

Thévenot, Laurent

## Article

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# Laurent Thévenot answers ten questions about economic sociology

*Laurent Thévenot is Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, and Senior researcher at the Research Bureau of the Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, Paris. With Luc Boltanski, he created the Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale and co-authored On Justification (Princeton University Press, 2006 [1991]), which analyzes the most legitimate repertoires of evaluation governing political, economic and social relationships. It has been influential in the new French social sciences (so-called "Pragmatic turn"), and in the "Convention Theory", a strand of Institutional Economics. He also co-edited two books concerning new approaches of action, the practical engagement of objects and social cognition: Les objets dans l'action (with Bernard Conein and Nicolas Dodier, Editions de l'EHESS, 1993), and Cognition et information en société (with Bernard Conein, Editions de l'EHESS, 1997). He recently published a book offering an analytical framework to deal with these issues: L'action au pluriel: sociologie des régimes d'engagement (La Découverte, 2006). This framework has also been developed and tested in collaborative and comparative research on the political and moral grammars of making things and issues common: Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States (ed. with Michèle Lamont, Cambridge University Press, 2000). The results of a subsequent Russian-French comparison are forthcoming. Laurent Thévenot is co-editor of the journal Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales.*

## 1. How did you get involved in economic sociology?

Before getting involved in "Economic sociology", I studied economics at École Polytechnique and then sociology at EHESS with Pierre Bourdieu as an unforgettable master. Later I received additional training in political and moral philosophy, through readings and the fortunate personal encounter with the generous and enthusiastic enlightener Paul Ricoeur. I took advantage of my engagement in various and often conflicting disciplines to address a question which appeared to be common to all of them: How are human beings and their environment "informed", in the sense of having the mind formed and given form to, so that persons can act together in the world, that is, coordi-

nate with each other in spite of personal and material singularities which hinder commonality?

The question originated from my work on categorization tools, which are at the core of social cognition studies, highlighted also by neoinstitutionalist economic sociologists.<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu's sociology, which inherited Durkheim's and Mauss' concern with social categorization, and added a Marxist twist (i.e. "classification struggles") fit these issues particularly well, together with Foucault's *The order of things*. However, I wanted to explore another direction and consider the role of these tools in the coordination between human beings and between human beings and things. I extended the economic notion of investment-as-sacrifice-and-roundabout-method-of-production to costly operation, which establishes stable and generalized relations in time and space through "investment in forms" such as standards, trademarks, instructions, degrees, etc.<sup>2</sup> The performative character of economics language is only one among different returns on investments in forms. In my first 1985 research on "the economy of conventional forms", the term "l'économie" already had the same double meaning as it would acquire it later in "les économies de la grandeur" ("economies of worth") and "l'économie des conventions". Beyond the domain of economy and economics, this notion points to the economy of coordination costs, which results from investments in conventional forms. Coordination modes vary with the characteristics of these investments, which are unequally extended in time and space, and objectified.

In terms of economic sociology: actually I participated in the creation of two new currents of research, one in economics (Economie des conventions) and the other in sociology (Sociologie politique et morale), which overlap and both address economic sociology issues. I have developed the first stream with economist companions from INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies), François Eymard-Duvernay, André Orléan and Robert Salais, and Olivier Favereau at the University of Paris X Nanterre. I expanded the second research agenda on the basis of a rare collaboration with the Luc Boltanski.<sup>3</sup> Both these currents of research can be related to the European genre "school". But because of strong individualities and

durable engagements of close friendship and mutual esteem, I prefer to call them "company".<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Could you name books or articles that have profoundly influenced your own thinking within economic sociology?

I mentioned before classics, and Max Weber is clearly a major reference because he worked to understand not only how the social and economic were interconnected but also how the socio-economic was connected with politics and law, grounding these relations in a rich theory of action. I would also like to pay tribute to some of the American colleagues whom I met at different stages of my research, in the US and sometimes in France, as was the case with Jeff Alexander. During my first stays at Harvard, Michael Piore and Chuck Sabel were working on their *Second industrial divide*, in particular on Italian industrial districts and the articulation between competition, trust and fashion, which correspond in our schema to three different orders of worth: market, domestic and fame. At Wisconsin, I had enlightening exchanges with Monique Girard and David Stark; Stark initiated me in the East European capitalism and "recombinant property", another case of subtle articulation of interrelations between different coordination modes. At Princeton, Luc Boltanski and I had fruitful conversations with Albert Hirschman, who deeply influenced our work because of his innovative work on shifting involvements, and more generally his concern for the politics and morals of the economy. At Princeton I also met creative authors of cultural sociology and economic sociology, Viviana Zelizer, Paul DiMaggio and Frank Dobbin. I visited Princeton often because of the US-French program, which Michèle Lamont and I had launched to develop a comparative cultural sociology with the aim to distinguish between cultures with respect to basic repertoires of evaluation and moral boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Exchanges with Ann Swidler at Berkeley were precious too. At Stanford, I made the link to other disciplines. With Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Bernard Manin and André Orléan, the Economics of convention came into challenging contact with the philosophy of Michael Bratman, the politics of John Ferejohn and the economics of Kenneth Arrow.<sup>6</sup> Personal meetings with Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg came later, after my reading of their seminal works in Economic Sociology. I also want to pay homage to Aaron Cicourel, (Bernard Conein helped me to become personally acquainted with him), the inventor of a kind of social cognition which is so important for Economic Sociology.

## 3. In a widely cited article, and more recently a book, you and Luc Boltanski have introduced the notion of worth into (economic) sociology. Do you see this notion as an alternative to the notion of value? And if so, what is wrong with the notion of value?

I mentioned before my first step in conceptualizing the kind of "economies" brought about by "investments in general forms," resulting from attempts to cope with uncertain and costly coordination. Persons and things thus "qualify" for a certain mode of coordination. The second step resulted from my collaborative work with Luc Boltanski on the plurality of orders of "worth".<sup>7</sup> Drawing on my previous research, and on Boltanski's own research on "denunciation" letters sent to newspapers (which show the attempts and failures to develop a general cause on the basis of individual difficulties), we related the operation of form-giving – or building equivalence through forms of generality – to that of making people and things more valuable. In this respect, which is a key issue in addressing the political and moral actor's involvement, we departed from our pioneering influential colleague and friend Bruno Latour.

When values are not discarded in the social sciences, they are most often attributed to individual preferences or to collective social norms. We chose the term "worth" to conceptualize the judgment linking the justification of actions to the qualification of persons and things. Someone or something is "worth it" when it is sufficiently good and significant to justify a specified action. In that sense, worth departs from an abstract value unaffected by the evaluation of practical consequences. Worth is put to the reality test of effective coordination. We view evaluative judgment as an open and practical operation, which is necessarily involved in doubtful coordination, which means searching for agreement or concord against a background of discord. We paid much attention to the fact that the arrangement of the situation ("dispositifs") induces certain evaluative forms of coordination, and that persons and communities have to shift from one to the other, and make compromises among them, depending on the situation. We chose the empirical domain of economic organizations and markets, which are at the very core of Economic Sociology. Characterizing the most legitimate forms of coordinative evaluation, we brought out a unique set of requirements which all of these forms meet and which express a certain sense of justice and injustice. Therefore,

*On justification* makes explicit what we called “grammars of the polity” backed by specifications of the common good, and relates everyday disputes to political philosophy constructions, shedding light on the implicit normative basis of the critical sociology of domination and power.

#### 4. Your work has been foundational for the economics of conventions school. Do you feel like this school is well integrated into economic sociology?

Some strong parts of the Economics of convention, like the plurality of qualifying processes for products, producers, workers or consumers are quite well integrated into Economic sociology, notably through Michel Callon's appealing analysis of “the laws of the market” which is also backed by actor-network theory. But the strategies have been somewhat different. Economic sociology currently aims at unveiling the hidden social part of economic phenomena that economists ignore or misrepresent. We would rather work in parallel with the two disciplinary traditions, bringing out common fundamental issues about coordination, cognition and evaluation, and qualification of the human and material world, questions which are blurred by disciplinary antagonisms.

In the issue of *Sociologia del Lavoro*, (2006, n°102) devoted to the Economics of conventions, David Stark wrote a provocative and illuminating discussion entitled “For a sociology of worth” which puts forward an economic sociology that would “break with Parsons' Pact” and abandon “the dualisms of value versus values and economy versus embedded social relations”. He calls for the analysis of ongoing processes of valuation in assessing the value “under conditions of competing metrics of performance”, in “incommensurable assessments in everyday life” and in political “contention over the very criteria to assess worthiness”. He characterizes the “heterarchical organizations” which exploit the productive friction of evaluative frameworks.

#### 5. The economics of conventions school seems to have been a by-and-large French School up until now. Do you expect this school to expand into other parts of Europe and the United States?

Obviously there is a need for more translations from French and English papers and books. But things are changing

now, supported by our cooperation with sociologists who share a renewed interest in politics. Escaping the two pitfalls of overall denunciation or prophetic discourse on globalization, these scholars focus on the dynamics of political grammars and moral worlds, which are involved in the contemporary transformation of economy and society. For instance, a new generation of Italian sociologists is related to the convention school in their concern with the compromising arrangement that links civic concern with market competition and domestic coordination in marketized public services and policies, and local development, which contests the state. I am thinking of Tommaso Vitale, who edited with Vando Borghi the aforementioned issue of *Sociologia del Lavoro*, and Laura Centemeri who sheds new light on the combination of community ties, entrepreneurial spirit and environmental concern in the movement toward local politics. Another example can be found in Russia, where there is also a need for a fine-grained analysis of the weaknesses of most formal conventions, and the resulting prevalence and sophisticated plurality of familiar and close engagements. With a double training in sociology and economics, Anton Oleinik is conducting innovative research on these subjects.<sup>8</sup> In the US, Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman are developing a remarkable ethnography of confronted “moral narratives” and the materialized, grounded understanding of moral judgment in non-profit sector and civic organizations.

#### 6. What do you see as the main differences between economic sociology in Europe and in the United States?

The preceding comments on Italy and Russia, and the French case as well, suggest that there are certain differences. In the old Europe, by contrast to the US, accommodating the grammars of political liberalism and market-competition raises tensions and need for compromise with respect to “domestic” worth and a variety of mutual engagements based on personal ties. Our comparative collective research, coordinated with Michèle Lamont, made this difference clear. American political and social sciences, which help generate international concepts, are dependent on liberal grammars which do not adequately capture these tensions and compromises, or the sophistication of various personalized engagements, which contrast with the liberal separation of individuals and of public and private. I don't refer here only to rational choice or self-interest models but the interactionist tradition as well and its pragmatist ancestors. This is one reason why European

sociological research on economic issues seems more concerned than American research with the varieties of capitalism or articulations between market coordination and other coordination modes.<sup>9</sup>

### **7. Is it important for you to establish a dialogue with economists, and if so, what are feasible strategies to accomplish that?**

I have already underlined the double relation with economics and social sciences in my work and in the Economics of convention. A serious investment in these disciplines and humanities is required if we are to go beyond superficial borrowing, or a cursory and reductive transfer. Very few traditional economists are ready to meet this requirement. Some Institutionalists did, such as Veblen and Commons in their relation to pragmatist philosophy. Sociologists are frequently reluctant to admit that economics might bring some knowledge on their research subject, even if it requires some translation into more transversal categories.

### **8. Which countries/cities/universities in Europe do you consider to be contemporary strongholds for economic sociology?**

I would not claim to offer a correct map of the field. I've already mentioned Italy and Russia for research inspired by the Economics of convention. More generally, I believe that the interest in economic sociology is rising in Russia because of the significance of the "informal economy" and the failure of standard economics to capture the Russian economy and society. I think the work of Vadim Radaev at the Higher School of Economics, in particular. In Germany, as elsewhere, social studies of science have moved to focus on economy and Karin Knorr-Cetina is offering her remarkable craft to research on financial markets. There is clearly a strong pole around the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG) which hosts this valuable newsletter. The connection seems quite productive between economic sociologists such as Jens Beckert and scholars like Wolfgang Streeck who developed his important comparative research in political economy before the "economic sociology" label and professional field were designed. This is the case in France too. Apart from the new advances mentioned before, including Latour's and Callon's sociology of actor-networks, there have been

strong traditions in institutional economics such as the "Regulation school" originating in the Marxist thrust of the 1970's around Robert Boyer. The Durkheimian school, as Philippe Steiner's research demonstrated, was open to economic phenomena as was the Bourdieu school.

### **9. What are according to you the main current debates within the field?**

Today standard economics claims to deliver scientific expertise and diagnosis on domains which are far removed from market coordination, such as law, institutions and politics. We can study the social construction and practical consequences of this expertise. But there is a need for another kind of analysis which would situate the market worth informing these economists' evaluations relative to other orders of worth and common good, or regulatory orientations which would lead to quite different diagnoses. The importance, for Economic sociology, of rigorous analysis of institutions and politics was the central focus of a conference recently organized by the MPIfG which offered a rare opportunity to bring together Economic sociology, Political economy, Regulation theory and Economics of conventions. Advances in this analysis demand specific attention to law and the variety of legal normative justifications, as well as governance devices, which mix market coordination with this variety, such as regulation or standardization authorities.

### **10. In your view, what research topics within economic sociology have so far been neglected or have not received enough attention?**

The fabric of our contemporary capitalist societies, with the increasing overlap of politics, work and privacy, is made of composite arrangements with high political and moral complexity. In a short period of time and possibly in the same place, "flexible" actors have to bring together, balance and move between quite different modes of action and coordination with others. Some modes refer to broad-based kinds of good and right, others to self-interested and strategic behavior, yet others involve care or personalized familiar relationships. These transformations challenge the models of action most commonly used in Economic sociology and sociology in general. I got this feeling from participation in the renewed debate in France -- though this is not an exclusively French debate-- concerning theo-

ries of action. This debate brought together, in the so-called "pragmatic turn", sociologists, historians, economists and philosophers.<sup>10</sup> After the two previously mentioned research agendas in my work (investments in form and plurality of orders of worth), I took up the challenge and developed an analytical framework to account for the plurality of "regimes of engagement", from publicity to familiarity, and analyzed the architectures of communities and personalities.<sup>11</sup>

## Endnotes

Thanks to Olav Velthuis for his help with the interview. You can find more information about Laurent Thévenot's work also in June 2004 issue of the *European Economic Sociology Newsletter*.

**1** This research was done at the INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) with Alain Desrosières who was the first go-between with Bourdieu.

**2** Thévenot, L., "Rules and implements: investment in forms", *Social Science Information*, 1984, vol.23, n°1, pp.1-45. Consequences for the analysis of the production function and productive models have been at the center of François Eymard-Duvernay's research; see *Économie politique de l'entreprise*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004.

**3** The Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) which we created is presently run by Nicolas Dodier who has been regularly working, both empirically and theoretically, on Economic sociology objects.

**4** I related experiences of diverse configurations of research to disciplines and contents in "The Two Bodies of May '68: In Common, in Person", in *The Disobedient Generation: '68ers and the Transformation of Social Theory*, edited by Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp.252-271); and in "Креативные Конфигурации в Гуманитарных Науках и Фигурации Социальной Общности", *Новое литературное обозрение*, № 977, 1'2006, с. 285-313.

**5** Lamont, M./L.Thévenot, (eds.), 2000: *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

**6** And later with Harrison White through a collaboration involving François Eymard-Duvernay and Olivier Favereau.

**7** Boltanski, L./L.Thévenot, 2006: *On justification. Economies of worth*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (trans. by Catherine Porter).

**8** Oleinik, A. (ed.), 2005, *The Institutional Economics of Russia's Transformations*, Aldershot, Ashgate.

**9** Boltanski, L., Chiapello, E., 2006, *The new spirit of capitalism*, London, Verso (Translated by Gregory Elliott).

**10** See the series "Raisons pratiques", Paris, Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, since 1990.

**11** Thévenot, L., 2006: *L'action au pluriel. Sociologie des régimes d'engagement*, Paris, La Découverte.