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The Arbitrariness and Normativity of Social Conventions

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Abstract

This paper investigates a puzzling feature of social conventions: the fact that they are both arbitrary and normative. We examine how this tension is addressed in sociological accounts of conventional phenomena. Traditional approaches tend to generate either synchronic accounts that fail to consider the arbitrariness of conventions, or diachronic accounts that miss central aspects of their normativity. As a remedy, we propose a processual conception that considers conventions as both the outcome and material cause of much human activity. This conceptualisation, which borrows from the *économie des conventions* as well as critical realism, provides a novel perspective on how conventions are nested and defined, and on how they are established, maintained and challenged.

Key words

Conventions; French pragmatic sociology; normativity; realism; theory

Introduction

Fundamental concepts such as rules, norms or institutions are often treated as primitive terms and used as the unanalysed building blocks of social theory. The focus of this paper – the concept of convention – is no exception in this regard. There are scant explicit references to convention as an analytical tool in sociology, nor a well-entrenched ‘sociological’ conception. While sociologists might not require a sophisticated understanding of conventions as long as they study communities characterised by high levels of social and cultural integration (Cf. Archer 2012: 87–96), their working definitions of convention appear limited when it comes to analysing situations of conflict between competing conventions as is increasingly the case in late modernity, an epoch characterized both by the coexistence of conflicting systems of conventions and by unprecedented emphasis on individual choices and identities (Baumann 2000; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991, see also Archer 2007 for a critique from a realist perspective)..

Nevertheless the study of the nature of social conventions has enjoyed a resurgence both within sociology and economics in the last twenty years¹, and convention has been proposed as the foundational concept of a promising new theoretical and empirical approach to the social sciences. Originating with the work of a group of sociologists and dissident economists in France, this new approach (which we refer to as the EC) has been variously labelled as ‘French pragmatic sociology’ (by sociologists) or the *économie des conventions* (by economists)².

Fortunately, ordinary linguistic usage of the term ‘convention’ provides some clues that can help to clear the conceptual ground. It presupposes a distinction between conventional practices and other forms of rule-bound social behaviour: conventions, it is usually supposed, are different from other rules because they are in some sense *arbitrary*. Some event, process or state of affairs *X* can be described as arbitrary if it might have been

otherwise (i.e. if it is not determined by the nature of things). Thus, it is generally agreed across theoretical approaches and even disciplines that a convention is not the unique response to a given social situation, nor entirely dictated by ahistorical canons of morality. The form that a conventional practice takes is seen as doubly contingent: it is the product of history rather than nature and its form is underdetermined by the convention's social function (for a realist analysis of the relation between form and function, see Faulkner and Runde 2009).

Despite their arbitrariness, conventions are also widely seen as normatively binding in some weak sense. That is to say, in everyday social interaction, conventions enable and constrain behaviour and provide standards against which judgments of appropriateness are made. Of course, conventional coordination involves an evaluative judgment of the acceptability of a practice by the actors participating in it. In principle, such evaluative judgments may be informed by (eudaimonistic) considerations³ relative to human flourishing: they can be altruistic or egoistic, they can aim for the individual good or for the common good, and they may or may not seek to distinguish between relative and ultimate goods (see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*). In practice, however, evaluative judgments draw on a mixture of cognitive resources, not all of which are oriented towards conceptions of the good. This distinguishes the task of the social theorist from that of the moral philosopher. Whilst the latter is concerned primarily with moral justification, the former is concerned with disambiguating the various social mechanisms through which conventions weigh on agents' activities.

Whatever its contingent source, the normative force of a convention is puzzling if we accept the view that conventions are arbitrary. Indeed, stating that X is a convention means both: (i) that, all other things being equal, I ought to do X rather than some alternative

convention Y (or Z), but also (ii) that Y (or Z) would have been appropriate had they been adopted by the community in place of X.

In this paper, we demonstrate that the conjunction of normativity and arbitrariness generates an unexpected tension inherent in the technical usage of the term. This tension is then reflected in social scientific attempts to conceptualize conventions. The latter have tended to split between asking two types of questions that emphasize one of the characteristics at the expense of the other. These questions can be formulated as follows:

(Q1) Which mechanisms make actors conform to X rather than Y?⁴

(Q2) How come X has become the convention and not Y?

Q1-type questions usually ask how conventions are maintained synchronically and focus typically, though not necessarily, on individual behaviour. Q2-type questions focus instead on the diachronic emergence of conventional behaviour: the sequence of events that led to the establishment of a convention. Synchronic and diachronic analyses typically have different objectives and employ different methods. Synchronic approaches seek to determine the relevant factors contributing to the maintenance of the convention through theoretical abstraction; they satisfy social scientists' thirst for generalization and prediction. Diachronic explanations are genetic accounts linking chains of events through historical narrative; they emphasize the contingent interplay of agency and structures over time.

Our juxtaposition of synchronic and diachronic accounts of convention in this paper reveals their mutual interdependence. Analytical treatments of convention structured around responses to Q1 that ignore Q2 provide partial and incomplete accounts of coordination. Reference to the past, either through the power of precedent or the weight of habit and tradition, is a crucial and inevitable background assumption. Conversely, historical treatments

structured around responses to Q2 that downplay Q1, though they may provide rich descriptions of the emergence of conventions, do not explain satisfactorily why these exercise any normative pull on actors.

Though we draw on a wide range of approaches from across the social sciences, our paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on conventions. Rather, it focuses on a number of exemplary contributions that highlight different ways in which conventional phenomena might be analysed. Section I introduces the EC literature to which we hope to make a contribution. At the same time, we highlight a potential weakness of the approach stemming from how its central category is characterized.

Section II addresses the problem posed by Q1 through a discussion of the synchronic mechanisms that are held to support the normativity of conventions. Section III addresses the problems raised by Q2 by discussing diachronic accounts of the formation and transformation of conventions. Section IV seeks to provide a corrective to some of the limitations we perceive in the accounts discussed. Using the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA, see Bhaskar 1998[1979]), we propose a realist processual conception of the social that emphasises the connection between individual activities and social forms.

Section I – The conventionalist approach

In recent years, the conventionalist approach or EC has become highly influential in social theory and economic sociology (Latsis 2006; Biggart and Beamish 2003; Wagner 1994). It is founded on a critical reaction to the theoretical limitations imposed by both structuralist macroscopic approaches and individualistic approaches such as rational choice theory.

The conventionalist approach within sociology has been developed and defended by EC authors Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006[1991]) who describe six generalizable conventions, or ‘orders of worth’ that underpin our everyday forms of justification. The major

innovation of their approach has been first to identify this plurality of forms of justification and worth and second to engage with the question of how they are sustained and deployed by social actors. According to Boltanski and Thévenot, these generalizable conventions are the ultimate source of normativity for social actors, who move from one order to another depending on context⁵. These ideas have been applied to a variety of social phenomena including unemployment (Salais, Baverez, and Reynaud 1986), agriculture (Allaire and Boyer 1995), cultural practices (Lamont and Thévenot 2000) and manufacturing (Salais and Storper 1997). Most of these studies rely on the notion of convention as a key concept, though it often remains primitive and unarticulated. The latter is unsurprising given the diversity of the contributions and the fact that Boltanski and Thévenot's book notoriously contains scant explicit reference to convention. So we might legitimately ask what conventionalists are attempting to pick out by designating some social phenomena as conventions and not others?

Whilst early contributions seem to under-specify the key theoretical notion of convention, it would be unfair to suggest that conventionalists have taken no interest in conceptual questions. An elegant review of the conceptual tools of the EC by Christian Bessy and Olivier Favereau (2003) has proposed a definition of convention as a 'representation of the collective [world] associated to a satisfactory functioning of [the] relation [between agents]'⁶ (Bessy and Favereau 2003: 12). The authors introduce this definition in order to distinguish conventions from similar concepts that are more commonly used in the social scientific literature. According to Bessy and Favereau's definition, conventions are frameworks of reference that are located at the individual, cognitive level. This provides an immediate contrast with the more commonly used concept of 'institution' which they treat as a collective, social, object.

Though Bessy and Favereau's proposed separation of social institutions and individual conventions clarifies their position, we fear that it creates at least as many problems as it is

likely to resolve (Latsis 2006). By associating conventions with the mental states of participants, Bessy and Favereau overlook key aspects of what the term commonly refers to. In particular, the causal relations between social conventions and individual mental states are difficult to conceptualize within their mentalistic framework since conventions are both referents and products of our representations. If conventions were reducible to the representations of agents, then how can we make sense of the difference between my representation of the convention of left-hand side driving and the convention of left-hand side driving?

An additional difficulty comes from how Bessy and Favereau contrast ‘convention’ with related concepts such as ‘social norm’ or ‘institution’. On the one hand, having adopted a mentalistic characterization of convention, they fail to provide a clear distinction between conventions and the more prevalent notion of ‘social norm’⁷ which could be treated as synonymous. On the other hand, they base their distinction between institutions (which are broadly seen as normatively binding social forms) and conventions entirely on the role of mental representation in the latter. We are sympathetic to the definitional problems faced by Bessy and Favereau in light of the fact that the term ‘institution’ has a wide and messy range of application within the social sciences (for a vivid illustration, see Clemens and Cook 1999). However, our analysis suggests that, should one wish to preserve the categorical distinction between conventions and institutions, arbitrariness offers a better criterion than mental representation.

A discussion of the arbitrariness and normativity of conventions is thus of potential benefit to the conventionalist approach and may also clear the ground for other approaches that focus on one aspect of convention whilst neglecting the other.

Section II (a) – Synchronic accounts of convention

The game theoretic approach to convention is worthy of discussion in virtue of its analytical elegance, simplicity and the fact it can claim to relieve the tension between normativity and arbitrariness – at least by its own standards. By formalizing convention in the language of rational choice, game theorists have provided an account of why it is ‘rational’ (and hence, it is tacitly presumed, normative) to follow a convention whilst retaining the idea that conventions are arbitrary through the notion of multiple coordination equilibria.

The father of the modern game theory of conventions, David Lewis (1969) sees conventions as arising from situations where agents have a mutual coincidence of wants and uses the theory of coordination games to delineate their formal properties. A coordination game is defined as an interdependent decision by two or more agents where preferences coincide and where there are two or more coordination equilibrium strategies. Coordination equilibrium strategies are defined as situations in which the players would not have wanted to act otherwise after the outcome has been reached. A number of different situations, including games where there is conflict between agents, can be accommodated within this basic structure⁸. Lewis describes two rowers adjusting the frequency of their strokes through a process of mutual observation and adjustment and campers collecting firewood dispersing in opposite directions rather than all searching in the same area.

In these typical Lewisian situations, players are faced with a problem: how should they coordinate around one of a number of satisfactory possible outcomes, given that any coordinated behaviour is preferable to coordination failure? A solution commonly proposed by game theorists is that, once a convention exists, conformity of behaviour can be achieved by reference to precedent. Information about past iterations of the game provides agents with reasons to employ ‘salient’ strategies that have been successfully employed in the past. Precedent leads to the formation of expectations about future behaviour, which, in turn, leads to conformity in the actions of individuals. More generally, game theory provides a rational

choice explanation of the maintenance of convention that relies on the idea that *agents will conform to an established practice because their desire for coordination outweighs their desire for any potential alternative practice*

Past equilibria provide the basis for future coordination but the question of *how* a convention comes to be adopted that is traditionally answered by diachronic accounts is ignored. Thus, game theory's claim to reconciling the tension between arbitrariness and normativity comes at a price as Q2-types of questions are deemed *a priori* to be irrelevant. The necessary and sufficient conditions for coordinated outcomes are simply assumed to hold.

Outside the strict limits imposed by traditional rational choice theory, however, one can identify other individual mechanisms that underpin conventional behaviour. John Maynard Keynes studied the influence of imitation in his discussion of financial conventions in the *General Theory* (Keynes 1936: 156). Fear and lack of confidence in forecasts, as well as the incentives faced by market participants are thought to be responsible for the adoption of a herd mentality that is highly reactive to the news and focused on short-term considerations of survival rather than strategic calculation. But, rather than succumbing to irrational hysteria, imitative behaviour is held up by Keynes as an attempt to 'save our faces as rational economic men' (Keynes 1936: 214). If an individual is faced with non-calculable uncertainty and has no reasonable grounds to form expectations about the future, imitation of a neighbour – who cannot be in a worse epistemic position, but may be in a better one – could lead to improved performance (Orléan 1989). In the case of financial markets, conventional practices related to the valuation of intangible financial instruments could spread through a process of 'mimetic contagion'. The latter is a self-reinforcing process: as the number of people coalescing around a particular convention increases, so does its attractiveness to people who previously failed to conform (Orléan 1989).

Calculation and imitation both seek the normative foundations of conventions in individual self-interest. However, other synchronic approaches emphasize different psychological and sociological mechanisms, some of which cannot be reduced to calculative self-interest. Critiques of game theoretic approaches to convention have pointed out the tension between the desire to formalize human interaction and the reality of conventional practices. Theories that emphasize the family resemblance between convention and agreement have been crucial to this (Gilbert 1989). The conventions of a community are usually described in moral language, though they are rarely consciously followed and lack the rigidity of moral rules. Margaret Gilbert's (1983) examples of such conventions include: sending thank-you cards following a dinner party, not kissing people upon greeting them in public unless they are a family member, and requiring that poetry uses rhyme. Agreement theory explains this quasi-moral aspect of conventions by claiming that they are conditional on the tacit joint acceptance of principles of action (Gilbert 1989: 373). These principles take a fiat form: they are stipulated rather than justified by reference to some higher order normative framework such as the common good or self-interest.

Agreement theory presents a plausible case for extending rational choice approaches, whilst remaining focussed on individual psychology. It replaces assumptions about individual calculative rationality with the myth of an original contract and explains synchronic coordination through this contractarian device. Like game theoretic models, it privileges one mechanism as the explanation of conventional behaviour and excludes others. In addition, like game theory, it cannot hope to answer the diachronic question which is dismissed by the idea of tacit joint acceptance of the contract (Latsis 2005: 715–8).

By focusing on psychological mechanisms, all three of the aforementioned approaches exclude another important mechanism for the reproduction of conventional behaviour that has been much discussed in anthropology and sociology: habit⁹. Habits or embodied dispositions,

functioning below the level of language and individual cognition, are thought by many to be an essential precondition of both self-interested and quasi-moral behaviour. The automatic feel of conventional practices related to table manners or dress is plausibly the product of habitual adaptation to communal discipline. Indeed, one might argue that this view of conventional behaviour is implicit in any account of conventions that emphasizes their ‘tacit’ dimension.

The problem with using embodied dispositions alone to explain conventional behaviour is that they cannot adequately account for the normativity of conventions (Bernasconi-Kohn 2007). Indeed, it is worth recalling that Bourdieu’s notion of habitus claims to transcend the notion of habit as it also includes ‘schemata of perception, appreciation and action’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16). Whilst psychological approaches can explain why one practice is selected through self-interest, fear, or shared commitment, dispositional accounts must find the normative force of conventions elsewhere. This is because habits are ingrained and unthinking: they might explain the way we act automatically or routinely, but they do not tell us *how we ought to act* when faced with an unfamiliar situation without appealing to some higher order principle. To be clear, our point is not that habits play no role in unfamiliar situations, and we accept the Aristotelian idea that nurturing virtuous dispositions equips us better for unprecedented situations. Our point is rather that habit, though it may be necessary, is not sufficient to explain our ability to behave conventionally in the face of novel situations.

Conversely, acts of improvisation in mundane situations have been extensively studied by ethnomethodological approaches (Garfinkel 1984[1967]; Pollner 1987; Sudnow 2001). Ethnomethodology presupposes that even those practices that are viewed as most ‘natural’ and ‘normative’ by participants draw their factuality and normativity from the ongoing ethnomethods informing the practices through which social order is continuously produced

and recognized. While ethnomethodology offers insightful inquiries into synchronic Q1-types of questions, it does not address, to our knowledge, diachronic Q2-types of questions. The latter are recognised though left to the efforts of other authors such as Norbert Elias (Cf. Pollner 1987: 143–7).

We shall revisit in our presentation of diachronic accounts of convention the idea that chronologically anterior social forms could be sources of normativity, but it is worth noting first some *prima facie* arguments for going beyond approaches that seek to explain conventional behaviour by reference to purely individual mechanisms.

Section II (b) – Some problems with synchronic accounts

Each synchronic account of convention discussed above focuses on a different mechanism for the production of conventional behaviour and we have suggested that conventions are not likely to be explained exclusively in terms of any one of these mechanisms. But furthermore, there are several other factors (irreducible to human motives and thoughts) that are crucial to conventional behaviour.

However one conceives of them, conventions never exist in a social vacuum¹⁰. The desire to dissect and provide a reductive analysis in terms of individual thoughts and actions obscures the fact that specific conventions are always embedded in networks comprising numerous social forms, including other conventions, but also more formal social rules, legal codes, organizations, (typically asymmetrical) relations of power, etc. These social forms are typically internally related and interdependent; they can be mutually reinforcing or undermining. Explaining the persistence of a specific convention will therefore often require an account of its interaction with related social forms.

Consider, for instance, the oft-cited example of driving. A standard, individualistic, synchronic account would conceptualize driving in isolation. Coordination games (for

example) do not provide the tools to theorise the interdependence of driving practices and the habits and conventions that constrain and enable pedestrians or car manufacturers. Switching from right hand to left hand driving is not merely a matter of coordination between drivers. It requires changes to positioned practices such as pedestrian behaviour, to symbolic forms such as road signs and marking, as well as transformations of technological objects such as cars' interiors. Even the simplest examples of social etiquette like hand shaking or bowing are highly contextual and couched in a rich network of social relations and positions. If simple, individually based and goal-oriented practices like driving are impossible to isolate from attendant social arrangements, it is unlikely that more complex collective practices will be isolable.

The idea that conventions are nested in networks of other more or less enduring social forms also highlights their effects on asymmetrical relations of power between participants. The observation that conventions are arbitrary and that the coordination they ensure could be achieved some other way can obscure the fact that the adoption of one convention rather than another often has significant consequences for participants' social status. Incumbent conventions will tend to solidify both relations of power and access to scarce resources within the community in which they hold sway. For instance, business and educational conventions may play a significant role in the entrenchment of class divisions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Archer 1979).

The role of conventions in the production and reproduction of identities and social status can also explain why participants sometimes quarrel passionately about conventions that can appear rather insignificant to an external, uninformed, observer (Al-Amoudi, 2010). Think, for instance, of Bourdieu's (1994) analysis of the quarrel of the hats – under the reign of Louis XIV – between the First President of the parliament, the princes of the blood and the peers. The quarrel, as reported in Saint-Simon's *Memoirs* (Saint-Simon 1856: tome 11, chap.

XVIII), turned on the question of whether the First President could dispense with wearing his hat when greeting the peers, thereby treating them in the same way as the princes of the blood. As Bourdieu (1994: 151–2) remarks, this quarrel sounds pointless and even ridiculous to a reader from the twentieth century. Admittedly, contemporary readers might share a common concern for proper respect with their eighteenth century ancestors. However, the specific conventional form through which respect is attributed in the quarrel of the hats is quite foreign to an early twenty first century reader. It is hard to see how the latter could be expected to share the indignation that permeates Saint-Simon's account.

To recap, we have so far proposed that calculative self-interest is only one mechanism amongst others. Interdependency with other social forms, habit, imitation, joint commitment, ethnomethods, the preservation of relations of power and their associated identities may all play an important role in the synchronic maintenance of a convention. But our discussion thus far does not explain how these diverse mechanisms coalesce over time. This is the question to which we now turn.

Section III (a): Diachronic accounts of conventions

Little has been written about the emergence of social conventions that explicitly invokes their inter-connection with economic self-interest, habit, agreement or identity. One remarkable contribution is provided by Norbert Elias's *Civilizing Process* (Elias 1978[1939]) in which he traced the development of Europe's complex social order in relation to conventional practices relative to violence, table manners, sexual behaviour, forms of speech, and bodily functions. Although he does not use the term 'convention', the practices that he analyses are clearly conventional in nature and display the arbitrariness and normativity that we have alluded to above. Whilst Elias's approach is exemplary in many ways, he focuses more on the influence of the overall system of relations on individual manners and mental states than on the reverse

influence of conventional practices on wider social relations. A noteworthy exception is provided, however, in those passages in which conventional change is attributed to royal whims which bear in turn on the social order of court society. Elias traces, for instance, how Louis XIV cultivated a network of conventions through which he distributed ‘faveur royale’ and ensured his domination over the Princes of the Blood. He has, however, little to say about how commoners also played a role in the emergence of novel conventional practices.

Another diachronic approach, the growing literature on path-dependence and standardization in economic history, gives a better insight into the latter. This research programme studies how agents in decentralized conditions of decision-making can end up coalescing around a sub-optimal standard. In this context standards are seen as specific convention about a product’s (usually technical) characteristics.

David’s (1985; 1987) study of the emergence of the QWERTY keyboard constitutes a case in point. As the story goes¹¹, the QWERTY keyboard is significantly less effective for speedy typewriting than alternatives such as the Dvorak keyboard and yet it was adopted instead. One historical reason for QWERTY’s success is that it was intentionally developed to minimize the jamming that was so frequent in the first typewriters. But then, how could the QWERTY keyboard remain the standard long after the early jamming issues were solved through technological improvements? David identifies three mechanisms that contribute to determining the locking-in of a sub-optimal standard: inter-relatedness, system scale economies and quasi-irreversibility of investment. In the case of the QWERTY keyboard, there was a relatively strong inter-relatedness between machines and typists touch-memory; economies of scale were appreciable to typists who would rather be trained on the dominant standard; and typists were not particularly eager to re-learn a different keyboard once they had become familiar with QWERTY.

David's account, like Elias's, has the merit of highlighting the importance of history in the evolution of conventions. As he puts it, situations of emergence of new standards are better understood as non-ergodic systems that can have more than one point of equilibrium.

Section III (b) – Some problems with diachronic accounts

We believe there is much more to say about the adoption of new conventions than what these diachronic approaches allow. The agential powers of participants, in particular, appear to have been systematically underplayed in both approaches. This, in turn, contributes to obscuring the powers of some participants whilst magnifying those of others.

As we argued above, in Elias's accounts, the king is portrayed as the only agent endowed with transformative social powers. His subjects are represented, at best, as agents capable of understanding and adapting their behaviour to the social order thus generated. Similarly, in David's accounts, people are agents for only one instant. That is, at the point when they choose which technology they want to adopt. David's theory assumes that what happened before this instant of decision and what will happen after it is either independent of the agent's will or is irrelevant to the emergence of a new standard.

In addition to the assumption of 'punctual' agency, the scope and nature of actions afforded to participants in David's analysis is questionable. In the story of QWERTY, for instance, the range of actions available to agents varies significantly depending on whether the agent is an 'entrepreneur' or whether s/he is a 'typist'. Entrepreneurs are assumed to seek the most economically efficient product for their business. Their actions are oriented towards private profit, which they seek to generate through attempts to create and promote technological improvements. In David's account, they are clearly endowed with stronger agential power than other types of participants. Indeed, entrepreneurs are assumed to be able to distance themselves from existing standards or conventions. They can create both

technological improvements and new standards; they are even capable of engaging in lobbying to increase the dissemination of the standards they have invested in.

The scope of action of non-entrepreneurs regarding the diffusion, transformation and replacement of standards is, however, reduced to adopting one standard rather than another. By reducing the agency of most participants to a mere choice between adopting standard A versus adopting standard D, David is able to isolate the mechanism of positive feedback through which, once a critical mass of users is formed randomly, convergence around a standard follows. Moreover, this simple mathematical model allows David (1987) to describe the patterns of path-dependence in relation to the expected evolution of returns that may be constant, increasing or decreasing.

What is missing from David's assumptions about the agency of both entrepreneurs and typists and its consequences for our understanding of the emergence of conventions? There is striking contrast between David's account and the story of the early days of the typewriter as it has been narrated by Weller (1918), a close friend of Christopher Scholes the alleged inventor of the typewriter. Weller recounts, for instance, how the inventors had to piggyback on an existing convention of testimonial transcription at play in the judicial system in order to commercialize the first typing services. Viewed from the perspective of Scholes's friend, their situation was nothing like a situation in which potential adopters waited patiently to be prompted on whether they wanted to adopt a new standard. Rather, adopters contributed significantly to the evolution of the typewriter's standard keyboard, especially during the earlier phases when the 'lock in' was looser and when they were positioned as customers rather than workers.

Whilst we agree that the scope of action of participants depends on their social position, we have difficulties with the *a priori* assumption that some specified group of agents is capable of transforming the sets of conventions whilst others are only capable of choosing

which convention they will adopt. The latter is a powerful (and empirically questionable) assumption that should, at the very least, be subjected to investigation. Whilst people in different social positions enjoy different powers, we question the validity of any depiction of innovation or entrepreneurship that ignores the social conditions of monarchs' and entrepreneurs' actions. Path-dependence theory leaves us, it seems, with the following question: how can we frame an account of the evolution of conventions that recognizes both the agentic powers of 'adopters' and the social conditions that enable and constrain the action of 'innovators' and 'entrepreneurs'?

Section IV – Process and the ontology of convention

Despite the problems we have identified in section I with the explicit formulations of conventions emanating from the EC, applied contributions within the EC research programme have implicitly invoked a broader and more processual notion of convention than any of the approaches described above. Even when the language remains superficially mentalistic, the word 'convention' is often employed to refer to social objects that are not reducible to mental states. A vivid example is provided by Salais's pioneering discussion of the crystallisation of employment conventions through the 'models' of statisticians, jurists and workers (Salais, Baverez, and Reynaud 1986). Moreover, we believe that, by considering the process of justification rather than the end-state of (justified) affairs, the EC opens the way to processual studies of the formation and reproduction of convention that transcend the entrenched distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches whilst offering a more realistic account of the role and limits of agency than those approaches surveyed in section III. In this section, we attempt to extend and clarify this insight by drawing on the social ontology provided by realist social theory that developed while attempting to theorise the agency-society connection without falling back into the shortcomings of determinism and voluntarism

(Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1998[1979]; Sayer 2000). This literature provides the tools to develop the processual approach to conventions within a systematic and analytically rigorous philosophical framework (for an earlier discussion along similar lines, see Latsis 2005).

A common pitfall identified by Bhaskar (1998[1979]) consists in suggesting, following Berger and Luckmann (1967), that people and society are dialectically related and that ‘society is an objectivation or externalization of human beings. And human beings, for their part, are the internalization or reappropriation in consciousness of society.’ (Bhaskar 1998[1979]: 33). In such a picture, people, through their activities, create social forms. The latter are, in turn, objectified from the activities that produced them and confront agents as external, coercive facts. In other words, structures are constraints on human activities while human activities are creative of structures. The diachronic account of the emergence of QWERTY keyboards in a situation of path-dependence seems to implicitly adopt this point of view. This results in a theory that distinguishes between moments of ‘decision’ during which ‘adopters’ exert a sovereign choice over which convention they wish to adopt and the rest of the time, during which they have little or no impact on the transformation of existing conventions.

What is missing from this framework is that, on the one hand, structures are necessary to each and every human activity and, on the other, human activities reproduce and transform social structures without creating them *ex-nihilo* (Bhaskar 1998[1979]: 33–4). Rather than considering agency and structure as two dialectically related aspects of one and the same process, the approach on which we base our argument considers agency and structure as ontologically distinct though existentially interdependent: social forms are the pre-existing *material causes* of human activities.

The expression ‘material cause’ deserves more attention, both because it is potentially confusing to authors unfamiliar with Bhaskar and because it is a distinctive feature of our

realist, processual, perspective (Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1998[1979]; Lewis 2000; Martins 2011; Pratten 2009). Material causality, along with formal, efficient and final causality, are the basic elements of Aristotle's fourfold account of causation. Realists have defended a number of modern variants of this Aristotelian approach to causation against the Humean accounts that dominate mainstream analytic philosophy and the empirical social sciences. However, it is not yet clear whether all four causes can be sufficiently disambiguated to be analytically applicable to the analysis of the social realm. Bhaskar (1998[1979]) and Lewis (2000) restrict their discussions to the distinction between efficient and material causation, whereas Pratten (2009) introduces the notion of final cause and Martins (2011) goes further by developing conceptions of both formal and final causality¹².

The distinction between efficient and material cause is, nevertheless, unanimously accepted and is typically the first step in all such realist analyses of causation in the social realm. Aristotle's metaphor of the clay used in a sculpture best conveys the distinction as it has been developed and defended in the recent literature. The actions of a sculptor are the efficient cause responsible for the production of an artefact, but the clay with which she works is the artefact's material cause: it has particular emergent properties resulting from its atomic or molecular structure that will only allow it to be shaped and moulded in certain ways. The analogy is extended to the social realm by noting that although they are not physical objects, social forms, much like the sculptor's clay, pre-exist social activity and are the primary material that is transformed and reproduced through it. For example, when two people get married, they simultaneously rely on and contribute to the reproduction of the institution of marriage. The act of getting married both presupposes the social form of marriage and reproduces it. From this perspective social structures are both enabling and constraining of human activities that are themselves reproductions and transformations of pre-existent structures.

What are the implications for the study of conventions? A significant implication is that conventional social orders, conventional activities, and representations of conventions must be recast as the simultaneously interacting elements of a *process* of reproduction and transformation. In this process, conventional activities (as well as behaviour and thought) are the efficient cause and conventional social orders are the material cause. It follows from this processual perspective that no account of the diffusion of conventions can dispense with an account of the transformation of those conventions that preceded it. As we have shown in section II, synchronic accounts cannot avoid assuming certain background conditions including details about the historical situation out of which a convention emerges. As important as they may be, psycho-sociological mechanisms such as economic self-interest, habit, imitation or the preservation of relations of power and associated identities offer only a partial account of why X is the convention and not Y. An important part of the explanation of why X and not Y is the convention lies in the story of what happened to W, the convention that pre-existed X and Y.

A second implication is that accounts of the diffusion (or disappearance) of a convention must seek causal explanations at several levels: events, thoughts and social mechanisms. Studies carried out at the level of events should be complemented by studies that engage the level of individual reflexive deliberation as well as (realist) studies that engage the level of social mechanisms. Third person narrations of the evolution of conventions must, therefore, be complemented by first person accounts. Whilst the description of agents' activities is a necessary aspect of the account, it is insufficient as long as the thoughts, feelings and desires of participants are not studied and interpreted. The latter form of hermeneutic analysis is partly grasped in biographies and histories of 'great men'. Moreover, if Bhaskar's views are accepted, these first and third person accounts must also be completed with a study of the social forms that enable and constrain the actions and representations of

agents. Whether the specific structural features of a given setting were propitious or adversarial to the transformation of existing conventions is, we suggest, an important though understudied question for the analysis of specific conventions and their genesis.

A third implication of our processual perspective is that conventions, like other social forms, are continuously subject to transformation even when it remains unperceived by agents. The delimitation of their identity and boundaries is imprecise and difficult to track. For instance, it is often hard to distinguish a case where a current convention changes gradually over time from its transformation into a new convention. The traditional way of dealing with this problem has been to posit a linguistic formulation of a convention as *the convention*, and then set about identifying the conditions under which it is infringed. This approach suffers from the well-known problems associated with the interpretation of rules that have been raised about rule-based accounts of social life (Winch 1990[1958]: esp. 25–39 and 57–65), which we will not develop here.

A fourth implication is that, contrary to the impression conveyed by the treatment of QWERTY keyboards in Paul David's work, users play a continuous role in the dynamics of (re)production and transformation. The influence of participants on a convention has both methodological and ethical implications. Every time a person adopts a convention, he or she also contributes to its reproduction; and conversely, by refraining from adopting a given convention, s/he contributes to its disappearance, replacement or, at least, transformation into a different convention.

In effect, a single instance of transgressing a given convention can have shallower or deeper effects on the convention itself, depending on whether and how it is justified. When the breach is justified by reference to contingent reasons, the convention itself is unlikely to be put into question. However, if the transgression is not justified by reference to accidental circumstances, and if the transgressor is deemed to be a competent participant acting

legitimately, then the convention's normativity is challenged and is likely to become less and less respected as the number of accepted breaches increases. Such concern with conventions' moral worth goes beyond the Aristotelian injunction to cultivate virtuous dispositions. It is not only our individual inclinations that must be evaluated and cultivated or amended but also the conventional social forms that constitute our society (see Bhaskar (1986; 1998[1979]) and Collier (1994) for a full exposition of internal critique from a realist perspective).

Conclusion

We have shown that analyses of conventions typically belong to one of two broad classes: synchronic and diachronic accounts. This dichotomy serves to perpetuate the tension that we have claimed is inherent in the technical usage of the term. On the one hand, we have seen how the coexistence of normativity and arbitrariness is problematic if we view conventions synchronically. Existing accounts offer a range of motives for convention following but must leave the question of how conventions emerge unanswered. By leaving the question of origins aside, synchronic accounts trivialise the arbitrariness of conventions. Once established, a convention is unbreakable because its very existence provides sufficient reason for continued coordination. On the other hand, diachronic approaches have the advantage of studying the arbitrariness of conventions through detailed historical analysis, but they achieve this by underplaying normative constraints for some categories of actors and individual agency for others. The reasons why a convention *should* be followed by some particular individuals and the transformative powers of most participants disappear.

Combining the theoretical insights of the EC with the processual social ontology outlined above casts new light on how to resolve these problems. Indeed, they disappear if we adopt a (realist) processual perspective, denying the received wisdom that the origins and the dynamics of social systems can be analytically separated. The adoption of a new convention is

not the creation of a social form *ex-nihilo*, but a transformation of antecedent social forms.

The twin questions that opened the paper can be reframed in processual terms:

Q1: Which mechanisms make actors conform to X rather than Y?

Q1*: Which mechanisms make actors conform to X rather than Y today? And which made them conform to the antecedent convention W in the past?

Q2: How come X has become the convention and not Y?

Q2*: Through what processes was antecedent convention W transformed into current convention X and not Y?

Returning to the example of the convention of left-hand driving; our approach suggests that we should consider those conventions that precede it chronologically (e.g. avoiding unnecessary obfuscation of traffic) as necessary though insufficient elements of any explanation. Note that the preceding convention does not determine whether one should drive on the right or on the left or whether traffic should operate on one side of the road. For instance, alternative potentially valid conventions could have consisted in adopting a one-way traffic system or even in designing narrower, slower cars. Because left-hand driving is underdetermined by the objective of avoiding congestion, the question of how the convention emerged is an historical question. However, because left-hand driving became normative for drivers once it was established, the question of why people tend to drive on the left and avoid driving on the right cannot refer merely to the antecedent convention of avoiding other users and must also include an account of the many mechanisms through which the normativity of the convention is maintained.

In the case of the typewriter the conceptualisation of the evolution of standards is valid as long as well-entrenched mechanisms limit the agential powers of adopters. That is, as long

as the only option offered to adopters is about adopting standard A rather than standard D. It is our thesis that a finer conceptualization of conventional activity is needed to make sense of situations in which adopters reproduce or transform conventions as they adopt them.

In the last section (IV), we have drawn on realist social theorizing to articulate a processual conception of conventions that takes into account the agency of adopters. This conception treats conventions as both the outcome and the material basis of conventional activities. It suggests analyses of conventions that recast them as social processes in which events, thoughts and social mechanisms interact, and in which the boundaries of conventions are seldom clear-cut. Ordinary participants also appear to play a role that is more important than traditionally assumed. This raises novel moral questions that are not included in classic Aristotelian ethics and are largely downplayed by individualistic accounts.

Faced with the declining socio-cultural integration of our globalized world, people are confronted with increasingly diverse conventions. Choosing amongst them (when such choice occurs) involves a combination of habit, instrumental calculation (what affects their resources, their status, their ability to be heard) and moral reasoning as it is those conventions that we re/produce today that we are also transmitting to future generations.

Notes

¹ See Sugden (1989) and Young (1996) for two sophisticated approaches to the study of socio-economic conventions.

² The founding document of this approach was published in a French economics journal (Dupuy et al 1989). The most influential single contribution remains Boltanski and Thévenot's *On Justification* (2006[1991]).

³ It is worth stressing that, whilst a convention may or may not be oriented towards human flourishing, it is not the unique way of securing such flourishing. According to our characterization, if a putative convention has the force of a non-arbitrary moral rule for eudaimonistic reasons, then it is not a convention.

⁴ We use the verb ‘to make’ because it provides a generic term covering terms such as oblige, incite, give reason for, etc.

⁵ The French literature has consistently interpreted the concept of orders of worth in these (conventionalist) terms. As we have already seen, Bessy and Favereau’s conceptual work on conventions suggests that – qua representations of the collective – they delineate a conception of the correct functioning of that collective. Boltanski and Thevenot’s work on orders of worth provides further arguments to elucidate the connection between these (typically local) conceptions of collective functioning and more general (in the sense of being more stable over space and time), but nevertheless contingent, conceptions of justice. See Boltanski and Thevenot (1999) and Latsis et al (2010) for a fuller explanation of these ideas and an account of how they fit into the broader interdisciplinary conventionalist tradition.

⁶ Author’s translation.

⁷ A discussion of how the idea of a social norm has been used within sociology and beyond deserves more space than we can afford it here. However, some clarification is necessary given the obvious overlap between some conceptions of norms and our notion of convention. The philosopher of social science Jon Elster provides perhaps the most precise definition of norms as ‘non-outcome-oriented injunctions’ (Elster 2009: 196), that is a species of social rule that is sustained by collective sanctions against rule-breakers. However, Elster’s definition captures only one of two major post-Durkheimian strands in the sociological literature: the strand that sees norms as beliefs possessed and deployed by individual agents

(Elder-Vass 2010: 117). In a recent survey of the literature on norms, Dave Elder-Vass rejects this approach and its dominant post-Durkheimian alternative, which equates norms with normative beliefs held by a supra-individual agent (2010: 119). His solution to the theoretical impasse lies in the newly coined concept of *norm-circles* (2010: 122–7).

⁸ The study of the influence of RCT on sociology and anthropology deserves more space than this paper permits. An example that enjoyed wide circulation is provided by Harris's (1989) analysis of taboos.

⁹ See Camic (1986) for an in-depth discussion of the role played by conceptions of habit in social theory.

¹⁰ In the remainder of this section we are presupposing an emergent social realm that is neither reducible to nor supervenient on the actions and thoughts of individuals. This 'emergentist' assumption has been the subject of detailed discussion in recent contributions to social theory (Elder-Vass 2007; Porpora 2007; Sayer 2001).

¹¹ The account offered by Paul David has been the topic of heated debate, see Liebowitz and Margolis (1990).

¹² Since this is a lively area of debate in realist meta-theory and we cannot develop a full contribution to it here we have decided to restrict our discussion to the notions of efficient and material causality.

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