



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer, Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz  
(eds), Power and influence of economists: contributions to the social  
studies of economics**

Christensen, J.

**Citation**

Christensen, J. (2022). Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer, Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz (eds), Power and influence of economists: contributions to the social studies of economics. *Oeconomia*, 12(2), 325-329. doi:10.4000/oeconomia.12534

Version: Accepted Manuscript

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3562744>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **Œconomia**

History, Methodology, Philosophy

12-2 | 2022

Women, Economics and History

---

### Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer, Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz (eds), *Power and Influence of Economists: Contributions to the Social Studies of Economics*

Johan Christensen

---



#### **Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/oeconomia/12534>

ISSN: 2269-8450

#### **Publisher**

Association Œconomia

#### **Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 June 2022

Number of pages: 0-0

ISSN: 2113-5207

---

This text was automatically generated on 30 September 2022.

---

Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer,  
Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz  
(eds), *Power and Influence of  
Economists: Contributions to the Social  
Studies of Economics*

Johan Christensen

---

## REFERENCES

Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer, Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz (eds), *Power and Influence of Economists: Contributions to the Social Studies of Economics*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, 276 pages, 978-036741984-4

1 Few academic disciplines receive so much unsolicited attention from their neighboring disciplines as economics. In recent decades, the influence of economists in contemporary society and politics has become somewhat of an obsession for sociologists, political scientists and historians. And rightly so: although economists themselves often complain that decision-makers fail to listen to sound economic reasoning, a wide array of studies highlight the outsize power of economists over ideas, institutions and policies.



## POWER AND INFLUENCE OF ECONOMISTS

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIAL STUDIES  
OF ECONOMICS

Edited by  
Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer,  
Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz



- 2 The edited volume by Jens Maesse, Stephan Pühringer, Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz builds further on this literature, examining in depth the structure and societal impact of the economics community across different geographical settings. The main argument of the book is that economists exert power over societies in manifold ways, whether through economic discourses, economic models and tools, scientific authority and prestige or strategic positions as advisers within national governments and international organizations. The multi-faceted influence of economists is partly a function of the peculiar structure of the economics profession. The discipline is characterized by strong internationalization, uniform knowledge and a strict status hierarchy, as well as privileged access to policy-making fora, high visibility in media and public debate and close ties to government and business elites. By closely analyzing the role of economists in society, the book aims to contribute to the developing field of 'social studies of economics' (SSE).
- 3 The book is divided into four main parts: The first two parts deal with economic expert discourses and economic governmentalities, inspired primarily by the work of Michel Foucault. The chapters in these parts are either predominantly theoretical or draw on critical discourse analysis and historical perspectives to analyze the diffuse power of economics over society. The last two parts of the book focus on the social structure and networks of the economics field—nationally, internationally and transnationally. In these chapters, the theoretical inspiration shifts from Foucault to Fourcade (Marion Fourcade, the leading contemporary sociological analyst of the economics profession), and the approach is more empirical: the authors conduct detailed mappings of the economics field based on biographical and bibliometric data and social network analysis. My review will mainly focus on this second part of the volume, which lies the closest to my own research interests and expertise.
- 4 The main theoretical arguments put forward in the different chapters are familiar and stick rather closely to the understandings developed by leading scholars in the field. For instance, regarding the international interactions within the economics discipline, the work of scholars like Fourcade (2006) and Dezalay and Garth (2002) looms large. The book thus adds incrementally to existing research lines rather than proposing

something radically new. This is understandable given the excellent existing work on the topic. Yet, some novel arguments and more critical engagement with the seminal contributions in the field would have been refreshing. Considering the amount of critical attention aimed at economists in the book, surely some criticism could have been directed inwards, too.

- 5 Instead, the novel contribution of the volume lies mainly in the rich empirical data it presents on the structure of the economics field. Several chapters creatively combine biographical and bibliometric data from a variety of sources to paint a fine-grained picture of economists' careers, scientific production, institutional affiliations, political leanings and involvement in policy-making, as well as of their links to each other and ties to other societal elites. For instance, Stephan Pühringer and Karl M. Beyer analyze the features of the economists Germany listens to, whereas Thierry Rossier and Pierre Benz map out the field of Swiss economics professors. Philipp Korom examines the career trajectories of an even more select group of even more select economists, namely winners of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Taken together, these studies yield interesting comparative insights. For instance, it turns out that the path to a Nobel Prize in economics very often goes through a PhD from a top-five U.S. economics department. In Germany, by contrast, where you did your doctoral studies does not seem to matter much for becoming an influential economist. Instead, the most important German economists have other things in common, such as being affiliated with an economics research institute.
- 6 More generally, the comparative and transnational perspective taken by the book well captures the nature of economists' power. Not only are economists influential both at the national level (e.g. through the role of economics professors in public debate or the position of economists in finance ministries) and the international level (e.g. through the many economist-staffed international agencies like the IMF or the ECB). Their influence is also shaped by international and transnational linkages: domestic economists draw knowledge, models and prestige from both international economic organizations and the international academic discipline, which are crucial resources in battles for influence at the national level. The importance of the international circulation of ideas and professional power is brought out well in the chapters by Elisa Klüger on Brazil and by Johanna Gautier Morin on Mexico. But as several chapters highlight, national differences in the structure and influence of the economics discipline remain, reflecting differences in the historical development of the discipline and its relationship to politics and society.
- 7 The relationship between economic science and politics is also explored from various angles in the book. A few chapters empirically examine the tension between the scientific role of economists and their roles as public intellectuals or policy advisors, combining data on scientific production with data on media presence and positions on advisory commissions, etc. Do the same economists dominate Google Scholar and public debates, or is there a tension between academic excellence and public engagement and policy-making impact? Pühringer and Beyer directly investigate this question in their chapter on German economists. Their findings suggest a certain division of labor, with some economists dominating the research rankings and others leading on indicators of media visibility and political influence. Yet, since only the leading economists on each dimension are included in the analysis, it is difficult to say whether this negative relationship holds for the entire population of German

economists. Rossier and Benz, in their chapter on Swiss economics professors, provide a more in-depth examination of this tension between the scientific capital and ‘worldly’ capital of economists. They find that Swiss economists vary in the amount and types of capital that they possess: while some economists are primarily top scientists, others also have close links to political and economic elites through policy advisory roles and company board memberships, whereas the ‘have-nots’ of the discipline are neither particularly productive nor well connected to policy-making circles.

- 8 Yet, one analytical angle that is absent is a focus on economists and public policy-making. For a book with the word ‘influence’ in the title, the actual policy influence of economists receives remarkably little attention. This feels like a missed opportunity (or better: an opportunity for further research), given that the types of data that are creatively used to map the structure of the economics profession could also have been employed to shed light on the influence of economic experts on policy decisions. For instance, data on citations to different types of economic research and advisory reports in government policy documents could be used to measure the varying influence of economic expertise on public policies across countries and policy sectors. This would also respond to a broader need for systematic empirical research and new methodological approaches to study expert influence in policy-making, as I have argued in recent work (Christensen, 2021; 2022). Given the outsize power of economists, scholars analyzing the economics discipline ought to be at the forefront of expert influence studies.
- 9 But my perhaps most fundamental criticism of the book concerns its exclusive focus on economists and its ambition to demarcate a distinct sub-field of sociological studies of the economics discipline (SSE). First of all, academic studies of experts and their power are already highly fragmented, with a broad array of parallel literatures in different sub-fields of political science and sociology that employ different concepts to study the same phenomena (Christensen, 2021). This book also falls into this trap: it raises issues that are not exclusive to economists, but makes few connections to other relevant literatures on expertise and policy-making. Just to take one example, questions about the scientific versus policy-making roles of academics have received ample attention in literatures on evidence-based policy-making and in science and technology studies (e.g. Pielke, 2003; Parkhurst, 2017). Instead of creating ever-narrower silos, I believe greater inter-disciplinary dialogue is needed.
- 10 Second, the many analyses of the structure and role of the economics discipline leave the reader wondering about what the picture looks like in other disciplines. Economics is rarely the only science in town; economists compete for scientific status, media visibility and policy-making influence with legal experts, political scientists, sociologists and others. And the status and influence of these disciplines varies across countries and over time. More explicit comparisons of economics and other academic fields could have sharpened the analysis of what is specific about economists and their societal and political role (for a good example of such as an approach, see Fourcade et al., 2015). It would also help temper some of the claims made about economists in the book. For instance, there is frequent reference to the political biases of economists. For instance, Rossier and Benz highlight “the importance of ideology and political orientation in guiding economists’ preferences for research specialisations and methodologies” (227). This is probably true. But it is probably also true for other social scientists, including for sociologists who study the economics discipline.

- 11 Related to this, some more critical self-reflection would have strengthened the book. The book is at its best when it presents clear-eyed analyses of the economics field drawing on rich empirical data. But at times it comes across as one-sided in its manifold and not always substantiated criticisms of the discipline. Confronting these claims more actively with competing voices and perspectives could have made it an even more interesting volume.
- 

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Christensen, Johan. 2021. Expert Knowledge and Policymaking: a Multi-Disciplinary Research Agenda. *Policy & Politics*, 49(3): 455-471.
- Christensen, Johan. 2022. Studying Expert Influence: a Methodological Agenda. *West European Politics* (forthcoming).
- Dezalay, Yves and Bryant G. Garth. 2002. *The Internationalization of Palace Wars. Lawyer, Economists, and the Contest to Transform Latin American States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fourcade, Marion. 2006. The Construction of a Global Profession: The Transnationalization of Economics. *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(1): 145-194.
- Fourcade, Marion Etienne Ollion and Yan Algan. 2015. The Superiority of Economists. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 29(1): 89-114.
- Parkhurst, Justin. 2017. *The Politics of Evidence: from Evidence-based Policy to the Good Governance of Evidence*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pielke Jr, Roger A. 2007. *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## AUTHORS

### JOHAN CHRISTENSEN

Leiden University, Institute of Public Administration. [j.christensen@fgga.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:j.christensen@fgga.leidenuniv.nl)