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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the word "network" has become ubiquitous. It is used in terms such as computer network, social network, postal network, telecommunications network, university network, electrical network, railroad network, road network, airline network, maritime network, distribution network, purchase and sales networks, etc. One could extend to the point of boredom this litany of expressions referring to different types of networks in various fields of activity, expressions that have become familiar to all.

While the word "network" has acquired today an importance previously unequalled, it remains vague and ill defined, sometimes even used in contradictory ways. In fact, each discipline uses it in its own way. This diversity of meanings, often conflicting from one field to the other, makes it difficult to pin down.

A number of questions remain insufficiently clarified in this regard, among them the history of the concept of the network, and in particular, of its emergence in economics and management. The present research focuses on the latter problem, although with all due modesty, since the subject is vast and complex, and cannot here be dealt with exhaustively.

The present article aims at casting some light on the history of the notion of the network and on its introduction in economics and management, with particular attention to the bases and to the logic that underlie inter-firm cooperation networks. It is divided into four parts.

The first part deals with the origin of the concept of the network and its emergence in various fields. The second studies specifically the introduction of this concept in economics and management. As for the third, it examines the contribution made by the new theories of the firm to the understanding of inter-firm cooperation networks. Finally, the fourth section analyses the recent resurgence of cooperation networks, with emphasis on their present and varied forms, and on the theories to which they have given rise.