

Ekkehart Schlicht

Linking Economics to Biology and Cognition



Born in 1945, Professor of Economics at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich. Earlier teaching at the University of Bielefeld and the Technical University of Darmstadt; editor of the *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*. His publications include *On Custom in the Economy* (Oxford University Press 1998), *Isolation and Aggregation in Economics* (Heidelberg-New York: Springer-Verlag 1985), *Grundlagen der ökonomischen Analyse* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt 1977), *Einführung in die Verteilungstheorie*, (Reinbeck: Rowohlt 1976). – Address: Institut für Volkswirtschaftslehre, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Schackstraße 4, 80539 München.

This was a very pleasant and productive year. At the beginning of my stay, I put the finishing touches to my manuscript *On Custom in the Economy*. The time until Christmas was filled with intense discussion and the planning of a book on *Localisms* which I am writing together with Eric Jones. This project is concerned with the interaction between economics and culture. We want to look at the way in which culturally induced tendencies canalise economic processes and are in turn moulded by these processes. We managed to organise the project, allot chapters between us and discuss some fundamental issues concerning the relationship between cultural and economic processes intensely. This would not have been possible without the help of the Wissenschaftskolleg, since such groundwork needs time (three months were hardly enough) and cannot be done on the phone easily, and it would have been practically impossible to meet elsewhere for a prolonged period of time, with Eric teaching at Melbourne, and me teaching at Munich.

In January, I changed gears and started to write a book on labour markets – a project which I pursued for some time. I managed to write some chapters and I am glad that I have been able to get a good start on the project, which will continue to occupy me in the future.

I participated in the biology/cognition workshop. This was a very productive and instructive experience. The contact with the biologists made me assimilate biological thinking in a way I could never have achieved by

reading. The parallelism between economic and biological thinking is quite surprising, and economists can benefit from absorbing elements of biological thought. It is also interesting to see that many theoretical shortcomings and unsolved problems are shared across these disciplines. Eva Jablonka's work on epigenetic inheritance and animal cultures turned out to be of particular relevance to my way of thinking about the economics-culture interaction, which was a central concern of my book on custom and is central again to the book about localisms, which I started to write at the Wissenschaftskolleg together with Eric Jones.

Further, and to my surprise, the cognitive scientists were quite open-minded regarding classical Gestalt psychology – they even put themselves in this tradition. This was a nice reconfirmation of the approach I have taken in my book on custom, and which was greeted with much scepticism by the psychologists I had talked to before. It is usually deemed out-moded. I thus obtained encouragement to pursue the path I have started to take to integrate cultural and economic issues.

There also emerged a field of common interest among a handful of fellows on the topic of property. We exchanged views, manuscripts, and papers, and even managed to organise a panel discussion. Further, there was fruitful discussion with many other fellows on various topics. The interdisciplinary character of the Wissenschaftskolleg is indeed a feature to be admired and nursed. Putting people from different disciplines together forces them to talk about issues of common interest, and these are typically issues relating to problems shared across disciplines, that is, on fundamentals.