

Material Markets

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Browsing in the British Library I came across this [book](#), right next to Danny Miller's *The Comfort of Things* (2008).

D. Mackenzie's *Material Markets: How Economic Agents are Constructed* explores the nature of hedge funds, derivative markets, asking how abstract economic principles are brought into being and taking the assumption, drawn from STS studies, of the materiality of markets, "their physicality, corporeality, technicality" as a basic starting point (p.2). Taking this emphasis on materiality allows Mackenzie and his collaborators to inject an ethnographically inflected understanding of human agency into the economics of the finance industries: rather than disembodied agents or abstract information processors economic agents are "embodied human beings, and bodies are material entities." (p.3). The study positions people, the technology that they work with, and the abstract ideas that guide them as equal partners in forming the analysis.

Mackenzie outlines ten precepts for the social study of finance, which guide his method and which are useful to abstract for any ethnographic study of modern bureaucracy:

1. Facts Matter;
2. Actors are embodied;
3. Equipment matters;
4. Cognition and Calculation are distributed and Material;
5. Actors are Agencements (a clunky notion drawn from Deleuze, and Callon which delineates the complex material-social nexus that makes up an social actor, here in the field of economics);
6. Classification and Rule Following are Finitist Processes;
7. Economics Does Things;
7. Innovation isn't Linear;
8. Market Design is a Political Matter;
10. Scales aren't stable.

I confess to not reading the entire volume, but enjoying what I did read (the intro and the chapter on derivatives). the chapters are short, they aren't what you might call ethnographic or anthropological, in that they provide summaries and overviews, but are clear and cogent in making this world accessible in a broad sociological framework. The material perspective could be followed up a little more, the focus is much more on the people and discourses than on a real scrutiny on equipment and technology.

Subsequent chapters examine the assemblage of economic actors in hedge funds, the production of virtuality in derivatives markets, the material sociology of arbitrage, the process of measuring profit, and the process of constructing emissions markets..

It's a good introduction to the working of financial markets and good methodological model for translating STS and Anthropological critiques of economics and finance into a workable perspective...In a similar frame to Olag Velthuis's work on the symbolic construction of price in [art markets](#)