Estudios de la Economía: An Interview with José Ossandón

Questions, editing, and translation by Taylor Nelms

Since 2009, the blog and website Estudios de la Economía [in English, Studies of the Economy or Economy Studies] has offered interdisciplinary and original research, interviews, and debate in Spanish, Portuguese, and English from a network of researchers around the world. Below we present an interview with the blog’s founder and editor José Ossandón. Join the conversation at http://estudiosdelaeconomia.wordpress.com/ and follow along on Twitter @delaeconomia.

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What is Estudios de la Economía?

Estudios de la Economía is a collective blog that seeks to make itself into a focus or shared point of reference for researchers who study economic themes with the conceptual and methodological tools of the social sciences. The word “studies” gestures to fields (like organization, science, gender, media, or—more recently—finance studies) in which researchers from different disciplinary traditions come together to discuss a shared empirical object.

Who contributes to Estudios de la Economía, and what kind of posts can be found on the site?

The blog currently has 38 contributors from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I am both contributor and editor (which involves organizing posts, editing, and moderating comments), and from the beginning I have counted on the support of Felipe González (currently a PhD candidate at the Max Planck Institute). As the network of contributors has grown in number, and the disciplines and geographic regions represented have diversified, we have also noted a certain academic maturation. When we began many in the group were doctoral students or had recently finished their PhDs. Today we have new PhD students, but also others who are a bit more senior.

With these changes, we have noted the development of both collective and individual voices. Not necessarily in the sense of generating a properly “Latin American” thought, but in moving from the specific intersection that first characterized the network of contributors to the development of original arguments that are starting to influence the local and global academic discussions in which each person is inserted. These changes are also evident in contributors’ more stable institutional positions and in

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the important increase of journal articles and books they have published.

Each week, usually on Monday, we upload “fixed posts,” which are generally 2000 words or less and report on ongoing research and recent readings. The dates of fixed posts are reserved a year in advance. We also post interviews, which will be of special interest to readers of Accounts who do not read Spanish. We don’t have the resources to transcribe, edit, and translate interviews, but editing audio today is quite easy, so we post interviews as podcasts, which allow you to listen to conversations with scholars whose work we generally only read. We have a rich archive of interviews with people like Jens Beckert, Daniel Beunza, Miguel Angel Centeno, Bruce Carruthers, Paul du Gay, Gil Eyal, Manuel Antonio Garretón, Mark Granovetter, Clara Han, Donald MacKenzie, Bill Maurer, Danny Miller, Timothy Mitchell, Yuval Millo, Philip Mirowski, Veronica Montecinos, Fabian Muniesa, David Stark, Wolfgang Streeck, Richard Swedberg, Peter Wagner, Guillermo Wormald, and Viviana Zelizer. Finally, on Thursdays, we upload all sorts of news, which appear underneath the principle post.

Tell us a bit about the blog’s history. How was it started?

Its history has something to do with my own academic biography. When I did my PhD in the U.K. during the second half of the 2000s, I found a very fertile field of study about the economy that consisted not only of sociologists (my original discipline), but also anthropologists, geographers, and scholars of STS and cultural theory in the broadest sense. In those days it was called “Cultural Economy.” After my PhD, I returned to Chile as an assistant professor in a sociology department and I began to search for people with whom to discuss and share what I was reading and studying. In Chile, I found a strong community of people working at the intersection of STS and topics like marketing, social policy, and creativity, plus a few doing social network analysis and others closer to critical management studies. I also learned about conferences organized by people at the Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales at the University of San Martín in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and there I was pleasantly surprised to find a rich conversation between economic sociologists and anthropologists in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro.

In September 2010, Estudios de la Economía started as an attempt to make something like a permanent seminar that would allow us to surmount geographic and institutional distance and extend the conversation beyond conferences and workshops. From the original group of people in Buenos Aires and Santiago, we have continued to “weave” the network, inviting people recommended by someone or people we met at conferences and in other activities.

At the beginning, we were inspired by blogs that had already existed for some time, like OrgTheory (http://orgtheory.wordpress.com/) or Socializing Finance (http://socfinance.wordpress.com/), but over time we have found our niche. Estudios de la Economía does not focus on topics internal to the U.S. academy like OrgTheory and we don’t have such a specific object of study like Socializing Finance. At one moment, I thought that perhaps we could transform the blog into a newsletter like Accounts or the European Economic Sociology Newsletter. But becoming a newsletter (circulated in .pdf form) would entail losing everything that being online makes possible. Today we are comfortable as a “collective academic blog.” We are able to post videos, images, podcasts, and so on; try out formats and ideas that would be too risky for a journal; and produce spin-offs or more traditional publications. For example, we have thought about editing, with Mariana Heredia, a book of the interviews on the blog, and several of the contributors who met each other through Estudios de la Economía have participated in special issues and collected volumes together.
The content of Estudios de la Economía is primarily in Spanish (although sometimes our Brazilian colleagues prefer to write in Portuguese). The interviews and some co-posts with other sites (especially the Charisma Network and, less frequently, Socializing Finance) are in English. Obviously, there is always the temptation to become more “global” and publish definitively in English. The majority of our contributors understand English, but it is much easier and more natural to write in Spanish and we don’t want to lose that. Moreover, the blog also acts as a resource for teaching, professionals and researchers in Latin America.

What are some of the most important discussions that have emerged from the blog?

I would highlight three themes among many, shared “objects” of study about which we have both individual contributions and collective discussion. I think that anyone interested in these three themes will be able to find on the blog a good archive and lively debate.

The first theme is about economists, who are very important in the recent history of Argentina and Chile. The discussion in these countries has been dedicated primarily to topics like technocracy related most closely to the political science or sociology of political elites. But on the blog, the discussion has turned, due to the influence of Michel Callon’s notion of “performativity,” more to the production and history of economic knowledge and its use in the practical production of markets. This has also been connected to discussions about the role of economists in specific areas of social policy—like the environment, education, or the city—as well as to the interests of other contributors (coming from the perspective of organizational analysis) in topics like “new public management,” rankings, and instruments of public policy.

The second theme is domestic, household, or everyday finance. There is a very rich combination of people working at the intersection of STS and finance, as well as others influenced by French sociology and anthropology. We have debated long and hard over the work of scholars like Bill Maurer, Jane Guyer, Florence Webber, and Viviana Zelizer. But such debates do not emerge from reading assignments, but instead from the search for conceptual tools to think through the incredible things that have appeared in contributors’ fieldwork on topics like inflation, credit, investment, the Argentine “corralito,” and the use of multiple moneys.

Third, there is increasing discussion about topics closer to comparative political economy. There has been an interesting conversation among people working with the idea of “varieties of capitalism” or the work of B.R. Schneider about Latin America, and others interested in performativity and domestic finance. This conversation has also generated new ways of talking about “big” themes like neoliberalism and capitalism. Another author that has appeared in multiple conversations is Karl Polanyi.

What does the future hold for Estudios de la Economía?

To continue! As long as we continue to find the project entertaining and continue to feel enthusiastic about it, as long as we continue to excite more collaborators, and as long as we don’t become something that people do just to improve institutional rankings. I would also like to continue exploring some of the experiments we have started—for instance, to continue to look for ways to do things with our friends in the Charisma Network and perhaps to open new types of collaboration beyond the social sciences, for example, with artists who work on economic subjects.

Finally, tell us about your own research. What you currently working on?

Currently I live in Denmark, where I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Organization at the Copenhagen Business School. These days I work in three primary areas: First, on subjects related to STS, markets, and finance, about which I try to write from material I collected for my
dissertation about the history of private health insurance in Chile, as well as from data from my later research about consumer credit in the retail industry there. With my colleagues at the Copenhagen Business School, as well as with others in Argentina and Chile, I work on what I am calling for now “markets as devices”—that is, the empirical analysis of the history and knowledge utilized in the creation, evaluation, and repair of markets designed to resolve public issues (like education, pollution, energy, etc.). Finally, on my less “economic” side, which is more about social and cultural theory but which of course always serves to inspire the rest of my research, I will continue to explore the intersections between the work of authors like White, Strathern, Zelizer, Luhmann, and Serres.

Emerging Market Societies Series

Questions for Salvatore Babones, Series Editor

Salvatore Babones answers a few questions about a new series he is editing for Edward Elgar Publishing on “Emerging Market Societies”

How did you get this opportunity?

Since the moment I was awarded tenure (and no longer had to worry about my own future) I’ve been thinking about what people with tenure can do to make the career trajectory from PhD to tenure go more smoothly for coming generations. It seemed to me that a major stumbling block was the challenge of getting a first authored book published. First book publishing seems more like a lottery than a process. If an acquisitions editor at a major university press (who likely doesn’t have a PhD and is not even a sociologist) happens to like your topic, you win. Otherwise, you struggle.

In fact, I made tenure on the basis of journal articles. Immediately afterward, I found the floodgates had opened. Instead of begging people to consider my proposals, I had publishers asking me to write books for them. It’s not just me. Most post-tenure academics at research universities have the same experience of going from famine to flood in just a couple years.

So I decided to do something about the problem. Many publishers are eager to piggyback on the expertise that senior academics can provide. The problem is that most academics don’t want to put in the work to develop junior authors. If I can be very frank, it’s much easier just to commission your already-successful friends to write books. I decided I wanted to work with junior authors to help them prepare for tenure or habilitation. When I approached Alex Pettifer, the editorial director of Edward Elgar Publishing, with a proposal to work hand-in-hand with junior scholars he was thrilled and immediately commissioned the series.

Who do you have in mind as contributors?

Salvatore Babones is an associate professor of sociology and social policy at the University of Sydney. He writes on comparative international development and on quantitative methods for the social sciences. His most recent book is Methods for Quantitative Macro-Comparative Research (Sage, 2014).

I have a mandate to acquire at least three books a year by junior academics. The people are as much a focus of this series as the topics.