

## CONVALUATIONS

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents convaluation as a form of social coordination. A Convaluation is a partial social order that is based on evaluation in which identities are formed. Order refers to the predictability of the world, and identity of humans to the question of who one is. Convaluation is a more general form of social coordination than markets, and it is argued that convaluation should be seen in relation to the two other basic forms, hierarchy and network. Convaluations capture how evaluations play a central role in identity formation processes. Convaluations are constituted by value, social structure, culture and identities. The paper presents six forms of convaluations that can be used for understanding empirical cases. The paper also makes two interrelated contributions. The first is the discussion of formation of identities in processes of evaluation, and the second is the idea of the partial order of convaluations.

**Key Words:** Convaluation, Order, Evaluation, Identity, Structure, Value

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to present *convaluation* as a form of social coordination. The text shows how this structural form, on the one hand, generates partial orders, and, on the other hand, generates human identities. Order refers to the predictability of the world, and identity of humans to the question of who one is. Order and identity are probably the two most profound and central issues in social science, though few sociologists have studied their relation (cf. Emirbayer 1997). Convaluation is a structural form of coordination characterized by evaluation. Evaluation refers to the act of value the “social things,” as cars, groups, and identities.<sup>2</sup>

The general thesis of the paper is that convaluations, rather than markets, together with network and hierarchy represent the three ideal typical coordination forms. Coordination refers to the process in which social things, including, for example, norms, values, objects, and identities are brought together as parts of an ordered whole. These three forms generate identities as well as order among identities. I see these forms, which often have been used to discuss coordination of resources within the economy, as more general forms that also apply to situations outside of the economy. In this paper, I concentrate on what I have called *convaluations*. These are partial orders that are based on evaluation that forms identities. This notion covers the form of coordination through evaluation that takes place in markets, but also has many applications outside of the economy. Thus, comparison, for example, to choose “who will be elected president of a club” or “the best paper of the year award,” implies evaluation of the candidates and thereby a form of ordering of the papers and people. One can draw examples from all spheres of life. Thus, evaluation takes place within the economy, such as when consumers in markets decide which producer is most prestigious or manufactures commodities of the highest quality. Identities emerge from these evaluations in the partial orders that each such convaluation represents. I talk of partial orders, as it is less

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of *convaluation*, a term which I have coined, is of Latin origin, and uses the prefix *con* which refers to, “together, together with, in combination or union,” combined with *valuation*, which refers to the process of assessing or fixing the value of something.

clear that there is a whole that is ordered, due to process of fragmentation and differentiation. This corresponds to the idea that an identity is tied to a specific social context (White 2008). To speak of partial also implies that an order is at least semi-autonomous.<sup>3</sup>

The paper makes two interrelated contributions. The first is the discussion of formation of identities in processes of evaluation, and the second is the idea of the partial order of convaluations. The convaluation approach stresses the role of partial orders, and it suggests that order and identity are related, and that it is wrong to start with the “subjectivist” approach that constructs the world and its order, as naïve social constructivists (Berger and Luckmann 1991) do, but it is also wrong to start with the objectivist approach that assumes the order of the world, as Bourdieu (1996) in fact does. Identities and order are, I claim, interdependent, and mutually constitutive.

I begin by discussing order and identity in the economic sphere. I then introduce the idea of convaluation and discuss the central role of human identities. I then present the different forms of convaluations, which leads to a typology of convaluations. To make the discussion concrete, I include a section of examples of convaluations, predominately from the economy, but also including non-economic examples. Before the conclusion, I outline issues to research further in the future.

### *Order out of Coordination*

If one looks at social life from a structural point of view, the literature has identified three ideal typical forms of social coordination to bring activities and things together to create order: hierarchy, network, and market (Granovetter 1985; Thompsson, Frances, Levacic, and Mitchell 1991). The question of order is central in sociology (e.g., Alexander and Giesen 1987:13; Luhmann 1981; Parsons 1968; Wrong 1994). I define order as the predictability of human activities and the stability of social components in relation to each

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<sup>3</sup> A convaluation need not necessarily be a “local’ stable world” (Fligstein 2001:29). Though convaluations are often anchored in space, they need not be. Global finance markets, for example, can be very ordered, but they are not local (Knorr Cetina 2002). World championships in large sports are often global, though every competition of course takes place somewhere.

other (cf. Hayek 1973:36).<sup>4</sup> The social constructivist perspective of this paper assumes that order is established when actors in practice share a viewpoint (cf. the notion "conception of control" Fligstein 2001), which remains relatively stable over time and enables the making of predictions.<sup>5</sup>

The three coordination forms generate social order, but they do it in different ways, as each is characterized by its own type of social relations and interaction logic (cf. Polanyi 1957).<sup>6</sup> I see these three forms as basic; other forms of social structure, such as class or roles, derive from these. These latter should be seen as products of coordination forms, typically the market, as Marx and Weber have argued. In a hierarchy, actors are positioned in roles in relation to the center from which power can be exercised (for example, by order giving or distribution of resources). Hierarchies represent asymmetric relations, as for example between the two roles of superior and subordinate in an organization. A network is characterized by reciprocity relations among those who share the role as members, which means that one can largely speak of symmetric relations in networks. The market is the form of coordination that enables actors who occupy roles as buyers and sellers to switch relations and compete in an arena that evaluates actors, or their offers (as sellers or buyers). This evaluation implies, "a measure of shelter from the uncertainties of the business" (White 2002:1). The central notion in this market process of evaluation is value, which I define as the determination and rating of a "thing."<sup>7</sup> This definition captures the double nature of the notion, i.e., to determine something as (a value), which sets it apart from other "things," and to rate

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<sup>4</sup> The more profound order, based on social institutions such as communication and language, is assumed in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The position I advocate, which stresses that some social constructions are relatively more entrenched, or taken for granted, rejects order based on realism and an actor-independent view of ontology. Stability, as I show, does not mean that there is consensus, only that there must be some more basic agreement even among those who disagree.

<sup>6</sup> Polanyi speaks of reciprocity ("network"), redistribution ("hierarchy"), and market. The fourth form that Polanyi describes, the autarchic household ("oikos") can be seen as a form of hierarchy since it is "a trade-less hierarchical community directed to noneconomic ends, self-sufficiency (autarky) and the god life of the master" (Booth 1994:212). Polanyi, moreover, does not believe that this form has had much relevance in history (Beckert 2007).

<sup>7</sup> To become qualified does not imply that the value that is the base of the evaluation has positive connotation, it may also have "negative" connotations. It is thus this potential capacity to evaluate that determines if it is of value.

those things that are of the same kind according to this value (i.e., to evaluate).<sup>8</sup> As I will show, markets, hierarchies, and networks order identities of things as well as humans, and this ordering is of course part of what generates these identities.

Of these three coordination forms, the market has a special role. It is only in the market that evaluations are based on the principle of comparison of offers, a benchmark which can lead into competition and selection (Simmel 1923; Weber 1978:38-40). Furthermore, it is only in relation to the benchmark of the market, and more specifically market prices, that “efficiency” of hierarchies (firms) and networks can be evaluated. Thus, competition in markets makes it possible to relate what is done within a firm (hierarchy) (cf. Coase [1937] 1988; Williamson 1981) as well as in the network (cf. Burt 1982) to the alternative that the market offers; the social relation at what is called “arm’s length” (cf. Uzzi 1997). This short discussion suggests that many problems of organizations and networks can only be addressed in relation to how they are embedded in markets, and its evaluation process. It is this evaluation that is central of convaluations.

### *Identity Formation in the Economy*

If order is one central question of sociology, identity is another. Identity, in sociology, refers to something that is the same across time in a certain context, which implies that this “something” (e.g., a human) may be “different” in different contexts. Identities are, of course, among the social components that are ordered. Within economic sociology, the notion of identity has become central, and several studies show how identities are formed in markets (White 1981; White 2002). A market separates actors, individuals and firms, from each other, and distributes social identities to them. This is to say that markets generate or fixate identities. In White’s market model (1981; 2002; 1987), to take one example, sellers (brands) of frozen pizzas are selling different kinds of pizzas that taste different. It is, however, only as a result of the interaction across the market and as a consequence of what the consumers do—what pizzas they like, buy, and the

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of value is often unclear and not well understood (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004); Weber (e.g., 1949), though he clearly assumes values, never analyzed this central notion.

price they are willing to pay for them—that the sellers gain identities in relation to each others. They gain identities in relation to their “competitors,” all of whom nevertheless share the collective identity as “sellers of frozen pizza.” This basic idea of how identities are generated in market as a result of evaluation and transactions is also evident in other studies, for example, in financial markets (Podolny 1993), photography markets (Aspers 2005) and in film labor markets (Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, and von Rittmann 2003).

But do not hierarchies and networks in the process of coordination also generate identities? Yes, but as members of networks of suppliers or as actors within a vertically integrated production chain (Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon 2005), actors will only gain collective identities, i.e., identities that are based on shared roles. In a hierarchy, it is the holder of the superior role who gives order to the subordinated actor(s). The identity the superior gets is, consequently, the identity as “superior” and the identity as the subordinated is simply “subordinated.” These positions may be further qualified by referring to “superiors” at a Bank, or even CEOs at Banks. Nonetheless, there is no way to judge who is the “best,” the most “efficient,” or the most “experienced” CEO among all those who share the identity of being a CEO. A similar analysis can be made of “members” of a network. Though some have more central positions, the network structure does not imply an evaluation of its members and does not endow them with different identities, for example, due to their centrality or usefulness. Hierarchies and networks, in other words, lack this function of evaluating actors. Though these three ideal types in reality will exist in mixed forms, it is nonetheless clear that networks and hierarchies only generate collective identities for their incumbents, i.e., identities shared by many.

### *Formation of Identities in Convaluations*

Thus far, we have only discussed markets, networks and hierarchies within the economy. We have seen that the market has a special coordination role within the economy, but what about evaluation outside of the economy? Hierarchies and networks exist also outside of the economy. Though research has shown the central role of



evaluation within the economic sphere, it has at the same time failed to develop a general notion of evaluation that accounts for evaluations outside the economic sphere, though Simmel (1923) has mentioned the issue.

I contend that it is incorrect to assign markets this central role in *sociological* theorizing; what we need is a theoretical account of how coordination through evaluation outside the economy generates order and identities. I aim to show that what is essential of markets, namely evaluation, applies to areas outside the economy, without simply applying the economic apparatus to everything (e.g., Becker 1991).<sup>9</sup> I call these forms of social coordination characterized by evaluation *convaluations*. I will show that these generate order as well as identities both in the economy and outside it; convaluation is a general structural form of coordination and is as such not restricted to a specific sphere of life. Figure 1 indicates how convaluations and markets are related to hierarchies and networks, separated by different spheres: the economy and other spheres.

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<sup>9</sup> Some researchers, most notably Bourdieu, have metaphorically taken over the notion of market (e.g., Bourdieu 1991), but without explaining with the meaning of the notion. It is only with the work in new economic sociology that we have begun to understand that there are a variety of markets, instead of seeing all markets as being of one kind (Aspers 2006; White 1988).

		<b>Form of social coordination</b>		
<b>Sphere</b>	<i>Non-economy</i>	<b>Network</b> (Old friends who watch baseball together)	<b>Hierarchy</b> (An Army)	<b>Convaluation</b> ("Rate your teacher")
	<i>Economy</i>	<b>Network</b> (CEOs from the same business school who exchange information)	<b>Hierarchy</b> (A Firm)	<b>Market</b> (The market for used trucks)

Figure 1. Relations between social coordination forms and social spheres. There are several non-economic spheres (cf. Weber 1946), which include, for example, law, art, sport and military.

The figure suggests that one can analytically separate the structural component of social coordination from value oriented (the spheres); in reality, we may of course only observe, for example, specific markets and organizations. One may, hence, say that the notion convaluation replaces market as an overall category of social formation, and thereby subsumes markets as instances of economic convaluations. A difference is that markets imply at least some transactions in the form of exchange of rights (Aspers 2006), which is not necessary in a convaluation. The transaction, manifested by a price and a good, has in most convaluations its equivalent in the "exchange," or at least the consequences, of more or less status, or being "chosen" as a friend, or "turned down."

Let me use a few examples to show what I mean by the centrality of evaluation outside the economic sphere. We evaluate actors for inclusion in a collective identity, but we also evaluate them in relation to others who share this collective identity. Thus, to become a member of a network, an army, or to get a job, i.e., to gain a collective identity, we first evaluate actors for inclusion. Convaluation also covers the evaluation that takes place of members within a collective identity. This enables a differentiation

amongst them, but it also “ranks” them, as, for example, the “best soldier in the platoon,” and the resulting set of identities, all of which are positioned in relation to each other, are included in a partial order. In a car market, to take one example of non-human identities, only cars, and not pets, are traded, which represents the first step of valuation. Once we have identified this market, the second step is the evaluation of cars. This is to say that the first step of evaluation is “identification” and only in the second step can evaluation among similar “things” be made.

Below, I will concentrate on convaluations, and its economic sub-category, markets. Evaluation is the central force that creates cohesion and order in markets as this reflects the importance of “quality” in markets (White 2002:1), but I claim that this is a general process that is not restricted to the economy (Simmel 1978; White 1992). When boys ask girls for a date, both sides evaluate their options, opportunities they are faced with, though this takes place outside of the economy. Some girls may be “popular” and some boys may be “undesirable,” perhaps because they are awkward, socially inept, or have acne. In this sense, “the boys” and “the girls” of this social clique receive identities. It also orders them and creates partial orders. The boys and girls share a cognitive frame of their social identities and positions to which they orient.

Let us look more at the components of configurations. All components that constitute a convaluation—value, social structure, culture and identity—play a role in construction of order. The social structure is composed of roles that actors hold. Each concrete convaluation is a partial order due to the stability in time of its components: actors, their relations (social structure), the value of the convaluation, but also because of the culture, i.e., the rules and practices of its partakers that are taken for granted, including the name of the convaluation, sets it apart from other partial orders. Convaluations are *partial* orders, which means that they are only valid within a certain province, or a limited number of participants.

### **The Primacy of Human Identity**

The basic idea of identity implies at least some stability over time. Identity, at the most general level, refers to a similarity between two “things.” I define identity as a perceived

similarity bound by a narrative pegged on a “thing-event” (cf. Goffman 1968:74-75). This is a generic definition of identity, which thus covers humans (e.g., Goffman 1968), organizations (Hatch and Schultz 2004), and things. The process of identity-pegging implies that humans are involved in the processing of generating identities. It is, in other words, only what humans constitute and fixate, for example by proxies, e.g., material objects, texts and pictures—that triggers the memory and that “preserves” narratives—that can become an identity. An identity extends over time through memory (cf. Ricoeur 1992:140-168), and the notion of narrative binds together the activities, deeds, interactions of the identity over time “on” the “thing-event.”<sup>10</sup> The identity is, so to speak, linked to something, such as a material object, a recurrent market, or a “human.” This “something,” such as a hero in a book, may or may not “exist.”

Let us look closer at human identities. By accounting for human intentionality, i.e., mental directedness, the ontological primacy (Heidegger 2001b), existence, i.e., who we are, and our role as both topic for, and reason of, social science, human identities have a double role as both active and passive in the construction of order in convaluations. Human identity, in addition, is one of these “social components” that is ordered. Human identities, in other words, are both ordered in, as well as the condition of, the ordering process of convaluations. In the remainder of this paper, I will mainly discuss human identities. When we talk of humans, we usually mean a body, which anchors a name with a series of actions and brings them together in a narrative that is seen as “the same” over time. An identity, in other words, is what makes a human “what she is”; it is a constitutive relation. The constituent elements may be due to “relations” or “characteristics” (cf. Somers 1994) that are attached to the human in social processes.

One can analyze identity at four related levels. To be a member of an organization or a network is to share an identity with others. This is a *collective identity*. All actors who share a role, for example, as producers of SUVs, share a collective identity; roles are

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<sup>10</sup> This process is not constant over time since it is always interpreted. Furthermore, that an actor moves in space over time (cf. Heidegger 2001b), and does different things in different settings is a condition for her to become aware of her being in the world. Simmel describes how people, by moving between and overlapping different social organizations and fields become unique (1890; 1923:311-313).

different from identities.<sup>11</sup> These collective identities can also be the result of, for example, membership in organizations (hierarchies) or networks. But these cases, to repeat, do not generate differentiation of the actors' identities within the collective identity. It is only within convaluations that actors may gain *discrete identities* as a result of differentiation and evaluation within the collective identity, as when an ice hockey player is valued as the Most Valuable Player in the NHL. An actor may be involved in many convaluations, and as a consequence, she may gain many discrete identities, each of which may be known to only a few. This means that actors may act differently in different convaluations, because they have different identities (cf. Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961).

What I call *unique identity* is made up of several different discrete identities. It is the "weighed sum" of the different identities an actor has, seen from the value of a particular convaluation; this is an issue to which I will return.<sup>12</sup> It is this unique identity that most clearly reflects the notion of person (Quante 2007; White 1992). An actor, however, can also reflect upon her social situation and her socially produced identities; what I call *reflexive identity* captures actors' capacity to reflect upon their identity or identities. This reflexive capacity is not made up of a pure ego as Descartes or Husserl would argue, but of the "play" in which an actor thinks of her "different" discrete identities, each time from the perspective of one of them. The reflexive identity refers also to an actor's possible desire for an identity, which can be different from how she perceives her current identities (Goffman 1968:129ff; White 1992).<sup>13</sup>

Simply put, one can say that an actor cannot escape her reflexive identity. It is the source of anxiety due to its constitutive element of being in the world together with

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<sup>11</sup> A role is defined in terms of what one does, and identity is defined in terms of what one is (Frank and Meyer 2002:86n1). An actor cannot be separated from her identity, but she can be separated from her role.

<sup>12</sup> The unique identity can only become the function of those discrete identities of actors that are "known" within a particular convaluation that is used as the baseline of evaluation.

<sup>13</sup> Giddens, in a similar fashion, talks about self-identity, which he defines as, "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" (Giddens 1991:53). The concept of identity, in contrast to self and person (White 1992), is inherently relational and social. One person's identity presupposes, above all, other persons' identities; one is always one among others (cf. Heidegger 2001a:83-148; Heidegger 2001b:114-130). Only given the conditions that make people different can one talk of understanding and reflection of a self, or as some say, self-identity (Sherif 1968:151). Identity is the condition of evolution of self (cf. Mead 1934:142-144) in several processes of evaluation, not the other way around.

others (cf. Heidegger 2001b:184ff). In the case of reflexive identity, one can say, the actor both creates and interprets her narrative. Thus, the other three forms of identity essentially capture the “perceived similarity bound by a narrative pegged on a ‘thing-event’” as a view that is shared and imposed by others. On the other hand, the reflexive identity captures the perception the actor has of what she wants to be, and her “existential freedom.” It is, however, only by relating the social determination of identity with the reflexive identity of the actors that one can see how the social and existential level are connected. The concept of reflexive identity lets us sociologically analyze the relation between social consciousness and the actors’ ability to make a “subjective” interpretation (Nietzsche 1911:§205).<sup>14</sup> Both organizations (Warde 1994:878) and humans (Giddens 1991) have reflexive capacity, but only humans are anxious, have existential concerns, and have intentionality. Understanding, consequently, refers to the understanding of the reflexive level; only this can “explain” actions in the meaning context of the actor. Moreover, the theoretical concept of reflexive identity separates the identities of people from the identities of things. Although both humans and things can be said to “exist,” it is only humans who can ask and reflect about themselves (Heidegger 2001b).

This discussion of levels of identity only indirectly addresses the question of order. There would be no order if there were only a group of different identities. To gain order, actors must have positions in relation to each other. So far, we have assumed this. To have discrete identities, it must be possible to differentiate, compare, and rank identities (that is, they must be evaluated and rated) in relation to each other within their shared collective identity. This similarity within the collective makes it possible to rate different identities. Only after positioning of the identities in relation to each other can one talk of ordering of the discrete identities. This differentiation, evaluation and ordering takes place in the partial orders I call convaluations. Only by talking of convaluations can we discuss and understand the processes of formation of discrete identities and the constitution of partial orders based on evaluation.

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<sup>14</sup> Reflexive identity has the advantage of retaining the relational component, while simultaneously including the reflexive character of the notion of self. By putting it in a sociological framework. It also circumvents the psychological baggage that may come with the notion of “self.”

## *Forms of Convaluations*

All convaluations generate order and identities through evaluation, but the way they do it depends on the structure of the convaluation. The following section elaborates on the approach by outlining the different forms of convaluations that generate partial orders. Convaluations can theoretically achieve order through two ideal types: “standard” and “status.” In a standard convaluation, a scale of value evaluates identities directly according to their properties,” e.g., depending on their weight, their wealth, or indirectly for their deeds, such as being “ethical” or for running fast. This means that one can rank identities as being “good” or “bad” or having “more” or “less,” according to the value of the convaluation.<sup>15</sup>

The values that are used for evaluation in a standard convaluation are stable social constructions, which means that they are taken for granted, and can be used for evaluation regardless of who is doing the evaluating and who or what is being evaluated. In this type of convaluation, actors’ standing, i.e., “who they are,” does not affect the evaluation process. What matters is what they do. In this case, it is consequently relatively easy to adjudicate and rate identities according to this “scale of value.” Once a standard is in place, identities and social structure are a function of this standard (value).<sup>16</sup> A human identity emerges in a standard convaluation when it is rated according to the value of the “standard” and given a name that is tied with a narrative over time pegged on this thing (body), such as histories in the form of text, pictures, visual look and memories that are tied to a body. This means that the identity is positioned in relation to the scale of value and indirectly to other identities. Guinness World Records (formerly Guinness Book of Records) is a typical example of records that generate identities in relation to “measurable” standards. Only records that are

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<sup>15</sup> In this respect, norms can be seen as less rigid “standards” than values. Weber uses order to cover the notion of norm (Weber 1978:31-36).

<sup>16</sup> The value can be constituted in material objects (carats of gold, length, weight), or it can be constituted in immaterial values (principles of evaluation).

“measurable” are accepted, but it is the Guinness World Record people who decide what new record categories to establish.

More generally, standard convaluations are based on principles of evaluation that are clear and stable, such as one can find in technology-driven industries (cf. Schmidt and Werle 1998). Because standard convaluations imply orientation to a standard that is unambiguous, the evaluation can be done across time and space as long as the same scale of value is used. Hence, identities can be evaluated “independently” of each other. It is possible, for example, for all of us to compare our times against the clock when running 100 meters, or to compete for a standardized order of oil by undercutting other offers, using price as means in the global market. Thus, everyone who takes part in the running 100 meter competition can in principle be ranked in relation to his or her time, and so to speak, to the world record. This is a stable convaluation upheld by competitions and records as well as standards (the length of the race, wind conditions for setting records and so on) for generating identities, which is more stable than the identities of the actors, who are replaced, for example when a new world record is set, when people enter, quit, or simply are forced to leave the track and field because they do not run fast enough.

A standard can be defined as a value that is at least more stable than the set of partakers in the partial order (the convaluation). In this case, the standard of the convaluation forms the basis for the evaluation. But what if there is no stable value on which to base the evaluations and comparisons? What of a situation with no tables or scales of values? In that case, we can generate convaluations ordered by status and avoid “chaos” or disorder. This is to say that the “decision” of what is “good” boils down to peoples’ “emotions,” “preferences” or more generally, what they value (cf. Aspers 2007a; Kant 1957 e.g., 198-203). In contrast to situations where there is a scale of value, status relies directly on the evaluation of what people prefer.<sup>17</sup> The evaluation of what is good and bad can be made in discussions among members of a group, or by an “audience” (cf. Bourdieu 1984; White 2002; Zuckerman 1999). In markets, for example,

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<sup>17</sup> In this process, many different spheres of justification can be used, and it is difficult to determine which of these, or what combination, will prevail (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). It is possible for a standard convaluation to emerge when the “preferences” become taken for granted.



the relationship between those who perform something and their audience, “constitute[s] one of the bases for evaluating the producers and their products” (Bourdieu 1993:46; Goffman 1971). The audience, by acknowledging the identities that take part and what they do, contributes, in the first phase, to the constitution of the convaluation. In the second analytical phase, the audience directly endows the identities, or indirectly endows their deeds, with status (Smith Spence 1974). In this way, a rank order of identities making up the social structure emerges out of a social process. Audiences thereby fulfill a “function” similar to the standard, i.e., they provide an evaluation and order, but it is another social form. This kind of evaluation is common in the art world (Beckert and Rössel 2004; Bourdieu 1993; Plattner 1996; Velthuis 2005), among critics (Bourdieu 1996), in the markets in these spheres, and, generally speaking, in situations characterized by aesthetic values (Podolny 2005:192; Warde 2002). Fashion (Aspers 2005; Entwistle 2000) is perhaps the clearest example of convaluations. It is not possible to evaluate quality by focusing on the objects because it has an entrenched value that is taken for granted; it is a social affair that is determined by those who buy and sell fashion items.

This principle of evaluation in status convaluations is the complete opposite of the situation in a standard convaluation. What an actor does, produces, or “gives off,” to use Goffman’s (1968:13) phrase, is a function of who she is and her position. For example, if a well-known designer takes on the temporary role as judge in a designer competition, this constitutes a convaluation. The verdict of this designer, in other words, what is valued in the convaluation, is determined essentially by her identity, which is a narrative that is linked to her, and to which status is endowed. The value that her verdict expresses, to contrast it with the standard principle of order, is not determined by an identity-independent standard, but according to her status in the convaluation of those taking part in the interaction. As a consequence of her verdict, and ranks they receive in the competition, identities can be ranked and ordered in relation to each other. Because status orders are more stable than what they give off (e.g., produced commodities or verdicts), it is more difficult than in a standard convaluation to know what to do to reshape one’s identity (e.g., to move up the status ladder). This means that the influence an actor has depends on the position in the social structure. It is, moreover, usually

more difficult to predict the outcomes in status convaluations than in standard convaluations.

Because a status convaluation, to exist, implies that actors know of each other, actors face cognitive capacity problems as well as problems of knowledge (Aspers 2007c). Several studies show that actors have limited capacity to differentiate between sets of people and things. Markets that, for example, become crowded may split into several, if there are too many identities (or products). (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001; White 2002; Zuckerman 1999). To keep track of the status order can be a time-demanding task to members, and even more so to the non-members, of the convaluation, not only because it changes, but because the judgment of the status order cannot be determined by a single actor. This means that the number of participants of a status convaluation, in contrast to a standard convaluation, is limited by the cognitive capacity of its partakers (those on the “stage” and their “audience,” White 2002).

### **A Typology of Convaluations**

It is possible to summarize the above discussion in a typology based on ideal types of different convaluations; this section presents the sub-categories of convaluations by building on what is general in all convaluations. In a status convaluation, the rank orders of the two sides are more entrenched social constructions than the underlying value, whereas in a standard convaluation, the value underlying the standard is a more entrenched social construction than the rank orders of actors of the convaluation. This, in other words, is to say that order can be either a function of value (standard) or a function of social structure (status). These two different types also represent two basic ways of determining identities in convaluations. It is, moreover, possible to differentiate between two forms of convaluations, called assembly and reflector, which are distinguished by the role structure. Both of these can be ordered according to status and standard. An assembly refers to a group of actors, all of whom have the same role, who come together or are brought together to interact openly. This is the case, for example, when development-oriented NGOs observe each other’s behavior and try to determine the standards for evaluating development projects. It may not in these cases even be clear from the beginning how they should interact and what they are discussing, and it is

hence not clear what is valued. However, the discussion gradually sorts out what values to use to evaluate the designers, and those who do not share these attributes simply drop out. Thus, the process not only forms actors' identities (i.e., the social structure); it also clarifies what is valued. Some actors in a an assembly convaluation have more power, which can, for example, be due to the information they have, their rhetorical skills, or due to their positions in other convaluations.

A reflector, in contrast, links actors from two different sides each made up by different roles with different interests (cf. Swedberg 2004). On one side are those who are being evaluated, and they may see each other as rivals or competitors. On the other side are those who do the evaluating—the audience. Each side is oriented to the other side, but there is usually also a relation among actors on the same side. The incumbents on the “audience” side make the calls and judge what those on the “stage” side do or offer, and thereby affect the identity of actors on the stage-side. In empirical cases, the roles of stage-actors and the audience may not always be that clear, because both can affect what is going on (cf. Kennedy 2005). There may, in other words, be a mutual exchange of “evaluations,” i.e., a form of reflection. Markets exist only in the form of reflector, and are categorized by the different interests of the actors on the two sides.

Assemblies and reflectors can be ordered according to the two principles discussed above, status and standard, as shown in Figure 2.

Typology of Convaluation		Assembly	Reflector	
		<i>All actors in the convaluations have the same role</i>	<i>Actors in this type of convaluation have a role only on one side in the reflector</i>  <i>(Fixed roles)</i>	<i>Actors in this type of convaluation switch roles in the reflector</i>  <i>(Switch roles)</i>
Principle of order	<i>Standard (value)</i>	Comparison of retailers' profit between CEOs of these firms	Producers of garments evaluating the offers of input material from suppliers	Stock brokers ranking each other depending on how much money they make in the market
	<i>Status (social)</i>	Gossiping at a fashion cocktail party about who is the best designer	Musicians are positioned depending on who gets a cover on Rolling Stone	Academics deciding on research funding for other academics

Figure 2. Typology of Convaluation. The six examples refer to formation of (discrete) identities in convaluations given a collective identity based on valuation. At the same time, they produce order. Reflectors can be instances of markets, as the roles have opposing interests, but not assemblies.

We can further divide a reflector into two types: fixed and switch role structures. The fixed role structure sets identities to the role on one side of the convaluation. Markets are example of economic reflectors (Aspers 2007b:385-387), and most real markets are fixed role markets (Aspers 2005; Aspers 2006). Shoe manufactures, for example, only hold the role as producers of shoes; they do not also operate as consumers or buyers of shoes. They operate, however, as buyers in many business-to-business markets, where they buy commodities, such as leather, glue and other components needed for the production of shoes. This they buy from suppliers, who are located upstream in the production chain. Actors, consequently, can have different fixed roles in different convaluations. The review process in academia, as we know, is organized as a switch role structure. When we submit papers, we do this in the role of authors, but we frequently switch roles so that we also are reviewers in this academic convaluation. In this convaluation, there are two roles, but few of us identify with the role of reviewer.

What makes the switch role structure different from the fixed role structure is that actors, organizations or individuals, switch sides (roles) in the convaluation. Incumbents' identities in switch role structures are not directly identified with one of the roles of the convaluation, but with the more general role encompassing the two sides (roles) of the convaluation. The shared role is the foundation of the collective identity. This means that the evaluators (the "audience") may be drawn from the same collective identity as those who are evaluated. Art directors of advertising campaigns, who peer review each other's works and hand out awards, are another example of a convaluation in which those on the stage and those in the audience are drawn from the same collective identity. Traders and agents of garments (cf. Braudel 1992), or traders in a stock exchange market, who switch roles between being buyers and sellers, also exemplify the switch role structure of the reflector. Thus, from a strictly role-analysis perspective there is no difference between switch role and fixed role structure; in both cases, actors come together and enact roles so that order emerges. The difference is that identification in switch role convaluations is made with a more general role that encompasses the roles of the two sides.

It is possible to make distinctions based on the concept of convaluations. If an actor, by her own will, decides to take part in a convaluation, this represents active identity

formation. An actor who is included in a convaluation, but not by her own actions, represents what can be called passive identity formation. Passive identity formation, for example, takes place when actors are scrutinized or audited within a convaluation, regardless of their wishes (Powell 1997; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, and von Rittmann 2003); one may even call this forced if it is against the will of the actors. In such cases, an actor is not in control of her discrete identity, though normally some ways of identity management, or even ways of affecting the entire convaluation that triggers the formation of identities, are available.

Convaluations can be public, in which case the evaluation can be known to everyone, or secret (cf. Burt 1992; Simmel 1964:334). When it is secret, an actor can have two different identities, one "public" and one "secret," the latter known only by those who take part in it. The limited knowledge also makes it possible to block or highlight information of certain convaluations and certain discrete identities for actors who try to manage their identities. Thus, identity management (Goffman 1968) is essentially about information control, i.e., blocking and presenting information to certain people and in certain networks and domains (cf. Mische and White 1998).

A convaluation can also be "open" or "closed" (cf. Swedberg 1998; Weber 1978:43-46, 341-344), which means that there can be entry restrictions. Entrance in a convaluation is never only a single actor's decision. Even in a standard reflector convaluation, an actor has to meet the standard determined by its insiders; an outsider cannot directly affect the standard. One does not, moreover, become an actor in a reflector convaluation unless one's actions, and ultimately one's discrete identity, are reflected in the light of those on the other side. In an assembly, an actor is only accepted if those who already are members accept the new member. Convaluations can be the result of a designed process (organized), by the state or by actors themselves, or an unintentional consequence resulting from social interaction (spontaneous). A convaluation is autonomous to the degree that what happens in it has repercussions on other convaluations and other partial orders, but what happens in this convaluation depends only to some degree on what happens outside the convaluation. Also, the size, permanence, importance, and the autonomy of convaluations differ, as do their extension in time and space. It is obviously possible to discuss each of these and other

issues in more detail, but this will not change the main point: that the partial orders of the convaluation coordinate social life based on evaluations that produce order, including the order of human identities.

### **Examples of Convaluations**

The following section presents some examples of convaluations in more detail, to make the concept easier to comprehend. Producers of SUVs (Sport Utility Vehicles) have stable identities in relation to each other in the market for SUVs (cf. Rosa, Porac, Runser-Spanjol, and Saxon 1999; White 2002). The firms in this economic convaluation share the collective identity as sellers of SUVs. This is, in principle, an open economic convaluation, and anyone may in theory enter this market; the problem of entrance is more of a practical nature. It is essentially an active identity formation in which car manufacturers take the active part as sellers.

The car firms' identities (brands) are differentiated so that some of them are perceived to be high "quality" producers in contrast to others who are low quality producers. This differentiation and ranking result over time in a form of social structure made up of the SUV-producers, which is more stable than each of the individual firms that gain discrete identities in the convaluation. What is seen as quality in this economic convaluation represents a value according to which the firms are evaluated, differentiated, and positioned in relation to each other. But who does this? On the other side of the market, there is an "economic audience" made up of consumers, ordered as idealtypes consumers. They are also part of the social structure, all of whom have their own identities. The market, in other words, is composed of two roles, and an actors' identity in this market is tied either to the buying or to the selling side of this economic convaluation. Consumers rank the firms and their offers in the market. There is, moreover, a culture in this market, which includes, how sellers advertise and price cars, and how actors on each side relate to those on the same side (gossiping), but also how interaction is "organized" across the market. That at least some of the various

components, the social structure of the identities, the culture or the value are stable over time is a condition for a partial order to emerge and to be maintained.<sup>18</sup>

Markets highlight the role of evaluation, and this makes them easy to understand as examples of convaluations. But because the majority of convaluations are not markets, I therefore also want to present a non-economic example. Book reviewers all have different status in the social structure of reviewers, depending on the magazines for which they write. When they review novelists' books, they distribute status to these authors. Similar processes have been observed in other markets and non-markets in the art world and the aesthetic economy (cf. Aspers 2005; Becker 1982; Podolny 2005; Velthuis 2005). Book reviewers function as "gate-keepers" in this convaluation. The first sorting process separates those who are allowed in, and whose works will be reviewed, from those whom they reject immediately; this, we should remember, is the first function of a value. This is not the only hurdle potential authors face; there are also others, who operate in other convaluations. Agents, who decide whether to represent the author, fulfill a similar function in an earlier stage of the process. Publishing houses, which decide whether to buy the book, play yet another gate-keeping function. In principle, to become "an author" implies that one's book is published, reviewed, and read by more people than the reviewer. Moreover, to become a "good" author, which is to gain symbolic capital in Bourdieu's (1996) sense, is essentially outside of an author's control; this is determined by the reviews the author gets, and by the status of the reviewer. The authors "become" better or worse authors because of this evaluation (this is the second function of value). There is a social structure made up of authors and reviewers, with each category (role) of actors ordered among themselves. In this case, it is the status of the reviewers that is the condition for status of the writers; to be reviewed positively by several high-status reviewers means that the author gains status among other authors. The culture of the convaluation governs, for example, how actors interact, and how reviewers evaluate authors (e.g., how to write a review, and what one says and does not say). The result of this interaction is that some authors become "high-quality" and others

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<sup>18</sup> As some readers may have noticed, an economic reflector convaluation with fixed roles covers Harrison White's (1981) producer market model. The culture, which always draws on the lifeworld (Husserl 1970), may be the same in several convaluations. Markets may, for example, be characterized primarily by a general market culture, or they may be very specific to a single market, as is the case with the diamond dealer market (Bernstein 1992).



“low-quality” authors, which is not identical with authors who are “well-known” and “unknown.” This way of sorting out what is good and bad is common in the cultural sphere that lacks a clear standard or value to judge “quality” (cf. Aspers 2005; Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993). Thus, the value that ranks the different discrete identities of the authors is inferred from the process of evaluation in which it matters who says what; a reviewer from a large literature magazine often has more impact on the status of the author than someone writing for a commercial blog of the publishing house. The partakers in the convaluation normally know its culture, social structure, and actors. This is a public convaluation that has existed for a long time, and it is clear from historical studies that the convaluation has gained increased autonomy over time (Bourdieu 1996).

The last example shows that actors take part in several convaluations. In the literary sphere, it is clear that the status endowment that takes place in the review convaluation, which does not provide authors with money, matters also beyond this particular convaluation. Potential customers read reviews, and publishers may quote reviews on the back of their books. How authors are perceived in the market, i.e., how they gain unique identities in the market as seen by customers, is at least partly determined by the discrete identities they gain in the review convaluation. This shows how one convaluation, the review convaluation, also potentially determines the value of a book in the economic convaluation, i.e., the market. Other status distribution convaluations also contribute to the value of a book in the market. The Nobel Prize is the most important convaluation in literature since it bestows the most status. In addition, this convaluation excludes most authors and celebrates only a few. If an author receives the Noble prize, which comes with a large monetary prize, she is likely to benefit financially even more because the sales of her books normally increase. Convaluations, non-economic and economic, are often embedded in each other. An editor of the newspaper that reviews books and sets reviewers’ wages according to their “performances,” exemplifies interaction between actors who hold different roles in the labor market; the superior, then, is the sole member of “the audience.” Nonetheless, both the reviewer convaluation and the price convaluation are autonomous. They are, in other words, convaluations that are ordered.

### *Future Research*

This paper aims at presenting convaluations, but it cannot cover all issues of the convaluational approach. Let me outline five additional issues that we can address by using convaluations. The first issue is the social conditioning of the self, or in other words, the “sociology of psychology.” Though each human has her “own” intentionality, experience and perceptions, manifested in what I call reflexive identity, these ought to be understood in relation to the other forms of identities that are directly socially produced. This idea is a sociological version of the constitution of what it is to be a person (cf. Quante 2007) that rejects the Cartesian-Leibniz- monadological approach to man that has been taken over, for example, by economists and rational choice theorists.

The second issue is actors’ identification with certain convaluations. Each convaluation provides a value base, or a benchmark, for interpreting and valuing the world. If the actor adheres to a particular convaluation at the level of the reflexive identity, the actor’s discrete and unique identity may be constituted in terms of this convaluation. But she may also start to value the world through the lens of the value of the convaluation. This idea of a value base suggests that one should speak of values in relation to partial orders, in contrast to the “overreaching” and all-encompassing value approach that is based on consensus, represented by, for example, Parsons. Western countries of today lack strong power-centers, like the church used to be in the past, which can rank the different convaluations and their different values within a world outlook, or *Weltanschauung* (“world-view”) that refers to the total view of ideas and beliefs of the world that are taken for granted and rooted in one culture (Heidegger 1975:24; cf. Heidegger 1997:39). Convaluations are partial orders that entail a value which may conflict with the values of other convaluations. In my view, it is not the *Weltanschauung* that constitutes the outlook used to interpret the partial orders of convaluations and more generally, “the world.” but what I call *Wertanschauung* (“value-view”), i.e., the outlook of the world based on a particular value.<sup>19</sup> I mentioned this idea above in the discussion of the “weighed sum” of different discrete identities that make up

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<sup>19</sup> This idea that can be traced to Nietzsche (Heidegger 1957:209-215). The value may be a mixture of the value-component of the culture of the convaluation and what is valued in it.

a unique identity from the perspective of a certain convaluation. Though different individuals value different things, each convaluation entails a value, either in the form of a standard, or as an effect of the social structure (status).<sup>20</sup> The identification of an actor with a particular convaluation implies that the actor values what it reflects. In other words, someone who identifies herself with the academy may also use the value that underlies the evaluation of discrete academic identities for valuing other activities (and convaluations) in life, and possibly life itself. To identify oneself with a convaluation and its value is to try to become (in terms of one's self) what one is (the discrete identity in a convaluation) or what one wants to be; this is an existential "choice." But as I have argued, whether an actor's wishes come true depends to a large extent on others, who judge what the actor is or does. A business leader may receive a high rating by a business magazine, and thereby a discrete identity as a "good business leader" within this specific convaluation. If, however, the "audience" of spouses who compare their peers are the judge, he or she may be rated as a bad parent, because from the underlying value of this second convaluation, it is parenthood, and not the capacity as business leader, that is valued. This example indicates not only that values are different, and possibly also incommensurable in real-world situations. It indicates, in addition, that the evaluations are made from the vantage point of a convaluation with a corresponding value, or what I called *Wertanschauung*.<sup>21</sup>

The third issue concerns material objects. I have been talking almost exclusively about evaluation of actors—mainly humans, but also organizations—in this paper. The general definition of identity, as shown, also covers material objects. Convaluation can be used for analyzing material objects that gain meaning in these social processes. Objects, like antiquities, cars, or model trains, are valued in relation to other objects, like horses and chairs, but they are predominately evaluated in relation to other antiquities, cars and material trains. Objects do not have reflexive capacity, and cannot therefore directly operate as an audience, for example in status convaluations. Material objects can, however, be part of the ranking process of humans or other objects. When athletes

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<sup>20</sup> In a status order, high status actors may in fact impose values.

<sup>21</sup> Consequently, a person's reflexive identity ("self") depends on which convaluation she uses as the baseline of reflection. It is of course an empirical question if people identify with collective identities or if they stress one particular discrete identity.

compete, for example, by running the 110-meter hurdles, the time is measured by a clock connected to other technical devices, including a camera and a computer. In this way, material objects and technologies can be essential for the possibility of having standard convaluations. Objects or “technologies” and thus “equipment” (“Zeug”) can replace objective judges of standards (i.e., a “quality”) to “test and measure the goods” (Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002:199), which is to say that man can be a function and thus ordered “by” technology (Heidegger 1957:271).

The fourth issue we can discuss in more detail is the emergence of convaluations. I have discussed order and change of convaluations, but I have not touched on their emergence and disappearance. It is, however, likely that a convaluation begins as a status convaluation and gradually turns into a standard convaluation when a value becomes entrenched and independent of the initial actors. Actors, moreover, may of course come together and construct a scale of value to decide what is good and what is not. This is a central problem, though there may be an overlap between change, at least the more radical change of convaluations, and the emergence as well as disappearance of convaluations.

Finally, I have in this paper only indirectly analyzed the relation between the convaluations, and the other two basic forms of social coordination, network and hierarchies. A major, but potentially rewarding, task would be to analyze how these three are related. How does one metamorphose into another and when does it happen? We have, of course, studies that analyze the relation between markets and firms in the economy (Coase 1937; Williamson 1975; Williamson 1981). This approach. However, assumes rational actors and aims to judge efficiency; it does not start with identities.

### *Conclusion: Differentiation into Convaluations*

Convaluations refer to partial orders that emerge in processes of evaluation that form identities. Based on the idea of convaluation, this paper makes two interrelated contributions. The first is the discussion of formation of identities in processes of evaluation, and the second is the idea of partial order of convaluations. I have argued that coordination of social life occurs in three ideal types: networks, hierarchies and

convaluations. Convaluations stress the principle of evaluation and they may evaluate and order identities, networks, organizations, and things, including other convaluations. As I have mentioned, convaluations, hierarchies and networks may exist side by side and in mixed forms in real life. Nonetheless, it is clear that it is only in the process of evaluation of convaluations that people and organizations, in hierarchical and network social structures, can gain identities in relation to their peers as a result of comparison and evaluation. Only by doing so can they become not only different, but also “unique” and ranked in relation to each other. In other words, convaluations account for order as in the form of simultaneous constitution of identities and values, as well as other “social components,” such as norms, cars, and activities.

Differentiation has been a central theme in sociology since the works of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel. Differentiation, in the light of convaluations, takes place both at the level of actors and that of convaluations. This paper argues that an actor can have several different identities, constructed in different settings. This idea goes against what Descartes, Leibniz, Husserl, neoclassical economists, and rational choice theorists have proposed, namely that man is coherent in time and space, and exists prior to any social formation or coordination. This “ego-logical” view is a myth and a sociologically naïve idea. The concept presented here is “socio-logical,” and draws on the ontological condition of man as one among others, as suggested by Heidegger (2001a; 2001b) and which has been analyzed in a more concrete way by pragmatists like Mead (Joas 1997; 1934).<sup>22</sup> The four levels of identity enable us to account theoretically for the differentiation among persons as a result of social interaction.

One central point of this paper is that convaluations have become more important over time. This is not only due to the role of markets, which is the economic form of coordination that has grown over the last few centuries (Braudel 1992; Polanyi 2001). Signs of the importance of evaluations that can be analyzed with the help of convaluations can be seen in the declining role of kinship networks (Malinowski 1922),

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<sup>22</sup> This idea contrasts the four founding fathers of sociology, all of whom took over a more or less atomistic approach to man. For Simmel, who studied man’s condition most in detail, as a consequence of modernity, differentiation of persons is primarily a result of people being members of many different circles; but he does not make use of the central notion of identity which could have enabled him to better connect the social, structural and psychological conditions.

for example, and the sorting of people according to hierarchical principles of status (“Stand”) (Weber 1922).

A second point is to talk of “marketization” if more and more convaluations become economic. A third point is that convaluations have become global, which is notable with global markets, but also with non-governmental organizations and standard settings, in which firms, organizations, and even states are evaluated according to the same standard, such as accounting standards (Djelic and Quack 2007:174-181).

The idea of the increased role of auditing (Power 1997) and standardization (Brunsson, Jacobsson, and associates 2000), including the construction of tools that can be used to evaluate and benchmark risks (Power 2007), should be seen as ways in which actors try to control and bring order in the world, often by imposing order in the form of standards on convaluations and other forms of social life that are organized by status. It is also, of course, possible to analyze the role of power, both inside the convaluation among members in a more elaborate empirical study, but also between individual convaluations, and between the collective interest of convaluations and other social formations, i.e., networks and hierarchies.

What is the scope of the convaluational approach? We should not understand everything actors do in relation to convaluations, as not everything we do is subject to evaluation and identity formation. Moreover, of those evaluations that exist, only some stand out and become relevant for identity formation, and the rest merely become part of a larger background of social life. Finally, actors can create convaluations. Convaluation, in conclusion, is a way to think about partial order from a structural perspective, in addition to networks and hierarchies. It is also an alternate way to think about identity as the social condition of our existential being in the world, as well as about order, without starting with man as a ready-made actor, and society as a coherent unit, two assumptions that have been with us in different forms since the dawn of sociology.

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