

La lettre de la régulation

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SOMMAIRE

- 1-3 Point théorique
- 4-6 Publications
- 6 Annonces

ÉDITORIAL

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La rédaction de *La Lettre de la Régulation*

POINT THÉORIQUE

THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP, ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITIES AND THE THEORY OF THE FIRM

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Introduction

Is the firm simply an institution designed to secure cooperation among potentially opportunistic partners, or is it better seen as a 'bundle of human resources'? In this short essay, I should like to outline a theory of the employment relationship which draws on both arguments, and at the same time helps understand the nature of their international diversity. Any such theory must be applicable to economies where collective agreements have wide coverage, such as France and Germany and to those where it is limited, such as the US.

One of the most striking changes in business organisation over the past century has been the displacement of various forms of labour subcontracting by the employment relationship which now covers nine out of ten workers in OECD countries. The transition from the firm as a business to an employing organisation was explained by Coase (1937) whereby the managerial authority to direct labour within the employment relationship displaces coordination of labour by a myriad of sales contracts. Simon (1951) develops this further, showing the value of a form of contract that allows firms flexible content under conditions of uncertainty. Thus, he treats an employee's job as comprising a set of tasks between which management may direct him or her as needs change.

Coase carefully stressed that the employment relationship gives the employer the authority to direct labour 'within certain limits'. However, unless such limits are satisfactorily defined, the workers will not sign up to it, and the firm will not exist as an employing organisation. If we assume that firms and workers cooperate out of self-interest, are subject to asymmetrical information and bounded rationality, they know their interests partly diverge, and that each faces considerable costs in hiring alternative workers or finding another job, then the conditions for opportunism are ripe. Even if neither party intends to behave in this way, it may well fear the other will. Under such conditions, how are employees to know that the firm will not take advantage of the difficulty of finding another job to 'intensify' work or to assign the employee to less desirable work? Likewise, employers may find their employees, once hired, will refuse to work flexibly, and use that threat to bargain for higher pay.

How can the limits of managerial authority to direct work be set so that they give the firm sufficient flexibility, while providing workers

with sufficient protection? This cannot be done by specifying a detailed inventory of the tasks and contingencies (Williamson 1975). The alternative is some kind of rule that enables management and workers to identify the kinds of tasks over which particular jobs extend. From the constraints such rules must satisfy, we may derive four different types of rules each of which underpins a different approach to employee management and skill formation within the firm.

A typology of transaction rules

One can understand the nature of the rules governing the employment relationship by considering the sufficient and necessary conditions they must fulfil for there to be a viable relationship over time. A *sufficient* condition for workers and firms to choose to cooperate through the employment relationship is that it should be mutually beneficial. The arguments of Coase and Simon take us part of the way by showing the overall gains that can arise as compared with the main alternative, some kind of sales contract. It is however, not quite sufficient because it is possible that one party will try to appropriate all the gains. Given the sunk costs each has in the relationship, the losing party may often be worse off if this happens. A *necessary* condition, therefore, is the existence of a rule that ensures both parties gain, in other words, that clarifies the extent of employees' obligations to their employers in a way that can be enforced. Unless this can be done, then one or other party will refuse to engage in the relationship. However, enforceability on its own is not enough. Work assignments could be determined by the colour of an employee's eyes. Thus, a second condition is that the rule should be productively efficient, and define obligations in such a way that employees' competencies match employers' job demands. Indeed, by aligning these, the rule boosts the 'added value' of the employment relationship by organising the training process and job classification systems.

Taken together, satisfying the *enforceability* and *efficiency* constraints is necessary and sufficient to ensure a viable employment relationship. As a result, one can regard the two constraints on employment rules as the basis for an exhaustive classification of employment rules given the basic assumptions of the Coase-Simon approach. Broadly speaking, employment rules may satisfy each constraint in one of two ways, and this founds the typology of rules shown in Figure 1.

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FIGURE 1. THE CONTRACTUAL CONSTRAINTS AND COMMON EMPLOYMENT RULES.

Enforceability constraint		Efficiency constraint	
		Job demands identified by:	
		Production approach	Training approach
The focus of enforcement criteria	Task-centred	'work post' rule	'job territory'/'tools of trade' rule
	Function/Procedure-centred	'competence rank' rule	'qualification' rule

There are two broad approaches by which employment rules establish the *enforceability* of work assignments. They may focus either directly on attributes of individual work tasks, or on functions within the production or service process. A very famous example of the first, widely found in craft work environments, is to identify the tasks belonging to particular 'job territories' by the tools or materials used: 'the tools of the trade'. Thus, among blue collar workers, electricians' may identify their set of tasks by the use of the electrician's screw-driver and similar tools. Within professional work, where distinctive tools figure less prominently, boundaries are often drawn by identifying certain key operations that must only be done by those with a particular qualification. Another famous rule, common in both blue and white collar environments, is that of the 'work post' under which tasks are grouped according to complementarities in production and assigned exclusively to individual work stations for which individual workers are responsible. Usually, neither of these rules are enforced rigidly, but the important thing is that everyone knows they may be invoked should work relations become difficult. Likewise, management tends to enforce work rules strictly only in periodic 'crack-downs' when effort seems to be drifting in the wrong direction. 'Working to rule' is a pressure tactic and not usually the normal method of working. Alternatively, the task content of jobs can be defined more flexibly by establishing an indirect link through some kind of procedure which relates jobs to functions rather than to individual tasks, described shortly.

To satisfy the *efficiency* constraint, work assignments can be organised according to complementarities either in production or in training. These are the *production* and *training* approaches. They diverge mainly because of the different cost structures of informal on-the-job training (OJT) and formal off-the-job instruction. The first has low set-up costs, but costs rise steeply as the share of trainees increases. The second has high set-up costs because of the investment in special training facilities, but falling average costs per trainee. Organising work according to production complementarities leads to what Williamson called 'idiosyncratic' jobs, whereas seeking to maximise the utilisation of expensive training causes firms to group tasks according to their training requirements.

Four models of the firm and employee management

Common examples of the rules corresponding to each type are shown in Figure 1. Maurice et al. (1986) described the operation of the *work post* rule in French industry as an 'aggregation of tasks sharing certain technical demands', and observed the frequent heterogeneity of tasks grouped into particular jobs. Like Cole's account of the same system in the US, work is organised by assigning one person to each post and holding them individually accountable for the tasks it includes. It is the typical taylorist solution in production and bureaucratic services.

The occupational *job territory* shares a number of features with the work post rule, and especially, the identification of a specific set of tasks with a particular type of worker. However, being based on the 'training approach' tasks are grouped for the efficient utilisation of

workers' skills. The 'tools of the trade' rule is a very simple way of identifying the tasks that belong to particular occupations, and of limiting the range of tasks over which management may deploy such workers. For both rules, their clarity and widespread recognition make it easy to identify breaches by either party, and facilitate calling on the assistance of other groups covered by the same principle in times of conflict.

The *competence rank* and *qualification* rules both enable the task content of jobs to be defined more flexibly and give rise to more diffuse job boundaries. They link tasks to jobs indirectly through procedures that are essential to the process of work and skill formation, and avoid the rigidity of the strict identification of task to job. Skill formation within the production approach depends on stable OJT. The competence rank rule regulates flexible task assignments by the way it structures the work group assigned to a particular function, awarding rank on the basis of technical and relational capabilities learned through OJT. Workers of higher rank can tackle more complex operations, and are expected to assist the OJT of junior workers. Ranking workers by the range of skills they have mastered and their seniority gives order to the group, and progression up through the ranks gives workers a visible indication of how far their abilities are recognised by management.

The *qualification* rule shares some features with the competence rank rule in that recognised competencies provide the basis for task allocation, except that it belongs within the training approach, and the criterion of competence is recognised vocational training. This provides a procedure identifying both the skill and the person holding it. Under both the competence rank and qualification rules, the pressure on management to behave cooperatively is strong because neither system has the safety net of detailed job specifications that can be enforced if cooperation breaks down. The same rules can be shown to regulate problems of 'moral hazard' over the quality of job performance (Marsden 1999).

Employment rules and organisational routines

In one sense, it is trivial to say the firm is a 'bundle of human resources'. What counts is the way they are organised, and hence contribute to specific organisational capabilities. The key is provided by the organisational routines on which they are built (Nelson and Winter 1982). These provide the link between individual workers' skills and their collective utilisation. The relationship between these three levels can be understood by considering the routine of 'giving priority to the right' (in Britain, or to the left in France) when entering a round-about. The collective outcome, the organisational capability, is the free flow of traffic within the road system. The individual skills are those of drivers controlling their vehicles and responding to each other's moves. The coordination routine, 'priority to the right', enables the transport system to function safely and effectively while drivers need only minimal information about the goals and intentions of other drivers. Such routines economise on knowledge and yet enable effective coordination.

In a similar way, each of the four transaction rules structures the key routines of employee management, such as control systems, models of on-the-job learning, the treatment of unusual tasks and problem-solving activities, internal and external flexibility, and patterns of workplace cooperation.

The two task-centred rules use control systems that are 'punishment centred'. Task assignments and patterns of individual accountability are clear, and so sub-standard performance is easily attributable and sanctioned. In contrast, the two function-centred rules rely heavily on positive motivational influences because a greater degree of discretion is left for individual employees. The first two generally imply a sharper division between conception and execution than the second, and thus a stronger polarisation between management and workers' roles.

Task identification also has a strong influence on the treatment of 'unusual tasks'. Such tasks provide opportunities for employees to develop their problem-solving skills and thus to broaden their compe-

tencies and deepen their understanding of the production or service process (Koike and Inoki 1990). Thus the more management can delegate to competent workers, the more that competence grows. There are also benefits for productivity and quality control.

FIGURE 2. EFFECTS OF THE CONTRACTUAL CONSTRAINTS ON HUMAN RESOURCE SYSTEMS

		Efficiency constraint	
		Production approach	Training approach
Enforceability	Task-centred	'work post': taylorist ILMs, tight control & individual accountability for work tasks. Narrow on-the-job learning. Low trust.	craft/'job territory' OLMs with strictly defined jobs based on vocational skills. Problem-solving confined to clearly defined jobs. Low trust.
constraint	Function/Procedure-centred	Competence rank: functionally flexible ILMs, OJT enriched by 'unusual' tasks & small group problem solving. High trust.	Qualification: functionally flexible OLMs based on broad occupational skills. High trust.

The contrast between the production and the training approaches underpins two models of skill formation and labour market structure. The first is characterised by on-the-job training within internal labour markets (ILMs) as compared with the development of more general, vocational skills for occupational markets (OLMs). The greater skill transferability of the training approach facilitates redeployment of skilled labour between firms which is restricted where internal labour markets predominate. Combining the two constraints leads to a classification of internal and occupational markets according to the ease with which workers can be redeployed between different kinds of work, 'functional flexibility', as shown in Figure 2.

Finally, the four employment rules function with different levels of trust and cooperation. The two task-centred rules are robust, and can function well under conditions of low trust, so management has to invest less in building up such relationships. In contrast, the greater flexibility of the function-centred rules comes at the price of greater vulnerability should confidence in the other party's good will break down. Trust requires continued demonstration of commitment, and can be expensive, for example, if it means seeking ways of maintaining long-term employment.

Thus the rules which help solve the problems of opportunism within the employment relationship also give rise to different human resource management systems within firms, and provide them with different types of organisational capabilities. It is unlikely that the performance of any one is absolutely superior to the others. Rather, the solutions to the enforceability constraint lead to different degrees of functional flexibility, but at the price of corresponding investments in workplace trust. The solutions to the efficiency constraint stress either firms' internal or their occupational markets, and their corresponding patterns of workforce adjustment and skill formation. Occupational markets bring many benefits but require a strong institutional framework linking firms' training investments.

Dynamics, diffusion and international diversity

Why should each of these four rules tend to predominate in a particular context, so that they become the basis of societal models holding across large sectors of an economy? Dominance can arise from either decentralised diffusion, or the support given by inter-firm labour institutions. They are not mutually exclusive. Decentralised diffusion occurs because the rules are needed to stabilise the employ-

ment relationship, and as shown above, there is only a fixed menu of types of rules. Rules which are familiar and well-understood are generally more robust and easier to enforce, and so more likely to gain the trust of firms and workers. Thus, once a rule becomes established in a particular environment, there are considerable advantages to its adoption even though it may not be ideally suited to every firm. This is particularly true of the two task-centred rules which are easier to enforce and make less demands on the quality of workplace trust even though the firm might ideally prefer a more flexible system.

The other channel for diffusion arises from the support of labour institutions, and especially employer and union organisations. These have a special role to play in helping enforce workplace rules and protecting the parties from opportunism. They can back up individual firms or groups of workers if needed, and they can restrain the actions of their own members in the interests of a wider bargaining relationship. In addition, the classification systems and grievance settling systems they use boost uniformity among firms through industry agreements and grievance systems.

Although collective institutions play an important part in helping to enforce the employment rules, one should not overlook the power that work groups can exercise even in non-union environments, as is demonstrated by the many studies of 'output restriction'. Clegg's (1972) famous textbook on industrial relations set out from the work group because he saw it as the bedrock on which trade union power rests. Likewise, Crozier (1963) shows how the rational ideal of bureaucracy is prone to 'vicious circles' because it does not recognise the power of work groups to obstruct management if it does not win their consent. In their review of US research, Appelbaum and Batt (1994) analyse the organisational and institutional obstacles preventing many US firms from taking advantage of more flexible patterns of work organisation associated with the function-centred rules, and so to generalise the 'American models of best practice' they identify, as compared with Germany and Japan where such rules are widely diffused. One feature shared by the first three countries is the prevalence of task-centred job rules, and particularly the 'work post' system. A key reason it remains so widely diffused, despite the frequent criticisms of its rigidity, is that it can function in environments that are only weakly institutionalised, or are strongly adversarial, because it places only modest reliance on workplace trust. The rise to preeminence of each rule in a particular environment was a historical event, and so change is possible, but it is not easy, and not always in the direction initially intended. In Britain, for example, many firms have sought to break away from craft and professional job territories, but often the outcome has not been to move towards either of the two functional rules. Instead, the move has been sideways: towards the work post model as both workers and line managers seek the protection of clear job descriptions and unambiguous lines of accountability (Clark 1994). Individual firms may 'buck the trend' and break away from the rule that is locally predominant, but the price is usually higher, and the outcome less stable, than if the same model were shared by neighbouring firms and supported by local labour institutions.

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Innovation, Changement technique,**Théorie évolutionniste**

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AU SOMMAIRE DES LIVRES & REVUES**REGULACAO, ECONOMICA E GLOBALIZACAO**

Coordination **Bruno Théret, José Carlos De Souza Braga**
São Paulo, UNICAMP - FAPESP - FUNDAP, 1998.

Avec la participation de :

Aglietta Michel, Deusy-Fournier Pierre – Amable Bruno, Petit Pascal – Boyer Robert – Caroli Eve – Dehove Mario – Lordon Frédéric – Marques-Pereira Jaime – Mazier Jacques – Nadel Henri – Rallet Alain.

L'ÉTAT A L'ÉPREUVE DU SOCIAL

Coordination **Philippe Auvergnon, Philippe Martin, Patrick Rozenblatt et Michèle Tallard**,

Paris, Ed. Syllepse* (avec le concours du CNRS), Collection
"Le Présent Avenir" 1998

Avec la participation de :

Abdelmoumène Amar – Barbier Jean Claude, Letablier Marie Thérèse – Belorgey Jean-Michel – Brochier Damien, Verdier Eric – Castel Robert – Colin Thierry, Rouuer Régis – Crouch Colin – Da Costa Isabel – Duclos Laurent, Mériaux Olivier – Fortunet Françoise, Kourchid Olivier, Trempe Rolande – Jobert Bruno – Join-Lambert Marie-Thérèse – Lafore Robert – Le Crom Jean Pierre – Méda Dominique – Théret Bruno – Tixier Pierre-Eric – Turpin Pierre – Vallée Guylaine – Vogel-Polsky Eliane – Whiteside Noël.

L'Année de la Régulation 1998**Économie, Institutions, Pouvoirs**

Paris, La Découverte, n° 2, 1998

♦ **Regard théorique sur l'actualité**

Origines et dynamiques de la crise asiatique - **Rémy Contamin, Cyrille Lacu** 11

♦ **Économie politique internationale**

Les fantômes du capitalisme mondial : l'économie politique internationale et l'école française de la régulation - **Ronen Palan** 65

La régulation et l'international : remarques sur l'article de R. Palan - **Jean François Vidal** 91

La théorie de la régulation face à la problématique des régimes internationaux - **Gérard Kébabdjian** 107

♦ **Changement institutionnel, régulation et croissance**

Le partage du profit : de la pertinence à l'échelle de la firme à la validité macroéconomique **Xavier Ragot et Jean-Philippe Touffut** 137

Formes structurelles et régimes de croissance de l'après fordisme - **Pascal Petit** 177

Histoire, institutions et production sur le long terme - **Robert Solow**

Séminaire Institutions, Nanterre. Transcription et traduction - **Jean-Philippe Touffut** 207

♦ **Notes de lecture**

Zbigniew Brzezinski (1998), Le grand échiquier **par Mario Dehove** 237

Thomas Coutrot (1997), L'entreprise néo-libérale, nouvelle utopie capitaliste ? **par Bénédicte Reynaud** 249

Bernard Friot (1998), Puissances du salariat **par Frédéric Lordon** 253

♦ **Présentations de thèses**

Laurence Baraldi - Miguel Bruno - Laurence Loulmet - Pierre André Mangolte 271

Par abonnement auprès de l'Association Recherche & Régulation (440 F an – tarif étudiant 200 F – pour recevoir La Lettre de la Régulation (trimestrielle) et les numéros 2 et 3 de L'Année de la Régulation – Trésorier Pascal PETIT 142, Rue du Chevalier 75013 Paris) ou directement auprès des Éditions.

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Bull Malcolm, "Slavery and the Multiple Self".
Habermas Jürgen, "There Are Alternatives".
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Cumings Bruce, "Korea-The Arrivist State".
Watkins Susan, "Christa Wolf's Medea".
Jacobs Nicholas, "Travails of East German Publishing".
Wallerstein Immanuel, "Problem of Eurocentrism".

ANNONCES DE SÉMINAIRE

Le séminaire **TRED** a repris ses activités sous un nouveau nom "Institutions et Développement". Nous avons en décembre 1998 accueilli Béatrice Hibou qui est intervenue sur la privatisation de l'État en Afrique. La **prochaine séance** aura lieu le **21 janvier au Cepremap** de 10 heures à 12 heures Animée par **Bruno Théret**, elle sera consacrée à la méthodologie des comparaisons internationales. Pour tous renseignements concernant les séances ultérieures, vous pouvez vous adresser à :

christelle.josselin@cepremap.cnrs.fr

Séminaire ARC2

Programme des séances du 1^{er} trimestre 1999

Le séminaire ARC2 se tiendra comme les années précédentes, le lundi de 17 à 19 heures au CEPREMAP, 4^{ème} étage (salle 410).

11 janvier 1999 : "Transnational Financial Markets and National Economic Development Models : Global Structures versus Domestic Imperatives" Geoffrey R.D. UNDERHILL (University of Warwick)

1^{er} février : "Puissances du salariat" par Bernard FRIOT

8 mars : "Les services publics européens" par Pierre BAUBY*

12 avril : "Les théories de l'économie politique internationale" par Gérard KEBABDJIAN*

3 mai : "Systèmes sectoriels d'innovation" par Franco MALERBA

7 juin : Table Ronde : "La politique économique peut-elle être de gauche ? Le cas britannique".

Contact : Catherine Bluchetin au 01 40 77 84 15.

E-mail : catherine.bluchetin@cepremap.cnrs.fr

* sous réserve de confirmation des intervenants

Séminaire d'Etudes Marxistes

Maison des Sciences de l'Homme

54, Boulevard Raspail, 75006 PARIS

Jeu 21 janvier 1999 - 17 heures, salle 214

Après le Congrès Marx International II (30 septembre-3 octobre 1998 à Nanterre), est née l'idée d'un séminaire centré autour de l'étude des problèmes contemporains, replacés, chaque fois que nécessaire, dans une perspective historique.

Les premières séances traiteront de la crise, ses déterminants et ses multiples aspects. Un second grand thème pourrait être la question des classes dans le capitalisme contemporain. Il devrait être abordé, plus encore que d'autres, en collaboration avec des sociologues, politologues et historiens (sans exclusive). Sur tous ces thèmes, on s'efforcera de comparer les analyses marxistes à d'autres approches, en vue de souligner les spécificités d'une problématique marxiste et d'évaluer les possibilités d'enrichissement.

Ce séminaire n'aura pas d'appartenance institutionnelle déterminée, mais sera coordonné par un groupe d'économistes qui réunissent des intérêts communs :

(1) Rolande Borrelly (GRREC, Université Pierre Mendès-France, Grenoble)

(2) François Chesnais (Paris XIII-Villetaneuse)

(3) Suzanne de Brunhoff (CNRS, Paris)

(4) Gérard Duménil (CNRS-Modem, Université de Paris X)

(5) Michel Husson (INSEE-IRES)

(6) Isaac Johsua (ADIS, Université Paris-Sud)

(7) Dominique Lévy (CNRS-Cepremap, Paris)

(8) Jean Magniadas (ISERES, Paris)

(9) Catherine Samary (Université de Paris IX)

(10) Claude Serfati (C3ED, Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin)

La première séance a eu lieu jeudi 17 décembre 1998, la prochaine est prévue le. Sans que l'ordre en soit fixé, les séances suivantes pourraient voir se succéder les exposés (par ordre alphabétique) de : Samir Amin, Paul Boccara, Suzanne de

Brunhoff, Gérard Duménil et Dominique Lévy, Isaac Johsua et la présentation des thèses de Robert Brenner.

Pour tout supplément d'information ou toute suggestion, contactez : Gérard Duménil ou Dominique Lévy CEPREMAP, 142 rue du Chevaleret, 75013 Paris, France.

E-mail : dumenil@u-paris10.fr ou levy@cepremap.cnrs.fr

Association Recherche & Régulation

Bref compte rendu de l'Assemblée Générale de l'Association Recherche et Régulation tenue le 17 décembre 1998

Au cours de l'année écoulée, l'Association a eu une activité soutenue, le nombre des adhérents s'est significativement accru, la situation financière a permis d'assurer la diffusion régulière de la Lettre de la Régulation. Sont ressortis les points suivants :

1. La diffusion de la **Lettre de la Régulation** se fera progressivement par courrier électronique auprès de tous les adhérents qui en feront la demande. La lettre sera consultable sur le site WEB de l'association dès sa parution. Une version anglaise récapitulant les points théoriques sera diffusée une fois par an, principalement sous forme électronique.

Personne à contacter : Bénédicte Reynaud CEPREMAP 142, Rue du Chevaleret 75013 Paris. benedicte.reynaud@cepremap.cnrs.fr

2. **L'Année de la Régulation** fera l'objet de deux numéros, l'un déjà paru en novembre, le second disponible dès le printemps 1999, sans que cette succession signifie un passage prochain à une périodicité semestrielle, faute d'un comité de rédaction suffisamment étoffé. Ce dernier sera renforcé par de nouveaux membres.

Les propositions d'articles sont à faire parvenir à Georges Benko, Université de Paris I, 191, rue Saint-Jacques, 75005 Paris, France. Gb@univ-paris1.fr

3. En conséquence et de façon exceptionnelle, le **montant des cotisations** pour l'année 1998-1999 passe à 440 F avec un tarif étudiant à 200 F. Cette cotisation à l'Association donne droit aux **deux numéros 1998 et 1999 de l'Année de la Régulation**, ainsi qu'aux quatre livraisons de la Lettre de la Régulation.

Chèque à l'ordre de l'Association Recherche & Régulation, à adresser à Pascal Petit 142, Rue du Chevaleret 75013 Paris (France).

4. Les adhérents aussi bien que toutes les personnes intéressées sont invités à rejoindre les divers groupes de travail :

➤ **Débattre de l'Approche de la Régulation (DAR)** : contacter Bernard Billaudot bernard.billaudot@upmf-grenoble.fr.

➤ **Régulation, Secteur et Territoire (RST)** : contacter Christian du Tertre dutert@dauphine.fr.

➤ **Institutions et Développement (ID ex TRED)** : contacter Michel Vernières, Irène Hors, Rémy Herrera et Christelle Josselin christelle.josselin@cepremap.cnrs.fr.

5. Les responsables des divers groupes de travail et les membres de l'Association sont invités à fournir régulièrement des informations sur leurs activités à Cécile Abattu cecile.abattu@upmf-grenoble.fr pour mise sur le site WEB. A partir du printemps 1999 sera accessible sur le serveur la **base de données bibliographiques "BABIREG"** qui rassemble les travaux régulationnistes depuis le milieu des années soixante-dix.

6. Deux nouvelles initiatives ont été retenues. En premier lieu dans le prolongement de la rencontre organisée les 27 au 29 novembre 1998 à Aix en Provence par Martine Gadille, Benjamin Coriat et Olivier Weinstein proposent **une nouvelle journée** consacrée au thème "**Théorie des Institutions, Organisation et innovations**" à l'horizon de septembre 1999. En second lieu est envisagé **un colloque** de mise en commun des diverses recherches menées au sein des groupes de travail à l'horizon du printemps 2001.