



**Media Review: Competition: What It Is and Why It Happens**

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| Journal:         | <i>Organization Studies</i>                       |
| Manuscript ID    | OS-22-0934.R3                                     |
| Manuscript Type: | Media Review                                      |
| Keywords:        | competition, social constructivism, social theory |
| Abstract:        |   |
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Manuscripts

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3 **Stefan Arora-Jonsson, Nils Brunsson, Raimund Hasse, and Katarina Lagerström (Eds.)**

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6 **Competition: What It Is and Why It Happens**

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9 Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021

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11 **Reviewed by:** Jelena Brankovic, *Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany*

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17 It is generally understood that, of all the social science disciplines, competition is the most at home  
18 in economics. No other discipline has been so profoundly shaped by a continuous interest in  
19 competition as the economic discipline has been over the course of its history. But saying that  
20 competition is exclusively an economic phenomenon, or that other disciplines have ignored it, would  
21 be incorrect. Even a cursory glance at the history of sociology is enough to see how competition has  
22 been central in some of its most influential works, from Simmel's triads, via Wallerstein's world  
23 systems, Hannan and Freeman's population ecology, Bourdieu's fields, to Podolny's status-based  
24 models, and beyond. A similar observation can be made about political science, whereby a  
25 sensitivity to competitive dynamics has long informed the discipline's interest in political parties,  
26 voting behavior, world politics, and of course power. Anthropology, with its sustained interest in, for  
27 example, romantic relationships and prestige economy, is another case in point. The list could go on.

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37 Over the past decade, the calls to extend the study of competition beyond the economic realm could  
38 have been heard from across the social sciences. In one recent example, Altreiter and colleagues  
39 (2020) explicitly challenge the dominant economic understandings of competition and propose an  
40 interdisciplinary framework for theorizing it. In another, Thorbjørnsen (2019) embarks on an  
41 anthropological investigation into the idea of competition and its consequences for humanity.  
42 Among the works bringing together multiple contributions, the edited volume by Stark (2020) should  
43 not go unmentioned. Armed with a variety of disciplinary perspectives, Stark and colleagues look at  
44 competition as inseparable from 'the performance complex'—which has become pervasive in  
45 modern society. Finally, a highly valuable collection of empirical and conceptual contributions can be  
46 found in the special issue on the sociology of competition, edited by Hartmann and Kjaer (2015) and  
47 published in *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*. Each one of these works has, more and less  
48 explicitly, grappled with the question: What *is* competition?

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58 It is in this context that the book *Competition: What It Is and Why It Happens*, edited by Arora-  
59 Jonsson, Brunsson, Hasse, and Lagerström, arrives. The book opens with a chapter by Arora-Jonsson,

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3 Brunsson, and Hasse, in which they set out to offer their own conceptualization of competition.  
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5 They, too, draw attention to the importance of considering competition beyond markets and beyond  
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7 arguably narrow economic understandings. But they go even further and set an ambitious task for  
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9 themselves: they propose, as the title of the opening chapter suggests, ‘a new understanding of  
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11 competition’. The extent of the literature referred to in the introduction, not least considering the  
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13 bibliography that exceeds 130 titles, suggests that the task has been approached very seriously.  
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15 Arora-Jonsson, Brunsson, and Hasse examine key contributions on competition so far, in which they  
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17 pay particular attention to those offered by economists, management scholars, and sociologists. Yet  
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19 none of these, the authors argue, satisfy on their own. They all have shortcomings: a parochial focus  
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21 on markets, a lack of interest in the origins of competition, taking competition for granted, and ‘a  
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23 narrow and often unclear conceptualization of competition’ (p. 12).

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25 What is the new understanding of competition that Arora-Jonsson, Brunsson, and Hasse propose?  
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27 Competition, they write, is ‘*a social construction that comprises four core elements: actors, their*  
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29 *relationships, desire, and scarcity*’ (p. 1, italics in original). Each element is duly explained (Chapters 1  
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31 and 4), although the reader may note that the authors do not disclose the underlying logic, theory,  
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33 or social mechanism that binds these elements together. The choice of elements may thus strike one  
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35 as somewhat arbitrary, though this could be interpreted as a strategy to accommodate the  
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37 interdisciplinary make-up of the book. The four constitutive elements are further complemented by  
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39 a suggestion to extend Simmel’s classic triadic model to include a ‘fourth party’. Arora-Jonsson,  
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41 Brunsson, and Hasse clarify this by saying that Simmel’s third parties adjudicate the competition,  
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43 while their fourth parties ‘contribute to the establishment and maintenance of the construction of a  
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45 situation as competition’ (p. 15). It remains unclear, nevertheless, how fourth parties are distinct or  
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47 independent from third parties, conceptually and especially empirically. The authors are certainly  
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49 correct when they assert that regulators, contest organizers, rankers, and others have not been  
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51 given much attention in the literature on competition so far. These and other conceptual  
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53 considerations contained in the book invite the reader to ponder these issues more deeply and more  
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55 seriously—which is one of the book’s significant strengths.

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57 Empirical contributions to the volume are a real treat. Most authors come from organization,  
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59 business, and management studies. Scholars from anthropology, education studies, philosophy, and  
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sociology further enrich the collection’s variety of perspectives. Reading through the chapters, we  
see how the authors creatively draw on the conceptual framework proposed by Arora-Jonsson and  
colleagues, while not always committing to each and every one of its elements. They bring on board  
a plethora of additional interesting and generative perspectives and ideas, which help them ask

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3 critical questions about various aspects of competition. Each chapter brings up a specific angle and  
4 adds a flavor to the overall discussion. Dissonant tones are not rare, and authors sometimes even  
5 espouse contrasting views about what constitutes competition and how competition matters. There  
6 seems to be a great deal of probing, exploration, playfulness even, which makes the book overall a  
7 very enjoyable reading.  
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12 Although Arora-Jonsson, Brunsson, and Hasse stress that they see competition, first and foremost,  
13 as a *social construction*, it is quite a challenge to determine where the book as a whole and even  
14 some of its chapters stand on the question of whether competition is an emergent feature of the  
15 social environment—a *fait social* as Émile Durkheim would have it—or something that can be  
16 reduced to actors, their interests, and behavior. Their decision to make *desire*— which they seem to  
17 see as existing exclusively in the imaginings of actors (p. 12)—a constitutive element of competition  
18 will make this book sit uneasy with many constructivists. For, ‘desire’ not only has a positivist ring to  
19 it, but its study would also require us to look inside people’s heads or, in the absence of that  
20 possibility, create models of what ‘might’ be going on inside people’s heads. The problem is not lost  
21 on the book’s contributors. In the study that investigates how restaurants in New York City make  
22 sense of their competitive environment (Ch. 2), Sands, Cattani, Porac, and Greenberg find that  
23 restaurateurs ‘see’ their environment differently than economic models would expect them. They  
24 conclude that competition does not simply exist out there but is construed by actors themselves.  
25 Combining sociological and philosophical approaches (Ch. 13), Kohl and Sapién challenge the view  
26 that competition can be reduced to individuals and argue that competition is deeply collective and  
27 relational. The authors call for the abandonment of the ‘the holy trinity’ of competition, ontological  
28 individualism, and meritocracy, as a way to ‘strengthen the overall social fabric and make predatory  
29 competition a gentler social game’ (p. 219).  
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44 The problems of actors’ acknowledgement of competition, intentionality, and desire (and the  
45 absence thereof) animate a number of chapters. In their study on the upper secondary schools in  
46 Sweden (Ch. 5), Bomark, Edlund and Arora-Jonsson find that the introduction of competition  
47 between schools by means of a student voucher system did not lead to the increased student  
48 choice. But it did, albeit gradually, lead to the school principals embracing their role as competitors.  
49 This is interesting to compare with Arnold’s study of the effects of rankings in the food waste field in  
50 Switzerland (Ch. 7), where measures expected to stimulate competition led actors to develop  
51 strategies for avoiding competition. Arnold argues that the bad performers may not show any  
52 interest in improving their positions, in particular when they can redirect their attention to other  
53 competitive fields in which they stand a better chance of being perceived as good performers.  
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3 Competition itself can sometimes be desired and sometimes not, especially when it comes to the  
4 competition for status, as neatly illustrated by Brunsson and Wedlin in their examination of higher  
5 education and sports (Ch. 6). Sometimes, as argued by Aspers (Ch. 3), competition emerges through  
6 the process of mutual adjustment and may not be a result of actors' intentions. And sometimes, as  
7 shown by Scroggins and Souleles (Ch. 9), actors are trapped into competition 'through the lure of  
8 material and symbolic rewards' (p. 148).

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14 Considerations of positive and negative effects of competition is another theme that permeates this  
15 book. In a historical account of the relationship between competition and financial auditing in  
16 Sweden, K. Brunsson and Rahnert (Ch. 8), argue that these two ideas are fundamentally  
17 incompatible, even though they continue to co-exist. The role of financial auditors as competitors for  
18 clients jeopardizes their capacity to be impartial when it comes to the firms they audit. Christensen  
19 and Knudsen explore the effect of competition on student learning and sociality (Ch. 10). They show  
20 how gamified learning technologies can stimulate both learning and socialization, thereby  
21 challenging conventional pedagogical arguments that competition drives individualism. The authors  
22 conclude: 'Education has never been simply a matter of learning how to read and count; it has  
23 always been a question of socializing future generations' (p. 173). Lagerström, Leite, Pahlberg, and  
24 Schweizer (Ch. 11) explore competition between subsidiary units in a multinational corporation and  
25 find, among other things, that competition can lead to more cooperation between units, to their  
26 mutual benefit and the benefit of the firm. Cooperation, however, does not always mean no or less  
27 competition. In the study of a private equity firm's efforts to reduce competition between its units  
28 (Ch. 12), Foureault shows how fostering cooperation between them does not yield desired results.  
29 Foureault sees the lack of legitimacy of firm's ownership in the eyes of the units' operating managers  
30 as the major factor in the failure to 'tame' competition.

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44 Concluding the book (Ch. 14), the editors take stock of the contributions and offer suggestions for  
45 further research on competition. They orient the reader around the questions of how competition  
46 happens, what its consequences are, and finally how competition can be removed. One notable  
47 characteristic of the volume, which is also evident in the closing chapter, is its attention to the role  
48 of organization(s) in competition. Specifically, in how competition is relevant for organizations and  
49 how, in turn, organizations and organizing are relevant for competition. As an interdisciplinary field  
50 of study dedicated to one of the most pervasive social institutions of modern times (Meyer &  
51 Bromley, 2013), organizational scholarship is certainly well placed to lend itself as a site for further  
52 exploration and serious contribution to the furthering of our understanding of competition in  
53 society. And yet, we should be careful not to be seduced into seeing competition as inseparable

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3 from or constituted by organization, although the centrality of organization in this book may give us  
4 the impression that this is always so.  
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8 The book *Competition: What It Is and Why It Happens* is a timely and welcome contribution to the  
9 conversation on competition in society, which has been picking up pace across the social sciences in  
10 recent years. The authors have successfully demonstrated that competition is not confined to  
11 markets, and they have convincingly argued that the study of competition should not be the sole  
12 purview of economists. I expect that this book will engage, provoke, and inspire many scholars in the  
13 coming years—in the studies of organization and beyond.  
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