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Conventions, the Great Transformation and Actor Network Theory

*Bert De Munck**

Abstract: »*Konventionen, die große Transformation und Actor Network Theory*«. This article proceeds from the field of tension between the synchronical approach of the economics of convention and the diachronical approach of economic anthropology (in the tradition of Karl Polanyi). It is argued that the economics of convention remain problematic to historians in that they fail to capture the long term transformations traditionally referred to as the emergence of modernity and the coming about of homo economicus. As a possible solution, the use of concepts and insights from Actor Network Theory is proposed. While this cluster of theories enables an historical perspective without considering modernity as a natural process, it confronts changing relationships between subjects, objects and cultural systems of meaning head on.

Keywords: conventions, Actor Network Theory, performativity.

Perhaps the most pertinent intervention at the workshop 'Conventions and institutions from a historical perspective' (Humboldt University Berlin, 10 February 2012)¹ pointed at the possible Eurocentric character of the convention approach. Convention-theorists rightfully argue that the price-mechanism is embedded in place and time-bound conventions and institutions which inform and format the preferences and choices of producers and consumers alike. As such, they have de-masked the universal utility-maximizing economic actor as an abstraction and an idealization, a notion that exists in (Western) economics but not in the economy. However, to the extent that the convention-approach continues to proceed from a type of methodological individualism, there may still be a universal 'homo economicus' involved. This is least what comes to the fore when addressing the economics of convention from an anthropological and historical angle. As a possible solution I will in this essay suggest to confront the economics of convention with certain aspects of Actor Network Theory – in particular the ideas of Michel Callon.

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¹ See also the introduction from Diaz-Bone and Salais in this HSR Focus.

1. Conventions versus the Anthropological and Historical Approach

Convention-theories are all about economic actors who actively seek to overcome uncertainty and arrive at coordinated actions by the purposeful use of specific repertoires of evaluation and frames of reference.² Although this can in theory be an unconscious process in which conventions precede the choices made by individuals not unlike the way ‘structures’ and ‘discourses’ did in orthodox sociology, the balance mostly tips in favor of a more willful economic actor. I realize, of course, that the ultimate aim of the economics of convention is to surpass the dichotomy of willful actors (and rational choice theory) versus will-less actors (whose choices result from structures, positions and discourses),³ but this has – in my opinion – been too difficult a task to date. While the heterodox approach has resulted in a richer and more profound understanding of the heterogeneity of markets and the range of possible conventions involved, the economic actor switching between conventions and contexts has hardly been problematized.

This is why I referred to the founding theories of Boltanski and Thévenot (1987, 1991) in my article in the special issue on conventions and institutions in *Historical Social Research*; 36 (2011) 4. In their agenda-setting study processes of evaluation and conflicts related to the assessment and ranking of persons and things involve both ‘objets’ and ‘dispositifs’, i.e., objects and cultural systems of meaning reproduced in the individual. The relationship of objects and systems of meaning with subjects differs across ‘mondes’ or ‘cités’. While, for instance, objects and dispositions are not detached from the person in the so-called ‘monde inspiré’ (they are intimately connected to the mind and the body), the ‘monde industriel’ is governed by such material devices as instruments, plans, schemes, and the like. And while the important ‘objets’ in the ‘monde civique’ are laws, decrees, and courts, the ‘monde domestique’ is formed by good manners, *savoir-vivre*, and representation. Unfortunately, the very relationship between economic actors, systems of meaning and objects has hardly been problematized in subsequent research. For an historian, this is problematic, as most long term transformations we are familiar with – the emergence of industrial capitalism, processes of proletarianization and alienation, disenchantment of the world, etcetera – involve changing relationships

² For references see the special issue on ‘Conventions and institutions from a historical perspective’ of *Historical Social Research*; 36 (2011) 4, edited by Rainer Diaz-Bone and Robert Salais.

³ As was made clear in one of the very first introductions: Jean-Pierre Dupuy, François Eyraud-Duvernay, Olivier Favereau, André Orléan, Robert Salais, and Laurent Thévenot. Introduction to *Revue Économique* vol. 40 (2/1989), special issue on ‘L’économie des conventions’.

between subjects and objects and between subjects and discourses or language. Recently, the work of Philippe Minard and Alessandro Stanziani among others has clearly shown that the coming about of nineteenth-century capitalism was not simply a matter of deregulation and the natural maturing of laissez-faire, but rather a complex redefining and reshaping of conventions (Minard 2011; Stanziani 2003, 2005). Yet a systematic account of long term transformations in the relationship between (economic) actors, objects and systems of meaning has not been written to date.

In what sense the shift from a regulated quality to a deliberated quality as identified by Minard in the special issue mentioned above differs from a shift from a corporatist economy to a free market economy? Should the so-called 'monde marchand' identified by Boltanski and Thévenot be seen as simply another type of convention or rather a more general historical shift related to the emergence of capitalism? According to Boltanski and Thévenot the 'monde marchand' is governed by competition and the price mechanism, the latter expressing the balance between production capacity and the desires of customers. While this clearly refers to nineteenth-century orthodox economic thinking, it is not clearly spelled out to what extent a 'monde marchand' involves a long term transformation in the relationship between subjects, objects and language. After all, even in the nineteenth century, other conventions – including domestic, civic, industrial etc. – apply as well. But do they differ from their early modern counterparts? Following Boltanski and Thévenot the emergence of Western capitalism may be reducible to the gradual domination of one convention. Yet wasn't there a 'great transformation' in Western history which gradually changed economic practices and processes of subjectivation across different sectors and regions (i.e., 'cités' or 'mondes')?⁴

From an anthropological angle, Webb Keane among others has convincingly linked economic and colonial dominance to broader and more fundamental cultural differences. Among other things, he has argued that Western (Dutch) subjects had a totally different relationship with language and discourses than their Indonesian 'subalterns' in the colonial encounter in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The point here is not that subjects use language differently, but rather that different types of subjectivation are at stake. While nineteenth and twentieth-century missionaries used language to sincerely express their alleged intimate self, 'primitive people' to them appeared to be fetishistically subjugated to language in rituals and ceremonies (Keane 2007). Such research is to be situated in a strand of economic anthropology which focuses on (changing) subject-object-relationships. Anthropologists studying material culture have for instance revealed important differences in the way subjects relate to objects. Notoriously, objects can be treated as either gifts or commodities.

⁴ I am of course referring here to the groundbreaking study of Karl Polanyi, first published in 1944.

While in the former case, the spirit of the giver is present in the gift even while it is circulating, the latter case corresponds to a situation in which subjects are either independent (the liberal version) or alienated (the Marxist version).⁵

Addressing convention theories from this angle, the actor invoked in the economics of convention would – on the whole – seem to be too constant and stable. While her/his preferences and repertoires of evaluation are shown to have been variable, her/his degree of autonomy and relationship to discourses and objects have mostly been taken for granted. It is as if an economic actor can simply shift from one context to the other, chose other instruments (conventions), and make other choices, while his capacity to do so continues to be universal.

2. From Economics of Convention to Actor Network Theory

In theory, historians should be able to adequately address this issue. Throughout the twentieth century they have extensively contributed to several master narratives about either an emergent individualism or proletarianisation and alienation. On the one hand, the birth of the modern reflexive, emancipated, and rational individual has been connected to the Renaissance, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment respectively.⁶ On the other hand, critical historians have written the history of alienation and subjugation from the perspective of either proletarianisation and the emergence of capitalist labour relations or civilization and disciplining processes in the sense of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault.⁷ In sociological terms, this could be seen as the emergence of either the economists' rational actor or the will-less Bourdieusian or Foucaultian subject. The last few decades, however, both master narratives have to a large extent been qualified. While individualism and rationalism have been de-masked as a Western myth built by social scientists and historians alike, the history of alienation, civilization and disciplining is now written in a more splintered and fragmentary way.⁸

The question of how to proceed next is rather urgent for current-day historians. Economic historians in particular still tend to refer to a more or less stable

⁵ An interesting introduction to economic anthropology from the perspective of 'value' is Graeber (2001).

⁶ A critical account in Bhambra (2007).

⁷ One excellent example in which an economic (Marxist) approach is successfully combined with a cultural one is Biernacki (1995).

⁸ It is of course impossible to refer to all relevant studies here. By way of introduction to the historians' attempts to reconcile structure and (rational) choice, read the brilliant book Sewell (2005).

economic actor. The reigning paradigm in economic history is derived from new institutional economics (NEI) in which institutions – understood in the broadest sense, including informal networks, customs, norms and values etcetera – help actors to solve economic problems related to contract enforcement and information asymmetries.⁹ In contrast, social and cultural historians still tend to focus on structures, discourses and systems of meaning, while downplaying individual agency. In this context, the conventional approach is a welcome reminder of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of markets and an important tool to examine the intricate relationship of culture and economic practices. However, it tends to obscure the overarching questions related to the emergence of free market thinking and modernity. Did markets become disembedded (as Karl Polanyi claimed) or did they rather become over-determined, i.e. subject to one over-arching cluster of discourses and habituses which determines the values, preferences and choices of all actors involved?

Given the importance of ‘objects’ and ‘dispositions’ for Boltanski and Thévenot it may be worthwhile to return to their ideas from this angle. How to understand the changing role of objects and systems of meaning from an historical perspective? Do different conventions and different situations simply imply (the use of) different objects or can the role of objects (and the connection thereof with subjects) as such change as well? How do material objects connect to immaterial elements or discursive practices? One way to explore this is through the concept ‘investments in forms’, which connects conventions to the tools and instruments used to establish equivalences, comparability and ‘objective’ judgments on the quality and value of labour and products (Thévenot 1984, 1986). Economic action involves material devices such as measuring equipment alongside non-material elements like rules and customs, cognitive abilities and representations. Conventions related to the intrinsic value of silver or the purity of milk cannot be separated from the instruments and devices with which to measure alloys and impurities – nor, for that matter, from the trade and certification marks with which the results thereof are communicated to customers.¹⁰ However, the relationship between material and non-material elements remains underexplored to date. Therefore, I would suggest to link this to Actor Network Theory, which specifically focuses on the relationship between the human and the non-human.

While economic practices cannot be reduced to processes in which a type of homo economicus instrumentally uses objects and instruments to resolve problems of uncertainty and coordination, the relationship between material devices and immaterial systems of meaning is highly unclear. A closer cooperation/confrontation between the economics of convention and Actor Network Theory may be an important step towards a more refined approach. One specif-

⁹ One often-cited book is Greif (2006). See for a critical perspective Ogilvie (2011).

¹⁰ Examples in Stanziani (2003, 2005) and De Munck (2012).

ic application of this theory involves the notion of performativity, which is used by Michel Callon and others to refer to the role of economic theories and the related ‘market devices’ in the creation of economic practices (Callon 1998, 2007). The idea here is that economics and the theories, formulas and instruments economists create not only reflect or represent economic practices but also produce certain effects in the economic realm. Perhaps the most famous example is the so-called Black & Scholes model (or Black-Scholes-Merton model). Basically a mathematical tool which gives the price of options, the introduction thereof on the trade floor in the 1970s had at least three types of effects. While it influenced the price of options (for a while they tended to converge to the model’s theoretical price), it led to a boom in options trading – not least because it enabled to calculate the perfect hedge for a portfolio in options and hence created the theoretical possibility to trade in options riskless. The latter effect was related to a third one: the model legitimised scientifically the trade in options, which turned from speculation and gambling into a rational activity (MacKenzie 2003, 2004, 2007).

3. Economics and Modernity

What is actually described in this theory is the emergence of ‘calculability’, which is situated neither solely in the human mind (cognition) nor simply in some external measuring and calculating equipment. Not unlike a machine and a manual, the human mind and the tools used for measuring and calculation cannot be approached separately. Moreover, the theory explicitly connects discourses and ideas to material devices used to measure and calculate. As such, it perfectly links up with the contribution of Alain Desrosières to the abovementioned special issue of *Historical Social Research*, in which the origin of the economics of conventions is linked to the intellectual process of seeing statistics and statistical tools not as reflecting reality, but as producing and reinforcing certain effects in reality. As a consequence, statistics could often be seen as tools of government in the spirit of Michel Foucault in his colleges on ‘governmentality’.¹¹ However, convention theory refrains from thinking this through in the Foucaultian sense. While quantification seems to be reduced to one convention among others (Desrosières 2011, 74) the broader historical transformation in which taxonomies, statistics and quantification become dominant tools and ways of thinking, tends to be ignored.

¹¹ For Foucault’s published lectures at the collège de France, see Michel Foucault, *Résumés de cours*, Collège de France (Paris: Julliard, 1989). An English translation of the crucial lectures: Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France (1978-1979)* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College de France (1978-1979)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Yet, in history there are strong indications that European capitalism and Western dominance as such cannot be understood without these tools and their related modes of thinking. Both the Western liberal subject and modern economic practices are literally unthinkable without a range of material devices such as maps, plans, schemes, forms, diagrams etc. and their related ideas and formulas. As an urban historian, I am familiar with the theories of among others Patrick Joyce (2003) and Chris Otter (2008), who have argued that the Western liberal and self-reflexive subject is quite literally produced through the implementation of urban planning and new technologies. Patrick Joyce has argued that urban authorities did not rule and discipline in a narrow sense, but rather transformed the material form of the city such that free and self-watching individuals were produced. For instance, the arrival of running water in the home and the capacity to defecate in private is considered to have generated the moral self-regulating self and the hygenization of the city simultaneously. In the same vein, Chris Otter argues that the introduction of such material devices as plate glass and light switches in the nineteenth century transformed social monitoring and the self-perception and self-regulation of individuals and groups. Examples include the mutual monitoring of groups within libraries, museums, reading rooms and art galleries, as well as the encouragement of self-inspection and introspection in private and enclosed spaces equipped with lamps and mirrors.

For social and economic historians, the challenge then is to link these political and intellectual transformations to economic practices in a more historical fashion than did Boltanski and Thévenot. One excellent example is the book *The rule of experts*, in which Timothy Mitchell tries to move beyond the opposition between, on the one hand, a view on modernity and global capitalism as the result of the historical unfolding of an inner-secular logic and, on the other hand, a social constructivist approach, in which the ingredients of modernity and global capitalism – i.e., the nation, the modern consumer etcetera – are but inventions of discourses and/or the social sciences involved. For Mitchell, the emergence of the economy in its modern shape and meaning is not solely the result of language and social imagination. It rather emerged out of a series of ‘extra-economic’ events and professional fields including political crises, ecological disasters and statistics. While the economy can be seen as being put in place by a ‘new politics of calculation’ (and hence of statistics, measuring devices etc.) its birth involves a set of demarcations, new forms of mapping and the realignment of colonial power.

What actually happens in the long run is the gradual reification of both objects (commodities) and subjects (actors). Western capitalism came along with realignments at the level of the division of the world into subjects and objects, culture and nature, and the human and the non-human. In its crudest and most orthodox way, this can be explained referring to the distinction between a gift economy and a market economy. While the spirit of the giver remains attached

to artifacts in the former, objects and subjects become separate entities in the latter. In a system of gift exchange, there is always a connection between the value of the gift and the 'quality' (status) of the giver – up to the extent that material artifacts remain, in a way, inalienable: they are kept even while given. (Weiner) In a market economy, in contrast, objects become subject to the price mechanism, while subjects turn into autonomous, rational, self-interested and calculating individuals whose choices and preferences determine offer and demand. I realize of course, that this is partly a myth and surely a construction, but history has shown that this construction becomes a reality in the end.

4. Towards New Concepts (for Historians)?

While Boltanski and Thévenot's approach had the advantage of pointing to different types of markets, historians need concepts to capture the broader transformation of subjects in calculating actors and objects into commodities. One set of concepts used by Michel Callon could be helpful here, namely 'framing' and 'disentanglement', which refer to processes in which objects are detached from their physical and cultural environment (including actors) and are made measurable and calculable (Callon 1998). The elements involved in these processes range from codes, customs, rules, discourses, and representations, to signs, marks, packaging, and the physical equipment in markets and auction halls. As such, these concepts again refer to material and immaterial (intellectual) processes simultaneously and should therefore perhaps be linked to the broader notion of *agencement* (translated as 'assemblage' in Actor Network Theory).¹² This Deleuzian concept not only refers to the assemblages and arrangements of human and non-human elements in networks, it implies that human agency and the relationship between objects and subjects and between subjects and discourses are 'emergent' from the network as well. While no priority is given to either humans or objects and artifacts, the network defines the nature and agency of both the human and non-human elements enrolled in it.

Instead of conventions, priority is given here to networks, but the difference is smaller than it superficially appears. While there have surely been genuine attempts to arrive at a better understanding of the difference between and relationship of conventions and networks, current literature tends to adopt an ambivalent stance. In the special issue to which the essays in this dossier refer, at least two different attitudes towards the relationship can be detected. Whereas the network-model is only one of many conventions in the general introduction (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011, 21) the methodological chapter of Rainer Diaz-

¹² By way of introduction see of course Latour (2005). Also De Landa (2006, 2010).

Bone rather considers conventions as emergent from assemblages of humans, things and cognitive concepts – so that networks would seem to precede conventions (Diaz-Bone 2011). Although this is neither the time nor the place to decide and argue which approach is superior, I am inclined to favour the second one.

From an historical perspective it is essential to de-stabilize, contextualize and eventually deconstruct the reified reality of both commodities and the trans-historical actor as we still know her/him from economic and sociologic literature. Economic actors do not only apply and refer to different conventions in different context, their very relationship with objects and systems of meaning changes as well. As a consequence, it is necessary to move beyond methodological individualism and the synchronical plurality of conventions and to also consider the possibly changing nature of conventions (i.e., its relationship to actors, institutions, and networks) throughout history. To be sure, this is not to say that Polanyi was right all along. This process can never be considered a one-way emergence of autonomous economic actors who decide about prices and value independent from objects and systems of meaning. As Callon has shown, there are always processes of re-entanglement and overflowing involved. While processes of disentanglement create new (material) traces (e.g., delivery notes, invoices etc.), framing creates new externalities (immeasurable realities beyond the frame) – as is for instance apparent from debates about pollution as a negative outcome of production processes.

Above all, however, neither commodities nor calculating actors precede the material devices with which they are framed and disentangled. As a consequence, the challenge for both historians and social scientists is to write the history of the emergence of calculative agencies and commodities without falling into the teleological trap of writing the history of modernity. And this is perhaps the ultimate trump card of Actor Network Theory. In his eye-opening essay *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* Bruno Latour considers modernity as the artificial distinction between culture and nature or the human and the non-human, while in reality 'hybrids' proliferate. As such, modernity is indeed a myth, built by scientists and intellectuals, but at the same time it is a reality and produces real effects – among others in the economy. Moreover, following Actor Network Theory scholars can no longer start from an independent or individual actor, but they should rather examine how they become (perceived as) independent and autonomous. Hence my plea for a more thorough confrontation of the economics of convention and Actor Network Theory. In contrast to convention theories, Actor Network Theory has the potential to account for historical transformations on the level of subject-object-formations and explore changing arrangements of theories, ideas and discourses, material devices, and (economic) practices and choices.

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