

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

NICO STEHR, *Knowledge and Economic Conduct: The Social Foundations of the Modern Economy*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press. 2002, xvii + 305 p., name and subject indices.

This sprawling, ambitious, ramshackle book takes up the question of "postindustrial society," a question posed variously in the writings of Peter Drucker, Daniel Bell, Fred Block, Manuel Castells, Ronald Inglehart, and Andre Gorz--all of whom Stehr engages. For Stehr, postindustrial societies are not postmodern societies; they are "knowledge societies." Knowledge, he suggests, is a "new force of production" taking the place of labour and property that until recently still dominated industrial society and its social relations" (236). Knowledge in this sense is not mere information: it is a capacity for action, and knowing is a kind of doing. Yet the distinctive knowledge which defines the "knowledge society" is also theoretical, formal, and scientific, and so differs from the practical skill characteristic of all societies.

Stehr repeatedly emphasizes his view that conventional economic thinking cannot grasp the emergence of the knowledge society. In the first place, knowledge is treated as an exogenous variable in most economic models. More fundamentally, he suggests, knowledge—unlike the traditionally enumerated factors of production such as land, capital or even labour—does not behave like a proper commodity which can be readily alienated and exclusively appropriated. Nor does he think the sociology of knowledge has contributed much to our understanding of this phenomenon (though he neglects the recent literature on the political economy of science stimulated by the increasing market orientation of university research).

Though *Knowledge and Economic Conduct* stresses that the social sciences have heretofore failed to come to grips with the dawning of the knowledge society, it is less clear just what contribution this book claims to make to our understanding. This is due in no small part to the book's meandering style. Much of the book consists of inconclusive discussions of one theorist or researcher after another, with little to connect these discussions to a distinctive overarching thesis or a sustained line of argument.

Some of Stehr's conclusions regarding the causes and consequences of the knowledge economy can be noted, however. Following Drucker, he

contends that the multiplication of knowledge-intensive jobs and the associated transformations of the workplace are driven primarily by the prior expansion of higher education and of the resulting *supply* of knowledge-skilled workers, not chiefly by economic *demand* for such educated workers. That is, the knowledge economy results from educated employees' demand for skilled jobs, not employers' demand for skilled employees. He finds indirect (and somewhat tenuous) support for this proposition in the so-called "productivity paradox" (the surprisingly modest measurable productivity gains attributable to investments in information technology), but does not spell out the mechanism by which this supply-driven shift might occur in a capitalist economy. Although Stehr is pessimistic about the governability of knowledge societies, he is more optimistic about the "unintentional and unanticipated" outcomes of economic changes. For example, while he doubts the effectiveness of deliberate state policies and international conventions in promoting ecological sustainability, he proposes that the progressive "dematerialization" of goods and services typical of a knowledge economy, together with the shift toward "postmaterialist" values traced by Inglehart, have the potential to reduce resource consumption as a side effect. He provides little evidence, though, that knowledge economies systematically and spontaneously "dematerialize" in the absence of policy incentives to do so.

Despite the vast interdisciplinary erudition and flashes of insight this book contains, I found it a frustrating read due to stylistic features mentioned above. It is disappointing that a book published by a leading academic press and written by a distinguished senior scholar (and editor!) should give the impression of being carelessly cobbled together from research notes and hastily drafted ruminations. *Knowledge and Economic Conduct* evidently went to press prematurely, still in need of editing and revision. It suffers from vague, ungainly writing, uncorrected slips and typographical errors (p. 110 finds David Ricardo transported to the seventeenth century; endnote 1 of chapter 1 still contains the author's note to himself to "find a place"), repetition, abrupt digressions which contain material belonging elsewhere (or nowhere) in the book and which interrupt the flow of analysis sometimes for dozens of pages, and a general lack of "connective tissue". All of this detracts enormously from its readability and pedagogical usefulness.

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