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Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy

Viviana A. Zelizer
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Edward Hopper started his well-known painting *Nighthawks* with a sketch. Seated at a restaurant counter are a man and woman, looking at each other, about to speak. When he transferred them to canvas, Hopper made a change—in the painting the man looks straight ahead, the woman stares at something in her hand. What was Hopper trying to convey—isolation or comfortable quiet?

"One might think that any sort of social interaction vanishes in the world of fast foods," says Viviana Zelizer, a professor of sociology at Princeton University, in *Economic Lives.* At first glance, financial institutions appear even more impersonal. In *Psmith in the City,* P. G. Wodehouse declares: "Most people look on the cashier of a bank as a sort of human slot-machine. You put in your cheque, and out comes money. It is no affair of yours whether life is treating the machine well or ill that day." Yet, when the cashier in the story faces dismissal, a colleague puts his own job on the line by interceding for him.

As in the above story, Zelizer believes cultural values undergird all economic activity, and cites many examples that blend interesting anecdotes with scholarly insight. For one, she traces the birth of the life insurance industry. Although they initially resisted the valuation of life in terms of money, Americans came to see life insurance as a "protective shield" that provides financial security to children and started including it among the duties of a "good and responsible father."

Zelizer challenges the notion that commerce and social relations are clashing worlds that are best kept apart. In fact, she argues, people quite naturally find ways to combine the two. Child psychiatrist Robert Coles once showed slides of Hopper's paintings to elementary school students, many of whom perceived loneliness in Hopper's characters. One girl, however, said the customers in *Nighthawk*s made her think of her mother, who worked the night shift at a doughnut shop. "She says she has a good time talking with some of the people, and they have a good time talking with her."

Another example is Robin Leidner's study of service routines at a McDonald's restaurant. Although workers are expected to adhere strictly to a customer service script, they manage to personalize exchanges and establish ongoing ties with regular customers.

As a compilation of three decades of Zelizer's contributions to economic sociology, the book will help economists and sociologists see how the discipline has evolved over the years. For other readers, the book is a fascinating introduction to the subject.

KARUNESH TULI (October 16, 2010)

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