

Acceptance speech

16 June of 2022

Mark Granovetter, awardee in the Humanities and Social Sciences category (14th Edition)

I am delighted to accept the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Social Sciences in the 14th edition of the program. It is a special honor for me to win an award that spans *all* the social sciences, because my doctoral training was in one of the last programs that offered training in multiple social science disciplines. At the Harvard University Department of Social Relations, in the 1960s, though each student specialized in one discipline, we were all trained in *five* of them: sociology, social anthropology, social psychology, clinical psychology and developmental psychology. Graduate students were mixed together in our offices *across* these disciplines, and we learned from one another as well as from the faculty. If the generous citation of the social sciences award committee is accurate, and my work contributes not only to sociology and economics but also to social psychology, political science, communication, marketing and computer science, it may be a consequence of this ecumenical training.

My earlier, *undergraduate* training was actually not in the social sciences at all, but in modern history. In the course of those studies I became quite interested in large-scale political movements that followed previously established patterns of human social interchange, such as the routes through which mail was delivered in pre-revolutionary France, as recounted by the great French historian Georges Lefebvre, in his remarkable book *La Grande Peur de 1789*. In graduate school, I discovered that a whole new area of social science study focused on questions like this, and that this fell under the rubric of "social network analysis". Previously, the study of networks had been of concern mainly to mathematicians who called it "graph theory", but increasingly, also to anthropologists and sociologists who thought that concrete patterns of social interaction deserved closer analysis. So when I wrote what was to become my 1973 paper on the "strength of weak ties", my main sources were applications of mathematical graph theory to social settings, investigations by social psychologists of how any random person might reach any other random person through a chain of personal connections – what the social psychologist

Stanley Milgram called “the small world problem” – and to my own research on how people found jobs. In that research my informants insisted to me that their contacts who linked them to jobs were not “friends” but “only acquaintances”. When you interview people, you need to actually listen to them, and I realized that they were telling me something important, that deserved further analysis.

My paper on “weak ties” found a much larger following once the study of networks became a major subfield in the natural sciences and computer science, from the 1990s on. One bit of evidence for this is that, to my surprise, when a few weeks ago I checked the dates of the 65,000 plus citations reported by Google Scholar to this paper, nearly 94% of them - to this 1973 paper – were from 2000 or later. So the paper seems now to have found a variety of audiences across disciplines.

My interest in social networks also led me to my current work that studies the social foundations of the economy. My doctoral dissertation on how people found jobs naturally led me to explore how economists had understood this question, which in turn led me to a broader concern about whether classical economics fully appreciated the social foundations of economic action. It seemed to me that what it did not sufficiently take into account was that all economic activity is embedded in networks of social interaction, which includes interaction beyond that which is *purely* economic. The first result of this interest was a 1985 paper on what I called this “embeddedness”, which was to become my second highly cited paper. And since that time, I have been working on this larger question of what are the social foundations of the economy. So far, the most significant outcome of this interest is my book called *Society and Economy*, which considers not only the place of social networks in the economy but also the critical role of norms, trust, power, social institutions and history. The first volume (published in 2017) is mainly theoretical, and the second one, that I am now in the process of writing, will consider a broad range of cases and applications. The importance of power and institutions means that in order to write such a book, I have had to immerse myself in the literatures not only of economics and sociology, but also of anthropology, history and political science.

For that reason, I am especially happy to receive an award that includes all the social sciences, and it is my hope to bring together insights from all these fields, in the search for the more comprehensive understanding of the human condition that we all seek.