An Interview with Michel Anteby

Michel Anteby is an Associate Professor and Marvin Bower Fellow in the Organizational Behavior area at the Harvard Business School. His most recent book is *Manufacturing Morals: The Values of Silence in Business School Education* (2013, University of Chicago Press). Scott Mitchell and Taylor C. Nelms posed questions.

The book is rich with insights for different publics. What would you say is the most important issue it tackles that would be of interest to economic sociologists?

At one level, the book can be read as an ethnographical account of one junior faculty member's socialization at the Harvard Business School (HBS). Indeed, the study relies on field-notes I collected when joining HBS's faculty right after completing my doctoral studies. But on another level, the book is not merely about any faculty socialization process. *Manufacturing Morals* is set in one of the central training grounds for corporate leaders in the United States. As such, I hope the book also offers a window into corporate morality.

Individuals trained in business schools have increasingly become central to the running and shaping of our economy. Their socialization in schools is therefore an issue of interest to economic sociologists examining the interplay of society and economy. *Manufacturing Morals* looks at the making of corporate morality. More specifically, the book argues that in the corporate world, being relatively silent about endorsing *any unique* moral perspective might be a form of morality after all. Put otherwise, my analysis suggests that refraining from stabilizing a unique moral viewpoint might be a key attribute

of the corporate world. What I think fellow sociologists will find most interesting is that such a take on morality departs from Emile Durkheim's claim that those involved in commerce and industry obey no morals of any kind. The difficulty to pinpoint and specify morality in the corporate world might therefore not signal an absence of morality, but rather be an artifact of a desire not to endorse any specific moral viewpoint.

You write about the production of "vocal silence"—that is, repeated opportunities in which agents are left to make decisions ostensibly alone, but in a context rich with signs that offer guidance as to what might be preferred. You write that such contexts "delineate limits within which discretion is exercised" and that a socialization model favoring such silence provides space for moral ambiguity "within limits" (p. 15). In the case of HBS, how does this work and what are those limits?

The beauty of vocal silence lies in its power to gently guide action. In vocal silence, people are left seemingly alone to make up their minds and individual efforts need to be deployed to reach closure; these efforts build individual commitment and ensure that participants adhere to a preferred course of action. The best analogy for such a system is perhaps Harrison White's use of the term "social plumbing." As he

insightfully notes, individual agency is rarely a *problem* in organizations. More often than not, it's a "neat kind of social plumbing" or a *solution* to attaining control. The individual agency inherent in systems built on vocal silence is therefore a very powerful socialization mechanism—more powerful, I would argue, than top-down command and control models.

For instance, when an instructor asks MBA students during a case discussion at HBS, "What is the worst thing that could happen on a factory line?" many answers come to mind: a shortage in spare parts stopping the line, the relocation of the line to another country, a fatal accident involving an operator, a unionization drive, and more. Some answers will without doubt make you and other students cringe, but all answers were voiced in my classrooms. As faculty and students exit the classrooms and echoes of the discussion swirl in their minds, some kind of conclusion on what the "worst" case scenario can be needs to be reached. These reflexive moments are the backbone of vocal silence. They repeatedly force individuals to articulate, at least for

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themselves, their sets of morals in the apparent void.

That being said, not all sets of morals echo to the same degree in organizations built on vocal silence. A flurry of signs constitutes the vocal element of silence. Leaders' messages, organizational histories, and organizational majority groups' reactions can ratchet up or dampen any given moral viewpoint. Take, for example, a controversial lecture delivered at HBS by a leader of the International Association of Machinists in the early 1920s. On the one hand, the Dean defended the decision to invite a labor leader to lecture on campus, writing in a letter to concerned manufacturers that he had "not the slightest fear" that students would be "thrown off their feet by the direction of instruction given" and that the School aimed to give students the basis for "independent thought." On the other hand, it is perhaps more significant that this lecture received an unusually high degree of pushback. In other words, morals need not only be voiced, but also need to resonate throughout constituencies to be vocal.

What proves off limits at HBS varies by time period and by constituencies. Let me give you a more contemporary example. I recently taught a session on contract pregnancy (also known as surrogate motherhood), once to MBA students and once to senior executives. The session is a dream moment for an economic sociologist since it gets at the heart of the tensions between economic and social norms. (I use in that session the documentary "Made in India" that I discovered at an ASA annual meeting.) Most MBA students were fairly receptive, but a few senior executives asked me why I had chosen such a topic. Repeated pushback from influential constituents might mute some discussion and the surfacing of given viewpoints; if this happens again and again, the vocal elements of the model kick in and some views might de facto become off limits. Contract pregnancy touches upon the legitimacy of commercial ventures, particularly as they relate to the human body. Such a discussion and its underlying morals might find fewer echoes on campus than, one for example, on private equity; signaling how limits can be enforced.

The book only rarely ventures beyond the ordered confines of HBS. Do you see this as a limitation? Can you comment on the broader theoretical and practical implications of your study on other organizations?

Excellent question! I love it because it reminds me of the exact same question I got while completing my single-site dissertation in 2005. The study looked at "moral gray zones" or instances when management and workers jointly agreed to break official rules. It was set in a French aeronautics plant where workers made illegal artifacts on company time and with company materials. I recall being encouraged, at that time, by a faculty member to open up a comparative site in the United States to "broaden" my argument and test its robustness across geographies. I did not go that route. I believe a lot can be learned from an in-depth study of a given site. What we learn is different from what we would if we had multiple sites, but single-site findings can still help us probe into many emerging issues.

One such emerging issue—that I hope Manufacturing Morals sheds light on—is the routinization of morals. I need to thank Robin Leidner for pointing this puzzle out in her book, *Fast Food, Fast Talk*. She asks at one point whether civility can be written into a script. That sentence stuck with me for a long time. Indeed, HBS has historically aspired to "moralize" business conduct. But the School is also a large operation with more than 200 faculty members, more than a thousand other staff members, and almost 2,000 MBA students on campus any given year (not counting other students in the executive and doctoral programs). So how do you moralize business conduct on such a large scale? How do you write morality into a script?

The intersection of scripts and morality has, to my knowledge, not been explored. By promoting a model of socialization that repeatedly asks participants to pass judgment "on their own" and with only indirect guidance from above, a large moralizing endeavor can be carried out. I therefore see vocal silence as an attempt to bridge scripts and morality. Whether routinizing morals in such a manner is successful or not is for readers to decide. One irony is that the answer to this routinizing puzzle requires adopting *under-specification* of morals as a morality.

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Theoretically, you seem to draw primarily from the sociological literature, but methodologically, you rely heavily on the work of anthropologists. How do you manage the disciplinary conventions your work and this book straddle?

I will share a funny story that might help answer your question. I earned a joint-Ph.D. in sociology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, France) and in management from New York University. After completing all my French doctoral requirements, EHESS's registrar asked me whether I wish my Ph.D. to be awarded in anthropology or sociology. (I opted for sociology.) EHESS's norm was to let doctoral students enroll in seminars across disciplines, allow them to discuss with their advisors their interests, and elect only at the end a disciplinary focus. For U.S. academics, electing *ex-post* a disciplinary focus seems almost like anathema.

In the United-States, the divide between disciplines is much stronger; this helps build discipline-specific expertise, but also limits cross-pollination. Disciplinary focus is important for a scholar to get know a foundational literature and speak to a given audience. The more one straddles, the harder it can be to find one's voice and audience. But we can also learn a lot from other disciplines. For instance, historians are master narrative-crafters. Reading historian Robert Darnton's book *The Great Cat Massacre* is a lesson in how to adopt a social group's lens to tell a story (here, the lens of French apprentice printers). Given

that many sociologists also tell stories of given social groups, it would be a shame to miss the opportunity to learn from historians. Similarly, we can learn a lot from anthropologists who study socialization dynamics. It would actually be quite strange to ignore their findings when looking at such dynamics. In most of my projects, the research question guides the literature review, so straddling disciplines seems quite natural. But I still believe it's important to ground one's inquiry in a given discipline.

How did you navigate working at HBS and researching how its routines and culture shape faculty members and students? How did you handle some other faculty members' potential reticence to your pursuit? What were some risks you took?

As any field researcher knows, field resistance is part of doing fieldwork. Studying your own field creates some complications, but none that are insurmountable. First, I went to great lengths to assuage any specific fears anyone could articulate. Besides going through a typical Institutional Review Board process, I interacted often with HBS's Dean's Office. In practice, the Dean conveyed an advisory panel of four faculty readers to review the final manuscript and alert him to potential confidentiality and privacy breaches. He then forwarded the issues raised to me so I could decide how to best address them. (For instance, a student's name card was visible in an initial illustration I had selected: I cropped it to delete the name.) Second, I liberally shared draft book chapters with any School

member wanting to read them. Being open about what I was doing was the best way I could imagine to handle potential concerns. Third, I focused the project on my own story, rather than write a broader narrative of faculty members as a collective. (Early on, I conducted interviews with other faculty members but dropped them from the write-up.) Overall, my proximity to the field constrained me in some ways, but also offered me insights and opportunities that a stranger would access only with difficulty.

Asking about the risks of conducting a study of one's academic home is a valid question. But I believe one that should also include a discussion of the risks of *not* pursuing such a project. Why not conduct this study? Many scholars, including sociologists, examine given social groups (e.g., bankers. boxers, cooks, models, opera lovers, sidewalk booksellers, surgeons, and more). So why should academics be off-limits to study? The belief that what we do or who we are sets us apart from the broader social inquiry is deeply flawed. It imbues us with an imaginary special quality. Thus, *not* pursing a study that takes us as an object of inquiry runs the risk of upholding an erroneous belief. We are no different than others. Everett Hughes once wrote that, "Until we can find a point of view and concepts which will enable us to make comparisons between the junk peddler and the professor without intent to debunk the one and patronize the other, we cannot do our best work in the field." I hope my book lives up to his expectations.