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Conventions and Institutional Logics

Invitation to a dialog between two theoretical approaches

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ABSTRACT

Two theoretical approaches – Conventions and Institutional Logics – are brought together and the similarities and differences between the two are explored. It is not the intention to combine the approaches, but I would like to open both ‘boxes’ and make them available to each other with the purpose of creating a space for dialog. Both approaches were developed in the mid-1980s as a reaction to rational-choice economic theory and collectivistic sociological theory. These two theories were oversimplifying social life as being founded either in actor-micro level analyses or in structure-macro level analyses. The theoretical quest of both Conventions and Institutional Logics has been to understand the increasing indeterminacy, uncertainty and ambiguity in people’s lives where a sense of reality, of value, of moral, of feelings is not fixed. Both approaches have created new theoretical insights by overcoming traditional micro-macro and actor-structure dimensions. However, they have also achieved this in different ways and I ask if there is a benefit to ‘importing’ some of these differences into the other approach.

INTRODUCTION

People and organizations increasingly navigate situations where there is no common sense of reality, value, moral or feelings. And they often have to coordinate their activities in indeterminate, uncertain and ambiguous situations. A quest to understand the phenomenon has been on the social science agenda in the last three decades – and even earlier too. Theoretical approaches such as Ambiguous Decision Making (March, 1976), Dilemmas of Identity (Gergen, 1991), Paradox and Transformation (Quinn and Cameron, 1998), Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 1993), Conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991/2006), and Institutional Logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991) have all explored how people and organizations navigate in indeterminate, uncertain and ambiguous situations.

I want to bring two of these theoretical approaches together in this paper: Conventions and Institutional Logics. Although the two approaches have differences, I believe they have much to tell each other. Both emerged at the same time in the late 1980s, the first in France and the latter in the USA. Very little dialog has taken place between the two. It's only recently that attempts have been made to bring them together, i.e. at a workshop in Innsbruck 2013 with the presence of Laurent Thévenot and Roger Friedland, and through a few articles. In some of these articles, Clotier and Langley (2013), as well as Dansou and Langley (2012), focus on how Conventions complements Institutional Logics by helping it address its limitations – and the former article also offers a short rapprochement between the two approaches. McInerney (2008) deals with how institutional entrepreneurs promote narratives to shape organizational fields by anchoring the narratives to moral ideologies, encapsulated in orders of worth (Conventions). Patriotta, Gond and Schultz (2011) look at how organizations and stakeholders debate and discursively justify the legitimacy of an institution when controversies arise and several forms of legitimacy are brought into play. They argue that the current institutional theories (including Institutional Logics) have not paid sufficient attention to this issue, and instead they build on insights from the Conventions approach. In this paper I specifically focus on a comparison between Conventions (as developed by Boltanski and Thévenot) and Institutional Logics (as developed by Friedland and Alford, as well as Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury).¹ I look at similarities and differences, make comments, ask questions of both approaches, and highlight some elements where the two approaches may learn from each

¹ Some scholars have been interested in the relationship between Conventions and different notions of institutions (e.g. economic neo-institutionalism and sociological neo-institutionalism). As Institutional Logics is a specific approach of institutionalism, I do not include the works by these other scholars in this paper (e.g. Annisette and Richardson, 2011; Daudigeos and Valiorgue, 2010; Dias-Bone, 2012; Gond and Leca, 2012; Knoll, 2013; Kädtler, 2012).

other. It is not my intention to combine the approaches, but I would like to open both ‘boxes’ and make them available to each other to promote a dialogue between them.

The paper is structured in the following way: I start by describing Conventions and Institutional Logics. Then I compare the two approaches, focusing on similarities and differences. After that I comment on what one approach may learn from the other (and vice versa), and I raise some questions about each of the approaches.

CONVENTIONS

The Conventions approach was developed in France by Boltanski and Thévenot, who elaborated their arguments in the 1980s. They published their joint work *De la Justification: Les Économies de la Grandeur* in 1991. Conventions developed as a critique of two roots in sociology: one tradition – rooted in Durkheimian sociology – where the ordering principle rests on the notion of the collective, and another tradition rooted in the economic model where the ordering principle rests on the results of individual choices. Conventions offered a third approach, developing a model focusing on the relationship between moments of agreement reaching and moments of critical questioning (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 25).² Their project is the understanding of what they call the *principle of common humanity*, where people ‘seek to carry out their action in such a way that these can withstand the test of justification’. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 37/38). They focus on everyday interactions where disputes are raised and agreements are reached. And they argue that there is an inner tension between one side which is based on reaching agreements where something is ranked, and another side where there is a principle of equality.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006) describe how individuals confront uncertainty by making use of objects to establish order and, conversely, how they consolidate objects by attaching them to the orders constructed. The ‘states of worth’ of a person cannot be predetermined; people have to interact and reach an agreement in order to discover their relative worth in the world – if they do not resort to violence, that is. Boltanski & Thévenot identify different principles of order that help people reach agreements. These agreements have to be enacted; in real-world tests they involve objects in relation to which people measure themselves and discover their relative worth in the world. Therefore, an agreement is not just a linguistic phenomenon as the notion of *objects* and *tests*

² For a discussion about the position of the approach in French post-war sociology and its specific relation to the work by Bourdieu and actor-network theory, see Bénatouil (1999), Wagner (1999) and Guggenheim and Potthast (2012).

play a central part in their argument:

In opposition to ‘the linguistic turn’, it (Conventions) inclines toward realism. Indeed, for persons to be able to reach an agreement in practice, not only in principle, a reality test has to take place, accompanied by a codification or, at least, an explicit formulation of valid proof. In order to be able to take these proofs into consideration, the model of analysis must be able to enlighten the presence not only of persons – the sole beings of political philosophy – but also of objects. We do consider the reality test to require the capacity of persons to take these objects at face value and to endow them with value. Therefore, every principle of justice is associated with a universe of objects that constitute a coherent world. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000: 212/3).

Boltanski and Thévenot don’t deal with objects as pure carriers of symbolic meaning:

We want, on the contrary, to show the way persons, in order to cope with uncertainty, rely on things, objects, devices which are used as stable references, on which reality tests or trials can be based. These reality tests enable judgments to reach a grounded and legitimate agreement and, hence, provide the possibility of ending the dispute. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 367).

Relying on classic works of political philosophy, the authors identify six coherent worlds, each of which has its own norms of appropriate behavior that the people in them follow. The six worlds are: 1. the inspired world; 2. the domestic world; 3. the world of fame; 4. the civic world; 5. the market world; and 6. the industrial world.

In *the inspired world*, the common principle is inspiration, and the state of worthiness is spontaneity and excitement. Your dignity as a human being goes through passion and creativity and the subjects are often defined as poor and sometimes useless within the society. The mind and body are the objects in this world, the test is the vagabondage of mind, and the evidence is signs. What you sacrifice are habits, and your fall will be evident if you are down to earth. In *the domestic world*, the common principle is personal relations and you show your state of worthiness by demonstrating good manners, and being wise and trustworthy. Your dignity as a human being is shown through habits and kindness, and the subjects in this world are e.g. fathers, parents, mothers, friends, and guests, etc. But the domestic world not only unfolds within a restricted notion of ‘the family’, but also highlights the personal relationship between people outside ‘the family’. Objects in the domestic world are gifts in order to support the relations, and the test is to participate in ceremonies

and social events, and the evidence is appreciation. What you sacrifice is selfishness. You invest in your duties, and you fail if you behave in a vulgar or impolite way. In *the world of fame*, the common principle is reputation and your state of worthiness is when you are famous and visible. Your self-love and desire to be seen and heard are fundamental to your dignity as a human being, and the subjects in the world of fame are stars and their fans. The objects are branding and interviews, and the test is your ability to present yourself under the gaze of others as well as the evidence is to 'be known'. What you sacrifice are your secrets, and you fail if you remain unknown. In *the civic world*, the common principle is collectivity and your state of worthiness depends on your public agency. Involvement in public affairs shows your dignity as a human being and the subjects in this world are delegates, representatives, and members. Some of the objects are laws, courts, and policy – and the test is attending meetings. The evidence is rules and legal texts. What you sacrifice is your individuality, and your fall will be evident if you become a free rider. In the fifth world – *the market world* – the common principle is possession of rare goods and competition. You show your state of worthiness in terms of being rich and living the high life. The desire for commodities is central to your dignity as a human being. In the market world, subjects are individuals, clients, competitors, buyers, sellers, and businessmen – and the objects are wealth, luxury items, and money. The test of belonging to this world is when you make deals, and the evidence is money. What you sacrifice is attention to others, and you fail if you become enslaved by money (and not your desires). In *the industrial world*, the common principle is efficiency, productivity, and needs. You show your state of worthiness by being predictable and reliable, and your dignity as a human being is defined by work and activities. The subjects of the industrial world are professionals and specialists, and the objects are means, tools, definitions, and concepts. The test in this world is verification and the evidence is measures, etc. The sacrifice you make is the ability to relate to other people as human beings, and you fail if you become instrumental and treat people like objects.

Boltanski and Thévenot (1999: 369) mention that these worlds are historical constructions. Some of them may be grounding people's justification less and less, whereas other worlds may be emerging, e.g. a green world or a communicative world. A projective world is also mentioned by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) (see also Gond & Leca, 2010), and Westenholz (2013a) suggesting a fuzzy world based on Eastern philosophy. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) investigate how orders are changing or emerging. They argue that the principal operator of creation and transformation of an order is critique (voice), which derives its energy from sources of

indignation. “Displacements make it possible to restore strength by deriving less identified forces from new circumstances in which those who bring them about are placed.” (499). These shifts are neither seen as the outcome of an overall strategy developed and implemented from above, nor are they an unconscious process, without a subject or reflexivity. They are understood as interpretable in terms.

Disputes can take place within a world without calling the world itself into question (e.g. the question ‘Who is the best qualified in the industrial world?’ does not challenge the industrial world *per se*). The disputes revolve around the issue of whether or not *the test* is genuine. However, the world itself might be challenged, subsequently leading to the confrontation of two or more worlds. What is described here does not refer to a person tested in different ways, in different situations (e.g. a person is tested in a concrete situation, for example as a company employee in the market world, and as a family father in the domestic world). What is referred to, is a situation where a person is tested in different worlds within the same scenario, e.g. do you have to pay (the market world) your child (the domestic world) to mow the lawn?

One of Boltanski & Thévenot’s main arguments is that people often manifest themselves in different worlds:

Although the room to maneuver is strictly limited by the way the situation is arranged, a model incorporating several worlds gives actors the possibility of avoiding a test, of challenging a test’s validity by taking recourse in an external principle, or even of reversing the situation by introducing a test that is valid in a different world. The model thus includes the possibility of a critique for which determinist constructions fail to account. (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: 216).

When several worlds are brought together in the same test scenario, no higher common order can be found to resolve the disagreement. As Boltanski & Thévenot mention, a disagreement might not be stated as people might choose to ignore it (234), or the worlds might not be in conflict in the specific situation. Alternatively, a *compromise* may be suggested where “people agree to come to terms, that is, to suspend a clash – a dispute involving more than one world – without settling it through recourse to a test in just one world.” (277). Let me exemplify. In a situation where both the market world and the civic world are present, a compromise might be established. For example, in some countries representatives of employees have the right to participate in board meetings together with the representatives of the capital owners. Such a compromise has been worked out in

Scandinavian countries and has been named ‘citizens in companies’, a compromise or hybrid between the two worlds. In other parts of the world – Great Britain and the USA, for example – this compromise is seen to be a strange, unnatural phenomenon. Compromises are often fragile. But as Boltanski & Thévenot suggest:

a way of solidifying a compromise is to place objects of elements stemming from different worlds at the service of the common good and endow them with their own identity in such a way that their form will no longer be recognizable if one of the disparate elements of which they are formed is removed. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 278).

Boltanski and Thévenot are well aware that their model of Conventions does not cover all circumstances of behavior. First, when people work together, they are not always focused on justice and compromises. They may enact *private arrangements* instead. A private arrangement is a contingent agreement between two parties that refers to their mutual satisfaction rather than to a general good i.e. “you do this, which is good for me; I do that, which is good for you.” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: 336). The term ‘private’ does not refer to a particular sphere (e.g. the domestic or market world). It suggests something that ignores the common good. It is in private arrangements that *interests* are defined. Although a compromise does not have a solid foundation, it does presuppose an idea of the common good, and that is what distinguishes it from a private arrangement.

Second, people may be engaged in other regimes than public affairs. As Thévenot mentions (2001, 2013), they may be *engaged in familiarity* where individual interests or opinions are less demanding for coordination, whereas the demands for intimacy are necessary. They may also be *engaged in a plan* that involves projection of the self, outside intimacy and ensuring of self-projection in the future. When people are engaged in familiarity, or in a plan, they are interacting with the environment in situations where they do not have to justify to others what they are doing, and their behavior is not institutionalized. I will not deal with these other types of engagements but use them to specify that the regime of justification is only one among other regimes.

INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

The Institutional Logics approach was developed in the USA by Friedland and Alford who elaborated their arguments in the 1980s (Alford and Friedland, 1985) and published their joint

article *Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions* in 1991 – the very same year that Boltanski and Thévenot published their book on conventions. The Institutional Logics developed explicitly as a critique of two roots in social sciences: one tradition rooted in the concept of the utilitarian individual (found in the public-choice theory, agency theory, rational-actor models, and new institutional economics), and the other tradition rooted in power-oriented organizational theory e.g. resource dependency theory, which autonomizes organizations from their institutional environment. Today, one could also argue that Friedland and Alford implicitly criticized a deterministic tendency within neo-institutional organizational theory that focuses on organizational isomorphism and a lack of organizational diversity (DiMaggio & Powel, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1983).

Friedland & Alford (1991) argue that the interests, identities, values, worldviews, and material practices of individuals and organizations are embedded in institutional logics. At the same time, individuals and organizations are able to elaborate on these logics. Therefore, the two scholars develop a perspective on society as a potentially conflictual, inter-institutional system, in which no institutional order should be accorded causal primacy a priori, and individuals, organizations, and institutions must be seen as nested.

Friedland and Alford (1991: 248) define institutional logic as a set of material practices and symbolic constructions, which constitute its organizing principles. They identify the five most important institutional orders in contemporary Western societies: capitalism, state, democracy, family, and truth (religion as well as science). The institutional logic of capitalism is accumulation and the commodification of human activities; that of the state is rationalization and the legal and bureaucratic hierarchical regulation of human activities; that of democracy is participation and popular control over human activities; that of family is community and unconditional loyalty to its members and their reproductive needs; and that of religion and science is truth whether transcendental or mundane. The routines of each institution are connected to rituals, some which define the order of the world and the individual's position within it, and some that reinforce belief in the institution (p. 250). However, the conflictual institutional orders are interdependent, which causes uncertainty as to how to interpret a concrete practice. The two scholars therefore argue that some of the most important struggles among individuals, groups, organizations, and classes concern: a) the appropriate relationships between institutions; b) which institutional logic should regulate various activities; and finally c) which categories of people they apply to (p. 256).

Since Friedland and Alford published their article in 1991 theoretical and empirical research on institutional logics have become a growing domain in organization theory both in North America (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999 and 2008; Thornton et al., 2012) and Europe (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009; Lounsbury and Boxenbaum, 2013). Friedland & Alford originally focused on institutional logics at a societal level. In recent years, however, other scholars have applied the concept of institutional logics to other phenomena or levels e.g. organizations, markets, industries, inter-organizational networks, geographic communities, and organizational fields (Thornton & Ocasio 2008: 106-108). Thornton & Ocasio argue that the variety of levels may have led to imprecision in research, so that any logic at any level of analysis may be characterized as an institutional logic. They suggest that the level of institutional logics has to be clearly defined and that institutional logics are understood as sources of legitimacy and provide a sense of order and ontological security. In other words, institutional logics are more than logics of action or interpretative framework at the micro-level analysis, although one could potentially observe institutional logics at the micro-level of analysis.

Uncertainty as to how to interpret a concrete practice opens up for micro-processes in which people negotiate relying on several institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011; Westenholtz, 2012a). First, organizations may *resist* the introduction of what they perceive to be a contradictory institutional logic (Feldman, 2003). Second, organizations may react by *replacing* an institutional logic with another (Tilcsik, 2010). Third, organizations may translate different institutional logics to suit their local context and let these logics *compete* and reach a *temporary truce* (Borum & Westenholtz, 1995; Cooper et al., 1996). *Fourth*, organizations may translate several institutional logics to their local context and let them *co-exist* in the organization (Reay & Hinings, 2009; Westenholtz, 2012a). *Fifth*, organizations may translate several institutional logics to their local context and develop a *hybridized mode* of material practices and symbolic constructions. (Boxenbaum, 2006; Westenholtz, 1993 and 2012a).

Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) aimed at integrating the steady growth in the development of empirical and theoretical research on institutional logics (focusing primarily on North American research) in their book *The Institutional Logics Perspective*. What is of special interest to this paper is that they develop an integrative model of the micro-foundation of institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012, chapter 4). According to the model, institutional logics focus the attention of individual actors through institutional embeddedness, activating a social actor's situated identities, goals, and action schemas and thereby shaping their social interaction. Social interactions sometimes generate

new social practices and structures that are selected and retained through processes of cultural evolution, influencing institutional logics. The scholars further argue that ‘what is important from an institutional logics perspective is that more micro-processes of change are built from analogies, combinations, translations, and adaptations of more macro-institutional logics’, and that both local situation and organizational embeddedness combine to explain reproduction and transformation of structures. The scholars are developing an integrative model combining macro-micro levels by – as I read it – giving ontological primacy to institutional logics in one stage of their model and ontological primacy to local situations in another stage of their model.

A second point that is of interest to this paper is that Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury elaborate on the numbers and detailed descriptions of institutional logics. Instead of the original five institutional logics – capitalism, state, democracy, family, and truth (religion as well as science) – mentioned by Friedland and Alford in 1991, they now propose seven institutional logics: family, community, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation. In addition to this development, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury make a contribution by developing nine categorical elements within each institutional order describing each logic by a root metaphor; sources of legitimacy, authority, and identity; basis of norms, attention, and strategy; informal control mechanism, and economic system.

In a review of the book by Thornton et al., Friedland (2012) brings in different controversies and discussions within the institutional logic approach. I would like to mention some of them, as they are relevant to the comparison I make between the institutional logics approach and the conventional approach later on.

First, there is a potential controversy within the institutional logic approach concerning the degree of ‘modularity’ of fragments or categorical elements that institutional entrepreneurs can deploy to transform institutional orders. Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury describe different institutional systems (2012: chapter 3) that apply the nine categorical elements mentioned above. They argue that, to a certain extent, individuals or organizations can break up the categorical elements and apply them to new situations to fit practical needs. The authors admit that the ability to break up elements might be limited but they give primacy to the modular quality of institutional logics as a condition of an enabling agency. Friedland, on the other hand, is much more hesitant in accepting the modularity of categorical elements:

I have always, perhaps wrongly, thought of institutional logics as having limited modularity, where material practices are not, as they (Thornton, Ocasio and

Lounsbury) put it, ‘symbol-barren’ (124). That is, where identities of subjects, material practices, and valued objects are co-implicated, lashed together and difficult to decompose...That they are joined together in the social imagination is what makes them real, available, good to think and act with. They are world-making production functions; their cognitive, normative or coercive components do not travel separately. (Friedland, 2012: 588).

Second, there is a dispute about the relevance of *values, feelings and passions* in the Institutional Logics approach. Although the concept ‘value’ is mentioned in the book by Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, it does not seem to play any important role in their own development of the seven institutional logics and it is not mentioned as one of the categorical elements describing the logics (Thornton et al., 2012: 73). As Friedland (2012: 585) comments, the closest they come to mentioning values is in the category of ‘sources of legitimacy’. But legitimacy is not the same as values, although they may be related conceptually. Neither do feelings nor passions seem to play any role in their theorizing about institutional logics. On the contrary, Friedland argues that values are constitutive elements within institutional logics:

Value is central to an institutional logic: a presumed product of its prescribed practices, the foundation stone of its ontology, the source of legitimacy of its rules, a basis of individual identification, a ground for agency, and the foundation upon which its powers are constituted. (Friedland, 2012: 585).

Furthermore, Friedland argues that values are especially essential when objectification is not in place and attention is not automatic, but must be ‘willed’ by the individual or organization as they change their world. These processes evoke intense passions, which is not surprising as these are moments of indeterminacy.

Third, there is a discussion about the role of *objects*. As Thornton et al. (2012: 141) mention, the Institutional Logics approach has a blind spot concerning objects as it highlights the importance of wider societal belief systems. They call upon research that bridges the Institutional Logics approach (e.g. the actor-network theory and other more practice-based studies) in favor of more localized approaches to meaning making. Friedland agrees with Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury that the Institutional Logics approach does not have any account of the dynamics of the material. He develops the argument by saying that one has to specify what is meant with more practice-based studies as ‘practices not only mark, they make objects.’ It is important to make a distinction here

between a situation where objects is a site for re-coding (practical cognitivism), and a situation where objects is integral and critical to the formation of particular formations of subjects and practical meaning making. Many objects (such as the telephone) may travel effortlessly across institutional fields, while other objects (such as money) may be media through which institutions are transformed. (Friedland, 2012: 390/391).

These controversies and discussions within the Institutional Logics approach show that when we are comparing this approach to others, we have to specify what part of the approach we are referring to.

COMPARING CONVENTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

The comparison of the two approaches will focus on answering four questions: What are their historical contexts? What are the macro-foundations of the approaches? What are the micro-foundations of the approaches? And what are the relationships between the macro-micro foundations in the two approaches? I look for similarities and differences between the two approaches in each of these questions. In figure 1, I briefly describe my answers to the four questions.

Insert figure 1 here

Historical theoretical context

Both approaches were seeded in the 1980s and the first publications came out in the same year – 1991: Conventions in France by Boltanski and Thévenot, and Institutional Logics in the USA by Friedland and Alford. The theoretical quest of both approaches was to understand plurality in society and how people dealt with indeterminacy, uncertainty and ambiguity in their day-to-day lives. Boltanski and Thévenot are specifically interested in understanding how people can reach agreements without applying violence. On the other hand, Friedland and Alford focus on organization as a potential conflictual, inter-institutional system without any normative (non-violence) value built into the approach. Both approaches were seeded at a time where rational choice theory had a strong worldwide theoretical position – although the theory had a stronger position in the USA than in France. The sociologists reacted to (what they found to be) an oversimplification of social behavior borrowed from economics where individuals' preferences were considered to be exogenous, their behavior determined by logic of consequentiality, and agreements were found on the marketplace.

Besides opposing economic theory, Boltanski and Thévenot (in their French context) also opposed the Durkheimian sociological alternative to economics. The Durkheimian tradition rests on the notion of collective norms, values etc. that people more or less consciously internalize as a compelling or determining factor that allows them to enter into relationships with others and reach collective agreements. Boltanski and Thévenot are critical of both assumptions in the rational choice theory and the collective theory as they are not able “to deal with the interactions of people in society, which both aim to do, unless they take the forms of agreement that people have fashioned into account.” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 32). And the two theories do not do that. The theoretical quest for Boltanski and Thévenot is therefore to understand the principles of humanity by constructing a model by focusing on moments of agreement reaching and moments of critical questioning as people are dealing with uncertainty.

As mentioned above, Friedland and Alford also opposed the rational choice theory in economics. That was supplemented by a critique of power-oriented theories of the organization that, at that time, had a dominant role in the USA. In these theories, organizations are isolated from their institutional or societal context and society is reduced to an abstract environment or an inter-organizational field. The theoretical quest for the two scholars was to create a nonfunctional perception of society as a potential contradictory inter-institutional system. And they maintained “an adequate social theory must work at three levels of analysis – individuals competing and negotiating, organizations in conflict and coordination, and institutions in contradiction and interdependence. Institutions must be conceived of as simultaneously material and symbolic. However, no institutional order should be accorded causal primacy a priori. To restore meaning into social analysis in a way which is neither subjectivist, functionalist, nor teleological, the notion of inter-institutional contradictions is vital.” (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 241). This theoretical quest also became a critique of the more deterministic structural tendencies within neo-institutional organizational theory that was developing in the same period – focusing on structure, stability, and isomorphism (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powel, 1983).

Macro foundation

The macro concept is contested (see Krause, 2012). When we talk about macroanalysis, we often mean a higher societal order (macro-level) having effects on a lower level as organizations (meso-level) or (interactions between) individuals (micro-level). But ‘macro’ can also refer to spatial extensiveness or large numbers in society, and that is the meaning I apply in the paper when I talk

about the widespread macro-foundation of the approaches. I do not indicate by ‘macro’ that it is a higher level determining the ‘meso’ or ‘micro’ level. I mean that the phenomenon we are studying is extensively spread in society.

Conventions, as well as Institutional Logics, have a similar macro-foundation in the sense that social orders as worlds or institutional logics are widespread but not unambiguously determining micro-processes. But their macro-foundations are also quite different or seem to be quite different.

Thévenot (2007, 2012) identifies three regimes of engagement in society. The different regimes indicate different relationships between the human being and his/her environment: “the actors access to reality, and the way he grasps it so as to coordinate his behavior within a certain apprehension frame.....It is from his dependence on an *engaged* environment that the *agent* derive his *capacity*, understood as the *power* to maintain that engagement.” (Thévenot, 2007). First, Thévenot mentions the regime of engagement in public affairs, which is the regime where people are engaged in justification of actions by referring to different conventions – Boltanski and Thévenot’s book *On Justification* focuses specifically on this regime. Second, Thévenot defines a regime of familiar engagement, which consists of attachments to other people more than given words or asserting a will. Third, a regime of engagement in a plan, which “guarantees the autonomy of the bearer of an individual plan” and “refers to felicitous exercise of the will by an individual endowed with *autonomy* and of *projecting herself* successfully into the future.” (Thévenot, 2007).

I understand the macro-foundation of the Institutional Logics approach as a general theory of the social focusing on material and symbolic practices in different institutional fields. In the original work by Friedland and Alford (1991), they deal with society in general. Other scholars have later applied the concept of institutional logics to other meso-institutional fields e.g. organizations, markets, industries, inter-organizational networks, geographic communities, and organizational fields. These institutional fields may be infused by several institutional logics creating ambiguity within the field.

At first, one may be inclined to compare the ‘worlds’ within Conventions and ‘institutional logics’ within Institutional Logics. But before doing so I would like to ask a question concerning the concepts of regimes of engagements and of institutional fields. Could one argue that there are similarities between the regime of engagement in public affairs and a societal/organizational field infused with multiple institutional logics? In that case, the concepts of regimes of engagement in public affairs and societal/organizational fields have a limited theoretical range, as they are only

dealing with social situations where people justify or legitimate to others what they are doing. Or should one argue that whenever people are engaging with their environment (social as well as non-social), they are making sense of what they are doing by justifying/legitimizing their behavior – either to others or to themselves? In that case, different types of engagements might be viewed as one important dimension within each world or institutional logic. The unknown answers to these questions have profound implications on how to understand and apply the insights from the two approaches.

If we set aside these unresolved questions and look at the type of social orders defined within the two approaches (worlds and institutional logics), they both argue that social orders may be transformed, new social orders may emerge, and old social orders may disappear. There is another similarity between the two approaches as they both mention the state and the domestic/family³ as social orders. In addition to these two orders, they mention different worlds/institutional logics where some are *rather* similar although not quite the same e.g. the market world/the logic of capitalism/the logic of corporation, and the civic world/the logic of democracy/the logic of community. And then the two approaches have some social orders that are exclusive to each approach e.g. the inspired world, the world of fame, the projective world within Conventions, and the institutional logic of religion, and logic of science within Institutional Logics. There is a need to expand on these similarities and differences in greater detail in future comparisons.

Micro foundation

Actorhood is an option in both approaches – but not as a micro-level determining factor over a macro-level.

In Conventions, ‘actors’ was one of the original concepts. It is well developed within the theory, stressing the reflexive and strategic competences of *interacting, moral* actors who focus on the common good, engaging in public affairs. When people interact they sometimes employ different worlds and their actions are then put to *the test*, where they question the value framework to be applied to the situation. To reduce uncertainty, people either close their eyes, solve the disagreement by force, or make compromises or private arrangements. These agreements have to be enacted; in real-world tests they involve *objects* in relation to which people measure themselves and discover their relative worth in the world. Therefore, an agreement is not just a linguistic

³ The institutional logic of the family does not only refer to the ‘private nuclear or extended family’ but could also be applied to relationships within organizations. It deals with the motivation of human activities by unconditional loyalty to community members and to their reproduction needs. (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 248 and 262).

phenomenon, as the notion of *objects* and *tests* play a central part in their argument. (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1991/2006).

In the Institutional Logics approach, ‘actors’ are mainly considered to be social-cognitive people applying discursive and rhetorical strategies, and persuading others to change their material practices and symbolic constructions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, Leca, 2009; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Thornton, et al., 2012; Ziber, 2002). The possible effect of these processes is that people resist a new institution, or an old institutional logic is replaced by a new one, or institutional logics compete, co-exist, or become hybridized (Westenholz, 2012a). Objects and values have not played an important role in the analysis of institutional logics but, as Friedland (2012) mentions, they ought to be a part of the Institutional Logics approach.

Macro-Micro foundation

A common feature in both approaches is that they look upon their micro-macro foundation as interrelated or nested in some way. Exactly how they do it is not always clear but I intend, in the following, to give full credit to each of the approaches.

In Conventions, the focus is on moments of tests and an important argument is that actors have the possibility to incorporate several worlds in a test and thereby escape macro/structural-determinism. This does not mean that people are ‘free’ to do whatever they want, as there are structures or worlds defining the identity of people and their moral obligations to a common good. But people may raise critical voices either within a world, or by introducing arguments from another world, in these tests. In this way, people depend on worlds but there is a loose coupling between these worlds and what is going on in tests. I therefore interpret the Conventions approach as giving ontological primacy to the micro-foundation without sacrificing the macro-foundation. The implication of this is that analysis within the Conventional approach should focus on what is happening in situated tests. Analysis of the tests will reveal how people get involved with each other and with objects, and how they discover their relative worth in the world. Analysis following these tests may also show how the creation and transformation of an order is happening – not as an intentional rational plan – but through ongoing interpretations in moments of critical questioning and agreement reaching.

In the Institutional Logics approach, it is assumed that interests, identities, values, world-views, and material practices of individuals and organizations are embedded in multiple institutional logics. At the same time, individuals and organizations are able to elaborate on these logics. Therefore, society is regarded as a potentially conflictual, inter-institutional system, in which no institutional order

should be accorded causal primacy *a priori*, and individuals, organizations, and institutions must be seen as nested (Friedland & Alford, 1991). This opens up for micro-processes in which people negotiate relying on several institutional logics. In a later article, Friedland (2009: 909/910) advocates institutional logics being the bases for evaluation and coordination. Therefore, he gives ontological primacy to institutional logics. He further argues that transforming institutional logics in blending processes may be difficult as the modularity of an institutional logic is limited as institutional logics are sticky. Alternatively, assimilation, the replacement of an institutional logic by another, or the segregation of institutional logics, are more plausible. These arguments are partly undermined by Thornton et al. (2012: chapter 4) in “an integrative model of the micro-foundation of institutional logics”. According to the model, institutional logics focus the attention of individual actors through institutional embeddedness, by activating a social actor’s situated identities, goals, and action schemas – and thereby shaping their social interaction. Social interactions sometimes generate new social practices and structures that are selected and retained through processes of cultural evolution, which influence institutional logics. The scholars further argue that “what is important from an institutional logics perspectives is that more micro-processes of change are built from analogies, combinations, translations, and adaptations of more macro-institutional logics”, and that both local situation and organizational embeddedness combine to explain reproduction and transformation of structures. Combining different institutional logics is possible in their model, as they argue that modularity is possible and institutional logics are regarded as sort of a toolbox. From my interpretation of their text, the three scholars are developing an integrative model that combines macro-micro levels by giving ontological primacy to macro/meso-institutional logics in one stage of their model (when they want to understand individuals’ identities, goals, attentions, and actions schemas), and ontological primacy to local situations in another stage of their model (when they want to understand how macro-institutional logics are transformed).

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS TO CONVENTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

Both Conventions and Institutional Logics are dealing with indeterminacy, uncertainty and ambiguity in social life and trying to overcome the simplification of dichotomies such as macro-micro and structure-actorhood that have haunted the social sciences. Both approaches have enriched our analyses and deserve our attention. However, celebrating approaches is not the same as accepting them uncritically and I would like to make some comments and raise some clarification

questions about both approaches.

Comments and Questions to Conventions

Firstly, Conventions was developed for the purpose of understanding how people coordinate their activities through reaching agreements and justifying their actions to a third person by referring to a common good within a world or a compromise between worlds. I would like to suggest that we expand Boltanski and Thévenot's approach of justification to at least two other types of situations. First, when people coordinate their activities with others they may make sense of the interaction by justifying what they are doing by applying the different worlds and worlds developed by Boltanski and Thévenot. They don't necessarily get into a dispute in the process of coordination, but justify what is going on to themselves and/or to an interviewer. Second, when people coordinate their activities – they do not necessarily reach an agreement. I have applied – perhaps by 'mistake' – the work by Boltanski and Thévenot in a study of coordination within commercial open source development (Westenholz, 2012a) to both situations. The analysis shows that coordination did not always take place because people thought alike within one world or within a compromise between worlds. Coordination sometimes took place because people performed common activities, but did not agree on the meaning of this particular action. For example, some companies released knowledge to an open community and, in their view, gained worth by combining the market world and the civic world. While other companies released knowledge and, in their view, gained worth by combining arguments from the industrial world and the market world. Companies were not justifying the release of their knowledge to others. They justified it to themselves and/or to me. In this sense, the analysis moved from a regime of arrangements in public affairs to a regime of arrangements where people only justify to each other some of the time. In this example, they only did it amongst themselves (or to me), whilst still coordinating their activities. The application of the different worlds seemed to work, although I was told from one anonymous journal reviewer that I did not apply Conventions 'in the right way'. If one accepts that Boltanski and Thévenot's work can be applied not only within 'public affairs' but also in other situated social contexts, I argue that Conventions moves closer to the Institutional Logics approach on this dimension of the macro-foundation. But is this argument acceptable within the approach?

Secondly, Conventions was developed based on Western philosophy. Does that imply that it may not be a helpful (or a less helpful) theoretical approach to study the coordination of people living in Asian or African countries? I raise this question as I am studying Chinese companies located in

Denmark (Westenholz, 2013a). When the Chinese and the Danes coordinate their activities and define their relative worth through tests, it appears that Chinese people sometimes enact what I have called a ‘fuzzy world’ (fast and close adapting), which is unknown to most Western people. On the other hand, Danish people sometimes enact a ‘civic world’ (discussing problems and solutions together on equal terms), which is unknown to most working Chinese people. This raises a question about which worlds are available for people to enact in concrete tests. I do not suggest that we go back to national cultural studies *à la* Hofstede, but we may have to understand that people might have access to different worlds when they coordinate their activities. In relation to this issue, one could ask if the concept of organizational fields could be a helpful concept to import from the Institutional Logics approach. (See also Clotier and Langley (2013: 373-375) for a similar argument.) Organizational fields could then be regarded as a dynamic phenomenon embedded by specific worlds defined by ongoing processes between people and organizations. McInerney (2008) is making a contribution to combining organizational fields and Conventions, as he investigates how change in an organizational field is analyzed by drawing on orders of worth. His shows how institutional entrepreneurs shape organizational fields by attempting to conventionalize accounts, and thereby convincing powerful actors in the field to accept those accounts without question.

Thirdly, one might ask how we study the emergence or transformation of worlds. Boltanski and Thévenot touched on this issue in *Justification* (1991). However, it was not the main focus of the book and compromises between worlds were regarded as fragile as compromises did not have a solid foundation. On the other hand, it was argued that a compromise could be solidified by blending objects of elements stemming from different worlds at the service of the common good and providing them with their own identities so they could not be recognized if one of the elements were removed. How that happened was not unfolded. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) focus on a new emerging ‘projective world’. They argue that the principal operator of creation and transformation of an order derives its energy from sources of indignation. Transformation is neither seen as the outcome of an overall strategy developed and implemented from above, nor is it an unconscious process, without a subject or reflexivity. Transformations are understood as interpretable in terms, and they are established in historical circumstances where an increase in the speed and number of displacements brings about significant changes (p. 522). The study by Boltanski and Chiapello is impressive but we need many more studies that explore how micro-processes could intentionally or unintentionally result in the transformation of worlds or emerging new worlds. Inspiration may come from some of the practice studies within Institutional

Logics (e.g. Christensen and Westenholtz, 1997, 2001; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007).

Comments and Questions to Institutional Logics

Has Institutional Logics thrown some ‘babies out with the bathwater’ as the approach became more established? This question comes to light in some of the controversies between Friedland on one side and Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury on the other.

First, Friedland argues that the modularity of fragments within Institutional Logics is limited – whereas Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury build on the idea that the elements within different institutional logics are like a toolbox, where elements can be blended into new institutional logics. One could argue that it is an empirical question, and I believe that Friedland, as well as Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, would agree on that. On the other hand, I also sense a difference between them. Friedland argues that institutional logics have a limited modularity and they are difficult to break down, whereas Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury focus on the ability to recombine elements from institutional logics into new ones. This may just be different ways of expressing the same phenomenon (i.e. Is the glass half full or half empty?). But for me, Friedland seems to be more in line with Conventions in this discussion, where compromises are fragile and difficult to stabilize over a longer period of time.

Second, values and feelings are more or less absent in the mature version of Institutional Logics, whereas they are fundamental to Friedland’s view on Institutional Logics. Once again, Friedland is more in line with Conventions where the moral sense of people is central in people’s engagement within public affairs. Feelings like passions, excitement, self-love, desire etc. are also more central to some of the different worlds defined within Conventions.

Third, objects are more or less not present in the later version of Institutional Logics and “it appears as though institutional logics are located at the level of language, as though symbol and category float free from materiality” (Friedland, 2012: 589). Friedland criticizes this linguistic turn as he regards material practices as integral to institutional symbolism, and material practices operate through and on objects: “practices not only mark, they make object” (Friedland, 2012: 590). Once again, Friedland’s argument is closer to the Conventions approach where the relationship between objects and humans plays an important role.

We do not want to deal with these objects as pure carriers of symbolic meanings, as sociologists often do. We want, on the contrary, to show the way persons, in order to cope with uncertainty, rely on things, objects, devices which are used as stable

references, on which reality tests or trial can be based. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 367).

To bring objects and materiality back into Institutional Logics, I would suggest that Institutional Logics adopts the idea of ‘a test’ within the framework of Conventions. (See also Dansou and Langley, 2012 and Westenholz, 2013a for a similar suggestion.) A test in social practices involves both humans and objects and I would like to suggest that it happen in at least two different ways. If people strategize about objects (which managers often do when they talk about objects and materiality), the test scenario is often a site for coding and re-coding founded on discursive devices. On the other hand, if people not only talk about objects but also work with objects (e.g. programmers), then test scenarios are of a different kind where objects are an integral part of the test. Federspiel developed the distinction between situations where people ‘talk about things’ and where people ‘work with things’ in a working paper (2013) on how material practices influence the institutionalization of digitalization.

Bringing the idea of ‘a test’ into Institutional Logics would also strengthen relational analyses. Theoretically, Institutional Logics has a relational foundation, but many analyses prioritize a focus on actors and how they maintain or change institutions. The analyses often do not prioritize a focus on the relationship between actors. If test scenarios are brought into Institutional Logics, relationships between actors and between actors and objects would be a natural part of the analyses – as well as a deeper understanding of the sense making and meaning construction taking place during these tests.

CONCLUSION

People and organizations must increasingly coordinate their activities in indeterminate, uncertain or ambiguous situations as they navigate across multiple orders. I focus on two theoretical approaches in the paper – Conventions and Institutional Logics – that have the purpose of understanding how people deal with living in such situations. Both approaches were developed in the mid-1980s as a reaction to rational choice theory, which had a strong worldwide theoretical position at that time (probably more in the USA than in France). The scholars reacted to (what they found to be) an oversimplification of social behavior borrowed from economics where individuals’ preferences were considered to be exogenous, their behavior determined by logic of consequentiality, and agreements were found on the marketplace. They also reacted to different macro-sociological

approaches founded on the notion of collective norms, values, and cognitive schemas etc., which people more or less consciously internalized as a compelling or determining factor that allowed them to enter into rather unambiguous relationships with others and reach collective agreements. The purpose of both approaches was to overcome the actor-micro foundation of economics and the structure-macro foundation of sociology so that the indeterminacy and ambiguity of our lives could be understood. Although they have this common purpose, the two approaches have developed in different ways in France and in the USA and not much dialog has taken place between them. This is the reason why I am interested in ‘opening the box’ of each theoretical approach, bringing them together, and discussing their similarities and differences – as well as commenting on how they might learn from each other *without* losing their own identities as distinct theoretical approaches. The aim of the paper is therefore not to combine the approaches, but to start a dialog between them with each theory mirroring each other.

When the two theoretical approaches are face-to-face, we can see that they both have a purpose in helping us to understand indeterminacy, uncertainty and ambiguity in society; they both identify different widespread social orders that may change over time; they both recognize that actorhood is important for the transformation of social orders; and they have both developed an understanding of how social orders and actorhood are interrelated. These similarities are essential common ground for starting a dialog. However, the interesting part of the dialog starts when we focus on the differences between the two theoretical approaches.

From the Conventions perspective, Institutional Logics is a more general social theory, whereas Conventions is defined as an approach that only deals with engagement in public affairs and not in engagements of familiarity and planning. Could the distinction between the two approaches be toned down? I am not suggesting to delete the distinction but to expand the scope of Convention by including engagement in situations where people coordinate their activities without having a common understanding of what they are doing. Second, when Conventions looks at Institutional Logics, a concept such as ‘organizational fields’ can be observed, which is foreign to Conventions. Could ‘organizational fields’ be a helpful concept to Conventions in understanding that different worlds are not available in all engagements in public affairs? (For example, some Eastern worlds may not be easily available for people in the West and not yet included in the approach.) Or should such a problem be dealt with in another way within Conventions?

From the Institutional Logics perspective, Conventions build on the assumption that elements/dimensions within a world are not easily broken up and compromises between worlds are assumed to be fragile. As this is in contradiction to the ‘toolbox’ assumption within – at least some later versions of – Institutional Logics, one could ask what the analytical worth of ‘an institutional logic’ is if the concept can be easily modulated. Why then not just work with ‘institutional elements/dimensions’ with a high degree of modularity and save institutional logics as an analytical concept with limited modularity? Second, when Institutional Logics looks at Conventions, feelings and moral values emerge as phenomena that are not strongly represented within Institutional Logics. Should feelings and moral values be imported into Institutional Logics, and how could that be done? Thirdly, although both approaches have a focus on practice, Conventions has a stronger focus on objects and on interactions in test scenarios. Institutional Logics is well on its way to accepting the inclusion of objects, but would it also be helpful for the theory to develop a stronger sense of interactions in test scenarios?

These are some of the questions that I think are worthy of discussion between and within each approach – and many more issues may be relevant.

As mentioned in the introduction, Conventions and Institutional Logics are not the only theoretical approaches developed in the last thirty years with the purpose of helping us to understand indeterminacy, uncertainty or ambiguity in people’s lives. But it is interesting to bring them together as they were developed on different continents. Other options could be to bring theories such as the actor-network theory (e.g. Callon, 1986; Callon and Latour, 1983; Guggenheim and Potthast, 2012; Latour, 1993), institutional work theory (e.g. Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2009; Zilber, 2013), and social performance theory (e.g. Alexander, 2006) into the debate.

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The idea of starting a conversation between Conventions and Institutional Logics was developed during a research project that examined coordination between Chinese and Danish managers working in Chinese companies located in Denmark. I presented my ideas at the IOA Wintergames in Paris, 2012 (Westenholz, 2012b) and in Innsbruck, 2013 (Westenholz, 2013b) where I got constructive comments – in particular from Eva Boxenboum, Rainer Dias-Bone, Helene Rainelli Weissand and Laurent Thévenot. I realized that discussing two theoretical approaches combined with an empirical analysis of coordination between the Chinese and Danes would be too much for one paper. Therefore, I have split the original idea into two papers: one focusing on the analysis of the empirical data (Westenholz, 2013a), and the other on developing an invitation for a dialog between Conventions and Institutional Logics. I have received constructive comments from Mike Lounsbury, Roger Friedland and Laurent Thévenot on the second paper, which I appreciate very much. Fiona Tod proofread the paper. The responsibility of the paper is of course mine.

	Similarities between Conventions and Institutional Logics	Differences between Conventions and Institutional Logics	
		Conventions	Institutional Logics
Historical theoretical context:			
Seeded when and where	Developed in 1980s. First published in 1991.	Seeded in France.	Seeded in USA.
Theoretical quest	Understanding plurality and ambiguity in society.	Understanding the principles of common humanity. Dealing with individual uncertainty without applying violence.	Dealing with organizations as a potential conflictual, inter-institutional system.
Critical of other theoretical approaches	Critical of rational choice theory.	Critical of Durkheimian sociology.	Critical of the utilitarian individual. Critical of power-oriented organizational theory. Implicit critic of determinism within neo-institutional theory.
Macro foundation:			
Macro scope	Widespread social orders – not as a determining macro-level over a micro-level.	Limited to understanding the regime of engagement in public affairs – not the regime of engagement in familiarity or the regime of engagement in planning.	General social theory of the societal level and different institutional field levels.
Type of social orders	State and family. Other social orders may emerge and/or be defined.	Social orders defined as ‘worlds’ such as: the inspired world, the world of fame, the civic world, the market world, the industrial world (and the state and family world).	Social orders defined as ‘institutional logics’ such as: capitalism, democracy, truth (Friedland) community, religion, profession, corporation, market (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury) (and the state and family institutional logic).
Micro foundation			
Micro scope	Agency is possible during interaction – but not as a determining micro-level over a macro-level.		
Focus within micro-processes		Focus on moments of agreement reaching and moment of critical questioning. Moral sense.	Focus on symbolic devices. Practice. Objects. (Friedland)

		Tests. Objects. Compromises.	Values and feelings. (Friedland)
Macro-Micro foundation:			
The relationship between micro-macro	Macro and micro are interrelated	<p>Although the room to maneuver is limited, actors have the possibility of incorporating several worlds in a test and thereby escaping macro-determinism.</p> <p>Indignation is a driving force in critique, which is a principal operator of creation and transformation of an order. These shifts are neither seen as the outcome of an overall strategy developed and implemented from above, nor are they an unconscious process, without a subject or reflexivity. They are understood as interpretable in terms.</p>	<p>Institutional logics are available for organizations and individuals to elaborate. (Friedland)</p> <p>Institutional logics focus the attention of individuals, activating situated identities, goals, and action schemas and thereby shaping social interaction. Social interaction results in practices that are selected through processes of cultural evolution from which institutional logics emerge at the levels of society, institutional field, and organizations. (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury)</p>
Modularity of the social orders		Strictly limited modularity – compromise is possible but often fragile.	<p>Strictly limited modularity – assimilation, replacement and segregation are possible. (Friedland)</p> <p>Modularity is possible – and sometimes blending the result. (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury)</p>