Enchanting Fields: Collective Events and Emotion as Value-Amplifiers during Field Emergence and Institutionalization

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Abstract

Recent research has shown that emerging economic fields, and their associated products, practices and organizational forms, often resemble social movements. Championing new and unrecognizable ventures is a risky business that deters opportunists—leaving social movement organizations and socially and politically motivated field pioneers to mobilize support for field formation. However, once social and material support for the new field is established, the draw of legitimacy and more certain profits pulls opportunists into the field. These new entrants prioritize instrumental goals such as economic efficiency over value-rational goals associated with the early, movement-like field: the field becomes “disenchanted” as it is legitimated and marketized. Applying this theory of institutionalization to the maker movement, an education and open-source technology movement that has fueled a nascent field, we find that disenchantment—the trade-off of value rationality for instrumental-rationality—is not a foregone conclusion in an institutionalizing field. Rather, organizations can use collective events to foster emotion, which in turn serves to maintain and augment the field’s value rationality even as the field becomes institutionalized and marketized. This study identifies an emotional mechanism through which markets and organizations can sustain and recharge their values, providing conditions under which value rationality and instrumental-rationality in a field are compatible.