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The Methodological Standpoint of the “économie des conventions”

*Rainer Diaz-Bone**

Abstract: »*Der methodologische Standpunkt der ‘économie des conventions’*«. The article presents the methodological position of the French approach of the “économie des conventions” (economics of convention, in short: EC). EC is introduced as a new form of a pragmatist institutionalism, which assumes capable actors, a plurality of conventions and different forms of rationality. EC explains collective quality constructions and regards conventions as solutions for collectives to deal with uncertainty. EC criticizes mainstream economics because of its notion of rationality and its methodological individualism. The article focuses on the methodological standpoint of EC. It is argued that the influences from pragmatism and structuralism place this new institutionalism beyond pragmatism and structuralism and that its methodological position can be regarded as a “complex pragmatic situationalism”. The situation is the unit of analysis. In situations pluralities of conventions have an impact as possible logics of coordination and evaluation. The EC has a strong tradition in empirical historical analysis of institutional forms and socio-cognitive categories. It is argued that parallels to the Weberian methodology exist. But EC supposes that ideal types are common knowledge also to the ordinary actors. At the end it is the specific complex methodological position of EC that places it also beyond the opposition of methodological individualism and methodological holism.

Keywords: économie des conventions, institutionalism, economic sociology, pragmatism, structuralism, socio-cognition, actor-network-theory, collective cognitive dispositives, Max Weber, Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Robert Salais, Pierre Bourdieu.

1. Introduction

The French approach of the économie des conventions (in short: EC) can be regarded as a new institutionalism for the social and historical analysis of the plurality of action frameworks in economic worlds (Storper and Salais 1997).¹

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¹ For a short introduction (German) to this approach in this journal see Diaz-Bone (2009a). See also the volumes of Thévenot (ed.) (1986), Salais and Thévenot (eds.) (1986), Boltanski and Thévenot (eds.) (1989), Salais, Chatel, and Rivaud-Danset (eds.) (1998),

The EC-approach was developed as a transdisciplinary institutionalism which integrates economical, sociological and historical perspectives.² In this contribution the methodological standpoint of EC will be discussed. It is argued that EC combines pragmatist positions with structuralist perspectives.³ Also EC collapses the opposition of methodological individualism (in short: MI) and methodological holism (in short: MH)⁴ in an innovative way. Therefore, the methodological standpoint can be regarded as a *complex pragmatist situation-alism*.⁵ The development of this new methodological position was prepared through by the reception of pragmatism and the later structuralist sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Both enable the EC-approach to develop a third way between MI and MH.

In this contribution the notion of methodological standpoint is used to denote a broader understanding of methodology. As Herbert Blumer (1969) has shown, a complete social science approach (as symbolic interactionism) entails not only research techniques and instruments for data analysis. To work out a methodological standpoint means to start from its theoretical concepts which include assumptions of the ontological reality of the social world. An empirical approach has to consider the theoretical assumptions “on what there is” and how this is observable. In order to be coherent, the practice of empirical social research has to take these assumptions into account in its instrumental and interpretational aspects. Thus, methodology can be conceived as that realm of an approach which develops coherent strategies for empirical research. So, one can speak of another kind of holism: *methodic holism*. Here the term methodic holism is used to distinguish it from the notion of methodological holism. The latter denotes a logic of explanation – while the former denotes the relation of theory and the methods which are suitable for the research driven by this theory. Methodic holism means the existing coherence between (a) theoretical assumptions about the ontology of the social, (b) the empirical research strategies how to access social practices/social structures and (c) the deployed research instruments of data gathering and data interpretation. In order to produce

Storper and Salais (1997), Favereau and Lazega (eds.) (2002), Orléan (ed.) (2004) and Ey-mard-Duvernay (ed.) (1987, 2006a, 2006b).

² See for systematic presentations of the institutional argumentations (Diaz-Bone 2009a), Bessy (2002a, 2011), Bessy and Favereau (2003), Storper and Salais (1997).

³ This perspective is also offered by Lazega and Favereau (2002).

⁴ MH sometimes is denoted also as methodological collectivism.

⁵ The current discussion how to sketch out the methodological position and how to name it is more or less inconsistent respectively ambiguous. Bessy (2002a) labels the methodological position as “complex methodological individualism”, Vercueil (1997) speaks of “methodological individualism of the type of a relational totality”, Defalvard (1992) labels it a “modernized holism”, Raveaud (2008) characterizes EC as a “methodological holism”, Postel (2003) labels it as “modernized methodological individualism”, Combemale (2001) argues that EC has a classical position of MI, Rose (1990) speaks of an MI in “a not extreme form”.

valid research findings an empirical approach has to respect this methodic holism. Otherwise, the ways the research objects are constructed and data are produced are incompatible with theoretical notions. The reason for this is that instruments and research practices have to respect the ontological claims made by the theory and have to fulfill the claims how reality can be “measured”. It has to be pointed out that there is a plurality of possible methodic holisms. One reason is that it depends on the chosen theory. Another reason is that one can imagine different possible sets of compatible instruments that enable to translate one theory into coherent research practice. One can argue that the methodological standpoint of EC realizes this kind of methodic holism.⁶

But this position has to be systematically reconstructed from the writings of the representatives of EC. The approach of the *économie des conventions* has been formed almost three decades ago in the Paris Region. Most writings about EC regard the issue “L’*économie des conventions*” of the economic journal *Revue économique* (40 (2) from 1989) as the “official” foundational document of this approach. But there have been some important publications before which also contribute to the methodological positioning of EC (as Salais and Thévenot 1986; Thévenot 1986), so these will be included in this review here as well as contributions to the discussion about the methodological standpoint of EC since the 1990s.⁷ The reason for the need to reconstruct the methodological position derives from the very few remarks in existing papers from this approach addressing the topic of the underlying methodological position. As Hervé Defalvard (1992, 127) mentioned, the collective introduction (Dupuy et al. 1989) of the foundational issue of *Revue économique* only comprises two paragraphs addressing the methodological standpoint of EC. In 1989 it is stated by the six authors of this programmatic introduction (Jean-Pierre Dupuy, François Eymard-Duvernay, Olivier Favereau, André Orléan, Robert Salais and Laurent Thévenot) that the new approach is still committed to MI but includes collective entities and collective objects. This methodological statement in this introductory article is not precise enough.

In the 1990s the discussion about the methodological standpoint intensified, starting with contributions from outside and from the margins of this approach (as Defalvard 1992, 2000; Vercueil 1997; Postel 1998; Combemale 2001; Raveaud 2005, 2008).⁸

⁶ Hervé Defalvard (1992, 131) uses the notion of “coupling” (French “couplage”) to depict this methodic holism between methods used and the ontological claims which are entailed (explicitly or implicitly) in the theoretical thinking of the EC. This is much more than just a kind of loose affinity.

⁷ See for a German written systematic outline of the EC-approach Diaz-Bone (forthcoming).

⁸ It is to mention that in the French philosophy of economics and in the French social philosophy there is an intense discussion about the epistemological foundations of economics and society. Here the positions of Arnaud Berthoud, Vincent Descombes (1997) and Pierre Livet (1994, 2005) are influential for EC.

This article introduces first some theoretical notions to work out central ontological claims of the EC. Then the discussion about the methodological standpoint of the EC will be reconsidered. There are several evident influences stemming from the French context in which the EC was developed – namely the pragmatic turn in French social sciences since the 1980s (Dosse 1999; Nachi 2006; Corcuff 2007).⁹ Here, the so-called actor network theory (developed by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, in short: ANT) co-evolved with the EC. Together with ANT the EC-approach includes objects and cognitive devices in its theorizing. But also structuralist thinking was (and is) still prominent. The specific methodological position of EC as a “third way” between MI and MH integrates methodological positions of pragmatism and structuralism in a new way.¹⁰ After that the Weberian approach is used at the end as reference because Weber introduces an interpretative methodology not only for sociology but also for socio-historical analysis. It is argued on the one side, that EC’s methodological position shares important positions with the methodological position of Max Weber. This is one of the reasons why the approach of EC is highly relevant for socio-historical research not only in the field of economic sociology or economics. But on the other side the EC differs from Weber’s epistemological and methodological positions.

2. EC as a New Pragmatist Institutionalism

Since the 1980s, the approach of the *économie des conventions* was developed in the Paris Region. It can be regarded as a research-network between economists, sociologists, statisticians, and historians who have worked out a new and heterodox (to mainstream economy) approach of a pragmatist institutionalism (and still continue to do so). The EC starts with a break with neoclassical economics by stating that actors are not isolated individuals with an a priori rationality but need a social environment and capacities to apply a plurality of possible rationalities. For the EC the name giving notion of convention is important. Conventions are not to be confused with arbitrary “standards” or traditional customs or ad hoc agreements. Conventions are understood as shared interpersonal logics how to coordinate and to evaluate actions, individuals and objects in situations of uncertainty (Eymard-Duvernay 1989; Thévenot 1989; Salais 1989, 2007; Storper and Salais 1997; Diaz-Bone 2009a). Conventions are socio-cultural resources for the coordination between actors. The EC relates these convention-based coordinations to the collective intentionality towards

⁹ For a systematic overview of French pragmatist sociology see also the contribution in the book series “Raisons pratiques” which has been published by the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris since 1984 and has now more than 20 volumes.

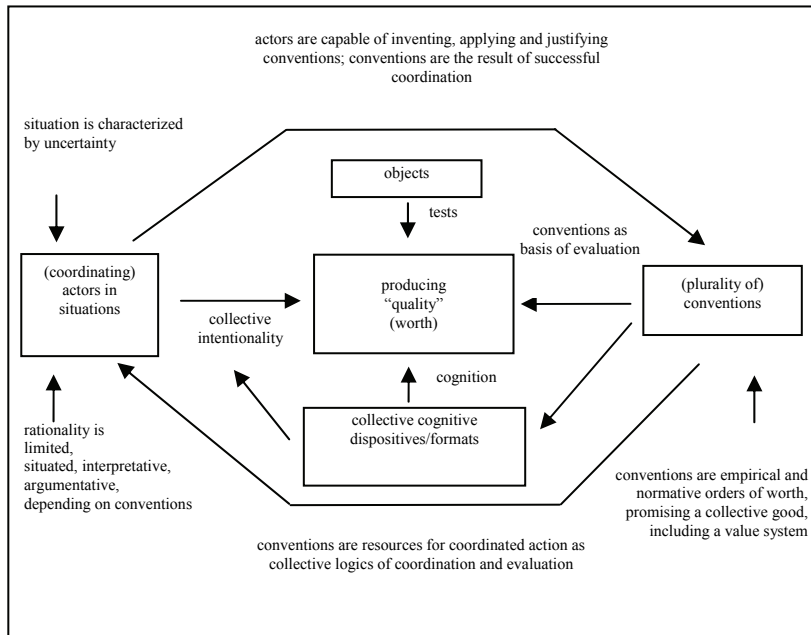
¹⁰ For this perspective of a new methodological position or a third way see also Dosse (1999), Livet (2005) and Raveaud (2008).

production and products. Conventions therefore are the foundations for different possible ways how to coordinate in the sphere of economic production, distribution and consumption and how to realize a common way how to evaluate the quality of products. The EC assumes a radical plurality of existing conventions. Actors are capable to judge the appropriateness of conventions and they are able to switch between conventions or to work out compromises between different conventions. In fact, in most situations a plurality of conventions is virtually present as a plurality of possible logics of coordination. The most important conventions in the sphere of the economy are conventions as the market convention, the industrial convention, the domestic convention, the “green” convention. Meanwhile, the studies of the EC identified more than a dozen different conventions. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006) formulated some of the theoretical notions which were developed within the EC-approach. In their book “On justification” (which appeared first in France in 1987) the authors made evident that this approach is a general pragmatist approach for social sciences and it is not limited to the analysis of economic phenomena.

The EC criticizes especially the economic neo-institutionalism which was developed by Oliver Williamson (1985) and Douglass North (1990, 1991, 1993). North regards rules (formal institutions) as external constraints for economic action.¹¹ Bénédicte Reynaud (following Herbert Simon and Amartya Sen) has pointed out that rules can be seen as incomplete devices for action, thus they are not determining economic action and coordination (Reynaud 2004). Instead of being determined by rules, capable actors use conventions in order to interpret rules and to apply them to situations. In a pragmatist perspective actors handle rules to reach a solution for a demand of coordination under condition of uncertainty. Thereby rules are enacted in the process of action and they become internal devices which are no longer adequately conceived as external constraints. The meaning of rules is identical to their convention-based practical usage. (Here Reynaud brings in the pragmatist conclusions of the linguistic philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Pierre Livet).¹²

¹¹ North (1991) differentiates between formal rules (laws, property rights, constitutions) and informal constraints (codes of conduct, custom, traditions). So rules are not the only form of institution in his theory. But it is important to note, that institutions for North are external constraints to action (North 1990, 4). Bessy and Favereau (2003) value North’s notion of institution as an open concept, because it includes formal as well as informal structures. Another parallel between EC and North’s theory is seen in the link between institution and cognition (Bessy 2003, 40). In both theories institutions are a cognitive reality (see also Dequech 2005). As Bessy notes, the shared notion of cognition is not the one of an autonomous individual, but the notion of “distributed cognition” as a collective institutional reality (Bessy 2003, 42).

¹² It is the linguistic work of Pierre Livet (1994) about speech acts and meaning which became important in EC. Livet delivered important insights of pragmatist linguistics to EC. Robert Salais made me aware of this. For a detailed account see Diaz-Bone (forthcoming).



In one regard actors are seen as capable because they can apply conventions and they are able to justify themselves. They also act on the argumentative basis of these conventions. But in another regard they are considered as “incomplete” because they are not equipped with a universal and complete “rationality”. From the perspective of EC actor’s rationality is limited, situated, interpretative and argumentative (Bessis et al. 2006). It is limited because no actor has the cognitive capacities to process all available and relevant information. Cognition is not limited to the individual brain but relies on cognitive devices in the socio-cultural environment.¹³ Therefore, the cognition of coordinating actors is regarded as “situated” which means it is co-produced by the formattings in which information is organized, retrieved and displayed for the actors (Laville 2000). In situations, actors have to interpret the situation and the actions of others. Here they use conventions to do this interpretation assuming others are doing the same. In the case of crisis (of coordination) or criticism (of the quality or worth of an object or an individual) actors use convention-based arguments to criticize others or to justify themselves. The following illustration depicts some of the main notions of EC.

¹³ Here the works of Hutchins (1995) and Norman (1988) are important influences for the analysis of “situated cognition”.

3. Situations as Units of Analysis

Why can one speak of “situationalism”? Situations are the units of analysis, not individuals. EC tries to understand the empirical logic of coordination in real situations from the inside (Salais 2007, 97) which is the perspective of the actors – not the perspective of the scientist who models actors.

To understand what economic actors do, we must examine quite closely the situations in which they find themselves. Even when actors describe their own actions in terms of laws (as in the everyday use of the language of the market), our theories do not have to accept those descriptions as ‘truthful’ (or lawful) – nor do they authorize rejecting them as irrelevant falsehoods. Instead, we must analyze the extent to which actors actually use such descriptions or hypotheses to represent their practical problems, and how, as forms of lived social life, the descriptions affect the real course of economic action, irrespective of their ‘truthfulness’. Our starting point is therefore the individual’s interpretative effort, a strong form of action in and of itself. (Storper and Salais 1997, 15)

It is in situations that capable actors have to use conventions to interpret the actions of others and the appropriateness of conventions and conventional forms.

However, this appropriateness of conventions cannot be judged by an isolated individual. Individuals need the involvement into common knowledge about existing conventions as ways of sharing forms of interpretation. From the perspective of the EC the possibility of collective intentionality cannot be reduced to the sum of individual intentions.

The situation is also characterized by uncertainty about the outcomes of the interactive process. Interaction is seen as not determined by individual intentions or by external constraint (except in situations of violence). So, actors face uncertainty in situations of coordination and they have to deal with it.

Furthermore, the concept of “situation” is not restricted to face-to-face-situations. Situations are complex arrangements or constellations of objects, cognitive formats, problems (coordinations to be realized), institutional settings, persons, concepts. Such situations are historically embedded into society in which conventions are already established because they have demonstrated on the long run their usefulness. It is the level of the situation where EC integrates micro- and macrolevel realities because in situations they realize their effects and their interwoven and interrelated ontologies. It is also the methodological perspective on situations where the positions of MI and MH are transgressed.

4. Neither Methodological Individualism nor Methodological Holism

To position an approach for the analysis of the economy today, it is still important to relate it to MI since the methodological thinking of MI is highly influential in mainstream economics – especially in neoclassical economic theory. The methodological thinking of MH is a classical foundation of social science and especially French sociology since the programmatic work of Émile Durkheim (1950). These two contemporary positions are important schemata for the explanation of social phenomena and for modeling relations between the microlevel and the macrolevel. They are both positioned at the different ends of an opposition. Meanwhile, alternatives exist, but they critically relate themselves to these two first schemata.

Joseph Agassi (1960) followed Karl Popper in representing a strong individual methodology. He sketched schematically the arguments of MI and MH.

	Methodological Holism	Methodological Individualism
1	Society is the “whole” which is more than its parts (holism)	Only individuals have aims and interests (individualism)
2	“Society” affects the individual’s aims (collectivism).	The individual behaves in a way adequate to his aim, given his circumstances (rationality principle)
3	The social set-up influences and constrains the individual’s behaviour (institutional analysis).	The social set-up is changeable as a result of individuals’ action (institutional reform)

The core argument of MI is that there are only individuals, their aims and their decisions as explaining principles. MI denies the existence of superindividual realities and collective entities with aims or intentions. For MI there is no genuine reality of any totality or any superindividual entity. Here, the relation of micro- and macrolevel is conceived as a mere aggregation of individual states or decisions to collective outcomes. The latter can be explained as the result of rational behaviour of many individuals. The core argument of MH is that superindividual and collective entities are required to explain social coordination and individual behaviour which is regarded not to be autonomous. Here, the macrolevel structures and influences the microlevel. Rationality is not a property of individuals but a socio-historical phenomenon with varying properties depending on the cultural and institutional structures. The classical objections against both positions are that MI is a kind of reductionism, reducing social sciences to psychological analysis unable to include institutions in theorizing (and explanations) while overemphasizing individual rationality, and individual

spontaneity, MH is criticized for ignoring agency while overemphasizing structural stability.¹⁴

The founding group of the six authors of the EC differs to some extent in their methodological position, although, all agree to overcome the classical MI of neoclassical economics. (Olivier Favereau is said to be nearest to MI and André Orléan is said to have the strongest affinity to MH.)¹⁵ In the introduction to a recent collection this group makes a more precise statement (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006).

Today, EC has itself distanced from simple versions of MI and MH. Because rationality is modeled as limited, situated, interpretative and argumentative, conventions and cognitive devices (collective cognitive dispositives and cognitive formats) have to provide the foundation as much as the instrumentation for individual agency or collective coordination. An example: In order to make individual decisions in a market, the market as social institution (including money and collective agreements about the quality of traded goods) must preexist. Afterwards, market coordination is possible. So, MI is not any more the methodological “confession” of this group. But the group also criticizes MH. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) make a clear cut by inventing a form of analysis of situations which breaks with the Durkheimian concept of the social group and postulated entities at the macrolevel (here EC has an anti-Durkheimian standpoint). So EC distances itself from this version of MH by criticizing the assumptions of pre-established social stability and of social groupings as the important explanatory principle.

5. Beyond Pragmatism and Structuralism

EC represents the central part of the pragmatic turn in French social sciences (Dosse 1999; Diaz-Bone and Thévenot 2010). It is argued that pragmatist and structuralist positions are influential precursors for this pragmatic turn – therefore for the methodological standpoint of EC.

Pragmatism represents the older influence. The classical writings of this first American intellectual movement invented a new methodological and a new epistemological position (James 1907, 1909, 1912; Dewey 1925, 1929, 1938). Pragmatism was developed to reconcile classical British empirical philosophy, continental humanism and the insights of Darwinism. There are some related fundamental elements of pragmatist thinking.

¹⁴ The so called institutional individualism proposed by Agassi (1960) is criticized by Defalvard (1992) because Agassi has to assume (a priori) autonomous individuals who decide how to use institutions.

¹⁵ In a similar manner Postel (1998) opposes Favereau (MI) to Thévenot (MH).

- 1) No dualisms. Pragmatism rejects the classical dualisms of continental philosophy (such as the division of body and mind or the dualism of subject and object).
- 2) No a priori. Pragmatism also rejects the Kantian notions of a priori such as the universal anthropological structures of pure reason.
- 3) No epistemological skepticism. Everything that can be experienced is real.
- 4) Dynamical world view. The physical, biological and social world is in constant evolutionary flow. Ideas of constant properties (such as natural laws) are just working hypotheses.
- 5) Radical pluralism. The physical, biological and social world is structured through an existing plurality of principles.
- 6) Viability. Living individuals are embedded in an (physical and cultural) environment in which they learn and try to adapt to this environment. Living is the successful hypotheses of how to learn and to adapt. This relation between living individuals and environment is interactive and dynamic.
- 7) Permanent fitting and testing. As knowledge, values and cognitive structures are practically gained and used, they are permanently tested in social practice. As long as they are useful for this practice, they are true i.e. viable elements of the empirical world.¹⁶
- 8) There is no universal a priori methodology for empirical research. Methodology has to be built up within applied empirical research. It is “operational a priori” (Dewey) when it is the systematized result of foregoing successful research.

Classical and modern pragmatist thinking was continually present in American microsociology (ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism), in cognitive sociology (Conein 2005; Conein and Thévenot eds. 1997; Thévenot 2006, 2007, 2011) and in the philosophy of language (Livet 1994). The latter two prepared the foundation for the French pragmatist social sciences. Their reception in France was the transmitting mechanism of pragmatist thinking.

Structuralism was one of the greatest paradigms in the humanities and social sciences in France. Originally developed in linguistics, structural analysis was modified and soon applied by Lévi-Strauss to the analysis of culture, of classifications, and of social structure in ethnological research. Structuralism never was a coherent scientific paradigm, but a scientific movement, which postulated the existence of a systematic organization of culture and society to be uncovered through structuralist research. Prominent representatives of structuralism as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu were influenced by the historical analysis of sciences undertaken by the French tradition of epistemology (Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and with some deviations from the former Michel Serres). They proclaimed the specific epistemological

¹⁶ This position is reflected in the importance which is given to tests in the EC.

practice which was to break with everyday experience and everyday notions (postulates which are in accordance with the sociology of Émile Durkheim) and to reconstruct empirical phenomena by means of instruments, compatible with the scientific approach in use. The cultural and social structures are regarded as being unconscious collective realities which coin thinking, perceiving and acting of the members of collectives. Structuralist methodology has to be appropriate to reconstruct these unconscious collective realities. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu extended the earlier forms of structuralism by exceeding its narrow methodological holism and integrating a dualism of practice and structure (Bourdieu 1972, 1979, 1980; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; de Fornel and Ogien eds. 2011). Practice is seen as being structured by the (unconscious) social structure and (re)producing it through the everyday practice of different life styles.

Again, there are some related fundamental elements of structuralist thinking (especially derived from the work of Bourdieu) which can be seen as starting points for EC.

- 1) Methodic holism. The coherence of empirical theory and its method must be respected and reflected. Instruments and research strategies must be applied in a reflexive way to reconstruct the research object; these instruments must replicate the metaphysics brought in by the theory.
- 2) Dualism of structure and practice. To overcome MH it is important to relate it to the forms of practice which are in turn related to it and contribute to the reproduction of the superindividual structures.
- 3) Reconstruction of structures. Social, cultural and cognitive structures (classifications) have to be methodologically reconstructed – like grammars are reconstructed in linguistics.
- 4) Cognitive structures – especially classifications – have to be analyzed in the context of social and institutional structures, in their relation to behavior (practice) and in the historical dimension in which they co-evolved. Some of the researchers of the EC-approach were trained in the Bourdieu-paradigm. This was the transmitting mechanism.¹⁷

But the sociology of Bourdieu was also a problematic reference for the forming pragmatist sociology in France, because Bourdieu and his followers rejected some of the theoretical and methodological positions of the EC-approach and vice versa. The following positions of the EC are at the same time (more or less overt) critical statements against Bourdieu's sociology.¹⁸

¹⁷ Bourdieu had immediate influence on many researchers of the EC because Bourdieu gave courses at the ENSAE (École Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Administration Économique), which is the Grande École that prepares for the INSEE.

¹⁸ And it has to be added that there is also a critical review of Bourdieu's critic of the economic theory by Favereau. He accuses Bourdieu's economic sociology of being another kind of scientific orthodoxical thinking (Favereau 2001).

- 1) Actors have reflexive-critical capacities themselves and are not unconsciously exposed to the macrolevel. The social structures at the macrolevel are not the dominant explaining principle for social reality, action and coordination.
- 2) Scientists do not have an exceptional epistemological standpoint compared to “normal” actors.
- 3) There is a plurality of structuring principles not only one (as Bourdieu’s hierarchical system of notions of social space, field and different forms of capital assumes).
- 4) Action and agency cannot be explained by incorporated dispositions (as Bourdieu’s notion of habitus assumes) or individual intentions, but by using the instrumentations and (cognitive) dispositions present in situations which do depend mainly on conventions and capacities.

The EC-approach has integrated these influences of both precursors. While pragmatism is weak in explaining social structures and structuralism is (or at least has been for a long time) weak in including agency, EC combines methodological elements of both.¹⁹ EC has become the most important heterodox approach in French socio-economic institutionalism. Its methodological position corresponds to its theoretical position. The consequence is that the research reconstructs the complex practice of the interplay between coordinating actors and conventions. This is done in historical-genealogical perspective – analyzing the co-evolution of the arrangement of practices, cognitive devices and conventions. Examples are Salais et al. (1986), Salais (1985), Thévenot (1990) and also Boltanski (1982). Many empirical studies use comparisons to bring the differences between the arrangements to the fore and to understand these arrangements (examples for national comparisons Storper and Salais 1997; Lamont and Thévenot eds. (2000); Bessy et al. 2001; examples for comparisons in branches are Boisard and Letablier 1987, 1989; Biencourt and Urrutiager 2002). Explanation is not done by statistical modeling or the logical forms of induction or deduction. Explanation is achieved through an interpretative process of exploring the logic actors apply in order to coordinate themselves in the process of production (of any kind of products, as statistical data, consumer goods etc.).

6. Parallels to the Weberian Approach

As Gilles Raveaud (2008) has pointed out, Max Weber is an ally for heterodox economic theorizing. Weber (1985) claimed that sociological methodology

¹⁹ But Bourdieu was here a precursor, because he already integrated some pragmatic elements into his constructivist structuralist theory to overcome earlier structuralist positions of Claude Lévi-Strauss (de Fornel and Ogien eds. 2011).

should understand social action through the interpretation of the meaning of action (“deutend verstehen”) from the actor’s perspective and explain its inner causality (“ursächlich erklären”). Here explanation is closely linked to the researcher’s understanding of actor’s interpretation (as a scientific interpretation of actor’s interpretation). Thus “verstehen” (understanding) and “erklären” (explaining) are linked.

Christian Bessy has highlighted one parallel between EC and Weber’s methodological claims. Bessy (2011) argues that two main strategies of institutional analysis can be differentiated. One strategy conceives institutions as external constraints to action and models the impact of these constraints as causal factor on action. Here institutions are exogenous factors to action. The other strategy places the interpretative processes of actors in the centre. Institutions are conceived as enacted by actors and the meaning of these institutions for actors is reconstructed. Actors contribute to the interpretative process and to the following enactment of the performative reality of institutions. Institutions are not given causal factors but endogenous to action. The parallel between Weber’s perspective and the EC-approach lies in this latter strategy to understand institutions as endogenous to action (see also Salais 1998a).

Weber proposed to construct ideal types. They are neither empirical cases nor average types. Ideal types are analytical constructions of types of rationality which are constructed to represent a coherent way of interpretation and acting. The task of sociology was to develop systems of such ideal types and to infer general rules of social processes.

The quality of these ideal types as constructions can be seen in their capacity to interpret series of actions as being integrated by coherent meaning (“Sinnadäquanz”) and in their capacity to interpret that action follows rules and that the interpretation of a series of actions is compelling (“Kausaladäquanz”).

Weber demonstrated his interpretative strategy in the historical analysis of the emergence of capitalism from the religion of Calvinism (Weber 1988a). Weber identified an ideal type whose religious motivation led him to discipline all aspects of his way of life and to aim for economic success (profit) as a divine sign to be a member of the chosen few.

The conventions – constructed in empirical analyses – have much in common with Weber’s notion of ideal type. But an important difference remains: conventions as logics of coordination and evaluation are not scientific constructions. They are – as ideal forms of coordination and evaluation – virtually present for all competent actors. They are a kind of “common knowledge” for all members of a society (Dupuy 1989). “Virtually” indicates here that conventions must not be purely realized in material form (for instance as organizational form), but that conventions are socio-cultural and then socio-cognitive resources which are empirically present in situations as possible ways of coordination and evaluation. Storper and Salais (1997) therefore use the notion of

“possible worlds” which are the resources for coordination and evaluation actors in the empirical world to construct real worlds.

In his sociology of religion, Weber showed that economy has normative foundations. In the example of Calvinism, this religious doctrine delivered normative foundations for a specific type of capitalism and economic action. The EC-approach also postulates that conventions can be seen as an empirical existing “ordinary normativity” as the basis for the economy (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006a, 2006b; Reynaud and Richebé 2007). Weber’s analytical interest was also to explain the historical development of different forms of economy (Weber 1991; Swedberg 1998). Weber’s approach is to make evident that cultural systems can induce the socio-historical evolution of the (material) economic organization (Weber 1988b) and it shows that in order to explain modern capitalism and its institutions, the foregoing upcoming of religious doctrine has to be studied. This is another parallel to the EC-approach.²⁰

7. The Complexities of EC’s Methodological Position

The use of the Weberian approach as reference appears helpful to point out the interpretative character of the methodological standpoint of the EC. But the EC does not focus solely ideal types. Coordinating actors have to deal with the empirical reality of a plurality of conventions, they have to cope with conflicts between conventions and they have to work out compromises. This is a first complexity (horizontal plurality of conventions). There is a second one. EC integrates the different levels as they are enacted in situational coordination and evaluation (Eymard-Duvernay et al. 2006a; Thévenot 1997). The methodological reason for this concentration on situations is that institutions are conceived as internal to coordination and evaluation (Salais 2007; Bessy 2002b, 2011; Bessy and Favereau 2003). They are not regarded as external constraints as in neo-institutional theory from Williamson (1985) and North (1990). The second complexity comes in when the different levels – starting from personal engagement (Thévenot 1994, 2006, 2007) to the level of state oriented coordination and evaluation (Salais 1998a, 2007; Storper and Salais 1997; Salais and Villeneuve eds. 2004) – are simultaneously enacted in situations (vertical plurality of conventions). The evolution of this double complexity (as two combined forms of plurality) is to be explained (the explanandum) – not the evolution of separated ideal types. EC aims to understand the practices that “make things hold together” and to interpret the logic of the constructed arrangement of practices, cognitive formats, conventions etc. Weber’s perspective was to

²⁰ Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) also reconstructed conventions (they named them orders of worth) as cultural formations out of historical documents as Weber did in his sociology of religion.

focus on how culture and different forms of rationality (resulting from membership in social groups and institutions on the meso- or macrolevel) influence the behavior of individuals. As most sociologists after him, he separated a priori spheres of causes and consequences. The new French social sciences with EC and ANT at their centre withdraw from separating such spheres a priori.²¹ Instead, arrangements of humans, things, and cognitive concepts are regarded as networks out of which new phenomena emerge. The differentiation of causes and consequences is understood as an attribution within these networks. It is a social construction a posteriori. EC and ANT take objects in a new way seriously (Thévenot 1993, 1994). Objects participate in “socializing” that is objects are involved in constructive practices. The worth of objects and individuals is constructed in mutual processes of attributions. Objects are the bases for tests that proof the worth of individuals or their actions. And vice versa: the social meaning of objects (as products) is constructed by relating them to practices, concepts, cognitive formats. Latour postulates a methodological symmetry in the explanation of ontologies. Instead of assuming the existence (ontology) of society and to explain afterwards the “social construction of nature” through social practices, ANT explores the processes of mutual construction (Latour 1993, 2005).

The complexity of the methodological position of EC is enhanced because EC avoids an a priori monocausality and explores the attribution of causality as a process in the empirical reality under study. This is a classical pragmatist research strategy.

Therefore, a plurality of research techniques and research strategies is used. As in the social studies of sciences (STS, which was mainly influenced by ANT), ethnographic methods are applied in the analysis of these complex processes of the construction of categories, and the worth of objects and individuals. The early analysis of categorizing in the field of official statistics already used qualitative interviews to explore the interpretative processes of actor’s using categories or constructing classifications (Eymard-Duvernay and Thévenot 1986; Salais et al. 1986; Boltanski and Thévenot 1983; Desrosières and Thévenot 2002; Thévenot 1983). But there are also statistical techniques like exploratory factor analysis (in the French version of correspondence analysis) which are suitable to identify the results of constructive practices (Salais 1992; Rivaud-Danset and Salais 1992; Salais 1998b, Storper and Salais 1997). In fact, these techniques were introduced by Bourdieu and his group for the

²¹ The theories of ANT and Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) were developed in mutual orientation (Dosse 1999; Nachi 2006; Corcuff 2007). Because the theoretical work that was done by Boltanski and Thévenot is part of the EC, ANT and EC share foundational theoretical positions. But Luc Boltanski himself is not a core member of EC as Laurent Thévenot is. And he still confesses to be a structuralist (as he did at the Congress of Sociology in Frankfurt 2010).

structuralist analysis of social fields. Another technique is the study and interpretation of documents to identify implicit categories and conventions and to infer from documents to the logics of practices (see for example the contributions in Thévenot ed. 1986 and in Boltanski and Thévenot eds. 1989 as well as the contributions of Luciani and Salais 1992, and Boltanski and Thévenot 1983, 2006). The group around Eymard-Duvernay studied job announcements to identify the underlying conventions (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal 1997; Bessy and Larquier 2000). Caroline Dahlberg (2010) studied the convention-based justification of the self-regulatory organizations of advertising using qualitative interviews.²²

One can argue that discourse analysis can be used in this approach to reconstruct quality conventions as deeper structures of the knowledge order in the economy (Diaz-Bone 2009c). There can be found different statements of representatives of EC who point out the importance of language use for the foundation of knowledge on conventions (Thévenot 2007, 2011; Eymard-Duvernay 2009). All in all, EC tries to apply a coherent arsenal of research techniques to translate the assumed ontological complexities and pluralities into a coherent research strategy.

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²² The path breaking work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) also identifies “orders of worth” as deeper structures in texts of classical philosophy or management literature – but without offering a methodology how these orders are to be identified and reconstructed out of the sampled texts.

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