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For over more than a century, business ethicists have formulated moral judgments on economic activity, while offering guidance to businessmen and companies seeking both righteous and profitable lines of conduct. This moral project has triggered faithful enthusiasm, but also skeptical if not scornful reactions – business ethics being for instance described as a disease which is “in principle harmless, certainly not life-threatening, but for the infected one sometime quite painful”.1 In The Moral Background, Gabriel Abend steps out of these controversies by considering business ethics as a social fact. The book is not about which ethics, nor is it about ethics’ (lack of) impacts on business and society. The book examines about the social production of business-related moral normativity, i.e. “business ethicists, their practical work, and the cultural and institutional contexts in which they carry it out” (p.9).

Gabriel Abend grounds his analysis into an original distinction between two orders of morality, which draws in particular on the philosophy of John Searle, Charles Taylor, and Martin Heidegger. While first-order morality consists in formulating moral judgments, a second-order moral background creates the conditions for these moral judgments to be made. More precisely, the moral background underlies, enables, supports, and facilitates moral judgments by providing six types of resources. It offers reasons and explanations that help justify why moral conducts ought to be followed. It supplies semantics with which moral claims can be formulated (e.g. noble, virtuous, cruel, inhuman). It defines which entities can be evaluated according to moral standards, such as persons, institutions, motives, or behaviors. It suggests methods and arguments that can structure moral reasoning. It entails premises about the status of moral norms, which can for instance be considered either as universal or as conventional. Finally, the moral background covers metaphysical assumptions about the world in which moral judgments are formulated – a creation of God, for instance, or a world of soulless individuals endowed with affects, cognition and agency.

Equipped with this analytical framework, Gabriel Abend explores moral backgrounds of American business ethics. While the study’s focus extends from the mid-19th century to the 1930s, brief incursions into antique philosophy as well as contemporary discourses on corporate social responsibility help identify the roots and continuations of modern business ethics. To uncover his – mostly implicit – object, the author analyzes in great details a significant corpus of documentary sources including sermons of 19th century pastors, books and public lectures, codes of ethics, and press articles published for instance by Nation’s Business – a magazine from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. These texts are complemented with parsimonious information about the business ethicists who authored them and the contexts in which they were conceived.

The result is a convincing series of insights into how different elements of moral background underlie the work of early American business ethicists. Pastors witnessing the rise of modern capitalism felt compelled to remind their flock of the villainy of greed, while exhorting businessmen to virtue, not because it pays – on Earth and in Heaven – but out of love for God’s creation. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was more concerned with preventing costly government interventions and fighting off leftist ideologies. To this end, it used business ethics extensively to convince public opinion that “American business” was moved by a righteous quest to serve the Nation, rather than by the “sordid details of making profits” (p.175). For newly created business schools such as the Wharton School of Finance and Economy, or the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, business ethics provided useful resources to ascertain their legitimacy within the university landscape and in American society.

Gabriel Abend systematizes his analysis in a typology that distinguishes two moral background configurations. The background termed “Standards and Practice” (Chapter 6) is primarily positivist and relativist. Societies are characterized by moral conventions, which business ethicists can uncover scientifically in order to help businessmen take them into account. The focus is on behavior rather than essential qualities, technical semantics avoid moralistic tones, and economic success is promoted as an overt motivation for moral deeds. The “Christian merchant” background (Chapter 7) is more ambiguous and twisted. Moral
norms are conceived as absolute laws which permeate God’s creation and express His will. Ethicists suggest that moral behavior leads to economic success, while immoral conduct troubles the soul and makes Hell a quite probable afterlife scenario. However, religious doctrine requires moral deeds to flow from moral motives, and moral qualities need to be constant, not opportunistic. Hence, ethicists skillfully slip their pragmatic sales pitch into a discourse that emphasizes general moral duties: God expects businessmen to be good Christians during office hours as much as during the Service, and each economic action must be subordinated to the higher ends of spiritual life.

The Moral Background belongs to the kind of books in which a demonstration is logically unfolded from the introduction to the conclusion. It reads well, and numerous lively examples make up for the slightly didactic overtone. The analytical framework is not only innovative but also productive, as it casts new light upon the social phenomenon of business ethics. Moreover, the historical approach usefully puts the ongoing claims of “newness” of contemporary business ethics and CSR into perspective. One hardly sees any difference between the trendy concept of “shared value” and the semantics of “service” and “enlightened self-interest” which populated business ethics discourses in the first decades of the 20th century (chapter 2). Nor are codes of ethics and claims of self-regulation a new phenomenon (chapter 4). The author’s ability to carefully delineate the limits of his argument conveys another quality to the book. References to patterns and probability avoid deterministic causal claims, and Gabriel Abend resists the temptation to infer statements about institutional and cultural change from his typology (pp. 263-264).

While these two limits are acknowledged, they remain frustrating nonetheless. G. Abend refers to the complex and evolving relationships between business ethics and other dimensions of “business-society” interdependencies in an almost anecdotal way. This is too much to link the floating business ethics discourses with biographic, institutional, and cultural variables. But the properties of these links, their effects, and their underlying mechanisms find little room for systematic analysis in the book. Conversely, the reader might wonder if the level of details with which the analytical framework is related to the work of selected philosophers is really necessary (chapter 1), and perhaps wish there would be less redundant arguments and examples along the way. Finally, while Gabriel Abend concludes his book with an interesting discussion on the new sciences of morality, which come primarily from neuro-science and psychology, his critic is mostly an expression of disciplinary conflicts. The author highlights short-comings of these approaches, which bracket socio-cultural variables, and which overlook the role of background elements in the production of morality. But the critic falls short of applying the moral background framework to these new sciences of morality, which co-produce moral normativity according to their own background as much as business ethics used – and continues – to do.

Overall, The Moral Background is a fine piece of sociology, which combines multiple disciplinary perspectives (philosophy, history, cultural sociology, economic sociology) to craft a solid contribution to the understanding of the social production of morality in general, and of American business ethics in particular. The short-comings listed above are less about internal argumentative flaws than about analytical areas left untouched. In fact, the book opens up multiple horizons for future research, in particular for diachronic cross-national comparisons – European or Asian business ethics are likely to reveal different backgrounds than the U.S. case – and for the study of transnational processes involved in the production and diffusion of first-order and second-order morality.

Endnotes


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Constructing Quality, edited by Jens Beckert and Christine Musselin, is a collection of twelve case studies about quality construction in a wide range of fields. The chapters are distributed into five main sections (investing quality, the quality of labor, the quality of aesthetic goods, the morality of quality, and consuming quality). The main purpose of the book is to show how quality is socially constructed on
specific markets and thus highly dependent on history, institutional context, regulation, and power relationships.

The introduction, written by the two editors, presents quality as “the outcome of a construction process involving producers, consumers and market intermediaries” (p. 1). This introduction reviews the results of sociological investigations concerning quality. It is organized around three core mechanisms involved in the construction of quality: categorization (forming categories to which goods can be allocated), classification (identifying the products that fall within a given category), and qualification (ranking products within a category).

The first section of the book includes chapters dealing with the quality of investments. Zsuzsanna Vargha studies how bankers advise people on mortgages at two different periods in Hungary, and she shows how such advice affects the amount and terms of the final contract. Thus, uncertainty is not one-sided and qualities (of the product on the one hand, and of its consumer on the other hand) are discovered and co-constructed during the face-to-face selling relationship. There are no such things as “preexisting preferences”. Consequently, singularity is not only a property of the product as in Karpik or Callon’s approaches, but also a characteristic of the match.

Patrick Aspers, in his chapter on timber markets in Sweden, questions the way exchanges are realized when the quality of the product is only known after the selling. Indeed the quality of the trees standing in the Swedish forests is obvious only after harvesting. This chapter thus addresses a classical question in economic sociology with quite original fieldwork. It shows the importance of market structures, regulation, history, and ties between actors to explain the market’s existence and the risk distribution between buyers and sellers.

Agnès van Zanten studies judgment construction about schools among middle-class parents in France and their ex post justifications. The author draws on pragmatic sociology and distinguishes between four categories of parents (technocrats, intellectuals, mediators, and technicians). Parents face two types of uncertainties: regarding their child (academic potential, maturity) and regarding schools (school mix, performance). What is a “good” school and how the information is gathered differ according to parents’ type.

The second section of Constructing Quality comprises two chapters dealing with the question of quality construction in the labor market. Emmanuelle Marchal questions the effect of “anonymous resumes” on recruiters’ judgment. From the analysis of a large-scale experiment conducted in 2010 in France, the author concludes that it “is not a good idea at all” (p. 104). It appears that it makes the recruitment process longer, that it is not always efficient since the hidden qualities can sometimes be guessed, and that the “preformatted” anonymous resume prevents the recruiters from evaluating the applicant’s ability to tell his or her career story. Thus the absence of information leading to a clear identification of individuals is regarded by recruiters as an additional source of uncertainty.

In his chapter, Philipp Gerlach investigates the evaluation practices in internal labor markets for engineers in French and German automotive firms. How do engineers become qualified as potential managers? To answer this question, P. Gerlach observes “critical moments” for the assessment of the engineers’ quality (annual interviews, career committees). He distinguishes between two different ways of dealing with uncertainty: a “technocratic” one which attempts to depersonalize evaluation using formal devices to make predictions; and a “trust based” one which relies on the personal knowledge of the person. HR experts who intend to establish a transparent internal labor market prefer the former whereas current managers favor the latter.

The third section tackles the issue of the quality of aesthetic goods. The work of Elena Bogdanova offers new perspectives on a classical question for sociologists studying quality. She studies how the quality of aesthetic goods (antiques) can be assessed in a context characterized by a temporary lack of institution guaranteeing safety in market transaction (post-soviet Russia), by an asymmetrical distribution of knowledge, and by an ambiguity of experts’ position. She distinguishes different segments of the market (high-end, middle-range, low-end) that differ according to the level of organization of the trade, and consequently to the level of uncertainty of valuation and price-setting. Her main argument is that storytelling (about the market and about antiques) is a core mechanism that reduces uncertainty and confers value in unstable contexts.

The chapter written by Sébastien Dubois and Pierre François aims at explaining how categories emerge as shared institutions by analyzing the structure of the field of French contemporary poetry. The authors examine 18
maps made by poets to describe their professional universe. They use network analysis for testing if people include the same poets within a given category (stability of classifications) and if different categories can designate the same groups of poets (substitutability of classifications). Answers to these questions differ according to the location of the poets in the field.

The forth section of the book deals with the social construction of value under moral constraints. Firstly, Frans van Waarden and Robin van Dalen question the construction of halal product quality. They identify two major sources of uncertainty regarding the quality of halal products: the absence of consensus over what is “halal” and, once a norm is established, the problem of quality assessment (whether or not the final product abides by the norms). In a context of long, global, and complex food chains, information asymmetries are strong for consumers living in Western societies. Since there is no state regulation of religious food standards, private quality certificates allow a market for halal products to exist. Those judgment devices give birth to several submarkets (“aunt-and-uncle”, domestic, and export markets) with different levels of control, and thus different price ranges.

The funeral market studied by Dominic Akyel also faces moral issues. Following the perspective of V. Zelizer, the author examines how moral values “contribute to excluding certain information from the process of qualification and how market actors compensate for this” (p. 224). The funeral market is a regulated market where price competition is inappropriate since burial goods are considered as symbolic representations of the deceased. Like in aesthetic markets, one important question is: how to price something considered invaluable? The article shows that quality construction and trust building (through reputation) are closely linked in the death-care business.

The fifth section of the book offers an interesting focus of quality construction in the case of mass consumption goods. Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier argues that “consumer preferences do not exist outside the marketing work that is performed by firms and their partners […] to build a representation of the demand” (p. 251). Marketing contributes to shaping values and value. According to her, mass consumption markets consist of leading companies that produce demand by shaping consumer preferences and defining products’ features, and challengers that either supply cheap me-too products or highly differentiated niche market products.

Another chapter by Frank Wehinger deals with counterfeit goods and the problematic assessment of their quality. In the last chapter, Jörg Rössel and Jens Beckert question the relationship between two competing classification systems on the German wine market and the effects of each system on price formation. They use quantitative analysis to show that the two classification systems (one measuring the “quality in the glass” through chemical analysis of the wine, the other relying on “terroir”) function as mutually exclusive strategic options for winemakers. The former is used in the “standard” segment of the market whereas the latter is used in the “status” segment of the market. Only the system based on “terroir” leads to price differentiation.

The various chapters offer different perspectives on the social construction of quality through case-studies of classification, judgment, regulation, competition between devices, pricing, etc. One major interest of the book lies in the variety of the case studies. They concern a wide range of empirical objects and countries, and the authors use different research designs, even if qualitative methods prevail. For the reader, a feeling of eclecticism may be the counterpoint of the empirical richness since theoretical approaches and level of analysis can be very different between chapters.


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Eight years ago, Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007) published a paper which was to initiate major discussions in the English-speaking social sciences (to name a few contributions in Sociology: Crompton, 2008; Savage and Burrows, 2009; Tinati, Halford, Carr, and Pope, 2014; Uprichard, 2013). In their paper, Savage and Burrows suggested that sociology was facing a coming crisis by neglecting the field of what they referred to as “transactional data” and “knowing capitalism”. According to the authors, these developments and the era of Big Data were going to fundamentally question the role of empirical social research, theory, and causality.
Up until now German-speaking social sciences largely seem to have turned a blind eye towards these issues, in sharp contrast to the media hype around transactional data. But with his edited volume *Big Data: Analysen zum digitalen Wandel von Wissen, Macht und Ökonomie*, Ramón Reichert and his authors have produced an impressive volume and a milestone in the debate. The contributions come mainly from media and cultural studies with the volume ambitiously aiming at “creating a space of reflection for a differentiated dispute on the data based media upheaval of the present” by analysing “Big Data in its entire social, cultural, economic and political spectrum” (9). Correspondingly, and in contrast to the public discussion on Big Data, the contributions explicitly avoid issues on the normativity of the development of late modern societies and the usage of social media. Instead they analyse the impact of digitalisation on knowledge, power, and the economy with the aim of systematically elaborating on digital data practices in order to contribute to the formation of future academic cultures and epistemologies of data production and analysis (10f.).

The book is divided into five main sections: 1. Big Digital Humanities, 2. History and Theory of Data, 3. Digital Methods, 4. Dataveillance: Algorithms, Graphs and Protocols and 5. Digital Technologies and Social Concepts of Order. Contributions in the first section deal with the cultural transformations and medial upheaval of digital media culture which are introduced by a paper from the French media scientist Bernard Stiegler. This text, filled with cross-references to philosophical works, traces the epiphylogenetic development of cognition, technology, and knowledge in human evolution and in human memory. A more social science centred focus is presented by David M. Berry, who deals with the challenges of the digitalisation of scientific research as commonly described by the digital humanities. Understanding these processes constitutes, according to Berry, the precondition for understanding how computer based forms impact and mediate our experiences of present culture and society (62). Even more focused on research practices is the paper by Lev Manovich about the issues and methodological and conceptual challenges related to working with large datasets. Particularly against the background of the optimistic vision of Big Data as reflecting ‘the social’ in total, Manovich’s differentiated reflections on the character and accessibility of Big Data constitute a foundation for further social science discussion on implications for research and methods training. The final contribution to the first section by the media scientist Frederica Frabetti concludes that the focus on the mutual constitution of technology and concepts of being-human should entail a critical reflection on digitality, especially the impact of omnipresent algorithms. She concludes with some political questioning of the instrumentality of technology and knowledge which challenges the view of knowledge as a commodity and universities as demand-oriented service institutions (101).

The second section of the book on the history and theory of Big Data starts with a paper by the US-American anthropologist Tom Boelstorff on the construction of Big Data in theory, reflecting on terminologies and concepts. As an outline of a broader theoretical view of the phenomenon, he highlights the principally temporal dimension of data under the term “dated theory” (108); second, he criticises the distinction of metadata and zero order data as a cultural and political distinction; third, he focuses on the tension of volitionally and unintentionally produced data and; fourthly, he draws on Lévi-Strauss’ triangulation of raw, cooked, and rotten in order to question the idea of raw data as pre-interpretative facts (120f.). He concludes, drawing on Geertz, that data is compact in the sense that it always already represents our interpretation of how other humans interpret their own practices and the practices of their fellow humans (124). The historian Daniel Rosenberg traces in the following paper the history of the term ‘data’ using Big Data sources (Google Books and Google Ngram as well as the database Eighteenth-Century Collection Online) in combination with qualitative case analyses. He thereby argues that data contains no truth or reality beyond the reality we construct on its basis (155).

The German media researcher Theo Röhle also takes a historic approach by outlining some parallels to the debates around “New Political History” which took place in US-American history in the 1960s and ‘70s. Concluding, and as desiderata of the current debate around Big Data, he highlights the analysis of media technological conditions and the impact of external economic aspects (168f.), and also warns of optimism with regard to the new promises and possibilities of Big Data. The final contribution to the history section is written by Richard Rogers and focuses on the status of the internet as a data source for social and cultural studies, pointing at the challenges of the chaotic structure of the data.

The third section, entitled Digital Methods, discusses the challenges of Big Data for research practices by presenting various empirical analyses. On this topic, Jean Burgess and Axel Bruns, Australian creative industry researchers, discuss issues around the analysis of Twitter data, thereby direct-
ing attention to the technological and organisational challenges of academic Big Data analyses. These consist of the limited availability and accessibility of social media data on the one hand (197), and of a lack of “code literacy” in media and cultural studies on the other (192f, 200). Also dealing with Twitter as a data producer, Caroline Gerlitz and Bernhard Rieder discuss sampling strategies, contrasting topic-centred samplings using hashtags with snowball samples starting at a set of user accounts as well as metadata-based marker samples. Their own suggestion consists of a random sampling strategy using the Streaming Application Programming Interface (API) in order to assess the relative meaning of user practices such as the usage of hashtags (217). Yet neither of the two Twitter contributions reflects on the relevance and scope of their research beyond the media itself; on what the practices represent and what kind of population is observed. The third paper of this section, by the two communication researchers Merja Mahrt and Michael Scharkow, gives an overview of the state of the discussion on methods regarding Big Data, which would have been a good introductory paper for the whole section. Focussing again on Twitter, the GESIS researcher Katrin Weller bibliometrically analyses publications with regard to the year of publication, research institutional affiliation of the authors, and data access and analysis strategies, showing that Twitter research does not at all describe a closed field but a highly dispersed and disconnected community of various disciplines. Reflecting once more on the character of social media data, Johannes Paßmann, scholar of German studies, states the impossibility of controlling future contexts of data usage at the time of inscription (265) after dealing with general issues on the reflexivity of social media data.

The fourth section of the book on algorithms, graphs and protocols is dedicated to social steering processes and political aspects of power, which are inherent in the production of data-generated research and material-data cultures. The common focus of the papers assembled here consists of the political relevance of software as well as digital media technologies (23). The section opens with a contribution by the media scientists Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, analysing networks on a micro-technical level of non-human machine practices (290). This demanding text aims at differentiating the relations between power, control, and network and, by introducing the idea of a counter-protocol, it suggests a concept of political resistance into the context of networks (308ff.). But for readers with less knowledge of these issues, this last point in particular remains rather vague. The next paper, by the philosopher and activist Matteo Pasquinelli, elaborates on the understanding of information with regard to labour, added value, and machines, by drawing on the works of Marx, Alquati, Deleuze and Guattari as well as representatives of Italian Operaismo: Lazzarato, Virno, Marazzi and Vercellone. His central argument is that machines – and thus also information technologies – have to be analysed as part of their social and power-structured context (319, 325, 329). What is more, information contains a specific value-adding dimension which materialises in the “Big Data society” with meta-data as a measure of the value of social relations and the improvement of the design of machine intelligence, as well as the prediction and control of mass behaviour (328). Thus he calls for attention to, and analysis of, the political dimension of these new forms of data (329). The paper following by Annika Richterich deals with the well-known analysis of Big Data using Google Flu Trends as a prognosis tool, a usage seemingly in the interest of the public. The problems she identifies consist not only of methodological issues such as the instability of the model (351f), but also of the corporate possession of epidemiological data and issues of data privacy. Next, the media scientist Christoph Engemann looks at the link between Big Data and transactionality. His genealogy of transactionality brings a fundamental paradigm shift within databases to the fore, in the sense that under conditions of Big Data, all communication and events are potentially relevant for transactions and thus lose their former voluntarism (377).

The fifth section of the book, entitled “Digital Technologies and Visions of Social Order” focuses on the interrelations between technological infrastructures and concepts of the social. It starts with another historical case, the Community Memory project of the 1970s, which is presented by the media scientist Stefan Höltgen in order to show the pre-structuring forces of technologies, hardware, and software interfaces on social practices. Regine Buschauer, a researcher on mobile media and information and communication technologies, presents a technohistorical reflection on the networking of social realities by tracing the topos of railway lines as a technological nervous system (407ff.) and by sketching a genealogy of forms of mobile sensing within the history of mobile communication (412ff.). Yet, in contrast to a self-image of technology as rigid, fixed and closed, Buschauer argues in favour of a perspective on technology “in all its emergent messiness” (429) which means that “we will always be assembling heterogeneous technologies to achieve individual and collective effects, and they will almost always be messy.”
Ramón Reichert, the editor of the volume and Professor for New Media Studies at the University of Vienna, focusses in his contribution on the role of technologies of knowledge and power within the process of generating ever more data of the social, distilling through his analysis a performative impact of corporate Big Data analyses on present and future subjectivities and individualities (447). On a similar theme, the final article written by Martin Doll addresses the forms of communities and socialities which are constituted and performed by social media practices, drawing on the role of print media practices within the constitution of national imaginaries, as elaborated by Benedict Anderson.

In sum, the contributions to the volume ‘Big Data’ represent an overdue and tangible landmark within the emerging German debates around digitalisation, the potential and dangers of new forms of data, and the implication of these developments for the social sciences. One of its achievements is to draw attention to the material and technological foundations of data production and resulting forces which tend traditionally to be ignored in social science research (cf. Kleiner, Renschler, Wernli, Farago, & Joye, 2013). Yet, in order to fully define the field of Big Data research and methodology, the volume lacks foundational clarifications of what is new and different other than the size of Big Data in comparison to conventional social science data. Beyond reflections on the character of the data and the interrelations of technology and the social, the implications for social science research, for instance the kinds of research questions and designs the new form of data allows for, thus remain unaddressed. However, the gap between the public hype and the academic abstention from Big Data analyses could be connected to the lack of theoretical frames and research problems, which transactional data for example may be able to answer. Furthermore, basic introductions of relevant concepts as a basis for further discussion remain missing. Some of the texts have been published before (and yet, the original publications are not mentioned) and are in parts translated from English into German in a rather doggerel fashion, and although they refer to other authors of the book, there are no cross-references of insights between the papers.

References