

Certifying the World:

Power Infrastructures and Practices in Economies of Conventional Forms

Laurent Thévenot

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Contemporary economies rest on heavy infrastructures of conventional forms. They rely on formal indicators, accounts and procedures, standards, benchmarks, good practices, etc. Formalization reaches everyday life, which, for the most part, consists of making and recombining formal statements. In a keynote address on “Shifting modes and loci of (e)valuation” at the 2013 Economic Sociology conference in Moscow, I used the venue to ironize on the fact that the present stage of capitalism resembles the Soviet Union—which I discovered as a child in the 1960s—on a key aspect: the central role dedicated to forms and formalities. If we are, to a certain extent, “back in the U.S.S.R.,” we might remember the lesson of this surreal experience. When formal cant is superimposed on the obliterated everyday reality, it generates double-language on a large scale, and split personalities. Yet, there are significant differences between heavily formalized economies. In contrast with inaccessible and centralized

bureaucratic authorities, contemporary formalized objectives come close to agents. Human beings are expected to invest their energy—and even their whole personality—in achieving objectives that are made objective to be measurable.¹

Critical observers highlight structural problems in the use of formal statements. Forms do not simply perform, at least not as stated by those who confuse formal accounts with realities. Therefore, documenting lies, double language and double accounting, and unveiling hidden reality behind formal accounts, are still major tasks in today's economic sociology (E.S. in this text), as exemplified by Michael Power's examination of the "audit society" (Power 1997) or Frank Dobbin's more recent research on finance with Jiwook Jung (Jung and Dobbin 2012). Sociologists have for long exercised their critical capacity in doubting formalities and exposing the gap between them and informal practices. Theories of practice in general have been suspicious of formal conventions, a favorite target of their criticism being the legal scholars' naïve belief in positive formalities. Network analysis also has contributed to restrain the focus on conventional forms, although it can be used with institutional norms, as exemplified in Victor Nee's and Sonja Opper's chapter of this volume (Chapter 6), which examines the link between networks and institutions via informal norms.

But sticking to the only side of doubt and suspecting rightly that conventional forms operate at the expense of sincerity, authenticity, and actuality—that is, other possible coordinated behavior—bears the risk of overlooking the confident side of conventions and of their formalities. In his chapter of this volume (Chapter 5), Bruce Carruthers deliberately focuses on formal rules, observing legal templates and standardized forms as reliable "building blocks" that offer an open variety of combinations. When people convene, in the etymological meaning of coming together to the same meeting point, they realize the coordinative power of conventional

¹ On this issue, see in particular: Eliasoph 2011.

forms. If we debase this face, we fail to grasp the decisive equipment of human commonalities, and inventions it allows. Current economies, because they are heavily loaded with conventional forms, demand that we encompass both sides of conventional forms in the same analytical framework.

The first part of this chapter considers analytical resources that might be helpful to deal with economies of conventional forms. This formulation also points to the kind of *economies* brought by conventional forms of coordination, in the sense of economies of scale or scope. The last meaning corresponds to the French Convention School main orientation (*Economie des convention*; C.S. in this text), which will be situated in the context of E.S. and earlier philosophical and sociological writings on conventions and symbolic forms. The second part focuses on valuation, a key issue in the analysis of our object. The formation of value in organizations, markets, and standards is related to a plurality of valuable *engagements* with the world. The third part focuses on the profit and power that issue from the transmutation of valuations.

Resources to Analyze Economies of Conventional Forms:

Theories of Conventions and Economic Sociology

French Convention School in the Context of Economic Sociology: an

Introductory Comparison

With regard to E.S., C.S. might have initially suffered from a somewhat eccentric position because of its origin, both cultural and disciplinary.² Originating in France and in French, it has been slowly translated and made available to the new sociological domain of E.S., which was initially labeled in the U.S. Moreover, C.S. was created by a group of social scientists who were mostly economists. Commenting on the fact that French sociologists and economists might convene in a new orientation towards conventions, Richard Swedberg remarked that this singular collaboration could hardly be expected elsewhere, especially in the United States where, “in the absence of these contacts, economic sociology (as I see it) should definitely maintain its identity as a special type of sociology” (Swedberg 2006: 90; translated quotes of this article are taken from Swedberg’s original paper in English).

Yet, we should not overestimate singularities of C.S.³ First, scholars who created this school developed a systematic criticism of mainstream economics. In his chapter of this volume (Chapter 1), Swedberg notes that “Neoclassical economists have a century-long tradition of prioritizing theory at the expense of empirical work” and that “theory-driven research tends to use standardized data and has little interest in ethnographic and related kinds of data,” preventing a creative way of theorizing. As is visible in the organization of Masters and Ph.D. courses and seminars related to C.S., ethnographical investigation has been constantly involved in most C.S. research while the aim remained to enlarge and rectify a theoretical approach. Second, each

² For a short introduction, see Thévenot 2006b. On relations to ES, see Biggart and Beamish 2003, Knoll 2013. On relations to organizational institutionalism, see Brandl Daudigeos Edwards and Pernkopf-Konhäuser 2014.

³ When introduced more widely in Germany, it was named “sociology of conventions” (Diaz-Bone 2011a, 2011b; Diaz-Bone Rainer and Thévenot 2010).

scholar supplemented his training in economics by investing in other social sciences, anthropology, and, particularly, sociology, in addition to political and moral philosophy for several of them. Third, the C.S. project was to overcome the strong disciplinary boundaries between economics and sociology by addressing fundamental issues that are shared by both disciplines (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006; Salais and Thévenot 1986). In the “Introduction” to this volume, Patrik Aspers, Nigel Dodd, and Ellinor Anderberg note that “there was no recognizable subfield of economic sociology in France” while referring to the impact of the *Economie des conventions*. The reason was not only the role played in this trend by (institutional) economics but also by theoretical models that more largely covered social, political and moral issues.

Invited to a conference on *Economie des conventions* as an outstanding actor of economic sociology and analyst of the relations between economics and sociology (Swedberg 1990), Swedberg structured his comments (Swedberg 2006) on three main notions borrowed from a position paper by CS authors: values, coordination, and rationality (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006; in English: Thévenot et al. 2005, chapter I.2). Here, I will continue the dialogue with him along these themes (see Table 8.1), valuation mostly being addressed in the next parts.

CONVENTION OF COORDINATION, NETWORK TIE, INSTITUTION

C.S. and E.S. are both critical of ways of reducing the mutual dependency between agents: by an atomist individualism, at one end of the spectrum; by a direct determination from institutional constraints, at the other. Yet, E.S. and C.S. research strategies differ in the main categories they uses to deal with interdependency: network ties, institutions and institutional logics, or convention of coordination for C.S. Swedberg remarked that

coordination is currently not a concept in economic sociology, even if it is sometimes used in organizational theory (in the sense of inter-organizational coordination). [. . .] It is well understood in economic sociology that you may organize—or coordinate—some economic activity in different ways, depending on the circumstances. But again, the idea and problem of actually bringing together various activities into a new unity, which constitute the essence of what is meant by coordination, is little explored (Swedberg 2006: 85).

In C.S., coordination is not confused with order, but viewed as a problematic and uncertain.

In an early step of C.S., “investments in (conventional) forms” of various lifespans, areas of validity and objective support, were viewed as leading to economies of coordination and associated with a cost—the sacrifice of other possible modes of coordination (Thévenot 1984). The Economies of Worth model (E.W.: Boltanski and Thévenot 1987, 1991, 2006) and the Worlds of Production model (Salais and Storper 1992; Storper and Salais 1997) went further in the analysis and differentiation of most legitimate conventions of coordination, while the subsequent elaboration of “regimes of engagements” extended the notion of coordination to coordination with oneself, and pushed the investigation below the level of most legitimate conventions, down to personal convenience (Thévenot 1990, 2006a).

HUMAN AGENCY AND RELATIONS WITH THE MATERIAL WORLD

Agency is an issue which E.S., according to Swedberg, does not push further by comparison with C.S. He notes that, in the work of John Meyer (Meyer and Jepperson 2000), “the actor has more or less disappeared” (Swedberg 2006: 82). Granovetter remarked that “what looks to the analyst like nonrational behavior may be quite sensible when situational constraints, especially those of

embeddedness, are fully appreciated” (Granovetter 1985: 506). In C.S., agency is situated in a material environment that has to be given a proper form to fit a convention of coordination. This realist anchoring of conventions met social studies of science, and research on the sociality of objects (Knorr Cetina 1997). Actor Network Theory was influential, as developed by Bruno Latour (1987) and Michel Callon (1986). C.S. notions of “qualification” and “quality conventions” were, in return, influential in Callon’s approach of markets (1998). Although quite different from C.S. “plurality of worlds,” Latour’s recent work came to identify a plurality of “existence modes” (Latour 2012).

ACTION

C.S. and E.S. are both critical of the reduction of action to individual optimizing rationality. While A.N.T. rejects the vocabulary of action, and most currents of E.S. rely on unreflective habits, C.S. differentiates reflexive and habitual actions, the elaboration of regimes of engagement leading to further distinctions: publicly justifiable, individually planned, familiarly habituated, explorative.⁴

COGNITION, INFORMATION

⁴ They are not only regimes of valuing objects in the sense of Arjun Appadurai’s pioneering research on “the social life of things” (Appadurai 1986); see Thévenot 2011. The notion of engagement was also intended to offer new insights into identity (Thévenot 2013). There I meet Patrick Aspers’ original recasting of this notion in his chapter of this volume (Chapter 10), with his strong anchoring in phenomenology. Divergence might come from the sharp distinction he makes between “collective identity” and “unique identity,” whereas I try to differentiate, on the basis of various engagements, components of personal identity that are unequally prepared for commonality.

Granovetter criticized the idea that an actor relies on “generalized information,” as he considers “information from a trusted informant that he has dealt with that individual and found him so [and] even better is information from one’s own past dealings with that person” to be better for him (Granovetter 1985: 490). This observation led to the well-known notion of embeddedness in “concrete personal relations and structures (or ‘networks’) of such relations in generating trust” (id.). Agents’ cognition imports for E.S.: mainly taken for granted and shared cognition through classifications, scripts, schemas, routines.⁵ By contrast with the neoclassical economics approach of information asymmetry, C.S. gives a central place to information production and communication, investigating the prerequisite of giving form to the environment, to transform it and make it informational. Various “formats of information” are unequally prepared to commonality, from formalized public formats to deeply personal and informal reference points (Thévenot 2007).

(E)VALUATION

Valuation is involved in E.C. cultural meanings. Thus, Viviana Zelizer’s approach of tensions between monetary evaluation and valuable intimacy (2005) was said to be, according to a French scholar’s comment, “*le cœur dans les networks*” (heart into networks: in French in Zelizer 2010: 5).⁶ C.S. puts a strong emphasis on (e)valuation modes, their plurality, and their equipment, with

⁵ New developments depart from the C. S. classical approach to cognition. Within the media-institutional model that Knorr Cetina’s chapter of this volume (Chapter 4) offers for financial markets, “attentional integration” is a central issue for these “scopic markets.”

⁶ In her chapter of this book (Chapter 9), Nina Bandelj prolongs Zelizer’s adhesion to “relational sociology,” giving a particular focus on “the emotional underpinnings of economic exchange.”

an early concern for emotions (Livet and Thévenot 1997). E.W. first pluralism of orders of worth refers to various specifications of the common good, while the second pluralism of regimes of engagement differentiates kinds of good according to their unequal readiness for commonality (Thévenot 1990, 2006a).⁷

Above the first level of “individuals competing and negotiating,” and the second level of “organizations in conflict and coordination,” the institutional logics project characterizes “institutions in contradiction and interdependency” which are “simultaneously material and symbolic” and involve valuation: “capitalism,” “democracy,” “family,” “religion,” and “science” (Friedland and Alford 1991: 240-1, 248). More recent writings on institutional logics point to the level of individual mechanisms (Thornton Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012). Roger Friedland himself went further in this direction in the empirical research he carried out with John Mohr, Henk Roose, and Paolo Gardinali on “The Institutional Logics of Love,” looking at “the relation between individuals themselves as sites in and through which institutional logics might be located” (Friedland Mohr Roose and Gardinali 2014).⁸

⁷ This extension of C.S. is presented in the second part of the collective paper on “Values, Coordination and Rationality” entitled “The Second Pluralism of Levels of Convention, From Public Coordination to Close Coordination” (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006: 37–43; in English, Thévenot et al. 2005). As suggested by the title, this extension of C.S. goes below the level of formalized conventions (Breviglieri and Stavo-Debaugue 2006), down to the level of close coordination.

⁸ Multiple Correspondence Analysis reveals two axes which I find to be related to distinct regimes of engagements. Whereas the first is “amoral,” “grounded in the present and based on the experience of another person,” the second differentiates sexuality as “morally coded” and is “oriented towards the institution of marriage” (Friedland Mohr Roose and Gardinali 2014: 22).

POWER

Power is an important issue for E.S., and is found in asymmetrical positions within a field or a relation, or in the strength of network ties. In C.S., power is viewed as being based on coordinative and evaluative conventions, as we shall see in more detail in the section *Profit and power from the transmutation of valuations*.⁹ From the preliminary step of research on codification, Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge (1966) has been influential.

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Conventions in practice and situation: challenging the collective/individual and symbolic/material oppositions

Social conventions are not a new topic in sociology. Sociology might even be said to be “over-conventionalized,” as it is “over-socialized” according to Mark Granovetter (1985). Howard Becker's “art worlds” (1982) presented a fully fledged sociology of conventions, and many sociologists would agree that social conventions are “interchangeable with such familiar sociological ideas as norm, rule, shared understanding, customs, or folkways, all referring to the

⁹ In his chapter of this book (Chapter 7), Dobbin relevantly recalls the forgotten significance of ideology, for power analysis, which Marx unveiled. He contrasts structural power “to shape the perceived interests of others”—exemplified by Neil Fligstein (1990)—with ideological power “to make certain institutions and conventions seem inevitable.” Although C.S. was criticized for downplaying power issues, orders of worth—or other constitutive conventions—are rightly viewed as an ideological system by critical (economic) sociologists and by actors themselves when they are in the position of doubting conventions.

ideas and understanding people hold in common and through which they effect cooperative activity” (Becker 1982: 30). Becker is neither formalist nor holistic, and art worlds conventions “leave much to be resolved by reference to customary modes of interpretation on the one hand and by negotiation on the other” (ibid. 31). He points here to the classical problem of interpreting conventions in situation, and sees it solved by customs, another kind of convention, although of a more informal or practical type than others. Becker addresses another classical problem, the collective/individual tension that conventions raise, resolved in his understanding by dynamics of “negotiation” between strategic individuals. He makes room for the equipment of conventions, stating that “the understandings that shape the convention can be embodied in permanent equipment” (ibid. 57).

Becker’s attractive synthesis combines the commonality of conventions with individuals negotiating on the basis of their interests. However, this smooth combination relies too strongly on the kind of commonality in the plural that the “liberal grammar” specifically offers (Thevenot 2014a). Conventions are seen as extensions of contractual agreements between opting individuals. This view does not account for the variety of conventional forms, and the tensions they raise with personalized behaviors and ways human beings engage with a material environment. To grasp these tensions, I will now introduce authors who strongly diverge in their approaches to conventional features.

Individual Behavioral Imitation and Salient Meeting Points: David

Lewis

The philosopher David Lewis is well known for his convention theory. When economists look for a convention theory compatible with a strong methodological individualism and purified

from any assumption of commonality, they turn to Lewis' convention theory (1969). In the continuity of David Hume, Lewis tried to make endogenous the production of all sorts of conventions, on the unique basis of observable behaviors, from coordinative conventions at a meeting point, to money or even language. Lewis' direction is certainly relevant for us as he looks at conventions from problems of coordination in an uncertain world. Swedberg noted: "an advantage with the concept of convention, as I see it, as compared to that of norm, is that the concept of convention is closely related to the idea of coordination and uncertainty" (Swedberg 2006: 86). Lewis' intent is to take into account the relation between conventions and the material world used for coordination, be it a salience that serves for a meeting point, or a bodily gesture that can be imitated as that of a rower.

However, one year only after the publication, Lewis had to significantly revise his theory on the suggestion of a critical colleague, Jonathan Bennett who contested that convening on language could result only from observable behaviors. Then, Lewis replaced "observable behaviors" by "actions and beliefs." Olivier Favereau examined this move carefully and concluded that it strongly modifies the explanatory system by introducing a common world (Favereau 2008). Lewis could no longer pretend that language conventions are generated in a atomized world of individuals imitating material behaviors. Lewis' addition also comforted Favereau's own early distinction between two levels of conventions (Favereau 1986). Low-level conventions can rely on imitation of observable behaviors on meeting points, whereas more high-level constitutive conventions have necessary recourse to common beliefs or evaluations, such as conventions of worth.¹⁰

¹⁰ "What we have is not a continuum, but a discontinuity between two logics: one founded on external imitation (A-conventions), the other on some common thought (B-conventions). In the latter case,

In spite of Lewis' failure to make his theory compatible with his claimed strong individualism,¹¹ the attention he pays to the low level of conventional meeting points is relevant for a conception of the genesis of convention based on a material environment, its morphological affordances (Gibson 1979), and the form-giving processes that accentuate them.¹² Points of references and salience prefigure the pre-eminence of “benchmarks”—originally a mark on a wall or pillar used as a reference point—in present-day economies. Following Thomas Schelling who underlined that most situations “provide some clue for coordinating behavior, some focal point for each person's expectation of what the others expect him to expect to be expected to do” (Schelling 1980: 57), Lewis understands salience as a “basis of common knowledge that everyone will do his part of a coordination equilibrium” (Lewis 1969: 57). In his “genesis of technicity,” Gilbert Simondon, a philosopher less well known, although more original than Lewis in his conception of the relations between human beings and their environment, names these singular points “key-points which govern the relation between human being and the world,” the “magical universe” being the “primitive mode of structuring” that distinguishes “figure from ground by marking key-points in the universe” in “the most primitive and most

agents have to forge some idea of the common world to which they belong and/or which they have to constitute, in order to coordinate” (Favereau 2008: 124–5).

¹¹ While we referred to methodological individualism in our 1989 manifesto in *Revue économique* (Dupuy et al. 1989), several authors rightly criticized the ambiguity of this programmatic statement (Diaz-Bone 2012; Latsis 2006). As John Latsis (2006) clearly demonstrated, the room we gave to intersubjectivity was distancing ourselves from the strong version of methodological individualism.

¹² For an original elaboration of “hold” [*prise*] somewhat linked to affordance, see Bessy and Chateauraynaud 2014 [1995].

significant [*prégnante*] of organizations: that of the reticulation of the world into privileged places and privileged moments” (Simondon 1989[1958]: 165, 168).

Symbolic Forms as Idealist and Delirious Collective Representations: Emile Durkheim

By contrast with former authors, several classical sociologists insisted on the proper character of formalities. Georg Simmel underlined that the conventional uniform does not reflect on the person (Simmel 1987 [1977]: 418), Niklas Luhmann developed a key notion of code and Max Weber, as a former law scholar, could not underestimate the role of legal forms.¹³ I would rather turn to the classic who elaborated the most radical characterization of confidence in symbolic forms, in support of institutions. At the opposite to previously mentioned philosophers, Emile Durkheim focuses on abstraction and idealization processes.¹⁴

¹³ Weber’s influence in E.S. is considerable. In addition to Swedberg’s work, Carruthers’ chapter of this volume (Chapter 5) refers to Weber’s conception of legal forms as both constraining and enabling, and demonstrates the impact on financial products of formalities issued from legal templates and standards.

¹⁴ Referring to these idealized aspects of Durkheim’s collective representations, Beckert’s chapter of this volume (Chapter 2) suggests that the formalization of economics models allows coordination through expectations that actors share towards future states of the world, without consideration of their relevance as models of reality. Theoretical forms can thus contribute to the coordination of economic decisions by “providing an understanding of how other actors will decide.” Beckert underlines the difference between this statement and the current “claim that *economic theories* are *performing* the economy.”

In *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim 1960 [1912]), Durkheim offers a view of symbolic forms and codes as markedly distinct from individual perceptual access to reality. He gives the formality of convention a place and origin which helps to understand the way human beings stick to a convention's face value or "letter"—in the sense of "the letter of the law"—when they are relying confidently on conventional markers, with eyes shut to any other reality, as in the use of benchmarks (Bruno and Didier 2013). Durkheim puts forward the "idealism" of "social thought" and the need to fix ideas on "material things as symbols" [choses matérielles qui les symbolisent]. Because the symbolic form breaks so sharply with individual perceptual experience, he writes about the "pseudo-delirium" [*pseudo-délire*] which is the basis of so many collective representations (Durkheim 1960 [1912]. 327). Durkheim's analysis of symbolic forms is relevant for us, because of the expanding "delirious" belief in the most formalized face of conventions, and their reduction to conventional benchmarks.

By contrast with the smooth interactional dynamics of contract-like conventions, we have to take into account the position of blind trust in codes, categories, and formalities, that is particularly visible in ritual or ceremonial moments of judgment in the sense of adjudication (Thevenot 1990, 2006a: chapter 3).¹⁵ In such moments, people actually close their eyes to the circumstantial movements needed for coordination. This first position towards conventions—the side of blind faith—of actors who move back to markers, as if they were following the letter of the law, has a central role in contemporary attempts to certify the world.

¹⁵ Since medieval times, legal vocabulary names judgment "*arrêt*" (stop), precisely because authorities' decisions will stop inquiry, doubt, and dispute.

The Letter of the Convention Put to the Reality Test in Situation: the Pragmatic Turn

While inheriting Durkheim's conception of symbolic forms as radically abstracted from perceptual and personal experience—the first face of the convention—C.S., and particularly E.W., went in a completely different direction when dealing with the dynamics of uncertain coordination. Put to the “reality test” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), coordination is opened up to doubt. Various theories of practice (Knorr-Cetina et al. 2001), among them Bourdieu's (1976 [1972]), expose what this first conventional face keeps hidden. Yet they unequally take uncertainty into account. The turn to practice does not necessarily lead to this account, when practice is itself viewed as social in the sense of collectively aligned. Latour's “trial of strength” designates the moment of facing reality, which resists (Latour 1987). Trying to grasp critical situations, Boltanski and Thévenot were also influenced by the dynamics of breaches and impropriety that come from ethnomethodology and interactionism (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1974). The pictures of actors facing problems of adaptation to a milieu under conditions of uncertainty can be traced back to American pragmatism, which influenced previously mentioned sociological trends. This is the reason for coining the term “pragmatic turn,” and naming C.S. “a new pragmatist institutionalism” (Diaz-Bone 2011a), although the focus on interpretation also followed continental hermeneutical traditions (Dosse 1998).¹⁶

¹⁶ Biggart and Beamish wrote that “perhaps ironically, convention theory traces its roots to American pragmatism, as well as to Durkheimian sociology” (2003: 449). On the French “sociologie pragmatique,” see Thévenot and Stavo-Debaugé 2015; Thévenot 2011.

Valuable Regimes of Engagement Valued in Organizations, Markets, and Standards

From the specific features of C.S., we shall now concentrate on the relation between (e)valuation and coordination, and resulting analyses on the formation and transformation of valuations in organizations, markets, and standards. Extending the analytical grid by including this plurality of regimes of engagement takes into account a wider range of valuations. After research on orders of worth and the wider comparative perspective adopted in a collective program with Michèle Lamont (Lamont and Thévenot 2000), this extension offers a new contribution to the expanding domain of the sociology of evaluation, worth, and pricing (Beckert and Aspers 2011; Lamont 2012; Vatin 2009).¹⁷

Valuation Through Organizations and Markets: Quality Conventions

Reducing Orders of Worth

Valuation was initially introduced in C.S. from the link that E.W. established between most legitimate conventions of coordination and orders of worth. It led to new approaches to organizations and markets, and of their growing interrelations. Previous research by Eymard-

¹⁷ Although singularity seems to resist investments in conventional forms that support modes of coordination, Lucien Karpik has built on the C.S. notions of evaluation and judgment device or regime of coordination to demonstrate how singularities are integrated in markets, proposing a specific typology of coordination regimes based on the judgment devices used to value “singular” goods such as fine wines, movies, luxury goods, pop music, and legal services (Karpik 2010)

Duvernay on “models of firm” in diverse industrial sectors (Eymard-Duvernay 1987) was refined by differentiating, inside the same organization, a multiplicity of modes of coordination supporting different “quality conventions” in the valuation of persons, things, and their relations (Eymard-Duvernay 2002; Stroper and Salais 1997; Thévenot 2002). Since the very beginning, empirical research dealt with a variety of products, from credit (Wissler 1989a, 1989b) to camembert cheese (Boisard and Letablier 1989; Thévenot 1989). An interesting although unpublished case was, by coincidence, investigated independently by two researchers, with one using A.N.T. and the other C.S. (Thévenot 2006c). The first approach appeared to be quite appropriate to display the network of ties between actants involved in the extraordinarily successful innovation of a new creamy, low-fat cheese (“Pavé d’Affinois”). The C.S. approach offered an analysis of the particularly wide gamut of orders of worth involved in the dynamics of the firm.¹⁸

Resorting to actor network and translation approaches is useful in representing the multiple relations that contribute to the establishment of quality. And yet, A.N.T. cannot take the full measure of the tensions between valuable engagements, which have to be overcome for

¹⁸ With an inventive idea that disrupts common sense (world of *inspiration*) and a positioning on a *market* of “rich” pricey cheeses as “Caprice des Dieux,” the innovator offers a low price and low-fat product which is seemingly “rich” because of a new particularly efficient technology, ultrafiltration. This technology removes the dripping phase, and makes the texture of the product particularly smooth (world of *industrial efficiency*). Moreover, the entrepreneur builds on local Charentes traditions for making and maturing cheese, and initially chooses small retailers who specialize in cheese and dairy products and have regular clients, benefiting from traditional know-how and taste (world of *traditional domestic trust*). Finally, he spreads its image through active public relations and creates events, in strong public relations (world of *public renown*).

“translation” or “network” connection.¹⁹ In E.W., “compromises” make this plurality possible, or “relativization” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991], V,9), which avoids critical tensions. This notion of compromise departs from bargaining or quid pro quo arrangements between individuals pushing forward their respective interests. It prevents critical tensions between objects stemming from different worlds, by aiming at a common good that transcends the two different forms of worth in presence and includes both of them. This notion has been used to compare organizations, and even to adopt a cross-national perspective avoiding reference to overall cultural characters. Measuring empirically the “degree of compromise” between industrial, market and domestic forms of worth in German and Russian comparable firms, Katharina Pernkopf-Konhaeusner and Julia Brandl found a higher degree of relatedness in the German firm (Pernkopf-Konhaeusner and Brandl 2010).

Initially introduced by Eymard-Duvernay (1986), “quality conventions” have built a bridge between the formatting of work and product involved in the productive processes of organizations and the formatting required for market coordination. They pioneered a domain now well established, the “social construction of markets.” As quality conventions transfer forms of worth that are foreign to market value—and possibly in critical tension with it as domestic, civic, or green worth—the reduction of these forms of worth into qualities attributed to merchandise is an important feature of the development of capitalism beyond its former boundaries.²⁰ It could not have reached the present stage without the huge infrastructure designed with the purpose of this transmutation of worth into market value: standard certification.

¹⁹ John Law insists on the differentiation of “modes of ordering” in actor-networks (Law 1994). Harrison White’s most systematic research (White 1992) addresses the internal differentiation of networks.

²⁰ On such a reduction that is inherent to the family of capital notions and to their extension, see : Thévenot 2015a.

Valuation Through the Certification of Use-Values: Standards Reducing Regimes of Engagement

Quality conventions show how merchandise comes to include, in reified properties, non-market orders of worth. The dominant position of market coordination is reinforced by absorbing other kinds of worth into the value of a commodity which appears, as Marx demonstrated, “so soon as it comes into communication with another commodity” (Marx 1887[1867]: part 1, chapter 1, section 3 The Form of Value or Exchange-value a.1.2.a The nature and import of this form [of value]). When he unveils the fetishism of commodities, Marx opposes exchange-value and use-value, which he characterizes by its “palpable bodily form.” With this physical understanding of the thing in use contrasting with the equivalence involved in exchange-value, Marx misses the plurality of valuable relationships between human beings and their environment that lack the general equivalence of market value or of other orders of worth, and stay indistinctly mixed up in notion of informality.²¹

Marx’s enquiry has to be prolonged because of the current extension of capitalism that issues not only from market proliferation. This expansion results more indirectly from the intermediate operation of certification by standards, which encroaches the variety of valuable modes of close coordination and personalized relationships with the environment.

Standardization orientation shifts from the value of efficient compatibility (industrial worth), to

²¹ In his groundbreaking Ph.D. *L’usage et l’habiter. Contribution à une sociologie de la proximité* [Using and dwelling. Contribution to a sociology of closeness], Marc Breviglieri identified four “topics of use,” utilization, consumption, custom, and handling [*utilisation, consommation, coutumes et maniement*], which remained confused in Marx’s use-value (Breviglieri 1999: part I, chapter 4).

social, ethical ,or political valuations. If we stick to the Marxian research program, the question would be the following: What transformation of use-value—or rather of a plurality of valuable *engagements* with things—into some kind of equivalency form of value—a certified good, not directly a market good—results from this new kind of standardization process? The first investigation on the whole chain of standard setting and enforcement (Kessous 1997; Thévenot 1997) selected safety standards that are designed for highly customized, personalized, familiar, and even intimate things used by children and babies (baby stroller, playground, toys, etc.). We followed them from general committee discussions to technical committees, to devising of testing equipment, and implementation in practice.

In standard-setting general committees, participants were involved in a *public justification regime of engagement* with the thing and referred to conflicting orders of worth, opposing civic worth, and domestic worth orientations on the education of children when discussing playground safety standards. However, such a contradictory debate about the common good, which commonly takes place in a political arena, is not encouraged by the organization of committees and their outcome, the objective measurement of some property of the standardized object.

Standardization cannot reduce engagement for the common good to a physico-chemical property without involving, through a notion of “normal actions,” the other regime of *engagement in an individual plan*—or project. It is valuable in that it supports projection of the self in the future, making it foreseeable. The corresponding format of action and of agency—and the related functional formatting of the environment—can be made more formal in contractual agreements which presuppose such an underlying engagement. Standardizers thus refer to the “reasonably foreseeable” use of the item.

This second regime of engagement is still insufficient to devise the standard because users have highly personal ways of handling things when becoming familiar with them. For instance, they may use a baby stroller as a shopping trolley, putting heavy loads its basket with the potential risk of knocking over the chair and the baby. This regime of *engagement in familiarity* is valuable because it supports the good of ease and a kind of agency—partly passive—which strongly differs from the agent projecting herself in the future supported by engaging in a plan. By contrast with functionalities that can be simulated in testing equipment, the familiar environment is formatted through personal and local grips depending on a specific habituation path. This regime is particularly reluctant to commonality and is more demanding than previous regimes in terms of coordination with others. As do many economists, sociologists usually overlook this engagement when they focus on strategic action that presumes engaging in a plan.²² In E.C., the “relational approach” is the one that reaches better than others this intricate mutuality. Conceiving standardization devices becomes particularly tricky when one has to take into account this mode of engaging in familiarity with the object. And yet, the safety value makes this account necessary as many accidents result from such familiar uses that depart from “normal” utilization. As the only output of the testing process should be a measurable benchmark, standardizers and testing laboratories have to devise weird chimeric machines and procedures with one foot in this imagined variety of familiar uses and the other in production of a quantitative measurement of physicochemical properties of the tested object, deprived of human engagement.

²² By contrast, research paying attention to “informal economy” and informal economies (Barsukova and Radaev 2012) has to cope with relations to the world and to others that require engagement in familiarity.

The reduction is still more drastic with regards to a fourth mode of engagement that is relevant for babies as it is in our “informational capitalism,” although for different reasons. *Engaging in exploration* maintains a kind of good which is excitement by surprise, human agency consists of discovering something new in the environment, and the environment—as the body itself—has to be prepared to relaunch surprise (Auray 2010; Auray and Vetel 2014). Information and Communications Technologies contributes to such a preparation of our contemporary environment. Babies, and hopefully researchers of all ages, are particularly inclined to engage in this regime of exploration.

Coming back to our initial reference to the Marx’s analysis of the formation of value as equivalence obtained by “communication,” which he contrasts with the palpable use-value, we now better understand the process of formation of value through standards and how this differs from market exchange. In place of the unique and naturalized notion of use-value, we differentiated a plurality of modes of “using” the world. What is valuable in each of them is not a thing in itself, nor a subjective belief, but an engagement with the world which implies dependency on its preparation. In the formation of the value of certification, what does the standardization process make of these valuable relations? First, it reduces their plurality of engagements to the plan, because the functional format of the world is the most easy to formalize in laboratory techniques, as it is to formalize in contractual techniques. Second, it reduces the very dynamics of engagement to what I called “the letter of the convention.” Impetus, doubt, adjustment, are left aside when reducing the engagement to its output: an objective. Moreover, the objective is transformed into an objective benchmark, which is viewed as a substantial property of the standardized item. The notion that standards make things uniform is misleading

when certification is at stake (Busch 2011). Things—or services—get their value from communicating through the standards while they can remain quite different.

Profit and Power From the Transmutation of Valuations

What consequences can be drawn from our analysis of conventionalized economies, in terms of profit and power? This last section offer some limited insights into this broad issue. Swedberg rightly criticized C.S. for not being talkative about the issue of profit (2006: 89). My answer is grounded on the plurality of valuation that rests on different coordination modes, their transformation originating profits and power.²³

Profit and Exploitation Out of Differentials of Valuation Forms

Without drawing direct conclusions in terms of profit, C.S. research frequently underlines the comparative advantages—in terms of innovation in particular—of deeply composite firms that rely on a wide variety of conventions of coordination (Thévenot 1992). In uncertain contexts, this variety offers opportunities to benefit a wide discrepancy of events that composite

²³ When conventions of coordination are viewed as prolonged by a relevant material world that qualifies for them (E.W.), or engagements as extending down to intimacy, power is distributed in these coordination modes and engagements with material *dispositifs*. This view is quite compatible with Foucault contemplating micro-power (Foucault 1980) in relations and techniques that are “colonized, used, inflected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms and forms of overall domination,” and understanding “how more general powers or economic benefits can slip into the play of these technologies of power” (Foucault 2003: 30–1).

organizations can absorb while creating value along various quality conventions. David Stark systematically developed this idea, bringing to the fore the “multiplicity of ordering principles” and of “portfolio management, in which actors responding to uncertainty by diversifying their assets, redefining and recombining resources that can be justified or assessed by more than one standard of measure” (Stark 1996) or “heterarchies” (Stark 2009).

Although many organizational studies refer to E.W. compromises to look at a peaceful coexistence of different logics in corporations, here I would indicate research orientations that investigate the relations between compromises and profit, power or domination. In this direction, Benjamin Taupin departed from other organizational studies of the previous vein (namely Gomez and Jones 2000; Huault and Rainelli 2009; Patriotta Gond and Schultz 2011) in his research on credit rating agencies (Taupin 2012). He dealt with the paradox of the perpetuation of the system in spite of the huge crisis and amount of criticism. He showed that it was precisely the dispute involving opposing logics in a “circular figure” that triggers a self-perpetuating process, without any change being made to the compromise which still dominates (Taupin 2012, 546). Ann Westenholz documented another configuration that departs from peaceful integration and stabilization. Studying the composite arrangements of “commercial open source software communities” which bring together the civic, market, and industrial worlds, she found two contrasting answers to the tensions raised by this plurality (Westenholz 2012). She names the first “ordering coordination” between worlds on the basis of specific compromises (market-civic or market-industrial), and she uses “disordering coordination” to describe a situation devoid of such compromises between orders of worth, in which agreement is maintained only at the level of engaging in a plan, without search for coherence at the higher level of engaging in

justification.²⁴ Here, again, a plurality of valuations is reduced to the objective of the plan, which is involved in governing through objective objectives (Thévenot 2009, 2012).

The variety of configurations of compromises must be investigated to shed light on asymmetries that result in domination of one component over the other, with resulting profits and exploitation. Profit ensues from chains of transformation of valuation, depending on the integration of segments and the distance between the ultimate points of the chain of valuation transformation. In their paper entitled “Where do markets come from? From quality conventions!,” Olivier Favereau, Olivier Biencourt et François Eymard-Duvernay (Favereau et al. 2002) confront and connect the C.S. approach with White’s analysis of markets (2002). They bring together the “domestic quality convention” with White’s third type of “viable market,” which he names “paradox.” They assume that the paradox of a higher level of quality matching a lower level of cost should result from “the hidden presence of an important factor of production not totally compensated.” They name it “motivation,” adding that “except in pathological cases, that should not be too quickly dismissed as ‘exploitation’.” The reason is that “the gap between wages and productivity may be filled by a non pecuniary source of utility, which, by chance, is also an input in the process of production.” Then labor is “underpaid (in terms of money) but it is not undercompensated (in terms of utility)” (Favereau et al. 2002, 239). This view should be discussed as the process generates profit on the underpaid labor. Paying one’s labor with one’s pleasure—a classical excuse for low-paid intellectual professionals—is a disputable issue.

Apart from this rather traditional model of production, profit can be extracted from a chain of transformation of value on the basis of workers engaging in the *regime of exploration* in a whole new range of activities. Although many activities require it because of an ever-changing work environment and the pressure of urgency, it is poorly remunerated with some exceptions as

²⁴ On the limits of the notion of compromise, see also : Knoll 2015.

finance. As mentioned before, ICT elicits this mode of *engaging in exploration* from users. Workers contributing to the value chain can be fully integrated into the firm. In a more ambiguous situation, such as the commercial open source software communities studied by Westenholtz, workers have to face hard dilemmas about open source and closed source cooperation in software development (Westenholtz 2012). An even more distant position in outsourcing is created by “crowdsourcing,” which solicits contributions from online participants for free, with only the possible reward of a prize. Interviews show that, in such cases, the boundary between professional and non-professional activity is blurred by engaging in a “fun” or “entertaining” or “amusing” and “playful” (“*s’amuser*”) action (Arfaoui 2013).²⁵ Participants may be reflexive and aware of their exploitation, as one says: “to put consumers to work (*faire bosser le consommateur*) [. . .] it’s voluntary servitude” (Arfaoui 2013, 3). Outside this crowdsourcing system, which commercially exploits “un(der) paid innovators” (Kleemann Voß and Rieder 2008), consumers are currently involved in the exploration of the potentialities of a new product such as software when released in a Beta version.

My contention is that we need to look for profit generation in such confrontations of contrasted valuations. It is not only through price differentials that profit might emerge but through valuation regime differentials, under the condition of their transformation into market values. This transvaluation can raise tensions—because of differentials—in legal, ethical, or political terms. Continuing his investigation on organ transplantation (Steiner 2010), Philippe Steiner’s chapter of this volume (Chapter 11) demonstrates that the chain of “organizational gift” for transplant surgery cannot be legally formatted as market exchange, but neither as a person-to-

²⁵ “I want to do it because it excites me (I love it, ‘*ça me fait kiffer*’ in slang), but it’s yet hard to do it during the week-end” (Arfaoui 2013: 7).

person Maussian gift: organization as a third party is needed for the transvaluation of the donor's body organ into donee's money. Chan's ethnography of the introduction of life insurance in China in the 1990s (Chan 2009) shows agents selling policies to their close relatives until the 40 percent commission was publicized by the company to recruit more sellers. We could frame this issue as a differential of valuations regimes which can produce profit if the chain of transvaluation is maintained.²⁶

An important aspect of this transvaluation results from the fact that different valuation conventions or regimes involve distinct orientations of time. E.W. is already differentiated clearly from market worth, which is presentist, and the industrial convention of worth, which is future-oriented and materially grounded on technical investments. It clarifies the inner tension which stays within real economies and within theoretical economics. In recent decades, economies evolved in such a way that the main place for profit was displaced from industry to finance, with a change in the balance between the two orders of worth, and between their respective time orientations. The Fordian industrial-market compromise of stabilized mass production, in favor of the industrial worth and its future orientation, was unbalanced and eventually completely dominated by market worth.²⁷ A similar evolution was followed by

²⁶ Transvaluation does not presuppose monetary equivalence, or even commensuration. On commensuration and power, see Espeland and Mitchell 1998. On the basis of her empirical research on environmental conflicts (Centemeri 2011), Laura Centemeri developed a whole innovative approach of commensurability, see Centemeri 2012a, 2012b, 2014.

²⁷ Three chapters of this book helpfully document the cognitive and practical instruments, which relating to economics, support relations to the future and expectations. While Beckert considers the “coordinating force” of “imaginaries of the future” brought by economic modeling (Chapter 2) in

economics, which, as Swedberg shows in his chapter of this volume (Chapter 1), have had decisive consequences in the history of European construction.²⁸ While the initial Saint-Simon model was deeply in favor of industrial worth, later E.U. development has been much more exclusively oriented towards the market worth.

Differentials between what is made commensurate with monetary equivalence and what is left aside, in particular between the valuation based on *engaging in a plan* and *regimes of exploration or familiar attachment*²⁹ can contribute to the analysis of exploitation and profit. In the transmutation and transvaluation processes that generate profit, standard-value plays an important role which we shall now consider.

Governing Through Certifying-Standard-Value: Which Political Economy?

A step further in the reduction of valuation modes to qualities of market goods results from the inclusion of a wide range of political and moral values. Instead of publicly and collectively engaging, as citizens, in support of a cause that qualifies for the common good, individuals are transformed into responsible consumers choosing products that are marketed as contributing to this cause. In such a dominant position, market worth not only competes with, or encroaches

continuation of his examination of the "imaginative value in the economy" (Beckert 2011), Knorr Cetina puts the engagement in promises at the core of her analysis of financial actors (Chapter 4), and Nigel Dodd sees *utopian* images of the *future* as an important aspect in the development of contemporary monetary forms such as the euro and Bitcoin (Chapter 3)

²⁸ On this topic, see also Robert Salais' critical essay on the rape of Europe (Salais 2013).

²⁹ Regarding ecological concerns, see on this point, Centemeri 2012a.

other forms of worth in a political debate, but de facto embraces them all as mere properties of market goods. In their book *Brand Aid. Shopping Well to Save the World*, Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte (2011) nicely document the profit resulting from “red products” labeling. This is an extreme and particularly profitable case of the reduction of a moral good (fight AIDS) to a quality of market goods, without any consequences on the value chain, except the small contribution given by the firm to the cause.

In other cases, certification is supposed to have an impact on the deeds of all the actors involved. This is why we can name it governing through certificated standard-value. Instead of separate market and productive organizations, chains of transformation of values offer a better representation as they join markets and organizations. The notion of “global value chain” was initially developed to grasp relations between producers, subcontractors, retailers, etc., figuring out the dominant positions in the chain. Stefano Ponte and Peter Gibbon (Ponte and Gibbon 2005) relied on political economy and on C.S. to complement this approach by a more fine-grained analysis of the different conventions of coordination that shape the different segments of this chain. This contributes to characterization of a mode of “governing through standards” (Thevenot 1997, 2009; Ponte et al. 2011), which is part of what today’s economies are based on. In a quite different area, another line of research investigates how relations to inhabited environments and to nature (Breviglieri 2012; Centemeri 2015) are transformed by the objectives of present-day urban planning and certification of habitat and cities, showing how governing through certification covers a broadening variety of domains of life (Breviglieri 2013).

Governing through standards first complemented market competition coordination and later became a coordination infrastructure in itself. The resulting displacement of power loci from economics to politics required remedy of the lack of political legitimacy that debased former

standard setting procedures. In ongoing research with Emmanuelle Cheyns, which benefits other scholars using C.S. on the same object (Cheyns 2011; Silva-Castañeda 2012; Thévenot 2015b), we are studying the case of a global government through certification standards. At a world level, outside the authority of nation-states, it is intended to coordinate all actors of a value chain in an agro-environmental business such as coffee, soy, or palm oil. This governing structure does not produce law but soft law regulations, a private voluntary sustainable palm oil certification. Political legitimacy is pursued through multi-stakeholder roundtables, which are assumed, in conformity with the liberal political grammar, to give an equal voice to all “stakeholders,” from Unilever to the Indonesian small farmer. Thus, these “global multi-stakeholder roundtables” combine the liberal grammar and the mode of governing through standards.

The usual political/economical distinction relates to two different types of places and modes of formation of value. Political structures of democracy, either representative or participative, are assumed to confer to decisions a political value that contributes to the common good, on the basis of a plurality of valuations that citizens express in a public space of deliberation. By contrast, markets are the place of formation of market value, as measured by a price, from individual choices of purchase expressed by consumers (without public space and neither deliberation). Governing through certification standards affects each of the two places and modes of formation of value. It connects them together in a new kind of compound, a new object of political economy. This link not only consists of markets penetrating politics through lobbying, but also rests on a notion that is more political than competition and stays in the core or sovereignty, security, to which nation-states legal and police infrastructures are traditionally dedicated.

Promoters of this new mode of governing with soft laws argue that it is more reactive and closer to practice than law. Although the analysis of this mode of governing may include more and more references to rights and international regulations, under the pressure of social NGO that are among stakeholders, observations of roundtables demonstrate the reduction of the range of valuations which can be taken into account, and which import to “smallholders” in particular. Because of the pre-eminence of engagement in a plan and the additional reduction to an objective definition of the objective of the plan, justifiable engagements for less unequal profit sharing, or valuable familiar engagements with land and habits of growing or dwelling, are excluded from debates and elaboration of the standard (Cheyns 2011). In his chapter of this volume (Chapter 5), Carruthers also underlines the reduction that governing with standards operates of political considerations: “The narrow private interests that dominated I.S.D.A. ignored the broader social interest that a market society has in a stable and functioning financial system. Collective interests that could have been recognized through public laws and regulations were excluded for decades.”

In the conventionalization and formalization of economies which go together with state deregulation, the last step of the movement demonstrates an overweening ambition. Nurtured by growing anxieties towards uncertainties and catastrophes, the contemporary project of certifying the world offers the promise of security in a growing range of our relations to the world and to others. It might add a new risk: that this certified world be certified insane or, in this last sense of the term, “certifiable tout court.”

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Table 8.1 Convention School and economic sociology: a comparative sketch

	Conventions <i>a. Orders of worth</i> <i>b. Regimes of engagement</i>	Actor network	New institutionalism
Key category to deal with interdependency	convention of coordination <i>a. justifiable conventions of worth: inspiration, domestic, fame, civic, market, industrial</i> <i>b. from justifiable conventions to personal convenience</i>	network link	legitimate taken for granted institution
Human agency and relation to the material world and others	human agent in situation, among things and material assemblages [dispositifs]	human and non-human actant	human agent
Action	<i>a. reflexive/habitual</i> <i>b. publicly justifiable, individually planned, familiarly habituated, explorative</i>	no action	unreflective habit
Cognition	<i>a. cognitive forms, instruments and dispositifs</i>	calculus center	classifications, scripts, schemas, routines:

	<i>b. plurality of information formats</i>		taken for granted and shared cognition
(E)valuation	<i>a. orders of worth referring to the common good</i> <i>b. evaluations involving a good of a smaller scale in engagement under the public</i>	—no—	through cognition and culture
Dynamics internal, when facing reality	<i>a. reality test when qualifying for public worth</i> <i>b. testing moments in regimes of engagement</i>	trial of strength (of network ties)	—no—
Power	exploitation of coordinative and evaluative conventions and engagements	strength of network ties	positions within fields

Abstract

Contemporary economies rest on heavy infrastructures of conventional forms. They rely on formal indicators, accounts and procedures, standards, benchmarks, good practices, etc. Formalization reaches everyday life, which, for the most part, consists of making and recombining formal statements. Yet, in contrast with centralized bureaucratic authorities, contemporary formalized objectives come close to agents. Human beings are expected to invest their energy—and even their whole personality—in achieving objectives that are made objective to be measurable. This chapter reveals the specific features of this new mode of governing through certifying standards and objectives. In a dialogue with other contributions on the renewal of economic sociology, the author offers new analytical tools at the crossroad of the “Convention School” and “pragmatic sociology,” two research orientations of which he was one of the initiators. These tools might help to strengthen critical approaches to political economy and economic sociology.

Keywords

power, evaluation, convention theory, pragmatic sociology, form, engagement, standard, certification, institution, critical theory