The Sense of Dissonance: Accounts of Worth in Economic Life. By David Stark. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. xviii+245. $35.00.

Olav Velthuis
University of Amsterdam

David Stark's new book *The Sense of Dissonance* develops a new organizational theory on the basis of three—at first glance—very dissimilar case studies. The first is the machine shop of a Hungarian rubber product manufacturer in the socialist era, where Stark conducted ethnographic research in the mid-1980s. At the time, the toolmakers were allowed to form a partnership that engaged in subcontractual arrangements with the

parent firm.The second is a new media firm in New York's Silicon Alley that rapidly became successful during the Internet boom of the late 1990s. And third is a trading floor of a large international bank on Wall Street, where traders spot new trading opportunities by associating securities where no associations had previously been seen.

What these three enterprises share is an extremely flattened hierarchy, making employees more accountable to each other rather than to their superiors—if they have any. More important, all three enterprises, as Stark describes in vivid detail, need to juggle different orders of worth in order to be successful or even survive. The Hungarian toolmakers have to play the socialist game during regular working hours, and the capitalist, entrepreneurial game during their subcontracting work. Moreover, they need to develop their own standards of value in order to divide the entrepreneurial fee that they receive from the parent company among themselves. Within the Internet company, different communities of practice, such as designers, programmers, or business strategists, with different ways of evaluating new media, need to cooperate in order to make websites for the company's clients. The environment in which they operate is changing so rapidly that existing knowledge cannot be taken for granted and innovations need to be produced continuously.

Finally, on the trading floor, traders need to be able to spot profit opportunities by looking at a single security through different evaluative lenses simultaneously. This case study in itself is an important contribution to the new field of the sociology of finance. Stark understands the trading floor as a laboratory in which diverse trading instruments are combined. He shows convincingly that, in a financial world that has become global and deterritorialized to the extreme, and where one may easily assume that space does not matter anymore, it is the positioning of trading teams in physical space and the way traders rotate among these teams that may foster or hamper performance.

What makes the book an important, thought-provoking contribution to economic and organizational sociology is that the case studies are used to build a new theory of organization and entrepreneurship. In this theory, heterarchy, which Stark casually defines as "cognitive ecologies that facilitate the work of reflexive cognition" (p. 5), is the central concept. Stark claims that heterarchy, which is further characterized by the simultaneous existence of different orders of worth, is highly productive and increases the capability of an organization to adapt to rapidly changing environments. Entrepreneurship is therefore defined as the capacity to organize friction, to recombine different knowledge stocks within an organization, and to stimulate collaboration between employees whose evaluative standards differ.

The book is exceptionally inspiring because of its normative angle. In particular toward the end, Stark is not shy about that. He argues that Western societies have learned the wrong lesson from the collapse of socialism: that liberal democracies-cum-markets are superior. The lesson we should have learned is that any society that is organized along one order of worth is inherently fragile. Therefore Stark is concerned about the market's rise as the sole arbiter of worth, especially in times of ecological crisis. In order to cope with this crisis, global search processes need to be stimulated and social friction that may lead to innovative solutions needs to be organized. The author wonders if the market is capable of doing so.

Stark could have been more precise about where the positive ends and the normative begins: at times Stark makes the—normative—claim that heterarchy is desirable as an organizational form because of its superior capacity to adapt and because it manages to "make assets of ambiguity." At other times, the—positive—argument is that heterarchy is or will soon become the dominant organizational form of capitalist economies in the 21st century, just as rational bureaucracies dominated the 20th century.

However, it is not clear what exactly makes the 21st century so different from the 20th that a new organizational form is warranted. Is it the Internet revolution? A more general increase in the speed of technological change? Globalization? Broader changes in the nature of capitalism that have previously been conceptualized as post-Fordism or late capitalism? Stark leaves it to the reader to speculate.

Moreover, the three case studies suggest that heterarchy, the sense of dissonance, and competing orders of worth can be found in any organization, both 20th and 21st century, both high and late capitalist, both pre- and post-Internet revolution. Indeed, one would not be surprised to find heterarchy as well in Weberian bureaucracies, which have traditionally been analyzed by neoinstitutionalists in terms of hierarchies and rule- making behavior.

The choice of case studies complicates Stark's theoretical enterprise in another respect: it suggests that heterarchy may not always be productive or lead to an increased capacity to adapt. Indeed, the Internet firm in the end had to file for bankruptcy, while the protagonist of the Hungarian case study was replaced by his peers because "his abilities to exploit the ambiguities of a situation in which multiple frames of evaluation were contending had reached their limits" (p. 66). As a reader one wonders if the protagonist is the exception to the rule, or if other employees, whether under socialism or under capitalism, may have similar limits for exploiting such situations.

In spite of these ambiguities, *The Sense of Dissonance* is an important and refreshing contribution to both economic sociology and organizational sociology, introducing a wealth of new concepts, ideas, and lines of thinking. As Stark himself argues, new economic sociology is in danger of aging prematurely if it sticks to approaches that have already crystallized and do not frame economic problems in new and innovative ways. *The Sense of Dissonance* unmistakably accomplishes the latter.