or for that matter in terms of *politics*. In certain societies kinship is much more important than economics. It is our society that tends to separate reality into different parts and to put the pieces in different drawers. One of these drawers is called *economics* and it is frequently seen as determinant. We are supposed to be a *Homo Economicus* who is constantly making cost-benefit calculations that end up acting in every realm of our live be it work, leisure, love, getting married (or divorced), having children, raising children, etc. Sahlins has called this *practical reason* and sees it as the *pensée bourgeoise* as opposed to the *pensée sauvage* coined by Lévi-Strauss.

But surely there are spheres in which it is difficult to reason in economic terms. Why are certain animals not eaten in certain countries, regardless of their economic value? Why do we remove the price tag when we give someone a gift? Why don't we sell family items we own even if we are offered sums that are well above their market value? Does use value always translate into exchange value? In other words, there are instances in which cost benefits calculations are not prevalent.

Even if we consider that our world is becoming globalized there are vast parts of it that don't function like a profit-making machine. Recently I helped a cooperative of artisans concerned about the production and marketing of their handicraft. One of the issues at stake was that artisans had been approached by economists as potential entrepreneurs, which they are not and don't want to be. Not only is handicraft produced in a very special way but also its most efficient way to market it is not in supermarkets. What we found out is that the most effective place to sell it is in places where buyers could see artisans producing their goods and talk to them.

In a fascinating film (*The Gleaners and I*), Agnes Varda takes up the question of people who make their living by gleaning. Gleaning ends up being a metaphor of a way of live. Since Varda constructs herself as a person who is aging (beautifully) there is a metaphor that we are all gleaners on earth.

There are several alternative ways of surviving, even as regards the obtaining of credit, that are not hegemonic in the modern economy but that should be taken into account as alternatives. Many of the papers presented at the Economic Representations Conference held at the Rockefeller Study and Conference Center in Bellagio in March 2002 showed alternative ways people in different parts of the world have of surviving without utilizing mainstream economic schemes.

A different way of looking at economic representations is to consider the symbolic aspects of economics. Since money is considered the universal equivalent, one could look at how equivalent it really is in symbolic terms. The comparative research I have carried out about money in Brazil and in the United States showed that in North American society money, which can be regarded as a total social fact, is considered less polluting than in Brazil where it is represented as something potentially dirty perhaps because of the huge social and economic inequalities existing in that country. Whereas in the States people speak a lot about money, in Brazil people have a certain difficulty in talking about it. As we know, silence can be very eloquent, to use an oxymoron. But Brazil is certainly changing and it is still early to say if it is following the North American path or whether its cultural specificities will work as counter-balancing checks.

I think art is an important place to look at economic representations. Since art is a creative form of representing reality people tend not to be worried by a rational discourse and allow themselves to speak more freely. Specifically music is

a key instance for looking at money. This is so not only because money appears frequently in popular music but also because music is an instance in which we have a special form of representation. Lyric composers are usually men and they tend to use music as one of the only public sphere in which they allow themselves to speak about their private feelings. They will allow themselves to sing about their weaknesses, their fear of losses, their sentiments toward women, etc.

*Big Rock Candy Mountain* (Harry Kirby McClintock), sings about a "land that's fair and bright,/ The handouts grow on bushes/ And you sleep all night." Not only do handouts grow on bushes, but it is a land "Where you sleep all day,/ Where they hung the jerk/ That invented work." It is interesting that at no moment is the word *money* pronounced in the song. *Big Rock Candy Mountain* was composed in 1928. In the same year, Sinhô, the Brazilian *King of Samba*, composed *Que Vale a Nota sem o Carinho da Mulher?* (*What is dough worth without the pure tender touch of woman?*), a song in which he underlines that love is worth much more than money, which means nothing without a woman's caress.

*Busted* (Ray Charles), a song composed in 1998, also does not mention the word *money* but is much more explicit: "My bills are due and the baby needs shoes and I'm busted/ ... I hate to beg like a dog without his bone, but I'm busted/ ... But I'll make a living, just where I don't know cause I'm busted/ I'm broke, no bread, I mean like nothing." In *Pode guardar as Panelas* (*You can put away the pans*), a samba by Paulinho da Viola from 1979, a man is saying to his partner: "I know that it hurts in the heart/ To talk the way I did/ To say that the worst has happened/ You can put away the pans/ For today I did not have enough money/ ... I tried as insanely as I could/ Asking for loans, but nobody lent me any money/ My salary, tight, pitiful one, funny/ Disappeared/ To fill our pan, my friend/ I don't know how it will be/ I've run around everywhere/ I did what I could do/ Hoping for a miracle/ To see if it will resolve the situation/ My faith is wavering/ And I don't want to suffer another deception."

Perhaps there is a parallelism in the North American and the Brazilian songs. The songs of the twenties represent a period in which people could still dream of surviving without working and of a society in which idleness and love could be held against salaried work and the need for money. The songs of the end of last century, on the other hand, are much more 'realistic'. The narrators are poor, possibly of African descent in both cases, and they speak about the difficulty of getting money working. Contrary to the lyrics of the twenties, in which the word *money* was frequently avoided, here it is cited explicitly. Perhaps the songs are witnessing the end of an era. A period that begins with the composers affirming the little value of money and the possibility of obtaining it magically and that ends with their recognizing its importance and the enormous difficulty of obtaining it.