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The Centre d'Etudes de l'Emploi (1970–2015): Statistics – On the Cusp of Social Sciences and the State

Thomas Amossé*

Abstract: »Das Centre d'Etudes de l'Emploi (1970–2015): Statistik – an der Spitze der Sozialwissenschaften und des Staates«. The Centre d'études de l'emploi (CEE) is a Paris-based public research institute. This article will attempt to draw up a social history of quantification viewed through the lens of the Center's story. Positioned on the cusp of science and State, its own history relates the tension, hesitations, and upheavals that have marked relations between labor and employment administration and social science organisms over the last 45 years. More specifically, it provides insight into the role played by statistics in the effort to combine action and knowledge – and by this we understand both a field of actors with its rules, practices and a myriad of instruments, methods and results.

Keywords: Research center, institutional portray, Paris region, quantitative methods, social sciences, economics of convention.

1. Introduction

Created in 1970, The *Centre d'études de l'emploi* (henceforth in short as CEE or “the Center”) is a medium-sized establishment. Employing between 50 and 100 employees as staff, it is typical of the many thematic research institutes that sprung up at that time (Pollak 1976).

Having co-hosted early productions in the line of heterodox economics called the “economics of convention” (*économie des conventions*), the CEE illustrates the unique relationship between the social science community and statistics in France – and elsewhere – during the 1980s and 1990s. Studied as a subject of research even before the “critical turning point” (*tournant critique*),¹ statistics were then withdrawn from research practices. This indeed amounted to a temporary rejection of a specific type of quantification: the large-scale public statistical surveys, symbolizing the State and the knowledge of society it builds.

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¹ As proclaimed in 1988 by the Journal *Annales* (Desrosières 2011, 67).

The history of the CEE in terms of both its status and its research activity reflects a shift from one era to another – the quantifying positivism espoused by the *Commissariat Général du Plan*² to a new expert power of numbers that went hand-in-hand with the emergence of a neo-liberal State (Desrosières 2014). Between these two periods, a plurality of different ways of relying on reality were examined and theorized at the CEE. And this chapter of the story may not be entirely closed.

Our institutional narrative will be in chronological order and based on administrative documents (legal texts, audit reports), the full range of publication collections at the Center and interviews carried out with present and past members.³ My own experience, gleaned over the last nine years in my role as researcher at the CEE will form part of the input.

2. State Science up to Science of Margins (1970-1983)

The CEE was set up by the decree of 25 November 1970, but its origins date back to 1962 when a research department specializing in “poorly adapted” population categories was created in the *Institut national d’études démographiques (INED)*. It very quickly sparked the interest of the working population. The department head, Claude Vimont, had previously acted as advisor to the cabinet of Bernard Chenot, Minister for Public Health and the Population. A graduate of the *Institut d’études politiques de Paris* and doctor in economics, he acted as *rapporteur general* for the *Commission de la main d’œuvre* of the IIIth, IVth and Vth Plans, and also worked with Jean Fourastié, head economist for the productivity policy implemented within the Marshall Plan. It was more of a political decision than a scientific one that led to the setting up of this department and its substantial financial aid (Girard 1986), making it possible to carry out several statistical surveys and studies, in keeping with the specifications of the Plan, particularly concerning changes to the working population, employment, and human resource requirements.

At the end of a decade marked by the emergence of employment problems (Pénissat 2009), Joseph Fontanet, Minister for Labor, Employment and the Population at the time, decided to consolidate his administration’s research and sta-

² This is the body in charge of economic planning in France between 1946 and 2006 (see Fourquet 1980 for an historical overview), hereafter named the Plan.

³ Thanks to (in alphabetic order): Jean-Claude Barbier, Christian Bessy, Jean-Louis Dayan, Jean-Pierre Faguer, Michel Gollac, Bernard Gomel, Guillemette de Larquier, Marie-Thérèse Letablier, Laurent Thévenot, Marie-Madeleine Vennat and Serge Volkoff. My sincere thanks also to Jean-Louis Dayan and Christine Daniel, who kindly granted me access to the CEE archives. I take full responsibility for the analysis and any possible errors in all the documents and data used. In no way whatsoever shall this engage the responsibility of the institute, any of its directors, or successive members.

tistical resources in an effort to gain clout vis-à-vis the Ministry of Economy. While remaining part of the INED, this department then became the CEE. Its mission was to study labor market functioning and to carry out research in the field of the sociology of employment.⁴ Claude Vimont remained at the helm of this new organization and in this capacity acted as scientific advisor to the General Director for Labor and Employment Administration of the Ministry. In addition, he was vice-president of the Employment Commission of the VIth Plan.

Due to its dual origin, both administrative and scientific – which has been symbolized by its first director – the positioning of the CEE was ambiguous from the outset. Somewhere between a research organization and an administrative department, the CEE is one of these “French-style” hybrid institutions, caught between science and the State, much like the INED as described by Alain Desrosières (1997). However, the similarity ended there. Whereas the INED – mid-way between “*science sauvage*” (wild science) and “*science d’Etat*” (State science), had succeeded in securing its position as a key seat of French-style demographic studies which it had embodied since the immediate postwar period, the CEE’s main focus was administrative – for the first decade of its existence in any case. The internal structure and organization were clearly hierarchical with the director at the top – acting as main interface with the Ministry – above the research fellows (senior, when formerly in the INED, and their less experienced counterparts) and at the bottom, short-term contract employees (mostly in charge of data entry and coding). Departmental meetings had a strong administrative atmosphere and had little in common with the ambience of a research unit. Writing a PhD was forbidden, as was attending scientific colloquia.

That said, the CEE’s vocation was not purely administrative.⁵ The creation of the *Cahiers du CEE* collection in 1973, where researchers could publish their work, was proof of the Center’s wish to confirm its unique positioning and set itself apart from the existing scientific journals and administrative publications at the time. Although it has not had a major impact on the economic science field, the collection is known and has its place among French economic reviews (Koen 1986). This is more largely true of the academic recognition of the Center’s research into labor economics (Mériaux 1978). Yet, it had few ties with the field of sociology of work, despite the fact that the *Institut des sciences sociales du travail* (operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Employment since its creation 20 years previously) had just closed down (Tanguy 2011).

The creation of the CEE sealed the plan, born of political aspiration and scientific ambition, to give substance to an issue that was yet to be clearly defined

⁴ Decree no. 70-1087 of 25 November 1970.

⁵ At the end of the 1970s, a regional head of employment stated “I don’t wish to be unpleasant but the research they do is almost scientific,” the adjective “almost” meaning “too” (thanks to Michel Gollac for the anecdote).

– employment. The intention was to produce information likely to drive public policy and thereby contribute to the creation of social science for employment, via *employment studies* (much like the INED *population studies*). Research methods were thus mainly statistic-based – either derived from existing data but exploited in an original manner; or from “in-house” representative studies designed according to the INED model (using a large cohort of students for example); or from reduced-scale surveys of companies where quantitative data are often enhanced by interviews in workplaces, not dissimilar to the “survey research” developed in sociology of work (Tanguy 2011). In-depth interview-based inquiries of a sociological nature were rarer. They were mostly covered by the *Division jeunesse* (Youth Division), which became part of the CEE structure at the time of its inception.⁶ Its director, Jean Rousselet (doctor in paediatrics), upheld the multi-disciplinary approach, which left substantial scope for analyzing attitudes and mentalities.

Micheline Galabert (economist and graduate of the *École nationale d'administration*, who took over as director from Claude Vimont in 1973) seemed slightly defensive as she pointed out that the place given to statistical research was not to the exclusion of other methods. It is true that in the 1970s, quantitative analyses were predominant at the CEE, and these were conducted along the lines of the methods developed at the same time as the *population studies* already mentioned. Having no in-house IT resources, the Center's research relied on analyses conducted in the Institute until the beginning of the 1980s. At a time when the framework of the Plan and the INED methods were the main references, the use of statistics was a given. Thus, statistics were key in the *Cahiers du CEE* volumes that most aptly reflect the period. Covering the area of employment in the manufacturing sector, these publications adopted, for instance, a taxonomist approach to determine the exact skill structure of employment and the geographic and sectorial distribution of employees. Even research conducted by the Youth Division involved making large-scale statistical surveys. One such example is a study carried out on several thousands of pupils born in 1955.

That said, the fact that statistics were used was not necessarily tantamount to their endorsement. For example, Jean Rousselet criticized the use of statistics in his preface to the 15th issue of the *Cahiers du CEE*. Unhappy with the still vague nature of social sciences for employment, he expressed the regret that a global approach had not taken shape and addressed harsh criticism more directly at “approaches that were almost exclusively statistical [...requiring] arbitrary systematizations and groupings.” He pointed out that “all too often specifics have been boiled down to generalization just for the sake of producing simple and easy-to-read spread sheets” and that “the reality of individual experience

⁶ The Division jeunesse had its origins in the *Centre d'étude et de recherche sur les conditions d'emploi et de travail des jeunes* (Cercetj), which was created in 1955.

has become increasingly foreign to the formal structures of institutions and organizations.” He added that “even words themselves gradually take on a different meaning and end up changing the apparently objective nature of purely quantitative analyses” (Rousselet 1977, 13-4).

This written statement reflects the personal position of its author and more particularly his attachment to the human dimension. But it also reveals that certain issues were being revisited at the time: a reflexive withdrawal from the methods and categories of economic and social analysis therefore developed – this was also the case in the *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (INSEE, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Research; see Desrosières 2011). A number of research projects started to explore the categories of perception and practices of “social codification” (Thévenot 1983) in a movement later described by Nicolas Dodier as a “totalization crisis” (1996).⁷ At CEE, structural approaches gradually started losing ground as the economy shifted from growth mode and the employment crisis took a hold. Analyses relying on administrative variables, such as geographical entities (*département, région*), as well as economic ones (occupation, industry), in the form of maps or forecast tables, were featured less systematically in the productions of the Center.

Throughout the years, research tended to focus on employment in the tertiary sector and employment of women – and no longer on the manufacturing industry, the kernel of economic statistics for the *Trente Glorieuses*. Researchers started exploring marginal employment zones such as temporary work, subcontracting, homeworking or teleworking, the unemployed, etc. It was no longer the Youth Division alone that focused on these aspects even if some of its researchers, also associate fellows at Pierre Bourdieu’s unit, worked specifically on the subject of “*marginalisme*.” The head of this Division was besides one of the first authors to theorize the subject of allergy to work (Rousselet 1974), thereby symbolizing a breakaway from the initial missions of the Center.

The type of recruitment carried out in the 1970s highlights the increasing discordance of the Center in relation to more legitimate areas of economic administration and research: *Polytechniciens*⁸ were particularly numerous among economists and demographers belonging to the INSEE and the INED (Pollak 1976; Desrosières 1997) and *Normaliens*⁹ among sociologists working in the *École pratique des hautes études* and the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS, the French National Center for Research). On the contrary, the CEE employed individuals with diverse academic backgrounds and experi-

⁷ See also the contribution of Laurent Thévenot in this HSR Special Issue.

⁸ The *École polytechnique* is a top French engineering school whose students become, for a part, high-rank civil servants and researchers.

⁹ The *École normale supérieure* is an elite higher education institution mainly leading to teaching and academics careers.

ence, with specializations ranging from economics to philosophy, and also including demographics, geography, or psychology. Its members had previously worked as engineers, doctors, nurses, social workers, trade union members, etc. With the exception of some engineers and IT specialists, there were few employees with qualifications in statistics, and practically no one had a PhD. The research tended to follow a “learning by doing” mode in an environment that could be described as artisanal. Here, with the exception of some statistic treatments made by the few professional statisticians at the INED, most of the analyses were done the old-fashioned way, using paper, pencils and a calculator.

The 1970s saw a move towards outsourcing scientific production, with a multiplication (advocated by the Plan) of administrative and research bodies (similar to the CEE) supposed to compete with the CNRS and universities (Pollack 1976). The Center also symbolized the clash of generations associated with the events of May 1968 and the subsequent departure of the positivism of social sciences of the previous decade. To give an example of the political atmosphere prevailing within the walls of the Center itself, any programming work done by short-term contract employees was checked for signs of sabotage at the end of the working day. The distance increased vis-a-vis statistics and analytical approaches that prevailed in the INED. At the end of the 1970s, a new profile of statistician appeared on the scene – one willing to work on developing new methods for analyzing these “*enquêtes intermédiaires*” (non-representative small scale surveys conducted on companies or workplaces). Around the same time, the sociology model based on measuring and quantifying was mainly rejected (Tanguy 2011).

The CEE’s initial scientific ambition started to lose momentum. The innovative methods and theoretical developments announced in the early *Cahiers du CEE* hardly went beyond the exploratory stage. It is true that research into how local employment markets operated had partially been linked to the segmentation theory.¹⁰ Additionally, research into how technical progress impacted job content provided opportunities for attempts at modelization. That said, the Center’s contributions were, for the most part, of an empirical nature, as Henri Chaffiotte, another *énarque* and economist, pointed out in the first foreword for the *Cahiers du CEE* he penned following his appointment as director in 1979.

There was a further shift when the Left came into power in 1981. A State Ministry for Research and Technology was created, tangible proof of the government’s commitment to jointly developing its research and industrial policies. Having suffered cutbacks in the latter half of the 70s, social sciences were once again granted funding. It was expected that they would assist the democratization process of research through their links with social actors and the long-awaited reconciliation between fundamental and applied sciences. In terms of

¹⁰ Michael Piore took a sabbatical at the CEE at that time, during which he followed several sectorial field surveys.

labor and employment, economics and sociology were supposed to boost the competitiveness of the economy, notably by bridging the gap between the different industrial players (the State, employers and unions) and by supporting the model of “*démocratie sociale*” (social democracy) upheld by the Auroux laws.

The CEE’s activity coincided with these new trends. Even if the quality of its research came under harsh criticism,¹¹ following a two-year administrative struggle,¹² its position was eventually consolidated with increased resources and a change in status some years later.

3. Theoretical Development and Withdrawal from French Public Statistics (1984–1993)

In 1984, the Ministry for Research created the *Programme interdisciplinaire de recherche technologie, travail, emploi et mode de vie* (PIRTTEM, interdisciplinary research program for technology, work, employment, and lifestyle), inspired by the American industrial research laboratories of the first half of the 20th century where a cross-disciplinary approach combining scientific methods and a broad range of skills was adopted to solve specific problems (Pestre 2002, quoted in Tanguy 2011, 167). Back in France, the early 1980s saw a leaning towards possible restructuring of academic disciplines. With regard to social labor science, the first audits conducted at the PIRTTEM underlined the inadequacy of the existing and outdated analytical frameworks (which still tended to be based on the economy of the *Trente Glorieuses*) and also emphasized the need for increased focus on company-level analyses. For the most part, the CEE was already following this trend, with its empirical *savoir-faire*, notably the surveys carried out in companies, and the plurality of academic directions followed by its members. The Center would be supported throughout the 1980s by the Minister for Research¹³ and proved itself to be the ideal environment for hosting an emerging line of thinking positioned midway between economics and sociology – the economics of convention.

In 1984, François Eymard-Duvernay was appointed director of the CEE. He was then joined by Laurent Thévenot, who worked alongside him to make the Center the ideal site for a convergence of different research programs initiated in the early 1980s – at the INSEE in particular. Research into three distinct

¹¹ As stated in the summary note written by Bernard Mériaux in December 1981 following his assessment report of the CEE submitted to the Ministry for Labor (CEE archives).

¹² Several notes and administrative reports were produced between 1981 and 1983 on the subject of the CEE, with recommendations fluctuating between closing down the Center and supporting it (CEE archives). The latter option would finally be chosen.

¹³ Several notes written by Yves Lichtenberger between 1983 and 1989 attest to this (CEE archives).

areas thus irrigated the Center's program: firstly, an economic study of the plurality of work organization models implying different "*investissements de forme*" (investments in form, see Eymard-Duvernay and Thévenot 1983a, 1983b, 1984; see also Thévenot 2016 in this HSR Special Issue) used for manpower management; secondly, a sociological investigation into the plurality of approaches to constructing a moral judgement; finally, an historical reflexive analysis of statistical tools and categories viewed as a plurality of means of representing social and economic reality. It is the notion of "convention" that bridges the gap between these three areas: it enables individuals to coordinate action in different work organizations, to formulate a judgement in different arenas of society and to develop different representations of the world.¹⁴

With its new director and a change of status, the CEE was well on its way to becoming a fully-fledged research center: the mission statement clearly mentioned that it had to "carry out research,"¹⁵ and it now had a board of directors and a scientific advisory group, thereby guaranteeing an equal balance between academics and administration directors; the collections published by the Center were redefined with the creation of *Dossiers du CEE* in addition to the *Cahiers du CEE*, the latter being used only for more in-depth productions from then on; a research seminar for non-CEE members was organized and collaboration with other scientific organizations was developed.

At first, this new research-oriented direction followed by the CEE focused on the economics of convention. Indeed, the importance given to this program is reflected both by the composition of the scientific council¹⁶ and the volumes of the *Cahiers du CEE* published in the second half of the 1980s. The first issue in the series, entitled *Les conventions économiques*, gave an overview of the analytical framework being developed by the Center at the time, illustrated by very diverse case studies.¹⁷ The following issue, entitled *Entreprises et produits*, was dedicated to publishing the work of in-house researchers, many of whom had been working at the Center since its inception. This research would often take the form of "situated" case studies (two examples being the footwear industry in the Cholet region and Camembert production in Normandy). All this provided additional input for the ongoing thoughts on "*modèles d'entreprise*" (company models). Three "types of coordination" were thus identified: "via the market, via investments that stabilize exchanges in a broader space, via investment into sustainable personal relationships" (Eymard-Duvernay 1987, xx). These three approaches corresponded to the market, the industrial, and the do-

¹⁴ For a more detailed presentation, see Diaz-Bone and Salais (2012).

¹⁵ Decree no. 86-399 of 12 March 1986.

¹⁶ Among those present were, notably, Robert Salais and Olivier Favereau, two of the founding fathers of the economics of convention, as pointed by Alain Desrosières (2011).

¹⁷ Two such examples are mine safety in the Decazeville-Aubin coal basin in the 19th century and the "production function of dairy cow milk" in the Ternois region in the north of France in the early 1980s (Thévenot 1986).

mestic types of economy respectively. The three subsequent editions of *Cahiers du CEE* (entitled *Les économies de la grandeur*, *Innovations et ressources locales* and *Justesse et justice dans le travail*) disclosed some empirical applications and theoretical developments inspired by this three-pronged program covering the economics of convention and the French schools of pragmatic sociology and the sociology of science. Thanks to the efforts of its directors and part of its research team – not forgetting its publications, the CEE earned its reputation as one of the pivotal institutions for this assemblage of research.

The new direction taken by the CEE brought a vast array of empirical materials into play: observations and interviews, corpuses of archival materials and scholarly texts, professional and legal documents, written traces and statistical counts. This did not amount to a rejection of quantitative methods per se but was more a voluntary withdrawal from the major national statistical surveys. At the time, both theoretical development and research practices focused on the notions of particularity and locality (as opposed to totality and nation level), illustrating the polarization between monographic and statistical approaches described by Alain Desrosières in *Justesse et justice dans le travail* (1989). A brief overview of these two forms of research (including the mutual criticisms they received) provided us with more details of the type of generalization they lead to: the unity and both the global and exemplary nature of the monograph were compared with the totality, the exhaustive nature and the “*conventions d'équivalence*” (conventions of equivalence) of statistics.¹⁸ Whereas at the time statistical research was still then relying on a division of work between researchers and statisticians, quantitative analyses were no longer carried out at the CEE as a key activity, notably owing to insufficient human and technological resources. Because of the fine granularity of data requested for analysis, contextualized observations and textual materials were often preferred to numerical data.¹⁹

In addition, statistical tools were used as subjects for research from then on. Whether they were the national accounts, the large-scale surveys, or the macro-economic modeling of company situations, it was the consistent manner adopted by public statisticians when organizing and depicting reality that was questioned by Alain Desrosières, François Eymard-Duvernay, Laurent Thévenot, and Francis Kramarz. Underpinned by the objective of disclosing different conventions underlying the construction of facts and coordination of actions, these authors stepped back from the professional universe they were familiar with, to which they belonged, and from which they aspired to break away.

¹⁸ See Desrosières (2011, 72) for a presentation of the notion.

¹⁹ In *Les Économies de la grandeur* (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987), words replace numbers as subjects for analysis. Another sign of the limited attention given to results of statistical methods was the PROSPERO software program, developed by Francis Chateauraynaud when he was at the CEE, the main and first focus being put on the categorization of texts: although it could have allowed to carrying out factor analyses methods, it was not used for this purpose.

The growing distance vis-à-vis statistics could appear to be a paradox coming from professional statisticians (Desrosières 2011). It was part of a movement of reflexivity addressed to knowledge production operations which went beyond the CEE but which was (the movement of reflexivity) facilitated by personal experiences and institutional trajectories. It is certainly no coincidence that it was the INSEE civil servants, who had stepped off their “classic” administrative career path when they committed themselves to research, who produced this work. And neither is it any more surprising that it was developed in the CEE, this center situated on the cusp of administration and research, where the number and variety of methods were the norm. Here we can perhaps draw a parallel with the career path of Luc Boltanski, following his ideological split with Pierre Bourdieu. Imposing a new multi-faceted mode of perception of reality implies going beyond a single approach conveyed – in certain areas of discussion at least – by previous visions of the world, and therefore being able to break away from these: industrial governance symbolized by the INSEE national accounts; a purely market-driven economy which also tended to be defended from within; the large scale surveys and variables used in the first period of the “*sociologie critique*” (the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu), up to the 1970s at least to highlight the structure of social inequality (be it “*reproduction scolaire*,” matrimonial alliances or the judgement of taste).²⁰

Research carried out at the CEE time showed *a contrario* specific focus on domestic and local issues, which had often and for a long time been previously considered as economic archaisms. In the same way, monographs and micro-objects became central to the practice of research. This opposition is not to be read so much vis-à-vis statistical counting and quantitative methods themselves, but more with regard to large-scale statistical surveys, symbolizing administrative variables that compact the thickness of real practices and prevent consideration of other categorizations when attempting to understand reality.

Not everyone working at the Center shared this approach however. Following the arrival of François Eymard-Duvernay, the practical and theoretical options chosen by CEE gave rise to some tension, both internally and externally. The direction followed was met with much reticence on the part of some researchers working at the Center. Some went as far as to refuse the distancing from the French Public Statistics and the Ministry of Labor and continued to conduct studies at its request. Other researchers, sometimes the same ones, estimated that the economics of convention was not “critical” enough because the subject chosen was precisely the “weapon” used for sociological disclosure

²⁰ The 1980s saw Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology also drawing away from statistics and his criticism of State domination was increasingly explicit (if we consider for example his lecture on the State given at the Collège de France in 1990; Bourdieu 2011, 24-5).

or social protest.²¹ Outside of the Center, the exotic nature of certain micro-objects, such as the ladled camembert or the *coquille Saint Jacques* (scallops)²² were misunderstood, especially in the public administration, which was mainly concerned with seeking specialists in order to tackle the issue of fast-growing unemployment. Although it was not completely disconnected from the issues facing the Ministry for Labor, the way the CEE analyzed the economy and society clearly showed its withdrawal from public statistics and, more broadly, from State action.

The appointment of two INSEE civil servants as director and deputy of the Center took place at the same time in the middle of the 1980s, with a reinforcement of the role of statistics in the public administration of labor and employment. This was in line with the ambition announced as of 1981 by the social reformers at the Ministry to strengthen its scope of expertise. However, the wish to pursue an original theoretical research direction and not to foster the best practices of the statistics Institute led to a deterioration of relations between the Center and its original governing body. The new ministerial team appointed in 1988 restated its intention to have arms available to defend an alternative policy to that recommended by the macro-economic models estimated by the INSEE and the *Direction de la prévision* (along with the INSEE, one of the main French public administrations of the Ministry of Economy). Following two audit reports²³ and several years' hesitation on the part of the government, plans to shut down the Center started to take shape in 1992 – at a time when the creation of an extended public administration for studies and statistics (that was to include the CEE) within the Ministry for Labor was on the horizon. This would be to replace the former *Service des études et statistiques (SES)*. However, the project of a merger never materialized, mostly because of the resistance shown by both management and the members of the Center.

²¹ *Les Economies de la Grandeur* (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987) was, for instance, met with a particularly stormy reception. Many researchers denounced the relativization of critical resources drawn from labor law and union action advocated in this piece of research. In the context of a breaking away from Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, Luc Boltanski's and Laurent Thévenot's analysis of the plurality of forms of criticism and their respect for the principle of symmetry in the sociological analysis were not seen as an attempt to allow the "small fry" to defend themselves. On the contrary, it had been considered as a sociology providing support to capitalism, without any real critical power. Luc Boltanski has since responded to such views in his book *On Critique* (2011).

²² See the *Cahiers du CEE* 30 and 32, for instance.

²³ The economist Jean Vincens and the senior official Gabriel Mignot were requested to do this in 1988 and 1992 respectively. In his report submitted to the Ministry, the former acknowledged the high quality of the research carried out at the CEE, stating for example that (the Center) "has developed an extremely ambitious theoretical and methodological approach aimed at gradually overseeing field work, in an attempt to standardize it and increase its scope. This framework was very well received by a significant number of researchers outside the CEE, leading to the development of a set of concepts forming a paradigm, which would inevitably compete against the dominant paradigm" (CEE archives, 64).

The *Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques* (DARES, Labor and Employment Ministerial Studies and Statistical Department) was officially created in January 1993 but did not bring about any institutional changes for the Center, apart from the appointment of Annie Fouquet, INSEE civil servant and sociologist (who was at the time heading up the SES) as head of the CEE while Claude Seibel took command of the DARES. The proximity of these two senior civil servants provided a new blueprint for the Center's development and allowed it to strengthen its ties with the Minister for Labor, and more generally speaking, with the expectations of the public statistical system.

4. A Return to Work and Employment: Constructivism versus Realism, Public Policy Evaluation (1994–2003)

The creation of the DARES marked the commitment of social reformers to have a real influence on government policy (Fouquet 2007), whereas the growing trend (in the INSEE in particular) was to use labor micro-economy as a basis for making economic decisions (Champsaur 1996). In this context, resorting to statistics was a given, as recorded in an exchange in July 1992 between Gabriel Mignot, one of the civil servants involved in setting up the project, and an SES staff representative clearly concerned that a monographic-type approach still had a place in studies conducted in the future DARES: “I am not a believer in purely qualitative research, everything should end up being quantified; I make no distinction between statistics and studies.”²⁴ This stance reflected the administration's mindset whereas at the time statisticians were increasingly hired and micro-computing was expanding, making collection and analysis of statistical large sample surveys much easier.

At the CEE, the appointment of Annie Fouquet confirmed the new direction taken by its former management during its final term of office. The economics of convention was still a significant source of inspiration for research conducted at the Center under the leadership of François Eymard-Duvernay, henceforth focusing on the analysis of how the labor market operated. However, there were other formally defined scopes of investigation: evaluation of public labor policy was directed by Bernard Simonin, and Michel Gollac oversaw an analysis of organizations and working conditions. The importance placed on quantitative data and methods varied from one focus area to another: although present in the program derived from the economics of convention, they played a secondary role, unlike the research into working conditions where their role was more central. As for the evaluation of labor policy, on the whole this mostly

²⁴ Exchange found in the DARES archives (1993–2000) and recorded by Etienne Pénissat (2009, 143).

steered clear of quantification tools. In the 1990s, attitudes toward quantitative methods varied greatly within the Center. This was at odds with the Ministry for Labor's expectations but was in keeping with the history of the CEE.

Statistical methods and tools may have played a minor role in the economics of convention program. That said they are far from being totally absent. Upon his arrival at the CEE in the mid-1980s, Christian Bessy set up, for instance, databases for dismissal and redundancy authorization requests (with the agreement of the Ministry for Labor) and produced a sector typology. He would later enrich it with a cross-analysis of wage-setting variables derived from the INSEE surveys *Coût de la main d'œuvre/structure des salaires* (on labor cost/wage structure). It comes as no surprise that typologies and classification methods were key to these research programs: However unlike previous studies carried out at the Center (typologies were already used in the 1970s), the aim was not then only to classify the different cases observed; the intention was also to offer a theoretical scope to the categories obtained from these analyses, which were then compared to industry or company "models."²⁵

If typologies appear to be adapted to the "conventionalist" program, existing statistical surveys could not offer the same level of granularity as observations conducted directly at the workplace. Due to the relative paucity of variables belonging to these data, they could not take into account those areas where reality resulted from a negotiation or was only partially visible (manpower management in companies, recruitment processes in the labor market for instance). It even did not always seem relevant to try to measure phenomena, like recruitment practices, where the target population was not known.²⁶ In addition, the publication of a figure that could be immediately taken and used in the public debate (one such example being the number of job vacancies) might be more of a hindrance than a help when attempting to provide shared knowledge on economy and society. Thus, these were the key notions of the representative survey and the quantifiable indicator had become less relevant. In order to understand and classify the vast array of different labor market intermediation or company models, François Eymard-Duvernay defended the need to open the "black boxes," namely, public statistical surveys. He went on to denounce what he qualified as the artificial "totalization" of companies, which provided an aggregate, illusory, yet at the same time, a key to economic statistics.

During a workshop organized in January 1994 by the DARES on the theme of "using statistical methods for research on labor," François Eymard-Duvernay mentioned the model of an "*enquête négociée*" ("negotiated survey") where the person interviewed is no longer just an instrument used for extracting infor-

²⁵ Other theoretical analytical frameworks were used at the Center in a typological perspective such as in the work of Bruno Courault on productive specialization in the 1980s and 1990s.

²⁶ Should only successful recruitments be considered? In terms of job advertisements, what should be the reference population?

mation. Instead, his or her own knowledge is restored and taken into consideration in the survey. He expressed the wish that “these deviant procedures contrasting with the canons of ‘scientific’ statistics should not be restrictive, they are an essential part of the survey protocol.”²⁷ During the discussions, Serge Volkoff, who would join the CEE some years later and who worked on linking statistics and ergonomics in order to study the relation between health and work, finally supported this position. For health and safety, as well as for manpower management in companies, the issue of defining how reality was anticipated and dealt with *prior* to any statistical survey was particularly important.

In practical terms, carrying out conventionalist research at the CEE entails giving clear proof to the Ministry by the use of figures. But it still was the image of an artisan who enjoys working with “unclean” data that was valued there. As it was a hybrid environment, the Center was deemed a suitable place to work on these specific types of survey and better understand the contrast between the specific and the general considered as notions. Furthermore, this opposition between different forms of surveys can be seen as a metaphor depicting the situation of the Center in relation to the INSEE and State statistics. As François Eymard-Duvernay stated during the workshop, this was not a symmetrical situation: “large scale surveys hold a dominant position [...] and we have to firmly adopt a critical point of view with respect to them” (Furjot 1995, 273).

Such criticisms are also partly shared by Michel Gollac in the unit he manages at the CEE. However, although the use of quantitative methods is not systematic, critical view is less perceived as an obstacle to the analysis of statistics survey. It has even been theorized that it should be part of the statistic reasoning process. An associate fellow at Pierre Bourdieu’s laboratory and, having developed a reflexive approach to statistical data, he arrived from the Ministry of Labor to develop quantitative projects and to organize the work of researchers who remained distanced from the conventionalist program. Because micro-computers, memory size, and statistical software were being developed in the 1990s, many researchers were involved in the analysis of the Conditions de travail, which was considered to be a legitimate instrument by the DARES. Issues such as work intensification were covered, followed by information, technology, and organizational changes in companies with the arrival of Nathalie Greenan, illustrating the strengthening of ties with the public statistical system.

The decade following the creation of the DARES was a particularly innovative period in terms of statistical surveys on labor and employment (Gollac and Volkoff 2010). The CEE was a resource for their analysis and thus contributed to the dissemination and understanding of their main results. The originality of the research done in the Center, particularly by Michel Gollac with regard to this data, was due to the specific care taken when interpreting the statistics. He

²⁷ As re-transcribed by Daniel Furjot in his summary of debates (Furjot 1995, 272).

believed that neither criticism of the statistical data nor their analysis should stop. In addition, the data themselves would be used in the process of *déconstruction* of the figures, the intention being to authorize and not prohibit their use. Such a stance was adopted in the interpretation of the surprising results of the 1991 survey on working conditions: the “data” were analyzed by linking changes in statistics with changes in reality, revealing a double objectivation process – of working conditions themselves and of figures produced to sum them up (Gollac 1997).

This position tended to reconcile the expectations of the Ministry for Labor and the main – critical – view existing in the CEE concerning the use of quantitative methods. The divergence of these standpoints was clear when the question “What is a good figure?” was posed during the workshop in 1994. In her opening speech, Mireille Elbaum, deputy at the DARES, described what was expected of statisticians and their responsibility in the social debate. For the administration, a good figure was one that had been carefully calculated, was not questionable and as such constituted proof likely to trigger action: it should be an “*objet réalisé*” (consistent with a “realist” position). Conversely, François Eymard-Duvernay and Nicolas Dodier spoke out against the use of black boxes (which is what surveys amounted to when they were considered as technical objects and not social processes) and did not agree that a good number – “the real number” – was the one that sealed the discussion. Having explored the dissemination of scientific statements based on statistics, they considered that a good figure was above all an “*objet négocié*” (consistent with a “constructivist” position), the product of a social compromise.

This debate on the use of quantitative methods brought up two opposing views relating to the expected roles of State and science. This tension was also present in the research on public policy evaluation conducted at the Center in the 1990s, which focused not on the measurable effect but on the usage of employment policies by different actors, whether it was the beneficiaries or the agents responsible for implementing them. Use of quantitative data was very limited, as such pieces of research mainly relied on field surveys comprising interviews and observations. Even if the early 1990s saw an increasing demand for quantitative expertise within the scope of the Ministry for Labor, the Center chose to take the opposite direction.

The Center broke away from the metrological approach of evaluation²⁸ which consisted of measuring and analyzing the gap between the objectives and the outcome of each separate public policy, an approach which was then defended by the *Conseil scientifique de l'évaluation* (Council for Scientific Evaluation of Public Policy) and used by the Ministry for Employment in its annual report on employment policies. In the introduction to the first issue of the *Cahiers du*

²⁸ This approach was imposed in France with the creation of the *Revenu Minimum d'Insertion* (minimum income benefit) and the Viveret report that followed in 1988.

CEE published after Annie Fouquet's arrival, entitled *Les politiques publiques d'emploi et leurs acteurs*, Bernard Simonin argued that separate evaluations of different policies were certainly necessary but insufficient, because they did not foster comprehension of the global nature of their effects. For this purpose one would have to observe actual practices and meet the field actors to understand the plurality of approaches that they follow (Simonin 1995).

The evaluation framework for employment public policies thus defined was closely linked to the economics of convention program. The various actors involved were not only considered to be like the docile cogs of an administrative machine where the subjects (individuals and companies alike) were obliged to comply with "top down" imposed State legislation. They were seen as beings with access at ground level to a plurality of resources and principles of action. Without being hostile to quantitative methods, the evaluation carried out at the CEE in the 1990s went hand in hand with a critical reflection on the role of the State, which is compared to other forms of public action, more specifically on a local level.

In the closing article of *Les politiques publiques d'emploi et leurs acteurs*, Jean-Baptiste de Foucauld (Commissioner-General of the Plan at the time) and Laurent Thévenot portrayed the State as only one of many actors in a position to define and assess public policy: In a context characterized by an unremitting crisis in terms of employment, social ties and public action, it was considered to be in less of a position to claim the only one. In the language of the "Economies of worth" (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987, 2006), the two authors condemned the predominance of quantitative methods in evaluation, which were related to the "industrial" and to the "fame" orders.²⁹ Instead they plead in favor of an evaluation approach which could, partially at least, be implemented by the local players themselves in a spirit of grassroots democracy far removed from overbearing expert or technocratic visions.

Another direction taken in the Center concerning the evaluation of employment policy highlights the growing distance vis-à-vis the State, not because of increased focus on the local level, but on the contrary by an opening to an international dimension.³⁰ The evaluation contract of the European Structural

²⁹ For instance in 1992, the "900,000 long-term unemployed" operation and the subsequent evaluation relied on a survey of 10,000 unemployed. Here, the fact that statistics were used reflects both the symbolic strength of the quantified target (which would lead the Ministry to organize systematic interviews with unemployed people, resulting in numerous unemployed people being struck off the register) and the argument of authority that a large scale evaluation statistical survey entails.

³⁰ This opening did not only concern employment policy, given that it had already been carried out on family policy (Hantrais and Letablier 1996), without a specific evaluation intention, triggering a shift to the international scene, a trend which continued to gather momentum at the CEE after the year 2000 with both participation in or coordination of several European projects.

Funds, with 10 or so employees working at the CEE under the direction of Jean-Claude Barbier at the end of the 1990s, was symptomatic of this shift in focus. An alliance between some researchers from the Center and the European Commission services was then formed, the objective being to have an independent evaluation of State action. Gradually, evaluation experts took more power, with an increasing autonomy from national administrations, be they budgetary or operational. In parallel, there was a move towards institutionalization of this area, with the creation of the *Société française d'évaluation* (the French Evaluation Society). Jean-Claude Barbier was its first secretary and for some years the society benefited from resources provided by the Center.

In the course of the decade, two very different directions were thus taken by the CEE in the evaluation of public policy. The first was at a local level, the other at European level and the common denominator was the marking of distance from the State and from the quantitative methods it implemented or wished to implement (through its administration). This resulted in increased pressure from the Ministry and, at the end of the decade the recruitment by the Center of some micro-econometricians whose analyses could not be refused by the Ministry. However these “standard” evaluation methods were still then accompanied by a critical viewpoint of micro-econometric methods by other researchers of the Center. More particularly, the poorly controlled importation of models developed by the “hard sciences” was denounced.

This being the case, throughout the 1990s, despite the diverging viewpoints of the Center and its main supervisory ministry, especially concerning the use of statistical methods, DARES’ commitment to establishing a productive link between research and statistical expertise, together with Annie Fouquet’s pacifying influence “in-house” and her negotiating ability outside the Center were accompanied by increased funding, allowing the Center to continue working on a wide range of research projects. External support waned somewhat when Annie Fouquet left to replace Claude Seibel as director of the DARES. Jean-François Germe³¹ was then appointed director of the CEE.³²

5. Transformation of the State and Normalization Process of a Hybrid Area (2004–2015)

The last chapter in this institutional history is marked by the far reaching transformation to the public administration after the 2001 vote in favor of the *Loi organique des lois de finance* (LOLF, the administrative accounting law). This

³¹ Sociologist, professor at the *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers* (CNAM).

³² The Center’s budget was allocated to the *Budget de la recherche et des conventions de développement* for then.

law modified the budgetary procedure in force in France since 1959 by introducing a performance-based dimension and supervision of public administration. For the CEE, this meant that as of mid-2000, they were included in a budget that was part of a program supervised by the Ministry for Labor only. This confirmed a tightening of its control of the CEE's activity. At the same time, Antoine Magnier, who embodied the economics-based direction taken by the administration, was appointed director of the DARES. Several micro-econometric statisticians and/or mainstream economists arrived in his wake. An excellence-focused and performance-driven climate prevailed, with an alliance between neo-liberal trends of both State and science (Pénissat 2009).

A second change was introduced and its effects were felt at the same time as those of the LOLF – namely, the granting of CNRS tenure to CEE employees. This decision, planned more than 10 years previously, did not become effective until 1999. And the tangible consequences were not made effective until mid-2000, when the regular individual assessment of CEE employees by the different *sections* of CNRS was set up. The full integration into a world of research where question of assessment plays an increasingly important role came about when several audits of the Center's situation were performed within the framework of the LOLF.³³ The timing of these different assessment exercises put even more pressure on the Center, with potentially contradictory injunctions: the integration in the CNRS tended to reinforce (individually at least, for members of the CEE) ties with research whereas the budget-driven reform obligatorily entailed intensified steering and control of the activity by the Minister of Labor. It is worth pointing out here that both measures were marked by the increasing use of quantitative indicators, not as a research method nor as a subject for analyses but as a means of assessing research pieces, fellows and centers.

In 2004, Pierre Ralle (INSEE civil servant and macro-economist) was appointed director of the CEE. His “social reformer” profile was not very far removed from that of Annie Fouquet. However, the context was different, as was his style of management. While the 1990s saw a wish to appease the atmosphere reigning within the Center, in the 2000s it was more a question of breaking away from a legacy considered to be cumbersome. In fact, an internal reorganization of the Center was undertaken, with the departure of a significant number of research fellows (employees that had been there the longest – many of them for over 20 years). Conversely, new staff was recruited for fixed term public-sector contracts (University researchers, INSEE civil servants, etc.) and contractors from the private sector were taken on. A new employment model was introduced and employee mobility and short-term projects partially replaced the stability and long-term projects of previous decades. A metaphor was used in

³³ They are the result, in 2005, of lying Ministries inspection services with a view to drawing up a *Contrat de projet et de performance* (project and performance contract, mandatory for public organisms within the LOLF) and of the *Cour des comptes* (Court of Auditors).

the Center comparing research to cycling – if you do not move forward, there is a risk of falling. Funding stabilized before being reduced at the end of the decade, a far cry from the significant increase of funding and resources experienced up to 2003. The director tended to align the Center with public sector reforms and this was not always well received by CEE researchers.³⁴ There was clearly a tightening of control – however the steering by the DARES was not really organized around the Center’s focus areas.³⁵

In terms of scientific directions this period brought about some changes, with the intention of developing different types of public policy evaluation (including macroeconomic simulations, micro-econometric exercises and random controlled experiments), as well as a wider opening towards social welfare themes (labor force participation, pension, caring occupations). The key focus areas that underpinned the activities of the Center did nonetheless remain aligned with those of previous years.

A major change was due to the new dominant position of quantitative methods. If the CEE was still a place where case studies relying on field surveys were carried out, the use of micro-statistics was now widespread. Even more so than in the previous decade, the growth of IT and the increasing accessibility to a great number of large-scale surveys conducted by the public statistical system made it possible for researchers to produce quantitative analyses autonomously. Reflections of a methodological nature continue to exist at the Center – one such example being the possibility of linking research either by combining different methods or designing original quantification measures. However, hardly a trace remains of the most critical positions taken with regard to statistics.

Researchers whose activity was in line with the economics of convention program, such as Géraldine Rieucan or Guillemette de Larquier, adopted for instance a micro-statistical approach to their work at the Center, using data obtained from large surveys, such as the *Labour Force Survey* for the analysis of the different recruitment channels. In addition, such research led to the setting up of new surveys by the public statistical system, such as the *Offer* survey, which focused on recruitment practices. This renewed proximity to public statistics since the 1990s reflected methodological innovations which made it possible to develop surveys with substance, allowing more in-depth analyses. In addition, the assessment of researchers, especially in empirical economics, reinforced the injunction to use statistical methods. The analysis of micro-statistical surveys was thus both an opportunity and a constraint. However

³⁴ The report drawn up by the Ministries inspection services states for instance that the reforms initiated by the new director were going in the right direction, his managerial methods had to a certain extent contributed to destabilizing the organization (page 1 of the summary; CEE archives).

³⁵ See for instance a new report of the lying Ministries inspection services in March 2013 (CEE archives).

these practices were always accompanied by other empirical methods in the socio-economic field derived from the economics of convention, with field case studies carried out to offer possible pointers for interpretation.

In other units of the Center, research and discussions started in the 1990s on the statistical analysis of work organization and working conditions continued. These relied on the wide set of existing surveys on work, with a focus on the job quality issue, and even suggested developments at European level. One such resource is the *Meadow*, a project coordinated by the CEE between 2007 and 2010. The deliverable was a manual presenting guidelines to conduct a linked employer employee survey in order to understand the dynamics of organizational change.³⁶ The inclusion in the Center of a team comprising ergonomists and statisticians to analyze work activity demonstrates the wish to continue reflection on the relation between the quantitative and the qualitative, with, in particular, thoughts of an epistemological nature concerning the construction and use of statistical surveys for health at work (Volkoff 2005). In addition, these analyses were used for practical purposes. The ensuing drawing up of surveys directly involving field actors (doctors, health and safety specialists in companies, employees) as seen from the perspective outlined back in the 1990s: the *Evrest*, which consisted (and still consists in 2015) of a longitudinal database of regular visits by occupational health care professionals, was one of the more original examples.³⁷

Public policy evaluation projects also saw a gradual yet significant arrival of statistic-based work at the Center. The original positioning of the CEE gradually disappeared. Evaluation was conducted using a wide range of approaches and subjects thanks to the arrival of several economists. In the context of the LOLF, there was clearly renewed interest for evaluation in all parts of the administration with, more specifically, reflection on the role of experimentation. So-called American-style experimentation was back to stay (Monnier 1987). In this context, it would be fitting to consider creating public policy that should systematically be experimented *ex ante*, ideally using a random statistical measure and matching methods borrowed from the medical field. The personage of the expert statistician marked the end of the 2000s, together with the notion of average effect and the growth of micro-econometrics.

The CEE followed this trend by launching experiments on discrimination concerning for instance access to employment and the *Revenu de solidarité active* (to replace the RMI). Nevertheless, it continued to offer a wide range of disciplinary approaches and methods that very few research centers could provide: A publication on the RSA (Gomel and Eydoux 2014) comprised for instance critical reflections on the method of random controlled trials at a time

³⁶ <<http://meadow-project.eu>>.

³⁷ <<http://evrest.alamarge.org>>.

when enthusiasm for experimental methods and the belief in a new methodological “one best way” was waning in France.

The end of the last decade at the CEE was marked by the realization of the need to use statistical data but nevertheless supported by a vast array of disciplines and methods. This proliferation of approaches was not without problems because of their possible disqualifications in the academic field where there was permanent assessment of researchers and stronger competition among research units. The scientific normalization underway left only little scope for areas without their own clearly-identified research infrastructures or methodological approaches. The unique position of the Center, which was finally recognized after the writing of the mid-term scientific document in 2014, still did not necessarily imply its external legitimacy.

Thus, there was paradoxically a withdrawal of support for the activity of the CEE at a time when the Center finally seemed to correspond – in terms of the research it produced – to the expectations of a Ministry for Labor wishing to obtain broad-based and in-depth knowledge of its areas of responsibilities and the policies it implemented. In 2010, the unit directors of CEE expressed their opposition to Pierre Ralle’s appointment for a third term of office and this triggered a period of unstable governance, with three different directors since 2010,³⁸ followed by budgetary cuts. Further audits were therefore requested from the supervisory Ministries and a restructuring process was launched for the Center, the outcome of which is uncertain today in 2016 in terms of both the budgetary allocation (Ministry of Labor and/or Ministry of Research) and its scope of action and mission statement.

6. Conclusion

The four chapters in the CEE story trace the changes of its institutional positioning and scientific focus over the years. While statistical tools and methods have not always played a key role in the activities of the Center, it is nonetheless true that they have been used in one form or other in the 45 years spanning the Center’s existence – either for the practice of research or as an actual subject of research.

At the beginning, both the activity and vocation of the Center were in line with the requirements of the Plan and a mathematical statistics approach. However, the Center was faced with a crisis concerning its purpose, employment, and methods. It gradually shifted its focus from research on structures to studies on margins. In the wake of vast interdisciplinary research programs, the CEE’s fortunes changed in the 1980s. It then became a place where theoretical

³⁸ Alberto Lopez (2010–2012), Jean-Louis Dayan (2012–2014), and Christine Daniel (2015).

development – a departure from both its administrative origin and the main trends in economics and sociology. It repositioned official statistics tools within a broader set of worldviews and moved away from the large-scale statistical surveys considered as providing a simplistic and overbearing State vision of society. The following decade would see a consolidation of the diversity of positions at the Center. These ranged from taking a stand against the “evaluating/quantifying” State to seeking statistical approaches combining the reflexivity of the social sciences and the positivist expectations of the Ministries. More recently, far-reaching transformations of public administration and research organisms have been making themselves felt with increased mobility for researchers, cutbacks and the carrying out of research projects mainly based on micro-statistical data. A normalization process, from both the administrative and scientific points of view, of the hybrid environment of the CEE is on its way.

The position taken and the work carried out at the Center show how difficult it is to reconcile two visions of statistics: the *realist* vision required by the administration in order to take action on one hand; the more *constructivist* vision on the other, providing a subject of reflection for the social sciences. The weight of the State’s role in France might explain the original nature of the economics of convention and socio-history of quantification, including critical one. These trends have, without a doubt, benefitted from favorable conditions allowing them to be developed at the CEE, an environment interfacing administration and research and helping to reveal and analyze a plurality of ways of perceiving the world. Prolific as it has been, the institutional position of the Center is no less fragile when faced with normalization processes launched at a time when the left hand of the State joined the right.³⁹

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³⁹ To use Pierre Bourdieu’s expression.

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