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A regulationist method of meso-analysis

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ABSTRACT

The paper is derived from the necessity of acknowledging the structuring nature of the process of economic and social differentiations that generates heterogeneous areas endowed with specific logics. These include issues related to the tensions arising from the accumulation of capital, which is felt particularly acutely in the wage-labor nexus. Monocausal explanations shall be ruled out for considering both the historical character of complex economic and social systems, and the peculiarities of labor processes and of social productions. We will demonstrate that the Régulation approaches refer to attitudes and methods that are deep-rooted in a meso-level, even if that has never been formulated in such terms. This kicks off a work program which aims to account how such areas differentiate and how they develop a wide range of institutional arrangements that involve players who defend their own interests. This results in meso-level areas for which the macroeconomic functionality is not decisive (hence the concept of half-functionality). This provides multiple regulations that are sectorial and territorial, or even professional, and who do not yet constitute a regime of accumulation as such. The "sectors" of people care, of education or of telecommunications will be used as cases for experimenting the heuristic character of this approach.

Keywords: *Régulation, méso-level, sectorial and territorial régulation, differentiation*

A. INTRODUCTION

The challenges for present-day economists concern the understanding of phenomena linked to the deepening of several crises and the answers to be given. (1) An economic crisis, which puts the question of the transformation of worldwide hierarchies, part of which is linked not only to the hardening of financial criteria, as well as to their extension in the form of management criteria within the productive organizations themselves, but also to the violent differentiations between sectors or enterprises called “stars” and enterprises “of the old economy” submitted to recurrent restructuring. (2) A social crisis, which is in part linked to the differentiation of status (between wage earners and between managers) whose forms of remuneration move away from a fixed wage norm (remuneration based on shareholding and conceived so that they are indebted to shareholders, remuneration based on merit, on piecework, even on outsourced work). Wage earning according to the Fordist forms of social protection remains the norm, but this is besieged by the constitution of sections of precariousness and grey zones of employment. (3) An environment crisis without precedent which disqualifies the answer, based on growth, to tensions between social classes, and which engages the emergence of new dedicated “green” sectors (whose economic evaluation cannot be made according to the standard remuneration of capital), and which also disqualifies other sectors using much energy, many natural resources or causing much pollution, whose ways of valorisation may still seem pertinent when looking at the declining industrial world.

These many kinds of fractioning in the present crisis lead us to reconsider the régulation theory in a particular way, so as to project its instruments on the present situation, especially when we wish that these instruments give the means to have a grip on this reality in terms of political economy. The founding publications of the régulation theory contain elements that have been forgotten or not sufficiently valorised. The research of Aglietta (1976) on the United States, Cordes (1977) on inflation or Boyer (1979) on wages over the long period does not simply boil down to stressing macro-economic coherences that allow one to bypass the contradictions inherent in the accumulation of capital. In the postscript of the re-edition of his book of 1976 Aglietta (1997) insists on the fact that the tensions, which cause the capitalist accumulation to weigh on the reproduction of the societies, generate institutional mediation; but the regulationists also think that one cannot be satisfied with the expression of institutional “mediations” or institutional “forms” with the risk of finding oneself in an analytical posture which mechanically divert the institutional forms from the accumulation regime (Théret, 1992) or inversely the regime from the forms (Billaudot, 2004). The tendency to privilege deterministic perspectives, which come from a structural fatalism and thus insist on the power of capital in an unambiguous way by underestimating the capacities of resistance and autonomy, can be not only a methodical error, but also an illusion that moves us away from certain aspects of reality.

This article explores the variety in the spaces of regulation, each one institutionally constructed, being able to guarantee the partial reproduction of the accumulation of capital situated at the meso-level. These spaces of regulation can be identified, and it is the object of this article to work on this identification, at the level not only of a sector or a territory (Laurent and Du Tertre, 2008), but also of numerous other unities or systems of linkages of rules that are able to guarantee a relative stability in the social relations of heterogeneous actors (big firms, lines of production of value, professions etc.).

To give an account of these intermediary spaces of regulation, we mobilize the notion of “pertinent subsystem” of J. de Bandt¹ that is based on two elements: (a) the meso-system is the place of convergence of different dimensions of economic dynamics; (b) it is necessarily heterogeneous and “permanently submitted to differentiations in behaviour and results” (De Bandt, 1989, p.2). While the driving force of the dynamics is situated according to De Bandt at the level of enterprises, the subsystem is the place of completion “where the dynamics is nourished, structured and decided” (id. p.1), because it determines a field of action for the economic actors. They are constrained to that, but there they can capture opportunities in different dimensions: external contributions in terms of competences, technologies, and rules of the game that preside over relations (international and national rules, forms of cooperation, commercial and non-commercial relations). These different dimensions only have meaning “within the specific fields of power” (1989, p.17) which are the places of completion of the dynamics: It “is not defined a priori. This is without doubt the most fruitful idea, but also the most difficult to apprehend of industrial economics” (De Bandt, 1988b, p.940).

The construction of a space of regulation in terms of a subsystem stumbles on three difficulties however: (1) the heterogeneity of the subsystem; (2) the modalities of the enclosure of the subsystem that must be specified; (3) and their linkages with global systems, must all three be specified. The forming of the meso-system is in fact based on the confrontations of actors linked not to the short term of the confrontations of enterprises on markets but to the mechanism of structural re-composition itself, and to the strategies of re-composition of the economic and social structure, rendering its contours difficult to apprehend.

To take account of this, we include social relations in the concrete modalities of capital valorisation by the economic agents in order to establish the modalities of meso-system formation. The role of the actors in the process of structural decomposition-recomposition orientates our work in three directions: identifying the configurations within which economic agents are engaged (part B.1), taking account of the way in which their insertion in these configurations weighs on their orientations in a crisis period (part B.2) and finally identifying the way in which the meso/macro completion is done (part C).

B. THE INSERTION OF THE ACTORS IN HETEROGENEOUS PRODUCTIVE CONFIGURATIONS

B.1. THE GENESIS OF MESO-SYSTEMS BY COMPLEX ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FORMATIONS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE THIRD ITALY.

The publication of Bagnasco and Triglia about the third Italy tries to describe the way in which the process that accompanies the selection of possible kinds of environment depends upon a mechanism of the “social construction of the market”² The description of this process of

¹ Cf. De Bandt (1989) and chapters 2.3 (industrial economics in the French context: developments and specificities) and 11.3 (returning to industrial economics) of the *Traité d'économie industrielle* (Arena et alii, 1988).

² These authors like German sociologists are opposed to the triptych of Anglo-Saxon literature: “In the advanced industrial/capitalist countries there is a fourth institutional basis of the social order (...) in order to render the social behaviour reciprocally adaptable and predictable. If we had to give a name to this source of social order we would call it “corporative association” – in opposition to community, market, State - . If we

formation of specific spaces must according to them simultaneously mobilize an analysis of social formations and an analysis of the concrete conditions of competition. The social construction of the industrial fabric of the “third Italy” is brought about by specific material and cultural resources, anchored in the historical heritage of regions that “draw their roots from the first capitalism of Italian city-states”. Economic development is the product not of a system “reducible to a fundamental principle of structuring”, but of a complex social formation “where the course of actions remains largely uncertain” and leaves a place for “strategies of individual and collective actors who move between different elementary formations”. The point was to try and understand why “the process (of the development of diffuse zones of industrialisation) started with a market mobilisation at a moment and at a point of the system where nobody, in practice, expected it” (p.49).

The theoretical possibility of the development of small enterprises depended according to the authors on “contextual, exogenous variables”. Three discontinuities offer a space to their development, namely the existence of a non-standardized demand necessitating small series, the discontinuities of technology in the production cycle which allow for complementarities of small enterprises to big enterprises, and the discontinuities linked to demand stability – the relatively rigid industrial organisation of big enterprises searching to capture a stable demand, offering the possibility of modelling prices.

The path of the development of small enterprises and of diffused industrialisation is nevertheless narrow: it depended on the macro-economic point of view of the space left by big enterprises and on the possible competition by countries with very low wage levels. The weakness of the central State and tax avoidance, the practice of monetary devaluation and of inflation had not only real advantages for the “third Italy”, but were also ways of regulating its development; but this would nevertheless not have been possible without endogenous dynamics³. The list of arguments of Bagnasco & Triglia then reintegrates social dimensions in the description of the formation of meso-systems in two directions. On the one hand they proposed to develop intermediary instruments in order to discover the realities of evolutions of a territory, based not on a structural analysis, but on an original historical combination of the regulation mechanisms of Polanyi. On the other hand the given social structures cannot per se be classified on an axe of “chronologically correct” development, nor per se be considered as efficient, out of context. This allows for the discussion of modes concerning imitation, generally observable and whose importance is probably under-estimated (adoption of an American model of organisation through a big enterprise, moving towards a Japanese development model, etc.).

To reintegrate social relations in the concrete modalities of capital valorisation by economic agents is therefore a way to find the modalities of formation of meso-systems. So if there is a lesson to learn from Granovetter, it is that the development of specific structures will be determined by the existence (or absence) of social networks endowed with their own identity:

wanted to identify it by proceeding from the principle which guides the interaction and the allocation of resources, we would call it organising consultation in opposition to spontaneous solidarity, dispersed competitiveness, and hierarchical coordination” (Streeck & Smitter, 1983, retranslation by us).

³ These endogenous variables are: a dense urban fabric, the absence of a city-countryside gap and the maintaining of an enlarged rural family ensuring the transmission of the know-how of a versatile craftsmanship and a workforce capable of capturing the opportunities of a labour market or of leaving it. The unitary management of family resources allows for supple transitions between the status of wage earners and that of business leaders.

“economic institutions don’t appear automatically in answer to economic needs. They are instead constructed by individuals whose action is both facilitated and limited by the structure and available resources of the social networks where they are present. One can see it in the case of developing countries where enterprises can greatly reduce transaction costs, but don’t succeed in being constructed” (Granovetter , 1994, p.86). In real situations there is only a limited number of possible scenarios, and their capacity to be brought into reality is limited in time: “an important part of the series of arguments consists of characterising the circumstances giving rise to a multiplicity of equilibriums, then specifying the networks of collective action which have determined the result finally observed; a part of my thesis on the electric industry is that when the form of the system was sealed, the other possibilities were excluded” (Granovetter, 1994, p.92).

The thesis according to which several trajectories of alternative organisations are possible at any given moment in a given sphere is based on the demonstration of the way by which the undeveloped alternatives have been blocked or reduced.

B.2. SECTORAL HETEROGENEITY AND VARIETY OF MESO-REGULATIONS

This process of social selection of the modalities of capital valorisation is also found on a sectoral level. In fact, during the Fordism crisis, the regulationist approach got down to identifying the sector that would be the driving force of the following period. This is a post-fordian preoccupation in the sense that it is the continuation of industry (and especially that of the car industry) what is at stake in the renewing of a mode of coherent regulation. The power of polarisation that is attributed to the dominant sector underlies this analysis.

However, by proceeding in this way, by homology or projection, from only one sector, that tends to crush the fact that the issues at stake can be very different according to the periods and sectors and that through their own structure they will react to tensions linked to accumulation in different ways. Consequently much research has greatly been influenced by the sectoral dimension, and progressively aims not to focus on the driving sector any more but to take into account heterogeneity. Heterogeneity is not considered as an anomaly any more, but henceforth as a constituent factor.

This research reaches out beyond sectors and allows one to characterise the variety of meso-regulations or to give account of a particular structural variety, by underlining a fundamental heterogeneity. Nevertheless, to focus on that which differs doesn’t allow one necessarily to take account of the regime as a whole. This will finally allow one to work on linkages between autonomous spaces of regulation (i.e. by thinking of the functions and roles that they assume for each other): working on the linkages , the macro-meso dialectical relations, by emphasizing the different forms of functionality or semi-functionality, particular to every space, in the sense of the modalities of insertion of the meso-space in the regime of the whole. This allows one to take account of the way in which the meso-dynamics conditions the macro-economic dynamics (in the sense of participating in its structure and logic) and, in return, is affected by this regulation (in the sense of what the macro-dynamics – and its crisis - produce with regards to the different components which are according to the mobilized cases, abandoned, put into competition etc.). This method is therefore heuristic in a big number of cases. For example for the telecommunications and the Network Services the restructurings of the institutional schemes are produced by the macroeconomic changes (financialisation, knowledge,

development of the service sector) and, in return, the sectoral deregulation participate in the evolution of the institutional forms (Lamarche, 2011).

The sectoral and then meso-studies have nourished the understanding of the mode of financialized regulation and allow one to review the varieties (sectoral, territorial, professional) within a mode of regulation. In this sense these meso-approaches are complementary to the macro-approach and aim not only to take account within a regime of everything that is not ruled in a direct (or functional) way by the macro-regime, but also of the structuring of the regime by the meso-regulations. As Boyer recalls, it finally appears “that the sectoral heterogeneity must not be interpreted in terms of archaism (the construction industry) or advance (...) with regards to the dominant norm. From a synchronic analysis comes out an analysis of a functional kind with regards to the general characteristics of accumulation, to the particular modalities of insertion of the sector, and of course to the constraints conveyed by the materiality of the productive process and of the particular products of every sector” (Boyer, 1989, p.8). The spaces of regulation are varied, and professions as in the case of professional football (Bastien, 2013) or education (Lamarche, 2008a) can play a determining role.

Since 1990, while the variety of regulations has had an important place in regulationist research, a difficulty has been brought up concerning the tension between the macro-regime and a variety of meso-regulations. The comprehension of the “dialectic” relations could thus “be reduced to a co-determination”, in such a way that “the production and the organisational specificities of every sector influence the regulation of the whole, which regulate them in turn” (Tinel and Légé, 2010). A variety of meso-publications give an account of the back and forth influences and it is thus the content itself of a co-determination that is at stake. It seems that the definition itself of regulation (ensuring the reproduction, steering the accumulation regime⁴, ensuring the accounting of decentralised decisions) amounts to perceiving the forms of determination and codetermination, in the sense that the modes of organisation and production of the meso-level have a double historicity, namely endogenous and exogenous. To characterize the meso-regulations amounts to perceiving these interactions, whose character cannot be perceived outside the comprehension of its dialectic (cf. Lipietz *infra*).

B.3. LONG-TERM CRISIS AND PROCESS OF SELECTION OF MESO-SYSTEMS

This must be put into relation with the fact that the approaches in terms of regulation perceive the regulation-crisis couple as two moments of the same logic of reproduction of actors, in specific spaces. The previously quoted publications show that in situations of structural crisis one must at the same time question the management modalities of the crisis and the exit programmes of the crisis, such as they are simultaneously constructed in economic or social coalitions that convey them. If one retains as hypothesis that actors are engaged in particular configurations corresponding to as many choices of modes of their revenue formation (or of valorisation of their capital, or of strategy of reproduction in the case of sustainable development), it would be wrong to think that their position is totally malleable facing the great tendencies of economic evolutions. There is no infinity of solutions of transformation of behaviour allowing one to maintain the objective of reproduction of the modes of formation of existing revenues, selected in the past.

⁴ At the meso-level it is not a question of ensuring the steering of the accumulation regime but of what one indicates in terms of sectoral accumulation, generally indicated under the name of functioning economic regime (Bartoli and Boulet, 1990).

One can from this point of view draw on the American school called that of the “social structure of accumulation” which puts forward, concerning the whole process of the crisis of American capitalism, a hypothesis which merits to be tested in this spirit at a sectoral level. Bowles, Gordon and Weiskopf (1989) distinguish two moments in the behaviour of actors as the crisis deepens. They put forward the idea that “in the beginning every class or group tries to preserve its acquired positions and to defend the level and the evolution of its revenue in spite of the unfavourable economic context. The structural preoccupations are then in essence absent from the perspectives of the protagonists of these struggles. But, as the crisis deepens, and under pressure from the difficulties linked to the crisis, the structural orientation of the class struggles and the structural preoccupations in the class-based positions adopted by the wage earners and by the capitalists tend to impose themselves more and more strongly” (Rasselet, 1996, p.12)⁵. The struggle for maintaining the power structure leads the dominant actors to impose choices whose negative effects on the economy come to re-enforce the cumulative character of the crisis. This is the case of the so-called “cold shower” policy – reduction of purchasing power and policy of a strong dollar under Reagan that weighed unfavourably on the rate of utilisation of the production capacities and “affected unfavourably profits and investment” (Bowles, Gordon and Weiskopf, 1989, p.121).

These cyclical answers to difficulties of different kinds can’t hide the fact that the deepening and length of the crisis encourage actors to consider it as a structural crisis calling for answers of a structural kind. There is no particular reason to imagine, except to considerably weaken the minimal hypotheses of rationality accepted by most economic theories, that actors are incapable of such strategic thinking, and are incapable of perceiving the crisis as a movement of decomposition-recomposition on which it is necessary to try and weigh.

If one transfers such an approach to the sectoral level, and if one admits that actors are tributary to past choices of insertion within particular configurations and that they try and preserve situations whose exit costs can be prohibitive, one then has at one’s disposal a key to the understanding of a whole group of economic and institutional evolutions, that could take account of the dialectic of strategies and structures both in growth periods and crisis periods and in specific production spaces.

A few bibliographical milestones of research in terms of meso-regulation

The regulationist approaches, in their diversity, but also in what creates their methodological unity, have appropriated for themselves the debate on meso-regulations, precisely because the Fordist dynamics of productivity is only found in a few dominant sectors (even if by isomorphism other sectors tended to copy their institutional arrangements). A surge of research

⁵ This leads one to consider that the questioning of the role of economic agents is productive in the analysis of long-term dynamics. These “individual and collective actors”, as Perroux recalls in the preface of a book on the idea of regulation, “cooperate and struggle for gains but also for the modification, to their advantage, of the rules of the game” (Perroux, 1977).

have explored, since the end of the 1990's, the sectoral specificities and the regimes of evaluation instruments associated to them

Let us first quote the precursory research – of Christian du Tertre on the construction industry (Technologie, flexibilité, emploi: une approche sectorielle du post-taylorisme, l'Harmattan, 1989), the thesis of Bartoli and Boulet (1989) (Dynamique et regulations de la sphere agroalimentaire: l'exemple viticole) that have lead to relativize strongly the monocausal character of the Fordist explanation by productivity, as well as the book coordinated by Gilles Allaire and Robert Boyer, La grande transformation de l'agriculture, INRA, Economica (1995), the research of Bodet and Lamarche (1995) analysing the reversal of the sectoral regulation of the telecom industry at the time of the deregulation.

A working group was then formed within the association Recherche et Régulation that was called Régulation Sectorielle et Territoriale (RST). For the collective presentation of this research see La lettre de la régulation n°33 (du Tertre et al., 2000), or the special number of the journal Géographie, Economie, Société 2002/4 (2) “Théorie de la régulation, secteurs et territoires: quels enjeux pour la recherche?” with contributions of G. Allaire, J.-P. Chanteau, C. Laurent, M. Nieddu, B. Pecqueur, P. Petit, M. Quéré, C. du Tertre or furthermore research analysing these transformations for example Nieddu and Gaignette 2000, Laurent 2002; Gilly, Perrat 2003, Dieuaide 2005, Berriet-Sollicet et al. 2006, Lung 2006, du Tertre 2007, Zuindeau and Rousseau 2007.

Certain publications concern specific spaces such as the digital spaces formed by the regulations of corporate social responsibility (Lamarche, 2009, 2010) or the rupture of the trajectory of the educational system in a situation of tension with the sectoral logic (Lamarche, 2008b).

The questions of professional regulation as “meso-space” and of the performative character of evaluation instruments play a very important role. Catherine Laurent in particular shows in a very precise way in a set of research (du Tertre et Laurent, 2008) how the construction of professional farmers and of the statistical field of farm categories becomes an instrument of exclusion of categories not corresponding to the ideal-types of professional farmers and of productivity gains that productivism ascribes to it. Lamarche (2008a) shows that the transformation of the sphere of knowledge is that of a professional regulation which collides with the domination of a service logic. The thesis of Nieddu (1998) takes up again the research on the production spheres of Salais and Storper in order to identify the regimes of competition, production and organisation in very different sectoral and territorial dimensions according to the type of productive patrimonies engaged.

The participation of Jean Gadrey in 1999 in a seminary of the network Régulation Sectorielle et Territoriale leads to an extensive exchange and is an important moment in the evolution of the RST group. He develops a long discussion of the notions of regime of productivity and of growth, whose pertinence he considers as limited to the Fordist regulation mode, and whose contents he considers as inappropriate for the comprehension of the contemporary phase of capitalism. (One can find a résumé in “Régime de croissance, régime de productivité: peut-on penser les régulations post-fordistes avec des concepts fordistes?” La lettre de la République n°39 (2001)).

The subsequent research of the RST network, - of which one can have a quite general view in the book coordinated by C. Laurent and C. du Tertre in 2008, *Secteurs et territoires dans les régulations émergentes*, Ed. L'Harmattan, - then concentrates, for what concerns us here, on two aspects: the integration of the teachings of the service economy as well as that of the environmental crisis that impose the consideration of "meso-spaces". Within these spaces the performance criteria must be analysed not only in their immediate aspects but also their mediate (medium- and long-term) aspects. The fact that the performance criteria cannot only concern individual measures leads us to develop an approach in terms of patrimonies (notably in terms of collective productive patrimonies), see Barrère C., Barthélemy D., Nieddu M., Vivien F.-D., (eds.) (2005), *Réinventer le patrimoine. De la culture à l'économie: une nouvelle pensée du patrimoine?*, Paris, L'Harmattan), the special numbers of *Géographie Economie Société* (2002) and vol.6, n°3 (2004) of *Economie Appliquée* (2007, n°3) with contributions of Allaire, Barrère, Barthélemy, du Tertre, Nieddu et Vivien and of *Economie Appliquée* of December 2014 on "meso-spaces" as varied as the field of water management (Calvo-Mendieta, Petit and Vivien), the territorial action of big groups of firms (Demissy), the transition in chemistry to the use of renewable resources (Nieddu and Vivien), the viticulture (Lemarié-Boutry and Cazals), the luxury industries (C. Barrère), or the production of material culture in potential cultural districts (Santagata).

Finally Catherine Laurent or Bodet and Lamarche (2007) have developed a working programme in which the meso-space is delimited by "statements of experts"; one then has a problematization of the industry (who must be recognized professionals? what is a real "economically efficient farm"? what are the good practices? how does one organize?) that one finds again in other forms in other publications aiming at imposing the statements of experts and performative measures as instruments of depoliticization and of depossession of the debate within this space (cf. for ex. Laurent (2014) and Laurent and Trouvé (2011)).

The confrontations don't concern a short-term horizon whose direct confrontations of enterprises on given markets are representative, but the mechanism of structural re-composition itself, and the strategies of re-composition of the economic and social structure. And the economic regimes of the regulationists must thus be reconsidered not only in their structuralist representation (their correspondence with institutional measures), but also as products of a construction by strategies in which to consider only the "economic" dimension will be an error for economists. The search for instruments in order to analyse the meso-dynamics (and not only the meso-economy) over the long term thus leads to complexify the question of the regulation of these "meso-spaces".

It first appears that this is a double question: on the one hand, the internal regulation of the reproduction of a certain type of structure of enterprises or actors, and on the other hand, the regulation of the linkages of this space to the global economy. Three sub-questions, linked to each other, are then put. One should define that what is regulated, how the regulation operates, and in what space(s) it operates. The main lesson that emerges from a confrontation between P. Bartoli and D. Boulet (1988, 1990) and the other "sectoral" regulationist publications that preceded them, is that the answer to the three questions cannot proceed from theory, and can only be of an empirical kind (Boyer, 1990), which from our point of view sets up the "meso-programme".

C. MESO-MACRO DIALECTIC RELATIONS: TO DISTINGUISH THE EMBEDDEDNESS AND THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

In this section we concentrate on the dialectic relations between regulations and meso- and macro-spaces in order to show that there are different configurations and articulations. The origin of this approach is the notion of sectoral regulation. This is the most constructed approach, and the best founded on numerous case studies. It was enlarged to sectoral and territorial and even professional regulations, which allowed us to identify a large spectrum of regulation, that doesn't form completely separate accumulation or development regimes in the macro-sense⁶, but specific economic functioning regimes.

We prefer the use of the term meso instead of meso-economic, to the extent that the categories present (institutional systems, social compromises, corporate government compromises of Boyer and Freyssenet, etc.) don't depend on the single "economic dimension". The notion of "institutional system" indicates in this meaning "the institutions that produce norms, processes, intervene by creating a framework for and orientate these economic regimes. It allows one to avoid an exclusively state approach" (Bartoli et Boulet, 1990, p.19).

C.1. FROM FUNCTIONALITY TO SEMI-FUNCTIONALITY: FOR A NON-DETERMINISTIC APPROACH OF THE MESO

The central concept of regulation mode, and more generally the approaches in terms of regulation, as is recalled by Bartoli and Boulet (1990, p11), should not "mechanically be applied to the sectoral level", and more widely to the different kinds of "meso". But for Bartoli and Boulet and later on for the RST approach (Laurent and Du Tertre, 2008), the sectors don't necessarily depend on pure inherent and structural specificities that would lead one to deny the movements of the whole. How does one in this case avoid to fall into a functionalist analysis according to which the sectors would be produced by the "function" that they ensure at the macro-economic level of an accumulation regime? These two pitfalls have been well identified, mais at the cost of tinkering together a notion of ex-post semi-functionality (Lipietz, 1990).

The criticism addressed by Lipietz against the definition of regulation given by Canguilhem in the *Encyclopédie Universalis*⁷, concerns this point because Canguilhem "assumed the existence of a teleological norm, of a finalism that automatically leads to functionalism" (Lipietz, 1990, p.142). Lipietz thus considers that "ex post functionalism" avoids the pitfall of intentionality that corresponds to the spirit of the *régulation* theory that intends to characterize a regulation mode only ex post⁸. Boyer (1990, p.46) made it clear that the regulationists "don't pretend that the forms of articulation of every sector were conceived in view of the stability of the overall development mode; on the contrary, the emergence of the forms of sectoral organization firstly and especially complies with very large sectoral interests and constraints, but in the end they must be compatible with the mode of development in force" (We emphasize).

⁶ The development regime is qualified as the couple formed by the regulation mode and the accumulation regime, which it pilots (Boyer et Saillard, 2002).

⁷ « Regulation is the adjustment, according to some rule or norm, of a plurality of movements or acts and of their effects or products that their diversity or their succession firstly renders foreign to each other », Canguilhem, *Encyclopédia Universalis*.

⁸ Today the pitfall is all the more important because the term of regulation is generally used instead of "réglementation" or control, and thereby refers to a very strong intentionality in the construction of the institutions.

Here one can ask oneself whether Lipietz went far enough when he wrote this text, while in “Régions qui gagnent” (Winning regions) the problem is reversed: the regions structure the dynamics of the whole. If it is possible to grasp ex post the functionality of a meso-space (which is what the notion of “semi-functionality” indicates), semi-functionality is the notion that, according to the thesis of M. Fruleux (2015), allows one to describe the structuring effects of the collective action of actors dominating a sector (the Brazilian agro-business in this case) on the macro-regime (characterized in terms of “relatively de-industrializing” growth (Salama, 2012). Here it is not the accumulation regime that determines the structures of the sector; on the contrary, one must consider the historicity of the social relations proper to the “meso-space” of the agro-business and the capacity of some of these spaces to orientate the regime. The semi-functionality must therefore always be characterized with regards to the dialectic exchange between macro-determination and autonomous determination, and even with regards to the tensions and contradictions between these spaces.

By characterizing the semi-functionality of a sector or a territory, one is able to take account of the variety of modes of sectoral regulation and conjointly of the overlapping of sectors. Thus the construction industry depends on its own logic (linked to the specificity of the work process). It is conjointly structured by the productive role that it plays for the others (producing roads for cars) (Du Tertre, 1989). In the same way the knowledge sector remains very strongly influenced by the endogenous logic of education systems and finds itself affected by its expansion outside this specifically regulated perimeter. The endogenous logic still takes precedence, but is under pressure from a new competition, outside the original sector, that expresses the anticipations of actors as regards the centrality of knowledge (cf. the Lisbon European Strategy) (Lamarche, 2008a and b, *infra*).

The dynamics of sectoral and territorial regulations is thus linked to the conditions through which, historically, enterprises are in competition and cooperate leading one to distinguish productive groups bringing together actors that share the same productive finalities, namely sectors. The enlarged reproduction of this process, however, leans on institutional systems that structure this space of relations and let it develop. Expressed in other terms, “sectors are institutional and historical constructions” (Du Tertre et Laurent, 2008, p.14). The new dynamics of accumulation upsets sectors (new interdependencies, volatility of scales and frontiers...) in the sense that scales and perimeters of territories and of sectors are not given, but are constructions and products of a dynamics. The territorial dimension of these regulations concerns “the capacity of a localised and institutional social system to guarantee accumulation processes on its territory, to maintain economic activities there, to valorise and protect its natural resources, its technological achievements and guarantee social peace. Territorial regulation thus results from the necessity to regulate conditions through which sectors are developed and resources are assigned” (Du Tertre et Laurent, 2008, p.15).

To avoid the trap of functionalism while at the same time integrating the macro-economic and macro-social role of sectors is the main interest of the concept of “mode of sectoral regulation”, that we propose to enlarge to “mode of meso-regulation” to such a degree that varied regulation spaces can be created. There is meso-regulation in the sense that different spaces, of which sectors are at the first level, are places of contradiction and struggle, to take up the terminology of Lipietz, according to which “‘unity’ and ‘struggle’, which are two aspects of a contradictory relation, themselves form a contradictory couple” (Lipietz, 1990, p.152). With the

concept of mode of meso-regulation it is a question of taking into account the conditions of reproduction of social relations proper to everyone of these fields, by avoiding the consideration of only the result (i.e. mode of regulation in its stabilized configuration), in order to keep in mind the processes and contradictions, the struggles and crises.

The trap of “result” in the sense of the smoothed out form that a regulation mode takes up is certainly the trap that is the most often set up for analyses in terms of regulation: to have characterized fordism is too often considered as the result⁹: forgetting in which way the régulation theory first produces a method, a way to seize inherent contradictions while at the same time updating institutions that allow one to ensure, temporarily, unity and stability. It is precisely on the basis of this regulationist method that one advances in the comprehension of local/intermediary regulations, that is qualified meso..

C.2. THE NECESSITY OF HAVING A DIALECTIC APPROACH IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND MULTIPLE REGULATIONS

Certain meso-spaces ensure or have ensured a central activity for the functioning of the regime (We refer to the automobile industry, finance, and to a certain extent to the whole telecom-technology of information). The polar role, or leadership role, has been analyzed within the framework of a two section-model by Hughes Bertrand (1983). This model corresponded to an industrial period and defined a partition of two (meta-) sectors (capital goods, consumption goods) in order to put forward the hypothesis of retro-actions between the dynamics of the two sectors. Here is a fertile dialectic architecture, to which one should add the heterogeneity of the regulation spaces that doesn't appear in Bertrand's study. The structuring of Fordism, according to the intuitions of Gramsci when he worked on the American proletariat, attests the centrality of the automobile industry in the characterisation of the regime. The mode of putting to work in the automobile industry in the sense of the factory and the assembly line (see Coriat, 1982) but also more largely of the wage relations that will be associated to it (in terms of competences, of income partition, of organisation of time, of modes of consumption etc.) and of forms of competition that the automobile sector engenders during its growth phase are as many elements as the régulation theory conceives ex post principally in terms of macro-completion but whose sectoral character is essential, and that very particularly in the formation phase of the régulation theory.

In order to enlighten more finely the variety of meso-regulations and the plurality of meso-macro articulations, we propose several case studies in the following sections underlining the dialectic in the semi-functionality.

We present the first case (C.2.1) of weak functionality, then two cases (C.2.2 and C.2.3) where we emphasized semi-functionality as a structuring factor of the process of meso-change. These analyses show that it is because they modify production relations and modes of coordination between actors that telecommunications in one case and knowledge in the other have contributed to modify the macro-economic regime, while for services to persons meso-

⁹ Cf. Mavroudeas (2012) and the focalisation on the characterisation of the post-fordist regime that takes time to be created, and the criticism that has been made against it (Lamarche, 2012).

regulation does not have a decisive return effect on the accumulation regime (but the effect on the wage relation can be considered as more notable).

C.2.1. THE CASE OF A (FAILED) CONDITIONING BY THE DOMINANT REGIME: HOW TO UNDERSTAND WEAK SEMI-FUNCTIONALITY BY LOOKING AT THE EMBLEMATIC CASE OF SERVICES TO PERSONS

The notion of “services to persons” is a social construction and a very particular attempt towards the problematization of the “completion” of a socio-economic space as a sector, there where other appellations depend on other ways of problematization of social questions and of cutting up the production of activities into sections (association sector, proximity services, and even silver-economy). Whatever the cutting up retained, the field doesn’t lend itself easily to an analysis in univocal terms of dynamics of capitalism, if one considers its historic depth. This on the contrary validates all the interest of the thesis defended by Sandrine Michel (Michel and Vallade, 2007) on a contradictory and dialectic relation between capitalistic accumulation and growth of “social” expenditure, but which in reality depend on an economy of human reproduction. The so-called “services to persons” thus don’t emerge from the existence of the dominant characteristics of the sector; they have only been very imperfectly inserted in the Fordist wage relation characterized by full-time and qualifications recognized by a wage grid; they have only recently been of interest to actors looking for new opportunities of valorisation of their capital.

The Borloo Plan defined an institutional framework retaining a nomenclature of 21 services to persons; it presents all the characteristics of a neo-liberal utopia of the construction of a sector articulated by the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and founded on a market regulation. It was the question of creating 500 000 jobs, through the formation of big companies by submitting associations and public services to competition, in order to “industrialize” these services¹⁰. This desired industrialization constitutes a Fordist metaphor indicating an extraction from the domestic sphere and an application of consumption norms to needs covered by it or by professional associations, in service of the latter (Gallois and Nieddu, 2015).

What are the results? The 500 000 were not created, the companies collapsed as soon as they were created, and the capitalistic actors who thought of entering in the field without difficulty had edifying stock market prices, the only tangible results being an increased weakening of associative structures and the rise of a quasi-market as a form of New Public Management. Other sectoral propositions could have been explored, which supposed that one accepts to articulate the reinforcing of social protection by the creation of new social rights and of forms employment securing the jobs, such as the creation of C du Tertre (1999).

The thesis of F. Gallois (2012) emphasizes on the contrary a territorial regulation of the contradictions by a permanent organisational tinkering that imposes on associations who are actors to “draw on all available means” by locally hybridizing resources and mechanisms depending on markets, social protection and management of mass unemployment; and this, to

¹⁰ Here we refer to the Cahuc Debonneuil Report drawn up with the objective of dynamizing the sector (Gallois Nieddu, 2015).

hide unsatisfied needs, in a “recurrent crisis” regime of “the sector”. For example, the sector must in fact often as an emergency take charge of people leaving the hospital and thus participate in the regulation of a health sector centered on the hospital (whose noblesse and limits are the restoring of individuals in the short term (Domin, 2014)) without necessarily being recognized institutionally as part of this sector. From this point of view the activity of home aid agencies cannot be reduced to the production of individual services. It also includes a collective function of articulating domestic, economic and political spheres in order to produce collective frameworks necessary for the recognition of these needs.

What functionalism can one detect ex-post? The weakening of associations is closely articulated with the growth of quasi-market institutional mechanisms; but these were not the privileged solution from the beginning. They are only the factual result that emerges when private actors perceive the difficulties to segment a market of profitable clients, and look for a solution to their own crisis, by demanding the State to more rapidly transform its relation to associations into quasi-markets open to competition. The intention to create a category of precarious workers accepting to work under difficult conditions, for low salaries and with big hourly constraints, is functional to the growth of mass unemployment and to the pressure exercised on couples of highly qualified workers to remain stuck to their work, which requires that they delegate a series of tasks of family solidarity and other tasks depending on the domestic sphere. Moreover, one had to create, in a “double bread winner” scenario where Bismarckian characteristics of social protection were reinforced by opening it to “right-holders”, new rights to protection. (what could have happened by the extension of the use of “employment cheques” for service to family solidarity). Ex post, we can only note that the functionalisation is rather weak...

C.2.2. A STRUCTURING EFFECT OF SEMI-FUNCTIONALITY: FROM THE PUBLIC SERVICE OF EDUCATION TO THE KNOWLEDGE SECTOR

The macroeconomic work of Boyer and Caroli (1993) allowed one to characterize the notion of “educational relation” linked to a “production paradigm change”. They insisted at the time on inertia and irreversibility concerning the institutional structures of Fordism, that is to say on the blocking between institutional mechanisms that rule the educational and training system which remained Fordist and the qualification and training needs of the production system which aren't Fordist any more.

The institutional mechanisms were at the time and remain in part those of a national administration originating from the Napoleonic imperial organisation (circumscription, title, hierarchy) and form the base of the administration of the educational system. That which is then identified in terms of professional regulation is induced by the constituted profession, under the aegis of the State, which delegates to it the production of sectoral institutional mechanisms (habilitation of degrees and diplomas, programmes, careers) (Lamarque, 2008a).

That which is called “second massification” (massification in university and higher education) is indicated by new institutional mechanisms that lead to the widening of frontiers through the intermediary of professional training and professionalization. The sector develops a new semi-functionality in the accumulation regime and consequently social compromises erode and institutional mechanisms are not coherent with the economic regime any more (Lamarque, 2008b). In the spirit of the economic school of conventions the institutional mechanisms that are

formed, notably the mechanisms of the New Public Management, constitute “form” investments (in the meaning of Thévenot, 1985) in that performance indicators structure competition relations, financing procedures and careers. The historical rupture is thus the product of two contemporary inflexions: sectorisation of higher education and territorialisation of the educational system (Lamarche, 2008b).

One should in fact identify a transformation of the territoriality of institutional mechanisms. The national structures of educational systems participate in the variety of capitalism and all the European countries experience a joint change of development of a Knowledge sector¹¹, but the institutional mechanisms (statutes of the personnel, responsibilities of territorial levels, public and private prerogatives) are themselves induced by different local social compromises (Lamarche, 2004). The recomposition of institutional mechanisms is closely linked to the creation of compromises of a political nature able to validate them and give them power. These mechanisms can only be created at territorial and sectoral levels having developed a common culture in the concerned field. It is in this sense that it is necessary to turn to a mesoeconomic lecture of the institutional change and that we try to describe the territorialized process of normative and regulatory construction. The political forces that allow one to help and legitimize the emergence of compromises and evaluation instruments, notably within the framework of taking into account social, environmental and human factors, suppose an exchange and a level of institutional and cognitive proximity quite elevated between actors.

This case study shows a mode of sectoral regulation within which institutional mechanisms take precedence over the economic regime (which corresponds to research by Bartoli and Boulet, 1990). Tensions are thus high concerning the transformation of the institutional mechanisms of the educational system (i.e. rules of the employment relation of teachers, conditions of access to resources careers). There is therefore a contradiction between the functioning regime of the Knowledge sector and the inertia of institutional mechanisms of a Fordist institution. Education reform comes from the fact that every category easily perceives the stability that it loses, while the inherent contradictions between the institutional dynamics and the services dynamics are not solved. The crisis of the sectoral regulation of education is explained by the confrontation of these two dynamics: an institutional and political dynamics that has historically dominated (production of rules, regulation of the social reproduction) and a services dynamics, historically subordinated to the first dynamics and which is progressively empowered. This services dynamics is itself double: services to the community (qualification, knowledge, competence) and services to persons/families (diplomas, differentiated access to employment). Teacher unions, enterprises (who marginally participate in financing the educational system) and the State (who has the power of arbitration)... all have reasons to be opposed to the emergence of a new compromise. The blocking of the evolution of institutional mechanisms of the sector is linked to an unobtainable quality convention, defining the nature of what the sector produces; convention which has difficulty to emerge, so much the pressure of competition hinders it and the two dynamics are contradictory.

The short-termism imposed by the financialization of accumulation and the profoundness of the deregulation movement the last twenty-five years have not allowed the adaptation of the

¹¹ To that can be added the characterization at an international level of institutional mechanisms defining education in terms of services. See the recomposition of the educational system in connection with institutions at an international level and the issues of this categorisation aiming to construct the representation of education as a market (notably GATS) (Lamarche, 2003).

sector to its macroeconomic semi-functionality (i.e. link of wage relations and education). The knowledge economy, that mobilises the educational sector, depends on a temporal horizon that is not compatible with that of the market finance (Colletis and Paulré, 2008). It is based on this incoherence that new sectoral rules are made of whom one can thus doubt the perennity and the capacity to face up to challenges of the structural crisis¹².

C.2.3. TELECOMMUNICATIONS, THE SHIFT TO SEMI-FUNCTIONALITY SOURCE OF A DESECTORISATION

Telecommunications only appeared as a sector at a later stage, after what must be considered as the rupture of the 1980-1990 years. The sectoral mechanisms, originating from the historical insertion of telecommunications within the public framework, advance at the rhythm of transformations, notably technique, but especially based on usage as production goods (Bodet et Lamarch, 1995). Two big periods can be distinguished.

During the first period entrepreneurs of telecommunications manage their productivity gains by market extensions, in connection with the creation of social demands (evolution of consumption patterns, lifestyles, communication modes). This period has been defined as administrated regulation. Until the beginning of the 1970's, the sector is characterised in France by a long period of scarcity (Bodet, 1995), during which growth is slow. Telecommunications is not a priority of the five-year plans; the financing of the technical network is thus largely insufficient and the sectoral organisation appears to be rather inefficient. The insertion of telecommunications into the central administration makes investments dependent on the national budgetary logic. The growth after the war doesn't allow for the mass consumption of telecommunications in France, contrary to the United States since the 1960's. One observes the passage from a slow growth period to a more intensive accumulation according to a temporality that varies from one country to another. This relative stability over the long period is articulated with a moderate productive use of telecommunications.

The second period is that of a joint rupture of the functioning economic regime and of institutional mechanisms. The economic regime is modified and becomes highly profitable; it is the period during which a digital "new economy" seems to bring growth along. A certain number of sectoral transformations take effect:

- Technological change: digitalisation revolutionizes usages
- Growing demand: the international traffic and circulation of computer data
- Tensions at the frontiers of the sector between telecommunications and computing
- Qualitative differentiation of production

¹² If needed to be developed: two modalities of insertion of education in the accumulation regime coexist:

- Education as growth sector: linked to the industrial crisis and the search for driving sectors, training and education are perceived as activity sources (like telecommunications and ICT). The low profitability of the sector inclines us to think that it is not from there that the sectorisation process comes.
- Education as growth factor: paradigms a priori remote (endogenous growth theory and the theory of regulation) end up with the same series of conclusions concerning the role of education as driving factor of growth (Boyer et Caroli, 1993; Michel, 1999). The sector ensures a function of knowledge enrichment and competence improvement; it is what is called semi-functionality.

Institutional mechanisms are jointly destabilized, in close connection with changes of the economic regime:

- Questioning of regulatory measures protecting monopolies
- Loosening of price controls (erosion of equalizations)
- Opening up of competition, firstly in the most profitable frontier markets

The insertion of the telecommunications in the macroeconomic regulation then runs into a major contradiction that produces a sectoral instability. The emergence of a sectoral semi-functionality shows a high level of demand, and a pressure exerted on telecommunications as production goods (network infrastructures that are competitive advantages). The specificity of the economic regime that stands out imposes a high investment level on operators. The insertion, however, in a financialized macroeconomic regime imposes a high rate of return on capital that thwarts the public economic regime proper to the precedent period.

There is in fact a temporal incoherence between the long-term horizons of investments (as much material for the networks as immaterial in terms of knowledge) and the short-term returns imposed by the market finance (Colletis et Paulré, 2008). The link to the public tutelage is attenuated in a way to promote the empowerment of the sector vis-à-vis the State with the objective of attracting private capital. The telecommunications sector as generic technology of ICT is dynamized by its semi-functionality. If the sectorisation is highly characterized by political control mechanisms on the networks, the desectorisation comes from a radical transformation of the economic regime to which the institutional mechanisms agree. In the first period the institutional mechanisms overdetermine the economic regime and hamper sectoral accumulation, while in the second period the deregulation intervenes as a process of liberation of capital forces hampered by regulation. The new economic regime can only develop after the institutional transformation. This shows us in which way institutional mechanisms take precedence, but are conditioned by economic regimes.

The sectoral regulation of the telecommunications thus bring forward three particularities:

- A periodization that is not perfectly synchronized with the succession of regulation modes (in the macro sense) and their crisis. If, from the point of view of the insertion into State forms considered as institutional forms, the telecommunications correspond to the Fordist regulation mode, they become a mass industry in France only at the end of the 1970's.
- The articulation between a functioning economic regime that doesn't correspond to the ideal-typical figure of Fordism, State forms (insertion into the public sphere, sectoral control and regulation) and forms of atypical competition (regulated monopolies) is constitutive of an original sectoral regulation.

- A specific wage relation, notably the capital-labour repartition, gives its coherence and its efficiency to the sectoral organisation. The maintenance of employment and qualifications show the growth of enterprises in monopolies. This wage relation finds itself profoundly destabilized by the change of profession and the dualisation of the sector that one can observe in the last period, after 1990, which is that of competition and of flexibility of the wage relation.

The change of mode of regulation only solves the investment need by a recourse to financial markets plunging the sector in a high level of incertitude and crisis: big variation of share prices, massif lay-offs in spheres non protected by employee statutes, recomposition of capital structures by mergers and acquisitions.

The major rupture of the productive dynamics of networks in the 1980's in France is linked to a technological rupture that itself comes from the structural change, represented by the industrial crisis and the emergence of an economy of information services. The semi-functionality of the sector is put into difficulty by the contradiction between two polar dimension of the accumulation regime: financialisation and knowledge (Plihon et Mouhoud, 2009).

Sphere	Context	Rupture/crisis	Actors	Characteristics of semi-functionality
Services to persons	Strong social State logic	Commoditisation with the Borloo Plan	Private actors wishing to place their capital in a market considered as profitable if segmentable	Largely incomplete. The sector to search to construct without thinking of its insertion into macro which could have guaranteed to it the solvability of potential clients
Education	Blocking linked to the institutional mechanism of the educational system	Necessity to adapt the educational system to the after-Fordism Sectorisation of higher education and territorialisation of training in connection with the requirements of enterprises and the dominant specialisations of the territories	The European authorities through development mechanisms of the knowledge sector: Local mechanisms for the organisation of the learning system to compensate for the financial logic that emerges	The institutional mechanisms take precedence over the economic regime. The temporal horizon of education, incompatible with the temporal horizon of finance. The semi-functional completion is (still) made in favour of the first but generates a strong instability of the sector
Telecommunications	Considered as a public service	Technological rupture, need for	Growing demand for	Destructuring of articulation be-

		research and thus for financing	innovation that shows a wish of empowerment of actors of the sector themselves vis-à-vis the public tutelage. Entrance of investors of the market finance world	tween State and competition forms (monopoly in telecommunication market) that gives a big sectoral autonomy. A wage relation destabilised by professional change and sectoral dualization observed in last period, after 1990
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D. CONCLUSION

In this article we wanted to re-evaluate the issue at stake in terms of the political economy of a meso-approach, because at that level there are spaces where the contradictions of capital accumulation are observed and where resistances are established. The meso is also the place where it is possible to identify alternative ways and a variety of possible futures (the worst never being inescapable) that an exclusively structural and monocausal analysis doesn't allow to apprehend. One of the contributions of approaches in terms of regulation is precisely to have shown the limits of functionalism, in which mechanisms generated mechanically a certain expected form of regulation compromises (Bartoli et Boulet, 1990; Boyer, 1990; Du Tertre, 1989). This invites us to explore three questions at the heart of regulationist problems.

- The first question concerns that what is really regulated: the rhythm of employment creation? The quality of products? The wage relation? The relation between enterprise structures and market logic? Or even the public deficits? Etc. One sees here all the meso-modalities that are articulated in macro-institutional forms retained by the régulation theory.
- The second question looks at how regulation operates in concrete terms and historically: by mechanisms only? By institutional compromises? By a deformation of the production system? Etc.
- The third question calls for exploring in which economic or social space regulation takes shape: at what collective level? In spaces to be identified?

This triple questioning invites one, in the line of pragmatist philosophy (Peirce, 1974) shared by regulationist approaches, not to mechanically deduce the regulation of only institutional mechanisms, but to deploy an abductive approach.

This implies that the pertinent system for research subjects and strategies cannot be given in advance, but, as De Bandt points out, constitutes at the same time an abductive hypothesis and

a study result. The meso-approach thus enters in resonance with other regulationist studies that are not a priori dedicated to this subject; for example, when Allaire (2013) is interested in immaterial common resources that form the infrastructure of contemporary market economies, he shows the necessity of studying the links between markets and collectively managed immaterial resources that vary according to the historical, social, sectoral or other contexts. “This perspective, that puts forward relations and interdependencies between commons and markets, brings along instruments of analysis of the diversity and of the institutional complexity of economies”.

Using the conceptual instruments of the *régulation* theory and getting rid of the original macro mono-subject in order to enlarge the fields of investigation to all the spaces in which economic activity operates, these are the issues at stake of the notion and the programme of “meso-regulations”.

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