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# Economics of Convention and the History of Economies. Towards a Transdisciplinary Approach in Economic History

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**Abstract:** »*Économie des conventions und die Geschichte von Ökonomien. Perspektiven für einen transdisziplinären Ansatz in der Wirtschaftsgeschichte.*«. This introduction and the contributions of the HSR issue intend to develop and to demonstrate the potentialities of the economics of convention (EC) for a transdisciplinary approach to the history of economies. “Convention” has become a core concept in the renewal of French social sciences from structuralism towards pragmatism. Conventions are interpretative schemes for action and coordination that persons and actors use in situations under conditions of uncertainty. Through repeated interaction they become an intimate part of the history, incorporated into justifications, behaviours and social objects like institutions. In contrast to neoclassic economics and to new historical institutionalism, the EC starts from assumptions of a plurality of economic frameworks of action, of the socio-historical construction of concepts, categories, and data. It rejects dichotomies, adopts a broad conception of the economy, conceives institutional change as the change of the “conventional” foundations for the pragmatic use and interpretation of institutions. Its methodology is that of a “complex pragmatist situationalism”, dedicated to a comprehensive approach aiming at reconstructing the internal going-on of historical processes. This special issue offers a set of contributions on: the origins of the approach, its methodological standpoint, its possible developments towards a sociology of engagement or hermeneutical concerns, several applications on economic history (notably about conventions of quality and of labor).

**Keywords:** Economics of convention, institutions, pragmatism, economic action, situation, economic history, new historical institutionalism, justifications, plurality.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decades the *économie des conventions* (economics of convention, in short EC) was developed as a transdisciplinary approach to the analysis of economic institutions.<sup>1</sup> It was originally applied in the 1980s from economists and sociologists in studies of statistical classifications, in studies of work, labor markets and of labor organization, and in studies of products and product qualities (Thévenot 1986; Salais and Thévenot 1986; Eymard-Duvernay 1987; Boltanski and Thévenot 1989). But from its beginning, this approach was also developed and applied in the historical analysis of economic institutions and classifications (Affichard 1977, 1987; Boltanski 1982; Salais, Baverez and Reynaud 1986).<sup>2</sup> In this perspective the historical interplay and the co-construction of institutions, social categories and the pragmatics of coordination were reconstructed. This is the reason why from the beginning also historians were interested and involved in the development of the EC as a complete paradigm in the field of political economy.<sup>3</sup> In the following decades research was applied to the whole range of socio-economic topics. Since the 1990s the international reception began to intensify<sup>4</sup> and the number of contributions about the internal paradigmatic structure, the paradigmatic coherence and the development of the EC increased.<sup>5</sup> And also since the 1990s the EC was conceived as one of the main parts of the so called “new French social sciences” and the notion of *convention* became a core concept in the new French social sciences (Dosse 1999; Nachi 2006; Corcuff 2007). The EC postulates a pragmatic competence of actors to coordinate their interactions to achieve a common goal (Salais and Storper 1993; Storper and Salais 1997). Actors are able to refer to specific socio-cultural resources to coordinate their interactions. Conventions are these cultural resources. Conventions are not to be misunderstood as traditions, customs or mere technical standards.<sup>6</sup>

Conventions resemble ‘hypotheses’ formulated by persons with respect to the relationship between their actions and the actions of those on whom they must depend to realize a goal. When interactions are reproduced again and again in similar situations, and when particular courses of action have proved successful, they become incorporated in routines and we then tend to forget their ini-

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<sup>1</sup> See for introduction Eymard-Duvernay (2006a, 2006b), Favereau and Lazega (2002), Orléan (2004), Salais (2007), Salais and Storper (1997), Diaz-Bone (2009a, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See also the contribution from Claire Judde de Larivière and Georges Hanne (in this volume).

<sup>3</sup> See the contribution of Christof Jeggle (in this volume).

<sup>4</sup> See Wagner (1994), for an overview Diaz-Bone and Thévenot (2010).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Eymard-Duvernay et al. (2006, 2011), Swedberg (2006), Salais (2007), Jagd (2007, 2011), and Diaz-Bone (2009a).

<sup>6</sup> There are other approaches which refer also to the notion of convention but which differ in many respects from the French approach of EC. An example: a completely different approach is the modelling of conventions in game theory by Peyton Young.

tially hypothetical character. Conventions thus become an intimate part of the history incorporated in behaviors. (Storper and Salais 1997, 16)

Conventions emerged historically from interactions wherein actors had to solve coordination under the condition of uncertainty on how situations, persons, objects can be evaluated in a shared way. Without shared evaluations no coordinated collective intentionality would be possible and any interaction would fail. Rules and institutions are seen as incomplete, so actors have to share ways how to apply them and how to evaluate their appropriate interpretation. Again conventions are needed to achieve a shared way of interpretation and to find an appropriate way how to “handle” institutions and rules. This sharing of interpretation does not presuppose peoples’ belonging to the same community, nor any categorical imperative or submission to some incorporated habitus (Livet 1994). It basically means that, in order to successfully achieve coordination – which is always situated in time and space – it is enough that nothing happens which contradicts the assumption made by the participants that they share the same evaluation of the situation. Conventions are both, the precondition of coordination taking place as well as the outcome of coordination. Process and outcome are intimately intermingled.

The EC can be regarded as a social-constructivist theory of economic action and economic institutions. The term “constructivist” is widely used these days and has become an umbrella term for many paradigms. But here it has immediate evidence as characterization, because the pragmatic basis of EC contradicts to paradigms which postulate given structures and qualities as *a priori* ontologies of the social. Instead EC regards these as a posteriori ontologies – i.e. as the result of foregoing processes and practices. And their reality is not external to these processes and actions which generated them. From this standpoint, institutions are seen not as exogenous to economic action, they are not pre-given exogenous constraints. Instead they must be “enacted” by competent actors in real situations (Salais 1998; Bessy 2002). Whereas neo-classical theory assumes qualities and rationality as given (and in their terminology as exogenous) EC regards qualities, cognitive formats and rationalities as depending on conventions. Here conventions become – as logics of economic coordination and evaluation – the interpretative resource on which the construction of qualities, cognitive formats and rationalities is grounded.

The theoretical work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) became an important foundation for the EC.<sup>7</sup> Boltanski and Thévenot identified a plurality of conventions which evolved in the course of the socio-cultural evolution. Such

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<sup>7</sup> This book was published in France the first time in 1987 (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987). It was published again (by another publisher) in France in 1991 (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). Translations were published almost two decades later. An English translation was published in 2006 (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and a German translation was published in 2007 (Boltanski and Thévenot 2007).

evolution was driven by actors who intentionally seek to solve problems which arise in the process of economic coordination and the processes of production and distribution. The consequence from the viewpoint of the EC is that there is a plurality of possible pragmatic logics for economic coordination among many others. Robert Salais and Michael Storper continued this theoretical perspective and worked out their influential approach of economic action frameworks and *possible* economic worlds of economic coordination (Salais and Storper 1993; Storper and Salais 1997). *Real* economic worlds are combinations (as compromises or as conflicts) of conventions. The *market convention* (or market world) is only one possible convention for economic coordination. The EC identified up to a dozen of possible conventions. In economies all conventions are existing principles as the *industrial convention*, the *ecologic convention*, the *interpersonal convention*, the *domestic convention*, the *civic convention*, the *network convention* and others. Every empirically existing market and every empirically existing productive organization combine a plurality of these conventions. For the EC it is impossible to reduce the sphere of the economy to a single logic of action – as neo-classical economic theory does.

## 2. Economist's Perspectives on Economic History

The EC aims at linking analysis of discourses and concepts with the approach of social practices; it has also a broad understanding of economic phenomena (Favereau 1986; Bessy and Favereau 2003; Eymard-Duvernay 2009; Diaz-Bone 2009b). In contrast to mainstream economics, the EC intends to meet the two criteria that the economic historian Jürgen Kocka recently claimed for a renewing of economic history which could also be a renewed basis for a fruitful cooperation between history (especially economic history) and social sciences.

First, discourse and conceptual history must be linked to the history of practices, which is difficult to achieve. Secondly, economic history benefits only if it adopts a broad understanding of its tasks and does not restrict itself to economic matters in the narrow sense, for instance its use of efficiency. (Kocka 2010, 53)

There are competitors whom one can meet on the road towards historians, the several neo-institutionalisms which emerged from the pioneer works of Ronald H. Coase (the transaction costs) and Oliver E. Williamson (the close relationship between asset specificities and structures of governance).<sup>8</sup> The most talented challenger, with no doubt, is Douglass C. North and his approach to economic history.

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<sup>8</sup> See Coase (1937) and Williamson (1985, 2000).

The specificity and novelty of the North program consisted in reframing the theoretical resources provided both by the transaction cost approach and the rational choice theories and making them more fitted to the existence of institutions and their role on economic change and dynamics. To do so, North has largely neglected the concept of governance and the rigid links established by Williamson between the degree of asset specificity and the mode of governance (Williamson 1985). He has redirected the concept of transaction cost towards a theory of exchange which details several types of exchange (from the local and personalized one to the most impersonal – in some parallel with the plurality of forms of coordination proper to the EC). He criticizes the rational choice school for its reluctance to accept that “institutions do exist” and for its narrow approach to individual rationality to which he prefers a (to some extent) cognition-based conceptualization. On this, Douglass C. North as well as (in 1986) the founders of the economics of convention built on (although differently) the theoretical opportunities offered since the 1960s by the analysis of problems of micro-coordination, thanks to the rupture it represented with regards to macro-historical and structural analysis.

Close comparison between the new historical institutionalism (in short NHI) – as framed by North in his seminal 1990 book “Institutions, institutional change and economic performance” (North 1990) and continued in his 2005 book “Understand the process of institutional change” (North 2005) – and the economics of convention (EC) reveals some parallels, if not resemblances, but deep core differences as well. The reader, one can guess, will become aware of them along this issue. Let us begin by parallels and then come to basic differences.

Both approaches have the same general interest in institutions and the role of cognition in economic matters, though in their own way as we will see. But parallels go further into details. Douglass C. North has a true concern with individual perceptions which, as he said, “are a function of the way the mind interprets the information it receives. The mental constructs individuals form to explain and interpret the world around them” contribute to shape their choices (North 1993, 2). At first glance, this resembles to the way the EC considers conventions: depending on the authors, mutual expectations, assumptions within action with regard to possible worlds, models of representation, collective cognitive arrangements, etc. Conventions are present in North’s construction as a specific kind among a variety of institutions and are classified under the label of “informal constraints”. North is aware of possible interactions between norms and, more generally, “informal constraints” and formal rules, and of their impact on economic performance; which resembles interactions between conventions and institutions considered by the EC. While the EC understands institutions as multi-layered sediments of conventions, the NHI does not neglect the possibility that, somewhere, institutions could be seen “as an extension of the mental constructs which the human mind develops to inter-

pret the environment of the individual” (North 1993, 7). Facing the same challenge, the long-term stability of institutional systems and the fact that, most often, only incremental changes are feasible, the NHI and EC come to evaluate the role of informal constraints (respectively conventions) to stabilize institutional sets; and, too, that institutional change becomes effective only when informal constraints (resp. conventions) more or less fit with it. And that may be more ... up to the point of wondering about the undertaking of a possibly fruitful dialogue at three: history, economics of convention and new historical institutionalism.

Could historians consider the choice between makes no difference in research outcomes? Could they simply link their choice to the nature of their object, economically dominant for the NHI, socially incline for the EC? That would be neglecting the impact of foundations and methodologies sincerely foreign to each other. Basically, the NHI aims at pushing the integration the farthest possible of new preoccupations (cognition activities of agents, limits of rationality, taking institutions seriously, understanding the long run stability of economic trajectories, and the difficulty to change institutional settings) without putting into question the “fundamentals” of mainstream economics. What the EC does is to face the challenge to rebuild these fundamentals in order to provide these preoccupations with solid and realistic foundations; and not the least to meet other social sciences and implement interdisciplinary work.

There are, at least, three premises to investigate which are basically different between NHI and EC. All revolve around the theoretical comprehension of what institutions do and of where they come from. The first premise is about the articulation and dynamic interaction between conventions (that EC does not assimilate to a kind of institutions at the difference of NHI) and institutions. The second one concerns the overall architecture: the NHI starts, curiously (considering its ambitions) from a holistic regulative conception of the architecture; the EC starts from coordination as a situated pragmatism in a horizontal as well as bottom-up conception of economic development. Institutional architecture is not pre-given, instead permanently built and rebuilt through interaction and interpretation. The third one is about the theoretical status of objects and, consequently, of persons. In NHI (as in mainstream economics) objects are reduced to their intrinsic physical properties and persons to the use of instrumental rationality dedicated to such objects (even values are considered under such angle). EC is mostly considering people through their productive projects in the general sense of realization processes in life and work. For EC such projects have a wider coherence, simultaneously material, cognitive and in some way intentional (in a weak sense). It follows that people have agencies which are, by necessity, anchored in social and historical contexts. They are not, properly speaking, embedded in something external, but are co-producing themselves and their world.

## 2.1 Conventions and/or Institutions

Like Kenneth Arrow (1951), North is using convention in the narrow sense of old social customs economics unfortunately has to deal with. One cannot overlook their influence, but in no case could they belong to the realm of economics. EC is working the other way. Following the linguistic, then pragmatic turns, it considers that conventions invade everyday life, in economic coordination as elsewhere. It is easy for everybody to observe their omnipresence on markets, on firms or, more generally in production networks, in sectors, in financial markets, or around the realization of complex products involving a lot of actors dispersed around the world for instance. How could such actors coordinate without having something in common, namely conventions defining the quality of the product, its pieces, the way they have to fit together? Information on prices is not enough.<sup>9</sup> Without conventions of quality and agreement on them among participants, the market could not work neither would the production process.

Conventions run the economic process in its dynamics, not institutions. They do so through mutual expectations between participants, the building of common knowledge; they serve as reciprocal references to evaluate whether the actions of others follow the path we expect they will do. Such conventions are multidimensional. They underline discourses of justifications, especially in case of disputes or deliberation. But, too, they guide practices as frameworks that allow overcoming uncertainty because participants have a reasonable confidence that others will follow the same guide; or if not, they would have a way to assess others do not respect it. So the EC has taken on board – as we said before – since its beginning the requirements underlined by Jürgen Kocka (2010).

One can say that conventions also work as practical norms. There is no need to bring disputes to a court; it is often sufficient that signals are sent by others to manifest they consider to deviate from their expectations, or to remind the necessity to maintain one's reputation for remaining on the market. All in all, the repeated use of conventions in daily coordination contributes to build and shape what one can call the practical knowledge of individuals and actors. They rely on such knowledge; they use it to test institutions, to protest or to

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<sup>9</sup> Imagine that a supplier of cast-iron pieces for car motors decides to substitute, say, tin to cast-iron, because he could lower his prices and then win new clients (which is the way mainstream economics basically considers market competition). It would not be long for him to be expelled from that market, because he does not any more respect the conventions of quality at work in the industry. Conventions of quality are prior to any market, and emerge from progressive agreement between their actors. Competition is, above all, over quality; hence the strategic importance to be the first to elaborate the future standards. See the contributions of Philippe Minard, Bert De Munck, and Christof Jeggle on conventions of quality and worlds of production (in this volume).



play the game. Such practical knowledge, largely autonomously built, is the very basis of the functioning of democracy. Basically we sustain in this issue that conventions have antecedence over institutions in socioeconomic, as well as political processes, and we claim the need to undertake convention-based socio-history.

This is not to say that institutions do not matter. Institutions matter, too. But the way NHI formalizes them and their connection to conventions is very deceptive, when considering how economies are going on, nowadays and in the past. We come here to our second point.

## 2.2 The Dynamic Interaction between Conventions and Institutions

The key words in NHI when considering the role of institutions are “constraint” and “incentive”: “Institutions are the constraints that human beings impose on human interaction”; even conventions are considered as “informal constraints” (North 1993, 1). NHI allows some feed-back from organizations to alter the rules of institutions, which contributes to institutional change. But the process of constraints and incentives dominates and is going down towards individuals, with organizations as intermediaries. Such a view is, above all, dogmatically normative; it does not fit in particular, even for a while, to globalized economies. It is better to have a more open and internal judgment rather than to ex ante evaluate, and from the external, what is going on. In a globalization context, markets and worldwide processes of production rely almost exclusively on conventions between actors. Transcription of them into international or national private law instruments are used to prevent or organize disputes that may arise. But these instruments do not constitute the very matter of what is at stake; such role is fulfilled by the conventions that are shared by actors depending on their markets, professions or sectors. Basically global actors pass over existing institutions, national or international.

Hence in the EC view, instead of viewing institutions as devices for “political control” over rational individuals, one should consider what empirical interactions develop between conventions and institutions. Institutions have to pass the test of the existing conventions and, at the end, should be analyzed as multilayered-sedimentations of conventions. Institutions aim at inscribing general principles of justice and ethics into conventional spaces which can no longer (and even not in the long run) act as if they ignore such inscription. But convention-based practices permanently remind to institutions that their legitimacy and effectiveness are only obtained when they, their rules and objectives, begin to be part of actors’ expectations as framed by the conventions they use.<sup>10</sup> Institutional changes arise for EC from the interplay of horizontal coordination in which actors in situation have to deal with a plurality of conventions and to

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<sup>10</sup> More is said in the contribution of Robert Salais (in this volume).

cope with conflicts and compromises between them, and of vertical coordination coming from the different levels (from personal engagement to state – oriented coordination and evaluation) and the conflicting orientations they assign to collective action.

### 2.3 Objects and Persons

The third premise to discuss is the theoretical status of objects and – consequently – of persons. Here another theoretical and methodological innovation comes from EC which – as we believe – offers long run perspective for historians: the use of a pragmatist approach. The standard view from Herbert Simon to NHI (that could be found also in Marxist vulgate or in positivism) is to maintain objects and persons external to each others. As we mentioned earlier, objects are reduced to their intrinsic physical properties and persons to the use of instrumental rationality dedicated to such objects.

The purpose of the EC is to overcome this dichotomy and to discover how objects and persons could be said as belonging to the same world, especially to the same possible world.<sup>11</sup> Pragmatism rejects dualisms;<sup>12</sup> its use by EC builds a bridge with initial investments made by Luc Boltanski, Alain Desrosières, Robert Salais and Laurent Thévenot in the history of social categories (like nomenclatures of social groups or the category unemployment) which prepared the emergence of EC. The bridge sheds light on the concept of “qualification” in its core meaning of providing quality to something or to somebody. This operation is not merely cognitive, but appears to be fundamental for any institutional change. Indeed it belongs to language exchanges and to the implementing of theoretical discourses into current practices, but it goes well beyond. To be achieved, qualification requires investments of form dedicated to it (Thévenot 1983) and, much wider, a socio-historical process of material and institutional change that, as in case of the category unemployment (Salais 1986, 2007a, 2007b), has run from the organization of firms towards the domain of public policies, law and the shaping of individual and collective expectations. When such a process is achieved, one can observe an overall coherence (or compatibility) between the qualifying of objects, persons and institutions that allow them to participate in the same world.

Not only NHI missed such understanding of institutional change, but, worse with regards to its project, it let aside the lessons brought about change by industrial economics in its institutionalist version of the 1970s and 1980s. We are thinking here of works from Michael Piore, Bengt-Ake Lundvall, Georges Richardson, Richard Langlois, Arndt Sorge or Dominique Foray, to speak of

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<sup>11</sup> But not equivalent as Bruno Latour and Michel Callon advocate for in their actor-network theory (ANT).

<sup>12</sup> More in the contribution of Diaz-Bone and Thévenot (2010).

some.<sup>13</sup> All have focused their attention on the substantial content and affinities which production processes require to be efficient between technology, cognitive tools, workers, type of network between firms, public policies, and criteria of choice.<sup>14</sup> The integration of these lessons in EC was one objective of Salais and Storper (1993; Storper and Salais 1997). Combined with the plurality assumption, the way is free for richer and more realistic conceptions of both objects and persons. The reader will find them at work in all contributions in this volume, as well as innovative conceptions of conventions and institutions.

### 3. EC and Economic History

As argued above, the NHI developed some modern positions in the field of economic history, but kept core assumptions of neo-classical economic theory, which remain problematic from the standpoint of the EC. From its beginning the new institutional economics and NHI were critical references for the development of this new approach (Bessy 2002; Dequech 1997; Thévenot 1989; Eymard-Duvernay 1989, 2002, 2011). What are the main positions and methodological postulates for the economic history, which are brought in by EC?

#### 3.1 Analysis of Economic Performance through Time

Douglass C. North defined the task of economic history. For him, “economic history is about the performance of economies through time” (North 1994, 359). The core argument of his approach is that culture and belief system can impede or enhance economic efficiency. Economic development therefore can be understood as the process of the development of institutions which reduce transaction costs. Then the performance of the economy will also develop. The New Institutional Economics, which is related to NHI, introduces therefore a model of different layers, starting with immediate transactions at the centre, which are accomplished by an institutional and cultural environment (Williamson 2000).

From the perspective of EC, the main task of economic history is not to evaluate and benchmark institutional systems through the lenses of a predefined theoretical model. It is to find the best ways and methodologies to reconstruct historical processes of economies (see part 4 below). EC does not neglect performance but provides it with completely different meaning and orientation. These are actors who pragmatically perform the economy in a plurality of

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<sup>13</sup> Richardson (1972); Piore (1992); Foray and Garrouste (1990); Maurice, Sorge, and Warner (1980); Lundvall (1985).

<sup>14</sup> One could find the same underlying sources and inspiration in the contribution of Jürgen Kädtler when he points on the tensions between financial evaluation and the cognitive tools used for productive activity and labor (in this volume).

different ways. Research done in the tradition of EC does not focus on the reduction of transaction cost (by culture or institutions) but does focus on the different constellations of conventions which coexist and are viable solutions for the problem of economic coordination under the condition of uncertainty. Research often reconstructs these pluralities in comparative perspective and argues that efficiency and transactions cost do depend on the way conventions are performed in situations by competent actors. One important methodological position is to start from the assumption of a plurality of modes of coordination; it is not to evaluate non-market constellations as deviances of an optimal institutional arrangement (i.e. the perfect market itself). Another methodological position is to conceive the situation as unit of analysis in which all levels of coordination (“layers”) and relevant entities of the economy are present and coexisting. As introduced above, the pragmatic position of the EC rejects dualisms as the division of social spheres – as culture and economy –, or the differentiation of levels of varying economic ranges – as transactions, institutional and cultural environment. Instead all relevant spheres and levels are not only assumed to be co-present in situations, they are simultaneously enacted and re-enacted in situations.<sup>15</sup>

To analyze the performance of economies therefore means analyzing interacting actors in situations who try to coordinate production and evaluation. Focusing on problems of economic coordination in practical situations is a promising methodological approach to identify the relevant conventions and the strategic and reflexive competencies of actors. The reason is that actors are forced to justify themselves – as Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot demonstrated in their study of classification practices (Boltanski and Thévenot 1983). To analyze the performance through time means to focus on the situational events that introduced a change in coordinating and justifying practices of actors.

Situational coordination is stabilized by objects and cognitive formats, on which interactions can rely. The relevance of objects and the form of cognitive formats depends on conventions as well. Another promising methodological approach is therefore to focus on the processes of different investments in forms and the processes of establishing conventions and compromises between them (Thévenot 1984). Economics normally sees only “economic” investments (as the buying of machines for production or the training of workers as investment in human capital) as relevant forms of investment. But organizations have also to invest in cognitive instrumentations to organize and stabilize coordination. These cognitive investments do format information in a way which corresponds to the relevant conventions – information is in-formatted. The historical

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<sup>15</sup> See for this claim, to take the situation as unit of analysis Salais and Storper (1993) resp. Storper and Salais (1997) and for the position of a complex methodological situationalism Diaz-Bone (in this volume).

study of processes of investments in new cognitive formats will discover the processes of the emergence of new conventions.

### 3.2 Explaining Institutional Change

It is not enough to describe the emergence of cognitive formats, of new conventions and to describe the performance of actors. The explanatory power of the EC-approach emerges from the conceptual difference between conventions and institutions. The analysis of institutional change is the analysis of the change of the conventional foundation for the pragmatic uses of institutions in situations. Institutions (as rules) are created as instruments for successful coordination. Conventions are the way institutions are interpreted and handled in situations. But the development of economic action and the consequences of economic coordination are confronted with radical uncertainty about future events and ongoing social critique. Uncertainty about future events arises because these events could change the regularities of economic coordination and the legitimate expectations of economic actors. Social critique can rearrange the legitimate order of conventions in relation to institutions.

As Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot have stated, dynamics is also caused by actors who engage for a common good. This does not mean that actors act in an altruistic way. Every convention is closely linked to a so called order of justification and world (as the worlds of production). Convention-based coordination pursues not individual and opportunistic goals but ideal horizons and the higher principle of a common good (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 76f). The orders of worth (of persons, objects, actions) are constituted on the basis of higher principles. Examples are the authors, whose theories Boltanski and Thévenot discussed, like Adam Smith (for the market world/market convention), Claude Henri Saint-Simon (for the industrial world/industrial convention), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (for the civic world/civic convention). The higher principle which is evoked in pragmatic critique makes all actors to become everyday metaphysicians of the social which promote practical moralities in the sphere of the economy. Uncertainty and critique are the driving forces for a continuing tension between conventions and institutions. Actors permanently have to apply their competence to judge the appropriateness of institutions for means of coordination and to fix and to adjust the relation between conventions and institutions in the course of economic coordination to situational purposes. Institutional dynamics result from these adjusting practices when actors invent new relations between conventions and institutions because the old relations were – in their view – no longer legitimate and viable.

Here EC differs again from NHI. For North the “agent of change is the individual entrepreneur responding to the incentives embodied in the institutional framework” (North 1990, 83). The methodological individualism of NHI postulates self-centered and utility-maximizing logics of action as motives for

institutional change, where EC sees a plurality of moral principles as driving forces for institutional change.

### 3.3 The “Culture and Economy”-Perspective

Neo-classical economics was projected as a discipline of “pure economics” by Leon Walras in the 1870s (Walras 1954). Economics was “purified” during the following hundred years by eliminating economic knowledge which was – from then on – characterized as historical or sociological. Also this new paradigm was formalized and represented in mathematical form. In the 1950s neo-classical economic theory became the dominant economic paradigm and modelled economy as a system of self-equilibrating markets. In the 1960s and 1970s economic sociology became also a “purified” sub-discipline but the other way round and the analysis of markets, market behaviour and market rationality was almost entirely left to economics. In the 1980s economic sociology renewed itself and began to bring sociological models into the so called “new economic sociology”. This label named the developments in the US American sociology. Seminal were the works of Harrison C. White, Mark S. Granovetter, Viviana A. Zelizer, and later on the works of Ronald S. Burt, Neil Fligstein, Joël M. Podolny and others. Social network structures and cultural practices were analyzed as constitutive principles for market structure.

The notion of the “embeddedness” (of economic action into social networks and culture) has become a core concept in US-American new economic sociology (Granovetter 1985).<sup>16</sup> Originally this concept was coined against such a “purified economics”, which modelled its research object as a disembodied social sphere with its own form of rationalities and institutions. So the research in the field of economic sociology found the embeddedness-concept useful in the founding period when new economic sociology had to find its own position against neoclassical analysis of economic phenomena. And the embeddedness-argument is in fact a classical concept in economic history which was introduced by Karl Polanyi (1944) – although he used it to describe *traditional* economies as “embedded” in society. Granovetter reused this concept to argue that *modern* economies should also be conceived as social constructions and economic institutions should be conceived as still embedded in *modern* societies by network relations (Granovetter 1985, 1992). In the 1990s the new economic sociology in the US was internationally recognized and received.<sup>17</sup> To-

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<sup>16</sup> See for an overview of the landscape of new economic sociology the edited volumes of Smelser and Swedberg (2005), Dobbin (2004), Guillén, Collins, England and Meyer (2002), Granovetter and Swedberg (2001).

<sup>17</sup> In Germany Jens Beckert and others started from the 1990s to review American new economic sociology and to develop the German field of economic sociology (Beckert 1997, 2002). See also the contributions in Beckert, Diaz-Bone, and Ganßmann (2007) and in Beckert and Deutschmann (2009).

gether with developments in the field of US-American organizational studies (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) US-American sociology offered new theoretical and methodological perspectives on the interrelation between “economy and culture” which emphasized the cultural embeddedness of economic action and which extended the concept of culture to a concept for the analysis of everyday (economic) practices (DiMaggio 1994).<sup>18</sup>

But there are two fundamental problems related to the way the embeddedness-concept is used in economic history. (1) The first problem is the danger of an implicit functionalism related to the application of this concept. In the 1990s this concept was criticized by economic sociologists themselves, because the reference to “embeddedness” (for example of the economy “in culture”) was used in studies as an implicit argument for positive effects which other social spheres exert on the economy. To avoid simplifying assumptions of positive effects of embeddedness Brian Uzzi had introduced the notions of overembeddedness and underembeddedness which characterize problematic effects of embeddedness (Uzzi 1996, 1997).<sup>19</sup> (2) The second problem is that the US-American new economic sociology was always in danger to be reduced to the embeddedness-concept when it is regarded from the perspective of economic history. Economic sociology and the US-American new economic sociology have never been one-issue approaches.<sup>20</sup> It can easily be demonstrated that there were some more key concepts and innovative approaches in the early period of US-American new economic sociology.<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective of economic sociology, there were original French contributions which were also innovative for economic sociology and were developed in the 1980s and 1990s – namely the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>22</sup> actor-network-theory (ANT) and the economics of convention

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<sup>18</sup> See for the notion of cultural embeddedness Beckert (2007, 6).

<sup>19</sup> See for a critical review Granovetter (2005), and Krippner and Alvarez (2007).

<sup>20</sup> A recent example is the article written by Nathaus and Gilgen (2011). The authors overestimate the role of this concept for present economic sociology.

<sup>21</sup> One early seminal paper – the article written by Harrison C. White “Where do markets come from” (White 1981) – presented a new sociological model of *markets as networks* which models markets as sets of (producers) positions who are *structurally equivalent*. These producers watch each other and seek to find unique quality niches in their markets, so they can place themselves on different positions in a market profile and they control real competition in the market – which they need to avoid if they want to make profits. White’s concept of structural equivalence and White’s market model became also key concepts. Viviana A. Zelizer has delivered since the 1970s a series of highly influential studies which demonstrate that the sphere of economy is founded on cultural and ethical everyday practices and – vice versa – how non-economic spheres (as intimacy or family relations) are economized (Zelizer 1978, 1979, 1985, 1994, 2005). Her studies were path breaking for the “culture and economy”-perspective. A new edited collection of her journal articles was recently published (Zelizer 2011).

<sup>22</sup> His contributions to new economic sociology were translated into English after his death (Bourdieu 2005a, Bourdieu 2005b).

(EC). ANT and EC were developed in close connection to each other. While ANT was soon internationally recognized and appreciated in the field of the social studies of science, the discussion of EC remained for a long time almost constrained to French social sciences.<sup>23</sup> Today, EC and ANT can be regarded as the French new economic sociologies which both reject the traditional division in sub-disciplines and which both integrate the analysis of cultural and economic practices.<sup>24</sup> Both reject the reduction of empirical complexity in theoretical modelling by using only one concept. For the EC-approach, the network-model is only one of many conventions and the prominence of the embeddedness-concept risks the reduction of empirical complexity (Eymard-Duvernay 2002, 2011).

EC extended its research field and included the analysis of discursive practices and media (see for example Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Eymard-Duvernay 2009). The inclusion of the analyses of culture and discourse became relevant because EC regards economic worlds (as the worlds of production) as *normative* orders (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Storper and Salais 1997).

Economic history resisted the “purification” of neo-classical economics successfully, and the works of scholars like Max Weber, Fernand Braudel, Karl Polanyi and nowadays Douglass C. North kept the integral character of economic history as a combined historical analysis of economy, culture and society.<sup>25</sup> Sociological approaches which share this rejection of a pure economics, as EC does, are therefore allies for a renewed economic history – as Jürgen Kocka (2010) has outlined (see above). But from our point of view current historical research in economic history (outside of France) almost exclusively views US-American economic sociology when discussing the potentials of economic sociology and overlooks the contributions of the new French economic sociology.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.4 Objects and Instruments

One of the main contributions of the new French social sciences – which are mainly represented by ANT and EC – is to demonstrate that objects and their

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<sup>23</sup> An important exception is the discussion between Harrison C. White and representatives of the EC-Approach about markets. This discussion became manifested in two volumes (Favereau and Lazega 2002; White 2002). Another important exception is the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which was highly appreciated as a genuine contribution to economic sociology (Smelser and Swedberg 2005).

<sup>24</sup> For an overview on the French economic sociology see Heilbron (2001) and the contributions in Steiner and Vatin (2009).

<sup>25</sup> For this claim see also Beckert (2011).

<sup>26</sup> So does Sewell (2010) and also the contributions in HSR 36 (3) do ignore the French approaches of ANT and EC (Nathaus and Gilgen 2011; Eisenberg 2011). An exception outside of France is – again – Jürgen Kocka (2010). But see also the contribution from Judde de Larivière and Hanne (in this volume).



material properties have an important impact on and contribution to the way individuals coordinate, evaluate and produce. Interaction between human beings and economic coordination entangle objects. Interaction and coordination therefore are to be conceived as interaction between human beings and objects and as coordination which is intentionally organized by means of objects. In the pragmatic perspective – as developed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1987, 2006) – objects back up and proof the “worth” (*grandeur*) of persons and actions. They are also the reference for “tests”, when the worth of persons or actions is questioned in critical situations. Cognitive formats and objects are the non-human environment for convention-based coordination, itself the result of previous actions and investments, and they are part of the equipment of worlds (of production). Correctness (*justesse*) and justice of economic action will be evaluated in these worlds with reference to cognitive formats and especially to objects. That’s why research in the tradition of EC includes the analysis of the convention-based coordination between persons, cognitive formats *and* objects (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997; Bessy and Chauvin 2011; Marchal and Rieucan 2010).<sup>27</sup>

Objects are part of the reality under study. But in the tradition of the EC objects are reflected as contributors to the scientific practices itself. The works of Pierre Bourdieu about the epistemological status of analytical tools (as scientific methods and instruments)<sup>28</sup> and their effects in co-constructing the scientific object were highly influential for the founders of EC (which has one starting point in the analysis of statistical practices of classification). Another object of study is therefore this effect of objects and instruments as scientific tools. Modern societies were coined during the course of some hundred years by this effect. The study of modern economies and its history (as the history of modern labor organization, the history of accounting, the history of financial governance and the history of official statistics)<sup>29</sup> can be understood as the performativity of scientific methods and instruments on the economy through time.<sup>30</sup> Different conventions underlying scientific practices and the construction of scientific instruments (as statistical categories) perform differently in generating “data”.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Economic history became also aware of the role of objects and material properties, for example in the historical analysis of consumption (Jeggle in this volume).

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu continued as sociologist the French school of epistemology which was established by Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and Michel Serres.

<sup>29</sup> See the contributions of Kädtler, Desrosières (in this volume) and Desrosières (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Michel Callon, co-founder of ANT, claimed that economy is not described by economics. Instead economics “performs” economy. He named this effect of economics “performativity” (Callon 1998).

<sup>31</sup> See the contributions of Alain Desrosières and Laurent Thévenot (in this volume).

#### 4. How to Conceive Historical Processes?

All disciplines have a dream. For economics this consists in finding the optimal economic system in order to provide prosperity for all. As it seems for us who are not historians, the dream for history is to break the wall erected by time and space distances. Under what conditions could the exchange and mutual understanding of past and present be possible? How could the origins and socio-temporal dynamics in which the present roots be truthfully and transparently recreated? What makes such a dream utopia – nevertheless worth to be pursued – is not that we are not omniscient, due to lack or loss of archives or to biases for instance. These are real problems, but not essential. Would we have all the necessary information and data, they would not provide any access to knowledge, except a wide mess of facts and statements from where no meaning could emerge.

The very problem to build a meaning-full history, as hermeneutics helps us to understand, is the opacity that social objects opposed to historical works.<sup>32</sup> Along time, social objects have acquired a consistency of their own as well as autonomy with regards to intentions, values, knowledge incorporated in them in the original situation. Even more to the original layer of meaning, multiple and diverse layers have been added as sediments to accumulate and to be reorganised. The whole leads to forgetting, misunderstanding, strategic justification, sometimes manipulation, which opens the route to an indefinite plurality of possible historical narratives, all for the same domain, starting from the same material, while respecting criteria of scientific practice.

To choose the type of narrative and the methodology for building facts despite of such uncertainties and opacities, there are two broad sets of strategies. The first set, as exemplified by NHI, starts from some established theory or model and applies them to historical material. One will call it the external-view set. The second set, as promoted by the EC, starts from the plural ways along which people conceive, act, coordinate, realise, evaluate and deal with justifications. One will call it the internal-view set.<sup>33</sup> The first set (the external view) is the more widespread one, thanks to the search for hegemony by mainstream economics. The second set (the internal view), a red line which goes through historiography (in economic history too), is exemplified by the contributions of this special issue.

The major critique to be addressed to the first set of strategies is that their ultimate concern is not how to conceptualize, but about how to evaluate historical processes and their outcomes from a normative point of view (in case of NHI from a given conception of economic performance). That makes a big

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<sup>32</sup> See the contribution of Salais (in this volume).

<sup>33</sup> Such a strategy for economic history is exemplified in this volume by the contributions of Christof Jeggle and Philippe Minard.

difference and creates huge problems with regards to the nature of so built knowledge and its objectivity. The consequence of applying from the external a grid framed by general categories and theories is that the historical narrative is inextricably intermingled with underlying normative evaluation. NHI-based historical narratives – implicitly or explicitly – are related to the good or the bad of behaviours or outcomes. With its foundational tools like the rational individual or the cost of transaction, the NHI is exemplary of such trends. This is not to say that such strategies do not produce useful facts, but facts which are tainted with pre-judgements which are no more questioned. For instance, behaviours, altruistic or oriented towards the common good, are not unseen by a framework centred on the rational individual, but are either reinterpreted and degraded to the status of refined strategic action, or considered as non economical and basically inefficient. Or, economic institutions based on personal links or upon the assumption that people are capable of engagements<sup>34</sup> are definitively supposed to create large costs of transaction and to be backward. Yet one can demonstrate that they prove highly efficient for systems of production and markets relying upon specialised and dedicated products (one of the major international specialisations of the German economy which explains its success in exports).

To be aware of the basic relevance of the above statements, one must acknowledge that no theoretical system built from an external standpoint can be neutral in axiological terms (for a statement with regards to the EC, cf. Postel 1998).<sup>35</sup> It carries normative judgements, which orient the construction of facts by the researcher. Acknowledging the absence of axiological neutrality is fortunately rising in social sciences; but adverse trends continuously emerge in daily research practices, less from ideological or political grounds than from, one could say, axiological naïveté, which happens due to lack of reflexivity on his or her methodological practices or on the place of research within society. More will be said later, especially in regards to the constitution of quantitative data.<sup>36</sup> It follows that, when applying such methodology, historians can, unbeknownst to most of them, become the spokesperson of prejudgments incorporated in the theoretical background, which they inadvertently enforce by the objective character of their narratives. As researchers aim at building knowledge and not normative evaluation, what should we have to focus on making judgements about the economic efficiency of institutional systems? Many

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<sup>34</sup> The civic regime of engagement in Thévenot's contribution (in this volume).

<sup>35</sup> Axiology relates to values judgments and their nature in knowledge, beliefs or action. By considering that institutions and their rules are socio-historically built (and not "natural") or by founding the approach more on hermeneutics and its concept of interpretation than on cognitive sciences, the EC asserts its full awareness of the absence of axiological neutrality in human and social sciences.

<sup>36</sup> See also the contribution from Desrosières (in this volume).

empirical works of the economics of convention,<sup>37</sup> as well as research based on the assumption of a plurality of national models,<sup>38</sup> have extensively documented that there exists a plurality of theories and practices of economic efficiency. These theories and practices rely upon a variety of modes of coordination, of quality conventions of products, of work or of financing (Rivaud-Danset and Salais 1992), of specific sets of institutions. It is impossible to decide that some are better than others; for economies that specialise in one of these modes of coordination demonstrate in practice their absolute advantage in a series of specialisations on world markets, and economies that develop other modes of coordination gain advantage on other segments of world markets. For research to a priori decide of a specific and unique principle of evaluation of economic and social actions not only is unjustifiable, but also becomes an epistemological obstacle.

From the point of view of scientific method and posture, much more important and relevant is to start from the documented statement that, in any economy and society, several types of worth, several worlds exist, have existed in the past and will exist in the future. These types of worth and these worlds enter in socio-historical processes by which they hybrid each other, or juxtapose, conflict, establish into stable hierarchies, and so on. They create for actors repertoires of interpretation, action and evaluation of their own. Every order of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), every world of production (Storper and Salais 1997) behaves like a critique, in act and in justification, against the others. It follows that no one may be identified as better than others, which, at the end, disqualifies the set of strategies which starts from externally predefined optimal points of views.

The other set of research strategies corresponds to the one advocated by the EC, that is precisely to start from the statement of plurality. Internal-view method and orientation are required in order to theoretically and methodologically grasp such an empirical statement. As we said earlier, we are convinced that such internal-view strategies are not uncommon in economic history and that we are joining similar debates within it. But it is up to historians who by definition master their field of research to tell us what the situation is in this respect. (That would be another theme for further dialogue between the economics of convention and economic history in the future, beyond this HSR special issue.)

A true internal-view strategy which starts from the assumption of a plurality requires firm and clear-cut principles. We will consider four of these principles relative to comprehensive approach (following Max Weber's precepts), to the

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<sup>37</sup> See among others Eymard-Duvernay (1987), Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal (1997), Bessy (1993), Bessy, Eymard-Duvernay, de Larquier, and Marchal (2001), Salais and Storper (1993).

<sup>38</sup> A key example being the series of works pursuing Hall and Soskice (2001).

status of embeddedness, to processes of rising into generality and to the cognitive status of data.

*(1) Using a Comprehensive Approach*

Being and living in an “elsewhere” foreign to external predefined points of view, persons and actors have no reason to conform themselves to the general categories and concepts as forged by these points of view. Equally they have no reason to segment their activities into domains as postulated and institutionalized by academic knowledge and institutions. “Economic” action cannot be reduced to the limits of accordingly institutionalized domains. Economic actions as other so-called types of action mobilise interests, values, common goods well beyond instrumental rationality, well beyond the “market” as formalised by economic theory. To nevertheless grasp these actions and coordination as they are, conceived by people and achieved, the only valuable strategy is an approach in comprehension. Such a strategy is neither bottom-up, nor top-down. Methodology must respect and follow the ontological claims made in theory about actors and situations.<sup>39</sup> Then it has to be “situated”, which means for the researcher to position herself/himself within the situation of coordination as developed by actors, in order to discover the conventions they use, their role in the coordination. That is the way, too, to grasp how general categories and discursive justifications are mobilised, to understand how institutions are present in the situation, how they interact with conventions.

*(2) The Status of Embeddedness*

As the discussion of the “economy and culture”-perspective and of the concept of embeddedness demonstrated, there is no separate social sphere called “the economy” with its own social laws. The original thinking on embeddedness implicitly assumes the existence of spheres in the sense that spheres are like Russian puppets. One needs to “re-pragmatize” the concept.

Economic institutions are not external to economic action and coordination. Economic institutions are endogenous to pragmatic interaction. For EC, in that sense one can say that economic institutions are “embedded” in convention-based coordination processes of competent actors in situations (Bessy and Favereau 2003; Salais 1998; Diaz-Bone 2009a). These actors face a radical plurality of conventions present in situations. Embeddedness cannot be reduced to a unique logic of coordination (as networks or a single cultural frame). Researchers have to study how actors in situations cope with this plurality (how they manage to build up and stabilize compromises between conventions) or

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<sup>39</sup> See the contribution of Diaz-Bone (in this volume).

how actors refer to different conventions in situations of critique and conflict. But the situation is even more complex to historical analysis.

First, actors rely on cognitive formats and social objects for coordination. Cognitive formats are the result of foregoing processes of investment in forms and social objects have traces of foregoing convention-based coordination. Most economic action therefore could be thus said as embedded in an already “equipped” environment. Second – as Laurent Thévenot (2006) has worked out – situations underlie another form of complexity. Actors refer to conventions in the process of coordination with others (and with their environment), but they are also engaged with their personal environment. Thévenot speaks in his contribution of different “regimes of engagement”.<sup>40</sup> The embeddedness of action therefore is more complex than traditionally assumed.

### *(3) Focussing on Processes of Rising into Generality*

In an internal-view comprehensive and situated approach, general concepts and categories cannot be treated like natural facts, institutional evidence or scientific statements. Their emergence is a socio-historical fact which has to be dealt with by research. Through which process of rising into generality have general concepts and categories developed and been established? This has been well documented for some of them, especially in French research, but not only there. Unemployment as a general category and conceptualization appeared only recently, that is after the Second World War (Salais, Baverez, and Reynaud 1986). “Before”, lacks of work were differently conceived. Furthermore, for unemployment such rising into generality has taken specific national forms, depending on the conceptions of the state: truly abstract and general for France; marked by federalism and subsidiarity in Germany; paradoxically constrained in Great-Britain by strategies of political containments aiming at impeding any rise into generality for social problems. The same could be said for the category and conceptualisation of the market: quasi “indigenous” in Great-Britain; strongly refrained in its generality, even today, in France (in behalf of the primacy of state intervention) and in Germany (in behalf of the respect of basic social and public order).<sup>41</sup> Instead of inferring from such differences judgements over backwardness of French and German economies, one must search to shed light on the configurations and circumstances that generated such national processes and on how they are the sources of specific economic performance.

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<sup>40</sup> See also Thévenot (2007, 2011), Diaz-Bone and Thévenot (2010), and the contribution of Thévenot (in this volume).

<sup>41</sup> See the contribution of Salais (in this volume).

#### *(4) Data are not Given Facts*

Not only actors do not conform their practices to theories built upon them, but even more institutions can borrow as justifications and rules some of the characteristics, orientations or formalisation from these theories. Data issued from institutional practices end up incorporating their normative framework. They could no longer be considered as given facts providing immediate and true access to the social reality. For instance, one cannot understand the data on judgments by the European Court of Justice if one does not take into account its recent inspiration by the neoclassical theory of perfect competition. Historians who take this data at their face value will conclude to degrading competitiveness conditions, due to a series of social rigidities, while data merely reflects the changing normative framework by European judges. Presumably the same could be said of judgments by US courts which take their frameworks from neo-institutional theories. Information drawn from US jurisprudence is more about its underlying normative framework than about the real functioning of markets in the US. The methodological trap for historians and, more generally, for research is to be locked in a self-referential loop. Though they believe to have created true knowledge about the real world, they are in fact only rediscovering normative judgements already included in the judicial data they use.

More generally one must be aware that cognitive tools, especially statistical instruments, do not merely provide data. First and foremost, by pre-cutting reality into domains, by including and excluding, by qualifying and categorising, they shape and build information in some direction and with some underlying normative conceptions. So doing, they are taking part in the building of social realities (Desrosières 2005, 2011; Salais 2007). This means that social processes of producing data (in economies at different times and places) must be considered as a key empirical material to be observed and analysed by research, especially by historians. Cognitive tools used by actors, institutions, national statistical apparatuses say more – via their conception, their technical rules, the debates on their implementation and underlying principles – about frameworks of interpretation and action used by actors and about the transformations of the real they induce than the data they produce. For instance, today but also before the Second World War, the rate of unemployment and its disparities by sex, age, profession, territory tell us more about the evolution of work conceptions and the extent to which the institutional and cognitive category “unemployment” has been diffused among population than about the intensity of a supposed naturalised social fact.

So the dreamed objective to reconstruct the meaning of historical processes, especially in economic history, cannot be achieved, but must be pursued and approximated as close as possible through transdisciplinary analysis. The challenge set by this special issue is to develop, thanks to the contributors, the potentialities of the EC for that purpose.

## 5. Contributions in this Special Issue

We editors invited some of the most visible researchers in the field of historical analysis of conventions to contribute to the present issue. We gathered an international group of contributors and contributed ourselves. All in all we collected nine articles which discuss current research topics in this field and some of them reflect developments and structures of the field itself. The collection of contributions illustrates the transdisciplinary character of the EC-approach and it illustrates its conceptual complexity – irreducible to only one concept (as convention). We will introduce them here with some sentences.

The first contribution is methodological in character. In his contribution (“The methodological standpoint of the *Économie des conventions*”) Rainer Diaz-Bone (University of Lucerne) tries to trace the influences of structuralism and pragmatism on the methodological position of the EC-approach. He argues that a methodic holism is underlying EC. Methodic holism claims that the applied methodology has to respect the assumptions (made by the theory) about the ontology of the object under study. Methods, ontological and theoretical claims must be compatible. So one cannot take theories and apply them to pre-given data, “data are not given facts” (see above), they are the results of social theories employed in social research or incorporated into institutional rules and practices. More precisely, the methodological standpoint of EC can be labelled as “complex pragmatist situationalism”. EC focuses situations as units of analysis, because in situations actors are placed in a social environment, which is equipped with objects and cognitive formats. The situation is always complex because there is a plurality of possible ways how to evaluate and to interact. EC investigates – thereby starting from the actor’s perspective – how actors interact in these complex situations to achieve a common goal. This methodology is sketched out in his contribution. He discusses methodological positions shared between EC and the socio-historical approach of Max Weber. Both approaches have to reconstruct socio-economic frames of references as kinds of Weberian ideal types. But there are also differences to the Weberian approach – as the assumed complexity and plurality of logics of action. Diaz-Bone highlights that the methodological position of EC collapses traditional dualisms like the dualism between methodological individualism and methodological holism or the dualism of subject and object (which EC regards as inter-related in coordination processes). This rejection is part of the pragmatic position of EC.

Alain Desrosières (INSEE, Paris) has contributed to the EC from its beginnings. In his article “The economics of convention and statistics: The paradox of origins” he reflects on the development of this approach. But first he focuses on foregoing (and for the EC-approach seminal) research, done at the INSEE in Paris, on social classifications, on the procedures of codification and on the statistical classification practices. The work of Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski,



Laurent Thévenot, Robert Salais and Alain Desrosières on classification practices was path breaking for EC. According to Desrosières, the major innovation developed at the INSEE in the 1970s and the 1980s (Affichard 1977, 1987) has been the methodological reflexivity on the conventional and social-constructivist basis of statistical categories and statistical instruments. He also portrays the institutional and intellectual setting out of which EC then emerged in the 1980s. His article is an important reflection on the continuities of research topics in the EC-approach – especially research on statistical instruments, statistical practices, and more general on the politics of quantification which are relevant research topics until today.

In their collective contribution “Occupational naming conventions: historicity, actors, interactions” Claire Judde de Larivière and Georges Hanne (both University of Toulouse) apply the EC-approach in their historical analysis of the creation processes of occupational titles and socio-occupational categories. Referring to the works of Alain Desrosières, Luc Boltanski and Robert Salais they point to the importance of naming processes for the achievement of social status, the establishment of occupational groups, which they treat as linguistic and discursive constructions. They reconstruct the genealogy of French occupational categories through the course of different epochs. Thereby they can show how occupational names and socio-occupational categories are constructed as linguistic conventions, which are institutionalized by actors (as governmental actors, trade unions, but also private actors) in pragmatic negotiations. As some of the other contributions in this volume do, this contribution proves that there is no necessity to bifurcate historical analysis in two strands: cultural historical analysis (after the discursive turn) or economic historical analysis. This contribution exemplifies the “economy and culture”-perspective as grounded on the EC-approach and as a promising perspective also for economic history.

The study of quality conventions is a core element of the EC (Eymard-Duverney 1989). Bert De Munck (University of Antwerp) applies the concept of quality conventions to the analysis of early modern guild’s regulations of product quality. In his contribution “Guilds, product quality and intrinsic value. Towards a history of conventions?” De Munck analyzes the relation between conventions and institutions and its transformation, which he calls epistemological transformations. His contribution exemplifies – as the one delivered by Judde de Larivière and Hanne – a viable combination of convention theory and discourse analysis. He examines the discursive investments into a specific quality convention “intrinsic value”, which became a dispositive for guild-based manufacturing artisans to link their political power in the city of Antwerp to the value of their products.

Christof Jeggle (University of Bamberg) presents in the article “Pre-industrial worlds of production: Conventions, institutions and organizations” his research about the linen production in the German town of Münster (in Westphalia). He reports the reception of the EC-approach by French historical

scientist since the early 1990s and argues that the import of EC offers solutions to long discussed problems in economic history. For Jeggel the EC approach helps avoiding the use of the opposition between traditional economies and modern societies. This opposition biases the historical analysis by implicitly ascribing “traditional” (“premodern”) characteristics to traditional economies. Jeggel applies the model of worlds of production, which was developed by Robert Salais and Michael Storper (1993) to describe the emerging linen production in Münster in the 16th and 17th century. This production was pre-industrial but highly dynamic and coordinated by three different worlds of production having their own quality conventions.

Philippe Minard (University Paris VIII) investigates the conflicts between different trades in the leather branch in London in the 18th century. Some of the leather trades contested existing quality conventions. Minard shows in his contribution (“Micro-economics of quality and social construction of the market: Disputes among the London leather trades in the Eighteenth-Century”) the micro-physics of these conflicts about the quality definition and about the procedure how to control them. He focuses on the actors play *with* rules as well as on the actors play *on* rules (which is a classical analytic perspective of the EC; cf. Salais and Thévenot 1986, 4). Thereby he highlights the role of conflict and power, but in an innovative way that results from his focus on quality conventions. Institutional change proceeds, not simply from competition or from changing hierarchies of power between actors, but basically from the passage from a former quality convention, which he calls “regulated quality”, to a form of “deliberated quality”. Such convention-based historical approach demonstrates that the traditional and teleological narrative about the ineluctable victory of liberal reason over archaic regulations cannot account for actual changes in the 18th British markets, at least for that trade, which pleads for developing such approach in other trades, products and countries.

Jürgen Kädtler (SOFI, University of Göttingen) focuses on the current global crisis, which, according to him, are due to the fact that financial rationality has established itself now as generic economic rationality. He investigates the process of financialisation in his contribution “Financialisation of capitalist economies – bargaining on conventional economic rationalities”. When deciding of their economic choices, actors in firms enter practical negotiations that confront different competing narratives, the most powerful one being based, now, on financial rationality, the other ones coming from product and markets strategies. Hence the cognitive, as well as normative and practical compromises (the conventional foundation of firms’ choices) became dominated by financial rationality. This leads to the substitution of simple and immediate cost-cutting to investments in production and internal services, which constitutes a key difference from the 1930’s crisis. The current crisis is, furthermore, misinterpreted in dominant economic and political discourses, as the crisis of financial markets (which leads to proposals to refine their functioning), while its core

lies in the increasing power of creative interpretations and narratives based on standard financial criteria and benchmarking in the whole economy.

When statistical instruments and statistical data are conceived as conventional, then different ways are imaginable, on how human characteristics can be measured in social surveys. Laurent Thévenot (INSEE/EHESS, Paris) explores (in his contribution “Conventions for measuring and questioning policies. The case of 50 years of policy evaluations through a statistical survey”) the different ways the French survey “Formation et qualification professionnelle” (FQP) historically changed its conventional basis for statistical measurement of these issues from 1964 to 2003. His research on the politics of statistics carries forward the research tradition of EC on statistical classifications and statistical practices. Thévenot recapitulates the analysis of the relation between “statistics” and policies the EC has done since the 1960s. He also inquires the interrelations of how people are taken into account by policies, by statistical surveys and in social sciences (as sociology and political science). He identifies four configurations how policy constructions, statistical tools, and social sciences are interrelated. Thévenot combines the different “orders of worth” (as introduced by Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and different “forms of engagements” (as introduced by Thévenot 2006) to investigate the different forms and levels of relevance, the politics of statistics has for groups and individuals.

The last contribution in the present volume combines conceptual as well as empirical developments. In his article (“Labor-related conventions and configurations of meaning: France, Germany and Great Britain prior to the Second World War”) Robert Salais (École Normale Supérieure de Cachan) introduces the concepts of trace and configuration of meaning as theoretical tools to prepare a perspective for the historical hermeneutics of conventions. Conventions materialize into social objects and leave traces which then can be interpreted (by social hermeneutics) as Salais demonstrates in the empirical part of his article. His research focuses conventions for the definition and the evaluation of labor, as interpreted and incorporated in social objects like labor institutions or economic thought. He shows that labor cannot be evaluated but by taking into account the different moments of the work process. These stages are the process of hiring (Moment 1), the coordination in the work process (Moment 2) and the realization of labor in kind of the product quality as it is perceived on the market (Moment 3). The comparison between France, Germany and Great Britain demonstrates three different national configurations of meaning and in this way the historical contingent forms how labor is evaluated and institutionalized. The contribution of Salais offers evidence of the socio-historical antecedence of conventions to institutions.

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Conventions and Institutions from a Historical Perspective

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