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Robert Salais Answers Five Questions about Economic Sociology

Economics of convention – its origins, contributions and transdisciplinary perspectives

Robert Salais interviewed by Rainer Diaz-Bone in Berlin.

Robert Salais is one of the founders and still one of the leading researchers in the French tradition of the “économie des conventions” (“economics of convention”, in short: EC). This transdisciplinary strand of socio-economic research is highly influential in France and has today a rich agenda of different research topics (Diaz-Bone 2006, Diaz-Bone forthcoming; Jagd 2006), which is shown in the two volumes of Eymard-Duvernay (2006a, 2006b). The EC was formally founded in 1989 when the special issue “économie des conventions” (Vol. 40, Nr. 2) of the leading economic journal “Revue économique” appeared.

In 2004, an interview with Laurent Thévenot appeared in this Economic Sociology European Electronic Newsletter (Vol. 5, Nr. 3), which was conducted by Søren Jagd (Jagd 2004; Thévenot 2004). This interview especially portrays the “start-up” of this scientific movement, and is focusing on the period before 1989. The following interview with Robert Salais addresses his contributions to this approach and newer developments of EC. Salais’ research orientation is the best example for a transdisciplinary perspective. In the interview he analyzes also the relationship between sociology, economics and other disciplines in the area of economic sociology. There is a brief summary of Salais’ career, and a listing of his most central publications, at the end of the interview.

1. Could you describe the stations of your academic career and how you got involved into the “économie des conventions”?

I began my professional, rather than academic, career – the distinction is worth to be reminded –, as “administra-

teur de l’INSEE” (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, National Institute on Statistics and Economic Studies). Generally speaking, this means to be selected from a “Grande École” (in my case École Polytechnique) to coordinate statistical inquiries and to undertake socio-economic studies. I personally chose employment and population as my domains and was very soon involved, both in econometric research on the functioning of the labor markets, and in the French economic planning (“Commissariat Général du Plan”) which was still very influential in the 1970s. This helped me to get a first overview of the linkage between statistical data and their categories, and their role in macroeconomic policies and planning. As I explained at the beginning of “Invention du chômage” (Salais/Baverez/Reynaud 1986), collective actors involved in the planning process (administrations, trade-unions, employers’ representatives) discovered in the 1960s that, for the first time since 1945, there would be no full employment at the end of the next four-year plan. Such worries had a great impact for developing more public research and data on employment and labor markets. As an answer to these collective worries, my works demonstrated that there was no clear link between the evolutions of the level of employment and unemployment, but rather complex mechanisms of adjustment.

However, my awareness, not yet of conventions, but of statistical categories, came from the seminal works of Alain Desrosières. Like many other administrators of INSEE, I contributed (in my specific professional area) to the wide 1978 *Colloquium on the History of Statistics* (coordinated by Joëlle Affichard and Alain Desrosières). Then, as a research project, I undertook a study of the history of the category “unemployment”, and I discovered that it had not always existed. Instead, the category of “unemployment” was the product of a socio-economic historical process, deeply rooted in national and institutional specificities. This finding made me, in the 1980s, aware of many theoretical questions: for instance the plurality of models of coordination on the labor markets; how technological as well as organizational innovations create what I called “social correlations” between positions on the labor markets; the influence that cognitive categories have in shaping, not only information, but more deeply rooted social

realities; the gap between implementing institutions or policies in some domain from the top and generating a situation where these institutions are taken by actors as resources and bases for their expectations and actions. Like many French researchers of the period, I read Marx and other Marxist writings and I was involved into the socio-political process which prepared during the 1970s the *Common Program of the Left* which resulted in the victory of the Left parties in 1981. All in all, from all these influences I definitively took an anti-positivist stance and revisited the Marxian approach, to replace the idea of abstract labor and situate it in more socio-historical terms.

The connection with conventions happened from the fact that previously we were all (Joëlle Affichard, François Eymard-Duvernay, Laurent Thévenot, myself and a little bit later Alain Desrosières) working in the same department of INSEE, the division "emploi". In the open-minded INSEE of the period, this division retrospectively appeared as a laboratory of ideas, open to external scientific influences. When in 1982 I became the head of the INSEE research unit and Laurent Thévenot one of its members, it was possible to hold an interdisciplinary workshop in 1984. It was closely linked to the theoretical investments that Laurent (in connection with François Eymard-Duvernay) lead on conventions and investments of forms. Published in 1986, the collective book issued from this workshop (Salais/Thévenot [eds.] 1986) already includes (except Jean-Pierre Dupuy) all the contributors of the future 1989 special issue of the *Revue économique*. The seminar, which then, from 1986 to 1988, prepared this special issue, offered me the opportunity to develop my own understanding of the convention-based approach and to apply it to labor economics. My later works follow from these initial investments, developed in a friendly competitive atmosphere and during a period open to intellectual innovation.

Let me conclude by a reminder, that four of the six contributors of the special issue of 1989 came from INSEE and were not academic people at the beginning. Such a foundation of the economics of convention has been a little bit forgotten during the development of its works. However, it signaled the key role cognitive conventions play in building and implementing public policies through the emergence of legitimate and fair informational bases of judgment.

2. Could you introduce your notion of convention? And what are the differences between your notion of

"convention" and the notions of "rule" and "institution"?

I will say, first, that the overall research program of the economics of convention departs from two dominant and opposed theoretical views. These views (the perfect market and the macro-structures views) try to explain from an external point of view how people are able to coordinate on markets, in firms, or in every ordinary circumstance of life and work, despite the pervasive uncertainty which surrounds individual expectations and actions. Due to this uncertainty, any coordination with other people is a problem. For neoclassical economics, the mechanism which produces this kind of daily miracle is the market. Rational and omniscient individuals negotiate on the market mutually advantageous contracts, which are perceived to be beneficial for the economy as a whole. The macro-structural view says, in contrast, that global institutions and the state, by sets of prescriptive rules, regulate the economy. There is in this view no opportunity for individual actions that could be undertaken autonomously to achieve effective coordination.

The economics of convention aims to comprehend from the point of view of people themselves how they try to solve the problems of coordination which they face on a daily basis. Such a comprehensive approach helps to understand that, to overcome problems of coordination, people are using conventions. The scope of conventions start from local ones, like those developed in family or work life, to more general conventions which, for example, support confidence into money, or define quality standards for products or wage classifications. In my case, I try to follow the definition given by David Lewis (1969) of conventions as systems of mutual expectations. But I anchor it into effective situations of economic or social coordination; and I take these situations to be embedded both in the past, present and future, which is to stress their dynamics. This approach of the economy introduces markets and institutions not as external machineries, but as "devices" which offer people resources in the situations they face to overcome coordination problems. Such devices are to be conceived as stabilizing expectations and offering rules to deal with potential conflicts between actors.

I will take a very simple example to make explicit how I understand the notions of convention, rule and institution: that of pedestrians waiting for crossing a street. Of course things are more complicated than this short example suggests. Nevertheless, for French people living in Berlin, as

myself this year, it is fascinating to see that (most) Germans are waiting to cross the street until the light turns green (walk), even though no cars are in view. French people would have seized the “no cars” opportunity to cross the street without waiting for the green light. I must say that, in general, even if there are some cars coming, French pedestrians try to slalom between the cars to access the other side of the street. In Germany and in France, institutions (the “code de la route”) ruling the pedestrian and car behavior are similar, and so is the problem of coordination met by them. However, French and German people act differently. The standard view with its moral background – so widespread in Germany – would say that French people are transgressing the rules, putting other people into danger, while German people, by respecting the rules, coordinate more efficiently and surely. And it is not uncommon, even in Berlin, when somebody does not wait until the lights turn green, to observe gestures and even open reprobation from other pedestrians. In practice, German people are following a convention, backed by shared knowledge, that one must respect the rules. German pedestrians and car drivers are expecting from each other that they follow this convention, that is, that they respect the rules. To be persuaded, look at the way by which drivers are taking an aggressive start as soon as their light turns green. Drivers do not expect pedestrian to be so crazy that they cross the street when the light is green for the cars. “French coordination” to solve this street problem is more complex, and helps to understand other aspects of coordination by conventions, namely that rules are considered only as references for people to grasp the problem of coordination they face. A collective and in-process interpretation of this reference will follow in situ between the actors. In the same way, it will consist of the development of mutual expectations between the pedestrians and car drivers at work to solve their problem of coordination. They will adjust to each other in the situation, so that, regardless if the traffic light is green or red, circulation continues without accidents. This outcome requires that each side interprets the signs that are sent off from the other side about its intended conduct. It also means that actors can signal by, for instance, deviating a little bit from its trajectory, slowing its speed, accelerating its move, or delaying it.

In other terms, conventions as systems of mutual expectations are for actors key tools to be able to coordinate, and for researchers the key features from which to start their inquiry into economic coordination. For instance, in the above so-called “German” case, the convention is to re-

spect the rules. Rules are either written or incorporated (into technical objects for instance) references that help to build a frame for interpreting what is going on into the situation and to adjust to its course, as in the traffic light example. But only conventions allow achieving in situ the workable (hence right) interpretation as, in the “French” case, the in-process mechanism of mutual adjustment. Institutions are sets of procedural and substantive rules, which pose the general framework for the coordination. In situations where coordination develops without “accidents”, they are ignored by the participants, hence not existing in some way for them. I would nonetheless say that institutions are always present in situations of coordination, at least at their horizon. Institutions “act” as common knowledge (CK) devices of last resort. When entering a situation, people know in advance that, if some accident or conflict occurs during the course of their coordination, there are procedures and resources available to set the issue and find a fair solution. In the traffic light case, if some pedestrian or driver causes an accident, this means to call the police, to contact the insurance systems, and if necessary, go to the courts. Institutions are decisive as horizon to the coordination, but they are not playing the game by themselves. Coordination only occurs through the active (and sometimes innovative) mediation of conventions and interpretation.

3. What would you say is the contribution of EC to the research about institutions and what are the different perspectives of the EC on institutions?

So many pages have been written on institutions that, by putting them next to each other, they would reach around the globe. And in my answer I will add some! Of course the “problem of the institution” is one of the most fundamental in social sciences. Mostly, institutions are conceived, with regards to coordination, either along an instrumental view or along a determinist view. These views are the two poles between which the EC contributions have to find their right place.

In its founding manifest – *Revue économique* 1989 – the EC program considered any coordination between individuals as double-sided. It apprehended coordination both as the outcome of individual actions and as the framework constraining their action. In other terms, the manifest joined the preceding views into one, while not explaining the reason for doing so. While keeping a “refined” indi-

vidualist posture, it nevertheless distances itself from the neo-classical program in considering that individuals are unable to act purely as if they were alone (hence, the conventions make expectations possible). But such deviance is not enough, as it appeared, to sustain the ambition to build an alternative framework to neo-classical economics. What was missing to provide solid foundations to the economics of convention was the collective and social nature of the worlds in which every individual lives. One can see institutions as the way by which the collective and social dimensions take presence within a process of coordination. However, to bring in a fresh contribution, something more was required on reasonability and institutions conceived as practices.

Firstly, standard (or limited) individual rationality must be replaced by a wider framework, that of reasonability. In a reasonability framework, individuals know that they are living in society and, consequently, they know that, to be heard and understood when they act, they should be ready to exhibit general reasons for their behavior (for instance to follow some shared principle of justice, or to respect their promises). Not only in arguing, but in their action, people must signify that they are aware of collective values. Of course they have a total freedom not to do that and they could be merely opportunistic, especially since collective values can be interpreted differently in a given singular situation, which is to say that values can turn into objects of controversies. However such individuals run the risk to be disqualified in their claims or interests. The EC view of reasonability relies on the works of social philosophers like John Rawls or Amartya Sen for who collective values (and especially social justice) are mutually expected references between people when they coordinate. Note that, in this perspective, the EC tends to depart from researchers like John Elster or Mark Granovetter who keep the standard view of rationality.

Secondly, one must apprehend (following Rawls on that point) institutions as practices. On the one side, in the EC framework, institutions implement common goods, principles of social justice, preconceptions of the individual (to some extent an expectation with regards to his/her behavior: is he supposed to be opportunist or reasonable?). Due to the plurality of values, principles, common worlds, for a given domain a wide diversity of institutional settings can emerge, as one can discover when comparing societies among space and time. On the other side, to take institutions as practices means that one should be aware that institutions are always embedded into processes of imple-

mentation, interpretation and revision which develop through social practices. One must distinguish between the "text" of an institution (its declared intentions and goals, its formal rules as written into law, regulations and so on) and its practical meaning when at work in a situation of coordination. Take, for instance, systems of unemployment insurance. They have been established for securing unemployed people and for giving them enough time to find a new job. However, their practical meaning can be different. Employers, being aware of these systems, can plan job redundancies with the hope that workers can accept them with less difficulty than in case that no insurance mechanism exists. In such situations, far from struggling against unemployment, these systems favor job cuts, sometimes with the implicit agreement of part of the workers. The last word, if I could say, will be given by the set of conventions between people. One should have a pragmatist approach to institutions. For they are always seized in a dynamics that mixes implementation and revision, that gives birth to unexpected interpretations and sometimes opens the road for institutional innovation.

Within the works of the EC's founders, one can find an array of positions from works close to formalized evolutionary approaches (André Orléan) or to revisited limited rationality (Olivier Favereau) towards research close to the above developments (François Eymard-Duvernay, Laurent Thévenot and myself), which I believe is the most promising for the next years.

4. From the standpoint of economic sociology, the EC is exceptional because from the beginning it is an interdisciplinary movement where sociologists, economists, statisticians, economic historians are working closely together. How do you explain this successful cooperation and how do you evaluate this kind of interdisciplinarity? Can one speak of specific contributions of different disciplines to EC or is EC better conceived as a transdisciplinary movement with its own transdisciplinary logic and dynamic?

At a first level, to be interdisciplinary can be viewed for the EC as a strategy of development and survival in an extremely hard and hostile atmosphere, that of standard economics. One should be aware that, should he come

today, Keynes with his wonderful and precise theoretical, but literary language, would be considered by standard economics at best as a political economist. Whatever he would develop, his powerful intuitions and ways of thinking would today have no access to the most prestigious journals in the field; his ideas would not be seriously considered or even known in central banks and in other macro institutions. It is therefore I say that gaining allies in other disciplines helps to survive and to be positively evaluated in social sciences.

At a deeper and more fundamental level, it is easy to discover that the major oppositions which historically structure research in economics (for instance, instrumental rationality versus reasonability; or individualism versus holism, or the search for some compromise between) are to be found in other social sciences. This means that it is very fruitful to look at the way other disciplines frame your question within their own discipline, how they develop their methodologies, and what empirical facts they bring to the debate. Exchange and cross-fertilization can follow in a mutually beneficial process. EC founders were prepared for interdisciplinarity. All of them have developed links, for intellectual reasons as well as through friendship, with other scientists (to your list I would add lawyers, especially in labor law). For my part, I develop research relations with economic and social historians and it has worked, in the sense that historical research, in France and in the UK, has begun to reformulate in its own way the basic concerns of the EC, for example to consider the role of expectations or to look at products as incorporating sets of social and economic conventions between people.

Interdisciplinary research faces some particular difficulties. In the EC case, difficulties come from the interested and ambivalent way by which, too often, some sociologists in particular (at least in France) consider economics. Sometimes concepts are borrowed from economics without making in-depth critics of what a concept means in its disciplinary environment and semantics (remember, for instance, the use of the concept of "capital" in the works of Pierre Bourdieu). Moreover, some researchers prefer to have a schematic view of what is going on in the competing fields, because it is easier to fight against an enemy you have chosen and predefined. This is also true of economics, which often uses an ad-hoc sociologist explanation for phenomena it cannot yet include in its theory or which takes an imperialist posture for explaining all social phenomena by extending the market model.

Instead of deciding between interdisciplinarity or trans-disciplinarity, my conviction is that one must develop research programs (for instance on institutions or public policies), common to the social sciences concerned by the core issue. This would mean that each discipline has an open mind to what others develop, at the same time as one is willing to renew (if necessary) one's own field of research. Maybe such a research strategy will help to develop a new discipline or subdiscipline (like socio-economics or economic sociology). Adopting an open and less finalized cooperation could be the best in the long run and would create room to basic innovations. It is, more or less, the strategy we had in the EC and that I believe one should continue to develop.

5. In the last years you intensified your research about the state and about Europe. Could you sketch the relation between the two topics and the way EC approaches them?

In modern social and political thought, the state has had the greatest difficulties to positively exist. For instance, one can find no reference to the state in the index of the Theory of Justice by Rawls (1971). Schematically said, the standard view is to see the state as external (and opposed) to society, as in the concept of "civil society". The state becomes an impersonal bureaucracy making intrusion into the private sphere. It is seen as full of civil officers or politicians pursuing their own interests under the veil of the general interest. This leads to a special conception of democracy. Democracy is viewed mostly as a mechanism by which citizens can control and limit the activism of the state, but not as a commitment for citizens to act themselves in direction of the common good. For European countries, difficulties to conceptualize the state are growing, due to the fact that the Brussels institutions threaten the national states. Through the restricting of their past competencies, or via the obligation to incorporate European rules more or less foreign to their own traditions, national states are progressively viewed from Brussels as obstacles to overcome. Furthermore, the theoretical status of European institutions remains unclear; it appears as a composite, but not yet identified object for the social sciences (see Salais 2007a).

The current situation can be an opportunity for the EC. The EC should develop a positive theory of the state. Under the condition, in my view, that the EC does not forget that it

develops itself within the French tradition of thought with regards to the state, citizenship, democracy and the *res publica*. This is the assumption I follow in my researches. By this I do not mean that the French political model, being presupposed universal, should be universally adopted (notwithstanding the fact that, historically along the 19th century and perhaps later, the reference to the French revolution of rights was the motor for democratic movements in Europe). The EC should rather develop this model as a theoretical model, apt to grasp the diversity of political conceptions of the state (even the negative ones) – and to be universalistic in that way. This would require establishing some basic assumptions or axioms.

Hardly any work has been done in this direction. For my part, I try to establish intuitions upon rather robust, theoretical and empirical foundations. A first intuition (Salais/Storper 1993; Chapter IV.1) is to consider that what the state should do is the object of mutual expectations among actors. In that sense, the state becomes a convention between people, and the state is no longer external to the political community. Instead it is an affair of the community, to which it belongs. This implies that persons become members of the state, which means that, through deliberative democracy, they take an active part to the formation and implementation of the common good. By this reciprocal move, the common good becomes the “public thing”, and persons become citizens.

In such a theory, the state is expected by people to deal with the coordination failures which happen when expected common goods cannot be achieved. In other terms, the state has something to do with the gap which, unavoidably, arises between the process of coordination among individual actions, on the one hand, and the collective common good that society aspires to, on the other hand. For instance, as Keynes demonstrated, full employment can be pursued as a desirable objective, but it is most likely that individuals’ actions do not spontaneously achieve this. Hence a gap arises between individual coordination and the objective, which both justifies the existence of the state and frames its policies to reduce unemployment. Depending on the conception of the state dominantly at work, public policies have to be sensitive to the failures of the coordination process, and complement or supplement the process to reach the common good. Several conceptions of the state can be developed by an approach of this kind. In the neo-liberal conception for instance, the premise is that no common good is possible, only private goods whose satisfaction should be favored

while at the same time respecting some basic rules (like the principles of justice in Rawls’ conception). In that case, one can say that a convention of the “absent state” was developed. In other conceptions, the state is present in various elaborations (see, below, the convention of the “situated state”).

However – here is our second intuition – for the common good to be pursued by the community, the gap between its achievement and the outcome of individual coordination should be the object of cognitive elaboration and become common knowledge within the community. Being objectified and publicly stated, this gap, so constructed, helps formalizing and legitimating policies, and evaluating their effectiveness. For instance, to reach full employment can be pursued as a collective objective only if the category “unemployment” has been invented. This gap can become the object of public measurement (through statistics and management), and policies can be targeted towards its reduction. In other terms, the informational bases which orient public policies and on which these policies rely, are one of the key entries to elaborate a positive theory of the state. History of cognitive categories which found the action of the state has been one of the sources of the EC (through the seminal works of Alain Desrosières and others). Not surprisingly, here one can discover a linkage between the EC and the works of, for example, Amartya Sen. The EC focuses on the diversity of informational bases of judgment on justice which legitimize public policies, in particular social policies (see the forthcoming issue 18/2008 of *Raisons Pratiques*, L’enquête sur les capacités). I am currently coordinating a European research program on these issues, precisely on the relevance of the Sen’s capability approach for social policies (6FP Integrated Project CAPRIGHT. See the website www.capright.eu).

Let me conclude by sketching what could be a convention of “the situated state” in the case of Europe. As theoretical objects, “situated” states are fascinating. Firstly, they start from the premise that the common good cannot be a priori defined from the top by general categories, but nevertheless can be defined in situation by actors. Specifying the common good as well as implementing it can only be achieved through its indexation to the “local” specificities. For instance full employment is depending of so many factors varying from one context to another that only actors embedded in the situation are able to acquire the required practical knowledge and to set the issue in relevant terms. Secondly, situated states start from the premise that people are capable to act towards the common good.

Such premise can be criticized based on its naïveté to speculate on the a priori good morality of human beings. Things can be different, however, if public action conceives its procedures and tools in such a way that the premise of personal capabilities becomes self-fulfilling. Learning by doing's schemes should be implemented. One can find many intuitions of such self-fulfilling processes generating capabilities in political philosophy. According to Tocqueville (e.g. Millon-Delsol 1992), the development of such capabilities can be built upon proximity: between people, with the objects of the situation. Such acquaintance and indexation to the situation create for the involved people a practical knowledge, which can be adequate to formulate and achieve the common good.

Far from being abstract, a perspective like this could be adequate to deal with the difficulties that the political building of Europe is facing today. The social heterogeneity among countries is so wide that imposing uniform and standard rules from Brussels raises growing political resistances. Opting for a convention of the situated state would, by contrast, allow European common goods to be concretized in situations (for instance at the levels of the member states, or even and probably better, at local levels like regions, sectors or professions). Letting local actors start from their practical experience and implement such defined European common goods in a similar fashion would provide them with capabilities to build Europe and to make it their own thing. Diversity would become a resource, not something to eradicate. For the Brussels bureaucracy, the price to pay will be to abandon its strategy to control the process by setting general and non disputable rules. If European citizens could see that they have a voice at their own level in the European process, they would perhaps begin to consider Europe as a collective project to which they could commit themselves, and not only as the private affair of some unknown and remote elite.

A brief summary of Robert Salais' career and works

Salais studied economics and statistics at the *École Polytechnique* and the *École Nationale de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (ENSAE) in Paris. In the 1970ies and 1980ies he worked at the INSEE (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques*), the French national institute for statistics and economic research, where in the 1980ies he participated at a group of researchers, to

which Laurent Thévenot belonged. This group contributed to research in the area of employment and socio-professional categories and employment relations from the standpoint of the EC (Salais/Thévenot [eds.] 1986) but the group also started to work about unemployment and the history of this category (Salais/Baverez/Reynaud [eds.] 1989). Later he was CNRS-research director at the IDHE (*Institutions et Dynamiques Historiques de l'Économie, ENS-Cachan*) in Paris. With his new group he did innovative research about the theory of institutions and the role of the state for economy (Salais/Chatel/Rivaud-Danset [eds.] 1998). His latest research focuses on the *European Community and Economic History* (Salais/Villeneuve [eds.] 2004).

Salais was research fellow at the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* (WiKo) in 2005/2006, and since 2006 he has a guest professorship at the *Wissenschaftszentrum zu Berlin für Sozialforschung* (WZB).

Concerning the approach of EC, especially the works of Robert Salais contributed to their international reception. On the one hand because he early published results of the EC in English, on the other hand because he is one of the first who applied this new approach to international comparative research in transnational cooperations (Storper/Salais 1992, 1997; Salais/Storper 1993; Salais/Villeneuve [eds.] 2004) as later did Laurent Thévenot (Lamont/Thévenot [eds.] 2000) and the group of Eymard-Duvernay (Bessy/Eymard-Duvernay/Larquier/Marchal [eds.] 2001). Salais also wrote the first German introduction into this approach (Salais 2007b).

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