
**Imagined Theory: On Jens Beckert’s Conceptualization of Capitalism**

*Imagined Futures* is the new book by the economic sociologist Jens Beckert. The book’s subject is suitably captured in the subtitle, *Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*, and its central thesis is easy to summarize: people’s fictional expectations about the future substantively shape capitalist dynamics in the present, and therefore to understand those dynamics we need to understand the expectations that shape them.

The book is organized into three parts, bookended by relatively meaty introductory and concluding chapters. Part I, “Decision-Making in an Uncertain World”, sets up the book theoretically and in relation to existing literatures. Beckert takes issue here with the ways in which the three disciplines he considers most relevant to the analysis of capitalist dynamics have dealt with economic actors’ orientations to the future. The first two are political science—which, in a move that will surprise many readers of this journal, Beckert identifies as the exclusive home of “political economy”—and sociology. Beckert argues that these two, with notable exceptions (such as Weber and Bourdieu in sociology), have seriously underplayed the importance of the future and of people’s future expectations when trying to understand capitalism. The third discipline is economics. Economics does, of course, explicitly factor agents’ expectations into its models of economic dynamics, but, for Beckert, it does so problematically, not least in the form of rational expectations theory. Although he admits that some economists have advanced more credible understandings of actors’ expectations and of how these influence capitalism—such as Keynes, to whom we will return below—Beckert argues that we nonetheless need a different, sociological, concept: his concept of “fictional expectations”. Chapter 4, the last in Part I, fleshes this concept out,
identifying parallels and differences between economic and literary fictions. Given the inherent uncertainty attached to the future, people’s expectations of it cannot be probabilistic assessments but are instead, Beckert submits, “interpretative frames that structure situations through imaginaries” (p.9). These imaginaries are fictional in the sense not of being false but of being contingent; they are social because “shaped by collective beliefs formed through communicative practices” (p.13); and they impact capitalist dynamics insofar as they motivate economic decisions and coordinate economic action.

Part II, “Building Blocks of Capitalism”, the main body of the book, explores how these fictional expectations help shape outcomes in four different contexts: money and credit (Chapter 5); investment, including financial investment (Chapter 6); innovation processes (Chapter 7); and consumption (Chapter 8). Part III, “Instruments of Imagination”, then contains two chapters looking at influential instruments involved in generating fictional expectations in the first place: economic forecasting (Chapter 9) and economic theories and models (Chapter 10).

The book makes for interesting reading, and is extremely clearly written. But the main problem with it is that its core thesis, concerning the importance to capitalist dynamics in the present of broadly “fictional” expectations of what the future portends, is not new (which would be much less of a problem if the author didn’t make the strong claims for originality that he does). It is not remotely new. It is has been a core axiom of large parts of heterodox economics—a tradition to which Beckert gives notably short shrift—and of not-insignificant parts of orthodox economics for goodness knows how long. And the proof is actually in the pudding: in the fact that to demonstrate in the four chapters of Part II the significance of fictional expectations in shaping economic dynamics, Beckert draws primarily throughout not on primary research but on existing secondary literatures that demonstrate, well, the significance of fictional expectations in shaping economic dynamics.
It is no wonder, then, that Beckert’s conclusion to the book is an underwhelming one; given he is treading established ground, it could scarcely be otherwise. His aim in the conclusion is, he says, to review the book’s findings with a view to their “implications for a theory of capitalist modernity” (p.17). Which sounds promising. But what this ultimately boils down to is an objection to Weber’s figuring of capitalist development as a process of rationalization and disenchantment, on the grounds that, as the influence of fictional expectations shows, “capitalist dynamics are still partly animated by nonrational beliefs” (ibid.). Well, of course they are. This fact, and the deconstruction of Weber’s stylized trajectory that its recognition necessitates, is old news. Consider for example the aforementioned, and far from contemporary, Keynes. Keynes, just like Beckert, saw the future as “only minimally predictable”, appreciating that “actors base their decisions on emotions”, and he formulated his (emphatically non-Weberian) theory of capitalist dynamics accordingly. And don’t just take my word for it: these snapshots of Keynesian thinking are quotations from Beckert (pp.45-46) himself.

To be sure, there is value in drawing together, as Beckert does, various extant strands of research on the significance of people’s imagined futures to economic developments. Identifying links and common patterns is an important contribution.

Beckert suggests that in doing this work of pulling-together, we end up with a whole that is considerably greater than the sum of the parts (those parts being primarily the four chapters of Part II): no less than “a theory of capitalist dynamics” (p.9). But I don’t really think that we do. For one thing, a theory of capitalist dynamics surely requires theorization of more than just future expectations; capitalism’s complex dynamics can hardly be reduced to these, however material they may be. And for another thing, the parts from which Beckert attempts to assemble his expectations-based whole are selective and have big, important gaps between them. In justifying his fourfold focus on money and credit, investment, innovation
processes, and consumption, Beckert variously refers to these as “what are considered to be four building blocks of capitalist economies” (p.15)–considered by who?–and as “the main buttresses of the capitalist economy” (p.271). But are they? Some might consider the relation between capital and labour to be a pretty important buttress of the capitalist economy. And what about markets, the process of exchange? What about the state? These must surely feature centrally in any theory of capitalist dynamics, even one centred on fictional expectations.

Relatedly, and perhaps most problematically of all, there is an altogether too marginal role in Beckert’s account for questions of power, which represents a rather important weakness in an alleged inquiry into “capitalist dynamics”. Beckert certainly recognizes that power relations are important to his subject matter, for instance “in the creation and influencing of expectations” (p.12): to one extent or another people’s expectations are inevitably “framed by powerful actors” (p.13). Yet the book as a whole offers scant consideration of whose expectations most materially power capitalist dynamics, or of where this power comes from. And while it may be true that the “deliberate influencing of expectations is a key feature in all the empirical realms discussed in this book” (p.276), Beckert does not actually demonstrate this. His discussion of expectation-influencing is shoehorned into sub-sections titled “The Politics of Expectations” in each of the four chapters of Part II; but, contributing only a combined eight pages out of Part II’s total of 118, and hanging precariously towards the end of each chapter, these sub-sections have all the appearance of an afterthought. Save an acknowledgement that money expresses a relation of power (pp.112-113)–an acknowledgement followed by a discussion of central-bank rhetoric that says nothing about the remarkable power of central banks–and brief discussions (e.g. at pp.122, 158) of the power of private financial investors, power is a shadowy absence in the
book, one whose lack of consideration is especially egregious given the author’s insistence that this is a sociological account of expectations.

In sum, this is a good book, but with an important lacuna—concerning power relations—and without anything like the originality or theoretical weight that Beckert imputes to it. Beckert opens the book by boldly comparing it to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, presumably in the belief that it is similarly path-breaking, and the hope that it will be similarly influential. The former is inaccurate, the latter, I suspect, unlikely.

_Brett Christophers_

*Department of Social and Economic Geography*

_Uppsala University*

*brett.christophers@kultgeog.uu.se*

_August 2016_