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LAURENT THÉVENOT AND THE FRENCH CONVENTION SCHOOL A SHORT INTRODUCTION BY SØREN JAGD

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The French Convention School shows an interesting interplay between economic and sociological perspectives on economic action. Yet, this French school is rather unknown outside France even though a few introductions are available (Wagner 1994; Wagner 1999; Wagner 2001), (Wilkinson 1997). This short note is intended to give a brief overview of the major publications of the Convention School with a special focus on Laurent Thévenot's work. The interview with Laurent Thévenot presented below was carried out as part of the data collection for a forthcoming introduction to the French convention tradition.

The official birthday of French Convention Theory has been linked to a conference on the labour market entitled "Les outils de gestion du travail" held in November 1984 (Orléan 1994). The notion of convention was central from the very start as shown by the title of the papers from this conference, *Le travail. Marchés, règles, conventions* edited by Robert Salais and Laurent Thévenot (Salais and Thevenot 1986). An important preoccupation was the study of how labour was qualified through the application of rules, norms and conventions. In 1986, Thévenot also edited a study on Economic Conventions (Thévenot 1986). It was the publication of a special issue of the top economic journal in France *Revue économique* in 1989 on Economics of Convention that made the group known in wider circles. A special feature was the programmatic introduction written in collaboration by Jean-Pierre Dupuy, François Eymard-Duvernay, Olivier Favereau, André Orléan, Robert Salais, and Laurent Thévenot (Dupuy, Eymard-Duvernay et al. 1989).

While, since then, most of these researchers have worked on slightly different tracks elaborating different aspects of the role of conventions in economic life, a few important books mark the development of the convention tradition. Based on the papers from a conference on Economics of Conventions held in March 1991, André Orléan edited a book that presents the theoretical perspectives of the tradition (Orléan 1994), a revised version has recently been published (Orléan 2004). An early publication in English was Michael Storper and Robert Salais' book *Worlds of Production* (Storper and Salais 1997). A more recent publication is an anthology of papers from a conference on *Organizations and Markets* in July 1998 that was edited by Olivier Favereau and Emmanuel Lazega (Favereau and Lazega 2002).¹ It should also be mentioned that in December 2003 an important conference was held in Paris with the title *Conventions et Institutions: approfondements théoriques et contributions au débat politique*. The aim of the conference was to discuss the state of the art of the tradition with a special focus on the contribution of the economics of convention to the broad institutional tradition in the social sciences.

From this short overview it can be seen that Laurent Thévenot have played an important role in the development of the tradition from the very start. One of the special features of his work is, in my opinion, a particular awareness of the way economics and sociology may be

¹ This book is reviewed in this issue of the Newsletter by P. Aspens (see below).

fruitfully connected. His academic background was in economics with a Bachelor's from *École polytechnique* and with a Master's from the ENSAE, he was employed as administrator at the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE).

Looking back, it is striking that the group of people working at the research section of INSEE at that time was very important for the development of the convention tradition and also for Laurent Thévenot's work. At INSEE, Thévenot met several other who came to play a central role in the Economics of convention tradition: Robert Salais (Salais and Storper 1992) was the leader of the research section at INSEE, Laurent Thévenot worked together with François Eymard-Duvernay (Eymard-Duvernay 2002). André Orléan (Orléan 2001) was also working at INSEE although in a different section. At INSEE Thévenot also met the sociologist Alain Desrosières (Desrosières and Thévenot 1988), who introduced him to Bourdieu.

From 1975 he gained a background in sociology through his link to Bourdieu, leading to one of his first publications, on youth as a statistical category (Thévenot 1979). Through Bourdieu he met the sociologist Luc Boltanski in 1981, who was Bourdieu's closest disciple (Dosse 1999). In 1982, Boltanski published his study of the rise of the French management profession (Boltanski 1987). In 1981 they started to work together on the problem of the socio-professional categories of the INSEE. To train volunteers, they developed exercises in 'the form of games: the participants were to classify the census information sheets corresponding to the professions, find coherent sets, then designate a profession representative of a more general interest, and collective discuss the pertinence of these regroupings' (Dosse 1999, p. 38). This project, presented in the paper on *Finding One's Way in Social Space* (Boltanski and Thévenot 1983), enabled Boltanski and Thévenot to discover the reflexive competence of non-specialists.

Around the same time, Thévenot returned to his original discipline, economics, producing his research on *Investments in form* (Thévenot 1984). Taking his departure in the notion of code which is applied 'to the set of conventions which govern "regulated" communications between people' (Thévenot 1984, p. 1), he argues that there has been a huge increase in coding operations. Codes may be of very different types, such as statistical, legal and administrative, linguistic, occupational, and technical codes. Using the large repertoire of form-giving instruments applied in Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* as an example, the notion of investment is expanded to cover these types of form-giving activities, including tools, trademarks, instructions, training and habits.

After the inquiry into socio-professional categories, Boltanski became interested in the question of denouncing injustices. Based on empirical studies, such as the selection of readers letters to the newspaper *Le Monde*, Boltanski started to develop a plurality of modes of justification: civic, domestic, inspired, and renown. To these four types, Thévenot added two other modes of justification: market and industrial greatness. These plural forms of justification led to their elaboration of six grammars of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987, 1991). This work has been highly influential in recent French sociology as well as in the French Economic of Convention tradition.

An important hypothesis from this work is 'that the same persons have, on the same day and in the same social space, to use different devices for assessment, including the reference to different types of worth, when they shift from one situation to another' (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, p. 369). To illustrate this hypothesis, Boltanski and Thévenot, in their 1991 book, looked at how these six worlds of action are applied to the management of one resource, labour, in management literature. In 1984 they established a research group, the

GSM (Groupe de sociologie politique et morale) at EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), in Paris, where Boltanski and Thévenot's work on justification was used as a basis for many empirical studies. Since 1984 Boltanski and Thévenot have cooperated on several important projects (Boltanski and Thévenot 1989, 1991, 1999, 2000).

During the 1990s, Thévenot elaborated on the various interrelated aspects of conventions in relation to economic action, some of the most important themes have been the concept of convention (Thévenot 1993) which he further elaborated with the philosopher Pierre Livet (Livet and Thévenot 1994, Livet and Thévenot 1997), norms and markets (Thévenot 1995), and cognition (Conein and Thévenot 1997, Conein and Thévenot 1998). In the late 1990s, together with several other French and American sociologists, Thévenot conducted a comparative study of France and the US applying the model of grammars of justification developed earlier (Lamont and Thévenot 2000).

Recently Thévenot has further elaborated his analysis in the context of the theory of action (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999), moral philosophy (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000), actor-network theory (Thévenot 2001), the analysis of organizations (Thévenot 2001), practice theory (Thévenot 2001), economics (Thévenot 2002). I will provide three examples to illustrate how the perspective of conventions is used to sharpen the analysis of economic action.

In the paper on *Organized Complexity: Conventions of Coordination and the Composition of Economic Arrangements* (Thévenot 2001), Thévenot applies his notion of coordination to economic organizations. A common conception of organizations is a stable and collective order, maintained by different types of constraints: rules, hierarchical prescriptions, rationalizing and bureaucratic methods, social structures, shared representations or common cultures. This 'over-coordinated' vision of organizations is being challenged from several different perspectives in organizational studies. From this experience of bringing about an alternative perspective to this 'over-coordinated' vision of organizations, Thévenot draws two conclusions. First, we need a notion of coordination which is more open to uncertainty, critical tension and creative arrangements than the ideas of stabilized orders. The characterization of modes of coordination should point to their dynamics, not to the resulting orders. Second, we need to account for a variety of modes of coordination.

Taking his departure in the notion of investment in forms, Thévenot links different perspectives, such as pragmatism and actor-network theory, to develop a more refined view on forms of cognition and realism to establish 'a notion of coordination which takes into account commerce with things as well as commerce with people' (Thévenot 2001, p. 408). A further step is to relate cognition to evaluation, as was done in the work with Boltanski on forms of justification. Complexity is seen to result from the variety of modes of coordination. Compromises can bring local and temporal compatibility between these different modes of coordination. Organization is theorized as arrangements which have been specifically designed for such a compromised complexity. All organizations, in this perspective, have to cope with critical tensions between different orders of worth.

Following this perspective, it is argued that the firm should be treated as 'a compromising device between several modes of coordination, involving at least the *market* and the *industrial* modes' (Thévenot 2001, p. 211). In the paper critical tensions between market and industrial modes of coordination are analyzed. Further, the basic elements of the domestic mode of coordination are discussed and the critical tension between the domestic mode and the market

mode of coordination and between the domestic mode and the industrial mode of coordination are discussed.

In the paper on *Conventions of Co-Ordination and the Framing of Uncertainty* (Thévenot 2002), Thévenot applies his notion of coordination to the analysis of interaction in mainstream economic theory. Thévenot argues that three types of core assumptions are more or less explicitly formulated in the different approaches to interaction in the different social sciences: the first type of hypotheses (H1) has to do with the *competence* with which the social actors are endowed, such as optimizing rationality in the economic model; the second type of hypotheses (H2) concerns the set of relevant *objects* which are involved in their interaction, such as commodities in the economic model; and the third set of hypotheses (H3) addresses the mode of co-ordination between the actors, such as the institutions, conventions, or rules upon which the actors agree, such as market competition in the mainstream economic model. The first type of hypothesis is a basic and highly debated aspect of economic theory. The second type of hypothesis most often remains unspecified in mainstream economics since the common identification of the list of commodities is generally considered as ‘natural’. The third set of hypotheses has only recently been brought up in economics, such as in the analysis of forms of co-ordination which differ from pure market exchange by New Institutional Economics, Principal Agency Theory, or Economics of Convention.

Thévenot addresses the tensions that occur in the economic model of action when it faces situations where behaviour no longer follows a single mode of co-ordination such as market coordination. In such critical situations, actors are torn between incommensurable rationales. Based on the research programme that he conducted with Luc Boltanski, Thévenot argues that the market order of worth is viewed as one among a plurality of equally grounded modes of evaluation involved in the coordination of action. This plurality of modes of coordination is seen to be constituted by objects that are relevant for each of those modes. The plurality of the forms of co-ordination (H3) and the plurality of relevant objects (H2) then leads to the need to reformulate the hypotheses about rationality (H1). The uncertainty concerning forms of coordination and relevant objects is seen to demand an analytical framework that implies significant changes in our way of addressing human action.

Expanding on the example of conflicting justifications for giving blood discussed by Oliver Williamson (Williamson 1975), Thévenot shows that coordination may be problematic. In Williamson’s example, the actor can either donate his blood or he can sell in on the market. In order to show the problems posed by different modes of justification, Thévenot places Williamson’s example in the framework of a confrontation between an actor and an interpreter.

Figures of judgement in a complex situation

	Actor	
Interpreter	C (civic)	M (market)
C	Sympathetic	Greedy
M	Naïve	Realistic

The first order of justification is civic (C) grounded on the notion of the common good constituted by collective solidarity. The second order is a market justification (M) based on the common good constituted by the possibility of a market agreement. The two diagonal cells

correspond to situations that may be said to be ‘natural’ because both the actor and the interpreter agree upon the assumptions of the action. The two other cells correspond to critical situations in which the actor and the interpreter analyze the situation according to different forms of justification. It is argued that Williamson only considers the first column. Adding an interpreter demonstrates the complexity of the situation brought about by the critical confrontation of these different modes of justification of action.

Thévenot argues more generally that the problems encountered in explaining co-ordinated action by only taking into account the first set of hypotheses (H1), dealing with the competence of the actors should lead us to explore the two other set of hypotheses (H2), about the object and (H3), about the forms of co-ordination. The notion of the qualified object is introduced as a way of accounting for the investment in form that links objects to different modes of co-ordination of action. The notion of principles of worth, as analyzed together with Boltanski, is introduced as a way to account for the different forms of co-ordination.

Recently, Thévenot coordinated a programmatic text, written collectively by five of the six co-authors of the 1989 issue of *Revue économique*, for a conference on convention theory held in December 2003 in Paris (Eymard-Duvernay, Favereau et al. 2003). In the programmatic text, it is argued that the Economics of Convention programme incorporates, in a new perspective, three issues that have been dissociated by a century and a half of economic thinking: the characterization of the agent and his/her reasons for acting; the modalities of coordination of actions; and the role of values and common goods. Economic sociology is seen to offer a counterattack to the extension of economic theory to non-commercial relations. Nevertheless, it is argued that the models of social action applied in sociology fail to characterize the specificity of action and coordination involving market objects, but lead to a reduction to models of social links. It is argued that a common issue for both sociology and economics is the problematic coordination of human actors. Each discipline has concentrated on different specifications of this coordination. Economics of convention would instead like to preserve the resulting pluralism. The notion of coordination developed by EC highlights the role of collective forms of evaluation.

Classical authors in both economics and sociology are found to have remained close to the reference models from the natural sciences, highlighting equilibriums, orders and structures of social reproduction. For interactionist sociologists, uncertainty remains part of the idea of an “order of interaction”, even if it is “negotiated” locally in the situation. Ethnomethodologists are particularly doubtful concerning the notion of order. For economists, the problem is concentrated on notions of uncertainty and information.

Economics of Convention proposes to take into account uncertainty weighing on the coordination of behaviours by differentiating forms of uncertainty and thus information, and then relating them to different forms of evaluation. Evaluation is then conceived of as being at the centre of coordination. In all coordination, whether in the market, in an enterprise, or aimed at political agreement, there is no regularity at the start of the action. In this sense, uncertainty exists for everyone. Overcoming that uncertainty requires the conventional construction of products, services and expectations that are the mediums of the commercial interaction and productive activity of firms. Conventions channel uncertainty on the basis of a common frame of evaluation that qualifies objects for coordination. Market conventions of qualification are seen as one among a plurality of such conventions of qualification.

Two types of pluralism are argued for. First, a “horizontal” pluralism of conventions of qualification presenting a high degree of generality. This type of pluralism opens the

possibility for an analysis of markets and economic organizations without reducing them to a calculation about contracts or transactions. This, it is argued, presents a better foundation for studying business enterprises and the particularity of labour and financial markets. Markets are then seen as places where the quality of goods is tested and evaluated through activities of codification, measurement, certification, regulation etc. It is argued that classical economics and sociology tend to consider the founding institutions (the market, the community) as exogenous, universal and stable. The economics of convention makes it possible to recognize the theoretical specificity of each type of institutional market device. To illustrate the point, the special features of two types of markets - labour markets and financial markets - are presented.

The introduction of radical uncertainties and of critical dynamics into the analysis leads to the conception of conventions that are plural and evolving. Actors 'are placed in a conventional environment (formed mainly by texts, legal corpuses, accounting units, evaluation tools) that they rearrange to remedy the lack of coordination and cooperation. And, furthermore, that to introduce this conventional dynamic into the analysis, the actors have to be endowed with a reflexive capacity regarding their own state, as well as a capacity to remodel forms of community life – in other words, a political capacity' (Eymard-Duvernay, Favereau et al. 2003, p. 13).

The second type of pluralism, "vertical" pluralism, is oriented towards more situated coordination and more personal conveniences. In both sociology and economics, various researchers have focused on non-reflexive relations with the world, such as habitus, routines and practices. Economic theory has, for example, proposed two local models, one with weak rationality (routines) and the other with strong rationality (contracts), both of which are considered unsatisfactory. On this basis a distinction is made between constituent conventions (Convention 1) which support the most legitimate modes of coordination, and second-level conventions (Convention 2), which encompass more limited rules intended to coordinate normalized local action plans. The analysis should then focus on the dynamics between these two levels of coordination.

This short introduction has been highly selective and only a small part of all Laurent Thévenot's publications has been presented here. Nevertheless, it should be clear that he has contributed, in several ways, to the recent development of social theory and, what may be of special interest here, he has explicitly elaborated on the importance of a sociological perspective for the study of economic action.

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