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BOOK REVIEW

Jeanne Lazarus, *Les politiques de l'argent*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France/Humensis, 2022, 336 p.

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It is hardly news that national social security systems have contracted sharply over the neoliberal decades, making room for individual risk protection via the market and, as a result, increasing socioeconomic inequalities. In her book *Les politiques de l'argent*, Jeanne Lazarus builds on this well-known scenario to introduce a subtler issue: not merely addressing social security in terms of quantity but identifying a shift in its area of action. In brief, the author's thesis is as follows: if the individual needs that were previously addressed by the public actor are now to be met through the market, then the line between economic and social policies blurs. What are commonly understood as banking and financial policies must be reframed as social policies, geared toward ensuring individual participation in markets, thereby making the financial space accessible for households. This approach aligns the citizens' need to protect themselves privately with both the new economic policies supporting consumption through debt, and the interests of financial actors.

The perspective adopted thus allows for a novel interpretation of the relationship between households and finance that, in line with the approach of social studies on *oikonomization*, mobilizes different levels of analysis to delve into how "the financial economies of households, the practices and instruments of commercial organizations, and the policies oriented to incentivize and regulate financial behaviour, are connected" (Ossandón, Deville, Lazarus, and Luzzi 2022, 1474). Lazarus's focus is on the household money policies, that is, the institutional environment that shapes monetary practices: what individuals can do with their money and what they actually do. Such policies, as well as the financial devices they implement, are far from being considered top-down processes; rather they are observed in their bottom-up evolution, investigating how they are socially constructed based on the interests of the actors in the field, the relationships existing between them and their evolving power structures.

It is from this point of view that the book explores, through a multi-sited empirical approach, various money policies.

The first two chapters address banking inclusion and how it has changed over time. First, Lazarus proposes a long-term reconstruction of the banking inclusion of the French population – but a similar argument could be made for all coordinated market economies – as a building block in the construction of a middle-class society. During the Glorious Thirties, there was strict public control over the banking system: banks were considered a public service and were conceived as institutions of social as well as economic integration, *à la* Durkheim. With the advent of privatization in the 1980s, the nature of banking changed profoundly. Thus, tensions emerge within the banking space between private financial institutions that claim the right to act exclusively according to market logic and the public actor calling on them to also pursue objectives of economic and social inclusion. These frictions, along with the difficult search for a balance between seemingly irreconcilable positions, are made visible by Lazarus through an analysis of legislative provisions, and the corresponding parliamentary debates, around the individual's right to have a bank account. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s laws enshrined the prohibition on banks from refusing to open a basic checking account, regardless of the applicant's situation, thus dealing with the risk of access exclusion, since the 2000s the focus has been on the service fees, possibly introducing a price cap, to tackle the risk of cost exclusion. The shift reflects the evolution in the meaning of financial inclusion over time and the role played by different stakeholders in shaping this inclusion to protect their interests, as shown in the second chapter.

Taking the issue of the right to a bank account as a starting point, the second chapter focuses on the process of institutionalizing banking inclusion as a tool to combat poverty and thus, implicitly, as a prerequisite for social inclusion. As Lazarus points out, this reframing again urges the relationship between the economic and social spheres. On the one hand, the recognition of the social function of banking implies the need for public regulation of banking services to protect the most fragile users. For the poorest, the need to deal with banks on market terms for the satisfaction of basic needs exposes them to neoliberal forms of value extraction that could destabilize their precarious condition. On the other hand, financial actors want to curb excessive public interference, which limits their business orientation. The mobilization against banking exclusion, which took hold beginning in the 1990s thanks to the lobbying efforts of various anti-poverty bodies, resulted in the new banking practices established jointly by public institutions, banks and third-sector associations. The reconstruction proposed by the author shows that what might appear to be a fruitful form of collaboration actually reveals the strategic ability of financial institutions that, in participating in the process of co-designing new policies, achieve a twofold goal. First, they contribute decisively to establishing a common understanding of poverty in which banks are represented not as part of the problem but as a possible solution. Financial actors are thus discharged of their responsibilities: as Lazarus puts it, we are witnessing "a de-financialization of the problems raised by the promoters of bank exclusion" (86). Second, financial institutions succeed in circumscribing public intervention to fragile users only, thus avoiding the imposition of price caps on financial products and services offered to the totality of customers. There is thus a dualization of the banking space, which leaves ample room for market regulation favorable to financial institutions. The micro-analysis of the institutional contexts in which these orientations take hold highlights the weakness of the public actor, which proves to be effectively incapable of governing the process, but also the mutual advantage gained by the actors in the field. While the banks protect their business, the public actor enacts pragmatic policies, which do not call into question the structural aspects of exclusion such as transformations in the labor market and production models. The third sector associations, for their part, gain legitimacy by getting involved in the processes of assisting fragile users.

The issue of policies designed to include the poor is particularly salient in relation to the issue of credit, which is addressed in the third chapter. In an era of privatized Keynesianism (Crouch 2009), in which access to credit becomes an instrument of social protection to deal with the scarcity of resources, is it appropriate to limit debt opportunities for those who would need it most, or should they be supported in accessing the credit market? To examine this dilemma, Lazarus proposes an analysis of French credit policies by distinguishing three types: i) defensive policies, which limit debt opportunities for those in fragile conditions; ii) reparative policies, which help ex-post those who are over-indebted; and iii) incentive policies, which promote and simplify access to credit for all. Through a periodization into four phases – the Glorious Thirties; the season of liberalization in the 1980s; the phase of financialization of the economy and flexibilization of the labor market in the 1990s and early 2000s; and the post-2008 crisis period – the author shows how policies with seemingly conflicting objectives have combined over time to contribute to a progressive institutionalization of credit. The affirmation of the aforementioned public narrative that removes the structural causes of poverty by focusing on individual responsibility is instrumental in the recognition of credit as a form of intervention that is conceived as both social, to combat poverty, and economic, to support domestic consumption. If fragility can be traced back to the behaviors of individuals, the encouragement of credit does not need to be questioned. Rather, it is considered appropriate, on the one hand, to segment the financial market, namely by distinguishing between a minority of excludables and a large majority of includables; and, on the other hand, to act on the transformation of individual behaviors, through tools such as financial literacy and accompanying budgeting practices, to which the last two chapters of the book are devoted.

In the fourth chapter, the topic of financial literacy is first framed theoretically, as an area of public action, and then explored empirically through the analysis of specific initiatives that have taken place in France in recent years. The multidimensional nature of the concept of financial literacy promoted by the OECD, which refers to both individual knowledge and behavior,[1] is reflected in the variety of pedagogical tools used. Indeed, the educational programs are intended not only to inform but to make participants aware of their *detrimental* practices and to show them changes they can make in their daily lives, thus implicitly conveying a precise value order on how money should be used. In other words, these programs show up as strongly focused on empowering people and their autonomy of choice, in accordance with the current shift toward individuals: if economic distress depends on individual choices, transforming behavior is both appropriate and sufficient to solve problems. Lazarus notes how this approach seems to completely ignore the fact that, very often, the root of the difficulties is growing economic and labor market uncertainty. Paradoxically, the proposed solutions – prioritization, long-term planning, saving to cope with the unexpected – implicitly assume a now outdated stability typical of the Fordist middle class. Financial education programs also contribute to the aforementioned redefinition of the role of banking institutions toward the economic crisis: it is often the financial institutions themselves that promote these initiatives and/or participate as experts. In this regard, the mantra by the representative of a financial education organization of banking origin exemplifies this idea of assumed neutrality: “To learn how to make bread, you go to the baker; to learn about money, you go to banking institutions” (218, my translation).[2]

Finally, the fifth chapter analyzes the Points Conseil Budget (PCB), an accompanying budget policy that, although limited in scope, condenses many of the features that have already emerged in other interventions: the focus on individual behavior; the co-participation of public, private and third-sector actors, who legitimize each other, with a leading role occupied by banks; and the segmentation of citizens according to their ability to cope with financial exposure. PCBs, in particular, are distinguished from other policies because they target

[1] The OECD International Network on Financial Education defines financial literacy as follows: “A combination of awareness, knowledge, skill, attitude and behaviour necessary to make sound financial decisions and ultimately achieve individual financial wellbeing” (OECD INFE 2011, 3).
[2] “Pour apprendre à faire du pain, on va chez le boulanger; pour apprendre l'argent, on va vers les institutions bancaires” (218).

a specific audience: the *Missing middle*, following Theda Skocpol's (2000) definition recalled by Lazarus. These are the impoverished middle classes, who have lost their previous stability but are excluded from the social protection intended for the poorest. In any case, such forms of social protection, as they are designed today, would be restrictive for a segment of the population that, despite its difficulties, resists being perceived as in need of assistance and does not intend to lose its decision-making autonomy. PCBs thus aim to support the middle classes who can no longer meet their debts incurred, while protecting them from the welfare stigma, which they perceive as shameful. It is actually a market solution: budgetary support is initiated and financed by credit banks, whose ultimate goal is to avoid the over-indebtedness procedure that could lead to debt cancellation.

The argumentation pattern provided by Jeanne Lazarus is suggestive and compelling, even if it includes financial phenomena of very different scales and effects, which reflect the research objects that she has studied over the years (on the one hand, an extremely articulated process such as banking inclusion, which lasts decades, involves innumerable actors and is articulated in multiple legislative provisions; on the other, the PCBs, a precise policy dealing with a few tens of thousands of people). Nonetheless, the unifying interpretation stated in the conclusions is convincing: all these phenomena can be seen as pieces for overcoming the opposition between the state and the market, on the one hand, and the class antagonism on the other (296). Individualization and segmentation of citizens-customers are thus the strategies implemented by mutual agreement by different collective actors to provide a new public construction of the problems that they cannot – or do not want to – deal with.

Given this fascinating interpretation, in the opinion of this writer the book shows three main shortcomings. First, in Lazarus's work – as well as in the work of authors with an approach similar to hers – a dialogue with the main approaches of sociology of finance and contemporary economic sociology[3] is almost completely absent. This is not simply to acknowledge an intellectual debt, but to confirm the full maturity of an academic movement, developed within Science and Technology Studies (STS), which has over time abandoned the "anti-social" posture according to which social and cultural factors have no explanatory power (cf. Ossandón 2022). The path is the one laid out by Daniel Beunza (2019), who in his book *Taking the Floor: Models, Morals, and Management in a Wall Street Trading Room* returns to the analysis of the materiality of financial markets conducted some 20 years earlier to investigate how market devices interact with the moral values of traders, contributing to its social construction. Similarly, Lazarus and colleagues integrate the focus on market devices in guiding financial practices, inherited from the social studies of finance (Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007), and the attention to normative and socio-institutional dimensions that characterizes contemporary economic sociology (cf. Ossandón, Deville, Lazarus, and Luzzi 2022). Put another way, it could be said that the social embeddedness initially postulated by Granovetter (1973; 2018), which allows better focusing on the intricate relational interweaving between actors with partially different interests, and later made multidimensional by sociological neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Powell and DiMaggio 2012), reaches a further degree of complexification by integrating economic and financial instruments within it. Even if this interpretation may not be shared by scholars who identify with the social studies of finance, in the writer's opinion the social studies on oikonomization would benefit from a greater confrontation with sociological neo-institutionalism in particular. "The field of household money [which] has recently solidified as a space for public action" (15, my translation)[4] described by Lazarus closely resembles the neo-institutionalist concept of organizational field, populated by relevant actors defining a common language (34) and based, we could add,

[3] On the relationship between economic sociology and the sociology of finance, see the different positions by Carruthers and Kim (2011) and Knorr Cetina (2007).
[4] "Le champ de l'argent des ménages [qui] s'est récemment solidifié comme un espace d'action publique" (15).

on shared interpretative schemes. Two aspects of the neo-institutionalist approach seem particularly fruitful here. They are its: i) emphasis on the cognitive, cultural and political dimension of institutions, that is, the role of prevailing interpretative models in guiding action within organizations (Zukin and DiMaggio 1990); in our specific case meaning that household money policies can be seen as one of the areas where different institutions struggle either to establish new cultural frames or to maintain existing ones; and ii) seeing the organizational field as a context of mutual constraints and influences: inside the field, although there are actors with greater power, it is not possible to clearly distinguish between the institutions exerting pressure to change and those that are pressured, since the interaction within the field is reciprocal and leads to a change for all the actors involved. What is more, this ongoing overall change favors the process of mutual legitimation rather than jeopardization of the organizations at stake (Meyer and Rowan 1977). In Lazarus's research, the relationship between the public actor, banking and financial institutions and third-sector organizations works precisely in this way.

In this regard, a second lack in the author’s analysis of how household money policies took shape concerns the little space devoted to radically conflicting actors and dynamics. Some initially opposing phases between the public, private and third sectors are reported before the affirmation of a shared public narrative on risk protection and individual participation in markets, functional to the interests of the actors involved. But there is no trace of the critique that occurs on the systemic edge, where maximalist players – from the *99% movement* to the *gilets jaunes* – raise foundational issues on how the market society works. Strategies of delimitation, incorporation and displacement are all the more needed for this kind of critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999), and observing them in action would have been thought-provoking. All in all, the storytelling of household money policies made by Lazarus appears non-confrontational and reassuring in its coherence; however, more space for radically conflicting processes, far from weakening it, would instead have enriched it.

The reference to the systemic edge obviously recalls the work of Saskia Sassen, which is the last major shortcoming of the book. The analysis of segmentation practices between a majority of those included in the financial logic of the market, and a minority of those excluded – passively, because they lack the means for neoliberal inclusion; or actively, as a form of public protection – would greatly benefit from a dialogue with the *expulsion frame* developed by Sassen, according to which “the move from Keynesianism to the global era of privatizations, deregulation, and open borders for some, entailed a switch from dynamics that brought people in to dynamics that push people out” (Sassen 2014, 211). However, this switch from incorporation to expulsion examined by Sassen does not always draw clear boundaries; instead, it gives rise to blurred margins where the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy struggles to take shape. This is just like the plight of the impoverished middle class highlighted by Lazarus, where a collective identity based on inclusion collides with the new material status and fear of the welfare stigma (267).

Despite these remarks, *Les politiques de l’argent* by Jeanne Lazarus can only be recommended. This book is a fundamental piece of the research program of social studies on *oikonomization* which constitutes one of the most stimulating contemporary approaches to finance and financialization. The focus on everyday domestic practices, which derives from social studies of finance and the anthropology of finance (Ossandón, Ariztía, Barros, and Peralta 2018), is combined here with the investigation of financial government and administration of the household through policies, within a multilevel analytical framework that sheds light on elements often ignored by other studies on financialization (Langley 2008; Pellandini-Simànyi, Hammer, and Vargha 2015).

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