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# Convening the Company of Historians to go into Conventions, Powers, Critiques and Engagements

Laurent Thévenot\*

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**Abstract:** »Geschichtswissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf Konventionen, Macht, Kritik und Engagement«. Reconsidering previous exchanges between the *économie des conventions* (EC) and historical research, the article puts right different prejudices against EC and shows grounds for going deeper into cooperation. The first part is dedicated to the genesis and dynamics of conventions, in an open perspective on the ways value is placed on forms coordinating with others, the environment and oneself. Rather than looking for abstract values, the article suggests to find the basis for repertoires of evaluation in empowering dependencies between human beings and their environment. This approach is favorable to a dialogue with historians on the domain of work identity, occupations and products or services. The second part deals with the politics of convention in a long-term perspective on power, authority and protest. Considering powers issuing from coordinative forms, it is claimed that this view helps to situate in a comparative and historical perspective nation-states among a variety of authorities which govern – possibly transnationally – through reduced conventions.

**Keywords:** convention, justification, repertoire of evaluation, critique, engagement, power, pragmatism, economic sociology, history, labor.

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## Introduction

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Rainer Diaz-Bone's and Robert Salais' initiative to organize a Special Issue of *Historical Social Research* on "Conventions and Institutions form a Historical Perspective" 36 (2011) 4 and its continuation with the 2012 February workshop in Berlin,<sup>1</sup> have been a great challenge. Not only did they arranged a German-French exchange of ideas around the *économie des conventions* (in short EC), but in addition to this confrontation between two different national traditions, they also chose to bring together economists, sociologists and historians. From my experience at the journal *Annales, Histories, Sciences Sociales*, I know that this is not an easy task. Historians would accuse economists and sociologists of

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<sup>1</sup> See also the introduction to this focus by Rainer Diaz-Bone and Robert Salais.

imposing models that lack historical context. Sociologists would reply that historian research is deeply informed by models that should be made more explicit and debatable.

Historians participating this enduring exchange noticed, at the end of the workshop that, although they did not initially expect an easy dialogue with economists and sociologists on EC, they were happily surprised by the quality of the communication which was made eventually possible. It appeared to be, they said, more easy and fruitful than with many of their historian colleagues. As a testimony of what I personally learnt from this dialogue with historians, as well as with my colleagues economists and sociologists, I will focus on the relation between convention, power and authority, in a long term perspective informed by research on work and occupations.

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## 1. Placing Value on Forms Coordinating with Others, the Environment and Oneself: A Key Issue for Exchanges with Historians

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### 1.1 First Steps

Prior to EC, research done on classifications by Alain Desrosières, Robert Salais and myself at the French national institute of statistics and economic studies (INSEE), has been historically oriented. We have drawn advantage from this historical perspective to undo the natural obviousness that engineers-statisticians as well as users currently attribute to classifications. The formula “invention of” was then commonly used to this end. The title of Salais, Baverez and Reynaud’s book (1986) *The invention of unemployment* provocatively expressed the deconstruction of the category. As one of his major actors, Desrosières reminded us of this prehistory of EC (Desrosières 2011). The 1976 conference at Vaucresson offered a first opportunity for an organized dialogue between statisticians, some EC initiators and historians, leading to the publication of two volumes (Affichard 1977, 1987). At this preliminary step, social historians using quantitative data were involved because of their concern for series, some of them paying attention to the construction of categories.

From the first meetings around EC, a dialogue was established with a new generation of historians who were in break with former social history. *Annales*, the major French historical journal presented this break as a “critical turning point (*tournant critique*)”. One of these innovative historians, Bernard Lepetit (who became editor of *Annales*) was interested in “forms of experience” (Lepetit 1995) and early followed EC research.<sup>2</sup> Working himself on the sedi-

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<sup>2</sup> For additional elements on early exchanges with economic history, see: Jeggle 2011.

mentations of usages and on the reuse of inhabited places on which cities are continuously rebuilt, he was much concerned with the dynamical relation between conventions and objects which support new interpretations and usages. I paid myself attention to this relation between actions and things which bear their trace (Thévenot 1995, 2006 chap. 2) referring to Ricœur in its shift from hermeneutic to action theory, from texts to “monuments” left by actions (Ricœur 1986).<sup>3</sup> The tragic death of Lepetit deprived both historian and economists or sociologists of a crucial link. They still suffer from the consequences of this loss. The dialogue also took shape with other historians who were interested by the “pragmatic turn” in social sciences, such as Simona Cerutti (Cerutti 1991), because they were part of the microhistory movement which took more precisely into account situated actions and interactions.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Economies of Worth: Which Historical Perspective?

Historians have made use of the model of *Economies de la grandeur* (in short EG, see Boltanski and Thévenot 1987, 1991, 2006), a main component of EC. But they also raised criticisms about the lack of historical construction of orders of worth. Wasn't the construction of the book deliberately anachronistic when bringing together classical works of political or moral philosophy – going back to Augustine – with contemporary handbooks dedicated to the firm ... In fact, the authors considered that the contextual reconstruction of orders of worth was an exercise different from the modeling offered in the book, and from the test of this model on empirical fieldwork (Boltanski and Thévenot 1989). They actually expected from future cooperation with historians the needed complements regarding the historical development of orders of worth.

After the publication of EG, its authors proposed two scenarios for the genesis of orders of worth, thus enriching the dynamics of the model by an internal-view perspective rather than referring to external explanation.<sup>5</sup> EG already mentioned the possible displacement of qualification tests at the origin of historical changes of orders of worth. In *The new spirit of capitalism* Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999) have shown how a new “connectionist” order of worth emerged after such test had been rigidified and even evaded. This move

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<sup>3</sup> On the relations between the sociology of orders of worth or engagements and Ricœur's work, see: Thévenot 2012b. Robert Salais developed the hermeneutic approach to conventions with an insistence on traces (Salais 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Risto Alapuro, a political scientist and historian of social movements, has been successively involved in both turns of micro-history and of sociology of worth and engagement. He has recently undertaken a fascinating confrontation of both orientations. For a first publication, see: Alapuro 2012.

<sup>5</sup> On the difference of research strategy between New Historical Institutionalism (NIH) based on an external view and EC based on an internal view, see Diaz-Bone and Salais in the Special Issue (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011, 23).

reacted to both social and artist criticisms against the hierarchical subordination brought by Domestic and Industrial orders of worth.

Claudette Lafaye, Michael Moody and the author had worked earlier on the genesis of a possible green worth, by contrast with the various ways nature is transformed to qualify for the others orders of worth and domesticated, industrialized, marketized, etc. (Lafaye and Thévenot 1993; Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye 2000; Thévenot, Moody und Lafaye 2011). On the basis of this empirical research and of ongoing work on a possible worth of information, I suggested how a new order of worth might be based on the systematization of an empowering dependency on the environment (Thévenot 2009). Rather than being human agents' own properties, major capacities or powers of theirs are highly dependent, for their implementation, on properly arranged environments of nature and artifacts. Once some empowering dependency is made more general and systematic by means of conventional forms of equivalence between situations, personal powers can be compared and give rise to worry about unfair or abusive powers. Inequalities with regard to this newly identified power create legitimate anxiety when confronted to equality among a common humanity. In response to criticisms, defenders try to demonstrate that this newly generalized power qualifies for the common good. This attempt inevitably sets in motion suspicion that this justification of inequalities is ideological in the sense it is not put to empirical test. From such a controversial confrontation might emerge a new order of worth.

This second scenario for the genesis of orders of worth does not exclude the first one. In response to waves of criticism, answers build upon the material equipment of the human political and moral world (Thévenot 2002). In the management reform which Boltanski and Chiapello documented (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999), a new generalised empowering dependency comes from the developing techniques of information and communication. The equipment which allows the extension of this power is accompanied by a new convention of equivalence in terms of information. The second scenario emphasizes the role, in the genesis of political and moral constructions, of experimenting new dependencies on the material equipment of the human world.

### 1.3 Valued Dependencies of Human Capacities on their Environment

The dynamics of orders of worth opens areas of a dialogue with historians which should not be limited to a rigid and timeless taxonomy. Claire Judde de Larivière underlined the absence of common humanity in Ancien Régime, and the inequality of rights. A historical perspective on conventional forms brings light on the evolving place of the imperative of common humanity which supports the conventions that qualify for the common good. In this dialogue with historians, we have to take into account a variety of conventions which do not

meet the extension nor the requirement needed to pretend to be legitimate for the common good. Among a wide diversity of repertoires of evaluation, we can differentiate families which offer variations. In the history of the evaluations aiming at validity for the community – among which Max Weber identified ideal-types of legitimate domination – we can identify such families of related evaluative conventions. One of these families turns around the valuable dependency on an inhabited territory, a household on which can be built the domination of the master of the house, and more widely of so-called paternalistic authorities. In this family of related coordinative powers, domestic worth is one among others, with the supplementary claim that it participates the common good of the common humanity. Devices ensuring visibility and allowing to (trade)mark and to remark things and persons, belong to another family of evaluation modes which relies on the coordinative power of recognition. Within a family which is still different from the previous ones, value is placed on the dependency on environments made functional. Several historian colleagues questioned the historicity of the positive evaluation of such relations to the world. Within each of these families, the construction of an order of worth aims at making the inequality which is inherent to evaluation somewhat compatible with common humanity.

#### 1.4 Jointly Manufacturing Human Agency and Crafted Matter: Occupation in the History of Human Identity

The dialogue with historians is also enhanced by EC research strategy to approach evaluation conventions through valued relationships to the material world. Bruno Latour's path-breaking sociological innovation which led to Actor-Network Theory brought to the fore the relations between human and non-human beings. Yet the human/non-human relationship remains unspecified and symmetrical, by principle, in this model. Bringing to the fore qualifying processes which attribute quality to somebody and something, EG clarified the kind of congruence of human with non-human qualifications that coordinative conventions of orders of worth demand when the common good is at stake.<sup>6</sup> In the next step of its research agenda, the *sociology of engagements* addressed capacities or powers that are primordial for coordinating with oneself and others, below the level of the most legitimate public conventions of justifications and critiques which lay claim to the common good (Thévenot 2006).<sup>7</sup> This new move might enrich exchanges with historians as well. While Latour rightfully

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<sup>6</sup> Salais and Storper's "worlds of production" also point to such a dependency between the quality attributed to the worker and that attributed to the product (Salais and Storper 1993).

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction and references in English to sociology of engagements, see the excursion into the sociology of engagement in: Thévenot 2011, 196-201.

pointed to the fallacious “modern” detachment of the subject from the object (Latour 1991), the notion of engagement specifies the kind of dependency of human agencies, or capacities, on arrangements of the form-given material environment. The *regime of engagement in a plan* makes clear that the functional arrangement and formatting of the environment is a precondition for the implementation of a willful and autonomous individualized agency, and for the power to project oneself in the future, which are attributed to the modern subject. Thus, the research strategy is not limited to social constructivism but widens out to adopt a historical and anthropological comparative perspective on the joint manufacturing of human agencies and of their environment. Augustin Berque has tackled this issue for long, drawing from his expertise on Japan culture a human ecology in terms of *écoumène* (Berque 1996).

Situating the engagement in a plan among other regimes is useful to follow the historical transformations of work and of the role it plays in identifying human beings, a main topic of discussion with historian colleagues. It also helps to take distance with disciplines that are dedicated to work analysis and (too) closely linked to these transformations (Thévenot 2011a). Organizers, managers and engineers presuppose such an engagement while reducing it to the abstraction of human rationality. Mainstream economists have gone still a step further in imposing a calculative notion of instrumental rationality needed for the optimizing calculus. The regime of engagement in a plan is not limited to this rational cognition of even to the instrumental ability to attain a particular aim. It grasps a more basic capacity to project oneself in the future that depends on a functionally arranged environment. During the workshop, Claire Judde de Larivière rightly questioned the history of the supposedly rational or instrumental relationship with the world: were the actors rational in the same way in the Middle ages?

Critical sociology of work concentrated its attacks on organisations that favour this engagement in plan or – even worse – that reduce the plan to the letter of the written prescription of the task without any regard to skillful practices allowing adjustments to the situation. The *regime of familiar engagement* offers a general analytical category to grasp the capacity of personally accommodating with the situation. More than just a work skill, this capacity brings forth a kind of fundamental ease that maintain self-confidence through habituation, quite distinct from the self-assurance based on the ability to project oneself in the future through the engagement in a plan. However, the correct understanding of the recent historical transformations of capitalism calls for attention to another regime of engagement that has never been exploited before at the same level. This *regime of engagement in exploration* which Nicolas Auray identified (Auray 2010) blurs the distinction between production and consumption, this blurring being one of the features of this late capitalism. The good which is maintained by this type of explorative coordination with oneself is the excitement of the new. Contemporary management of flexibility is strongly equipped

by communication and information technology which fosters this readiness to explore and seize unexpected opportunities. Dispersion is not taken any more as a flaw in work activity but as a valuable openness to the unforeseen (Datchary 2011). The basic, local and highly idiosyncratic engagement in exploration needs transformation to be publicly acknowledged as work creativity. Innovation requires more and assumes the serial production of a new product which thus qualifies for Industrial worth. Inspiration worth also requires the aggrandizement of the exploration good and evidence that inspired states of worth benefit to all, as a common good.

Differentiating the variety of engagements which professional activities rest on is well attuned to historians' concern for fine-grained analyses of various labor relationships to crafted matter. In his article Bert De Munck (De Munck 2011) contrasts the convention of "intrinsic value" with the object-subject relationship which developed later during the eighteenth century, and that we already related to the engagement in a plan. He notes that placing intrinsic value on matter matches God's signature and the idea that manufacturing was not unlike alchemy up until the seventeenth century (Daston and Park 1998, quoted by De Munck). Against the rigid applications of the grid of orders of worth which bear the risk of projecting a contemporary perspective upon the distant past, De Munck argues that a complex and moving combination of different conventions were involved at the same time in production and labour relations.

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## 2. The Politics of Conventions: A Long-Term Perspective on Power, Authority and Protest

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Once we closely relate forms of coordination to powers, we are in better position to examine the connections between conventions and various governing authorities which regulate, exert control and enforce obedience, and to include in the research agenda protests or rebellions against such authorities. Most if not all the contributors to the Special Issue deal with such political questions. The domain of work and occupation will still be appropriate to continue our exchanges of ideas with them around the politics of conventions.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 Powers Issuing from Coordinative Forms

Contrary to some restrictive understandings, convention and concord do not go hand in glove. The critical issue of power is at the very core of EC. While the

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<sup>8</sup> For a recent remarkable and empirically documented EC synthesis on work evaluation and unemployment today, see: Eymard-Duvernay 2012.

vocabulary of convergent expectation is relevant to grasp the cognitive economies (and not only economics) of conventions, it overshadows the internal relations between conventions, assurances and powers.<sup>9</sup> The possibility of coordinating acts from one situation to another is the ground for fundamental capacities and powers. This coordinative definition of power is needed since brute force is rarely sufficient to coerce without strong coordination. Even when coordination is only achieved with oneself, it allows the agent to be engaged in such a correspondence with oneself, from one moment to another, that it leads to self-assurance and to power as such. While carefully paying attention to the dynamics of life together (Thévenot 2007a), we should not align too fast on the views on “horizontality” in contemporary interactions as opposed to former hierarchies and social orders. In an opposite direction, the analysis of coordination demonstrates that conventional forms which equip life together inevitably generate power asymmetries.

As mentioned during the workshop by Judde de Larivière against usual criticisms, there is a place for conflicts and hierarchies in the convention framework. Ancient regime society bears the burden of high domination. And the historian’s concern for competencies is not a way to deny domination but to study what actors did with domination. In his contribution to the Special Issue, Philippe Minard also noticed changes of hierarchies of power between actors which are the result of passage from a “regulated quality” convention to a “deliberated quality” (Minard 2011). As commented by Salais, EC does not ignore hierarchies and power but explores cognitive hegemony – and evaluative hegemony as well – rather than brutal discipline.

## 2.2 Authorities Governing through Conventions: A Comparative and Historical Perspective

Michel Foucault’s analyses of disciplines, governmentality and micro-powers have enriched and displaced the legacy of Weber’s historical sociology of State and of legitimate orders of domination. Departing from the insistence on the monopolistic access to legitimate violence, it led to a view on distributed powers, and even on the positive enabling potentials that micro-power *dispositifs* offer. When we conceptualize capacities from engagements with the world and try to encompass both the enabling and potentially oppressive features of such powers, we take side with Foucault struggling against limited Foucauldian conceptions of disciplining power.

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<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Kädtler fully acknowledges this source of power in justification (Kädtler 2011). Building on David Stark’s argument about the benefit for entrepreneurship “to keep multiple orders of worth in play and to exploit the resulting overlap” (Stark 2000, 5), Kädtler diagnoses the present financialised capitalism with a severe failure to bring into play a plurality of orders of justifications and rationalities.

Dealing with power through forms of coordination, EC is able to embrace States and other governing arrangements as well. Historians highlight a variety of authorities and governments which are distinct from nation-states. Sociologists have to get free from the historical dependence of their discipline on such nation-states, and to grasp other modes of governing of growing importance in our contemporary world. Judde de Larivière and Hanne show that hierarchies of names of occupation were not initially hierarchies of rights. They could be local and arborescence of names which differed from one town to another. The authors show the historical shift from local institutions up to a central State, among places where conventions of naming occupations and their hierarchies were managed. History continues with new displacements, from nation-States to agencies which have authority on the standardization and certification of competencies, and which are more and more often transnational. An ongoing dialogue with historians has been made possible by research on socio-occupational hierarchies and classification, first involving regular exchanges with Steven Kaplan and then continuing with Robert Descimon and Nikolay Koposov among others (Descimon 2010; Koposov 2009). These historians have paid close attention to *Ancien Régime* ranking of occupations according to various scales of grandeur, or orders of worth, and to authorities regulating them.

Beside more compulsory regulations, Judde de Larivière and Hanne interestingly refer to literary works when reviewing the different ways conventional naming of occupations is governed (Judde de Larivière and Hanne 2011, 94). The Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman paid close attention to the contribution of literature and theater to the codification of occupational identities and of associated rules of conduct. Gogol's *Khlestakov* mystifying a whole provincial town as a fake *Revizor* (translated in English as: The Government Inspector, or The Inspector General) is for Lotman a case of theatrical unfolding, through scene and roles, of a "semiotics of rank" (*chin*) deployed in the contemporary Russian society, where he finds "high semioticity" (Lotman and Ouspenski 1990, 193, 223). The Russian nobility in the epoch of Peter the Great had to learn new codes of conduct and Lotman makes the distinction between the code of solemn or ritual behavior – external to daily practice – which one "learns like a foreign language" by "following rules, a grammar," from the habitual behavior. This latter behavior, like the "mother tongue", does not appear in its codification except to the outside observer (Lotman and Ouspenski 1990, 247) who is not able to grasp it by engaging in familiarity.<sup>10</sup> Different format of

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<sup>10</sup> On the productive imbrication of literature with sociology, history, anthropology and philosophy, as remarkably exemplified by the Russian author Lydia Ginzburg in her historical account of the Leningrad blockade, see: Thévenot 2012a.

knowledge transmitting coded conducts are associated with hierarchical occupational ranks, and with different engagements as well.<sup>11</sup>

On this issue of knowledge and power, important points of convergence with historians result from the shared legacy of Foucault and earlier sociological traditions. EC benefited Durkheim and Mauss' connection between cognitive categorization and the making of communities, and Bourdieu's concern for dominating symbolic forms.<sup>12</sup> As Rainer Diaz-Bone made it clear (Diaz-Bone 2011), EC is also informed by quite different legacies coming from hermeneutic and pragmatist traditions. This combination allowed to develop a differentiation of "information formats" along with a plurality of engagements (Thévenot 2007b), and thus to make more subtle the argument about "performing" as per-formatting. We noticed that literature or theatre is one of the places from where occupational naming conventions are governed. Open to a wide plurality of information formats and richly documented, this literary deposit of conventional or more personally convenient markers leaves full space for doubt and irony which "open one's eyes" on what is left aside when one adhere to the letter of the convention. As such, it strongly contrasts with other loci of government which stick to this letter of the convention, or to the measurable objective, "closing one's eyes" to what is lost by such a reduction to only one of the two sides of the engagement.<sup>13</sup> When statistical conventions of socio-occupational classification are closely linked to instruments of government ("official classifications"), such a reduction to the letter occurs, and taxonomies take an official turn. The haunting fear that results from this reduction might prevent the creation and use of "ethnic" classifications that are needed to struggle against discriminations (Stavo-Debaugue 2003). In her comment to my article Sigrid Quack rightly underlined that the relationship between statistical categories and the State are specifically strong in France. A comparative European research program about conceptions and usages of socio-occupational classifi-

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<sup>11</sup> Linguistic usages and strategies of designation by members of occupations themselves are also governing the naming conventions. Early research studied variations of occupational names as declared in statistical questionnaires and attributed to statistical categories, to differentiate various grounds on which occupational identities are based (Thévenot 1981). Desrosières refers to this research among others to bridge the gap between two research orientations without much overlapping: measuring/instituting (Desrosières 2012). This bridge is particularly needed nowadays when the growing importance of "objective" measurement of policies with regard to standards and benchmarks leads to the domination of a new kind of "objective government through objectives" (Thévenot 2012c).

<sup>12</sup> For a worthwhile cartography of cognitive social theories, see: Strydom 2007.

<sup>13</sup> In order to prevent EC to be "conventionalist" in the sense it would give too much credit to the convergence of collective representations into agreed upon conventions (a Durkheimian holistic fallacy), and not to restrict either our view to the suspicious unveiling of the arbitrariness of the convention, I proposed to place the double meaning of "conventional" at the very core of the concept of engagement with its two sides: "closing/opening one's eyes" (Thévenot 2011b, 197).

cations (EUEeQUA) demonstrated that this relationship is even stronger in countries from the Eastern soviet bloc.<sup>14</sup> In Romania – and Poland evolved from the same situation – the Ministry of labor establishes one official list of the names of occupations that have to be included in the statistical classification. The performativity of this taxonomy is thus completed. This State-centered control on registered occupation names does not preclude the influence of other conventions of coordination, and the displacement of territorial authorities following the construction of European Union. The Romanian Ministry of labour thus recently received a request to register the occupational name of shepherd. It came from a German manpower agency recruiting shepherds in Romania to supply the German labour market which nowadays lacks such skills.

### 2.3 Concluding Remarks and Needed Extensions Towards Protests

Meeting and working together with historians allowed to put right several prejudices against EC. The first one is given rise by the very term convention itself. Would not an approach based on such a notion favour a conformist and conservative stance, insisting on continuity at the expense of change? Actually most contributions and discussions have been devoted to dynamics: shifting conventions or the elaboration of new ones, and the control exerted by authorities. I would suggest that we pay more systematic attention to the doubting stance which contests these authorities, while seeing it as part of the conventional engagement consisting of both stances. In accordance with some historian colleagues, I think that concepts of social struggles are sometimes anachronistically projected on the past, and that we should also differentiate carefully the modalities of contest and protest with regard to engagements involved.<sup>15</sup>

According to a second prejudice EC would favour micro-analysis by putting the emphasis on the situated adjustment and locally interpretation of action and coordination. Such limitations would come from the double pragmatist and hermeneutic inheritance. With respect to this alleged bias, our meeting demonstrated, on the opposite, a shared concern for long term perspective although informed by a plurality of time scopes in coordination and engagement. Finally, the last prejudice which was rectified by our exchanges deludes potential historian users of EC with the idea that it lacks ... historical perspective.

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<sup>14</sup> "Quantifying Europe. Comparative genesis, instrumentation and appropriation of socio-occupational harmonized classifications", ANR (National Agency for Research) international research program coordinated by Martine Mespoulet.

<sup>15</sup> The historian Malte Griesse took advantage of the sociology of conventions and engagements to bring fresh air on the understanding of critique and reflexivity in Soviet times (Griesse 2008a, 2008b, 2011). He plans to pursue his investigation backwards to types of discontent and uprising which depart from current frames which identify public criticism and collective class struggles.

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