Institutionalized actors from events – the contribution of systems theory

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Abstract

This paper proposes to radicalize the search for the microfoundations of institutions by analyzing the formation of inistitutionalized actors from events. It introduces concepts from systems theory that allow for reconstructing actors. In addition, it proposes two mechanisms of actor formation: identification and categorization.

Institutionalism and action theory

The new institutionalism in sociology has a complicated relationship with the notion of the actor (Meier 2011). Arguing in an intellectual environment that was dominated by conceptions of rational action, its early proponents formulated accounts of organizations that privileged institutions and legitimacy over individual actors and instrumental rationality (Powell & DiMaggio 1991). Departing from this starting point, institutionalists took two distinct paths.

John Meyer's contributions to the theory of action took him further away from conventional accounts (Jepperson & Meyer 2011; Meyer 2010; Meyer & Jepperson 2000). As Meyer and Jepperson (2000, pp. 101, original emphasis) argue, "the modern 'actor'" who is "an *authorized agent* for various interests (including those of the self)" is an "historical and ongoing cultural construction". From this perspective, the actor and her competences are *historical* concepts: What an actor *is* and what she is able to do are effects of social institutions. The modern preponderance of the *individual* actor as opposed to, for instance, communities or states, is an object of sociological investigation (Frank & Meyer 2002, p. 91ff.). The very idea that it is individuals who act is characteristic of a certain form of society and culture, expressing its central social institutions.

Turning to "micro-foundations" of institutions, discussions on "institutional entrepreneurs" or "institutional work" take a different approach. They suggest that institutions themselves are produced by purposeful and goal-oriented actors (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum 2009; Beckert 1999; DiMaggio 1988; Greenwood & Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby 2006). As Paul DiMaggio (1988, p. 13) has argued, "institutionalization is a product of the political efforts of actors to accomplish their ends and [...] the success of an institutionalization project and the form that the resulting institution takes depend on the relative power of the actors who support, oppose, or otherwise strive to influence it." Using the concept of "institutional work", Lawrence and Suddaby (2006 p. 219) emphasize the "reflexivity of individual and collective actors" whose practices are constitutive of institutions as they are created, maintained and disrupted. Indicating a shift in the concept of institutions from taken-for-grantedness of meaning (Berger & Luckmann 1967) to reflexive availability of patterns of behavior, these accounts of institutions and institutional change normalize the notion of actors within institutional theory. Their central theoretical reference points are theories of practice that point at the interrelatedness of structure and action (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984).

Both concepts grasp important aspects of the notion of actors in relation to institutions. While Meyer emphasizes the existence of institutional templates or scripts for being an actor, theorists of institutional entrepreneurs and institutional work highlight that once actors are understood as modern actors in the sense analyzed by Meyer, these models can be used in explanations of social institutions. In the remainder of this paper, I am going to argue that there is a third way of understanding actors, radicalizing both, the micro-foundationalist impetus as well as the constructivist aspirations of institutionalist theorizing: If social actors themselves are not natural beings but institutionalized, their micro-foundations deserve scrutiny, too. In addition to John Meyer's vocabulary for analyzing the macro-dimension of the social construction of actors, then, the New Institutionalism needs also tools for analyzing the formation of actors in situations. In order to develop such tools for micro-analyses of actors, I will problematize the notion of the actor in the next section before turning to some theoretical motives in Niklas Luhmann's work that are useful for advancing institutionalist accounts of action and actors. I will conclude with some remarks concerning two mechanisms of actor formation: identification and categorization.

What "is" an actor?

From a life-world perspective, individual as well as organizational actors are treated as being always already there. We encounter persons we can address by name or, in case their names are unknown to us, ask for identification. Similarly, organizations usually come as fixed entities with easily identifiable logos, letterheads, personnel, organizational culture etc. But not only everyday observations, most sociological analyses treat actors as given entities, too. Of course, sociology's actors result from socialization (Bourdieu 1977, 1984) or pooling resources (Coleman 1990, 1991) and they may change in the course of time. But most of the time, it is the always already constituted actor – her formation, transformation or intervention – that is scrutinized in sociological analyses.

This presupposition of the unity of the actor, however, is not beyond doubt. As Andrew Abbott (1995, 2007) has argued with respect to social entities like professions and organizations – and also with respect to individuals – making entities primitive excludes them from explanation. If analyses start with the notion of the actor already in place, they have to presuppose the existence of "actors" in order to build their analyses on this supposedly firm ground. As an alternative to this approach, Abbott is suggesting turning to the social processes that produce and concatenate differences to establish boundaries. By arranging such boundaries the contours of entities are produced. Similarly, Charles Tilly (2004) has argued that

in phases of contentious politics, the boundaries of entities or "social sites" are at risk and reshaped. This is possible because "individuals as such do not constitute the bedrock of social life, but emerge from interaction as other social locations do" (Tilly, 2000, p. 721).

Taken together, these two arguments question the presupposition of the unity of the actor. While Abbott is challenging the methodological postulate of the "stable actor", Tilly is pointing to the consequences of turbulent social environments for identifying actors. Of course, these arguments do not preclude analyses building on the notion of actors. It is perfectly legitimate to make the decision to use the concept of the "actor" as a theoretical foundation for sociological inquiries. But they do remind us that, as a decision, this starting point is contingent and contestable. And there might exist research questions or states of the world that suggest different theoretical decisions. For instance, if we want to explain actors, we have to deconstruct their unity and to identify the traces of actor constitution in social process.

Actors from events – The contribution of systems theory

In the shadow of hegemonic theories of action, a couple of theoretical approaches attend to the problem of the constitution of actors (Latour 2005; Luhmann 1995; White 2008). Each of these approaches is highlighting the relational nature of the social, argues that social phenomena are continuously reproduced in time and views actors as achievements of social process. In this section, I will focus on one of them – systems theory – and sketch its contribution to reconfiguring the notion of the actor.

Contemporary sociological systems theory (Luhmann 1995, 2012) is proposing a thoroughly dynamic, eventful and relational view of society and actors. Contrary to action theories, Niklas Luhmann (1995) argues that action is not the fundament of society but that it results from processes of communication.

Communications are events that relate Alter and Ego by processing selections (Luhmann 1995) : Alter is selecting information from a world full of data as well as a behavior that conveys this information to Ego. Yet, communication only takes place if Ego observes these two selections as selections: If you burn yourself and scream due to the incredible pain you experience, the mere fact of you uttering alarming sounds itself does not constitute a communicative event. It is only due to an observer that identifies the information (apparently the coffee is quite hot) as well as the conveying behavior (the verbal

signs of danger) that communication takes place. Without this distinction of information and utterance communication just doesn't happen and the observer will make her own experiences with the cup of coffee she is about to drink.

Action and actors emerge as soon as communications are attributed to persons within the basic social processes of communication (cf. Fuchs 2001). "Origins" of specific communicative acts are identified ("X said...") and their contributions to discourse tied to them ("... said Y"). This enables social systems to observe their operations and to seize opportunities for further communication. In systems theory, then, actors are fictions that participate in the reproduction of social systems (Hutter & Teubner 1994, p. 110).

This bold theoretical step towards deconstructing actors and actions begs many questions none of which can be addressed here: What about the relation of social and psychological systems? Where are the body and the materiality of communication in all of this? What about motives, interests, etc.? Yet, while these and other topics are well worthy of critical discussion, I want to point to one specific aspect of the turn from action to communication that is of significance within the current context. Moving theoretically beyond the unity of the actor allows for formulating the explanatory problem of the emergence of actors: How are institutionalized actors formed in social process?

Forming actors

As far as actors are concerned, the crucial question according to systems theory is "How are actors produced?" For theoretical as well as empirical work, this question calls for conceptualizing and reconstructing the ways in which actors are formed and stabilized in the continuous flow of social events. However, as far as I can see, these problems are not adequately dealt with up until now. In order to fill this gap, I want to propose two sensitizing concepts of actor formation that can be used in empirical research: identification and categorization.

Identification refers to the production of actors out of events. Observers observe events as distinctions (Luhmann 1995). Whatever may happen at any place, it turns into an event only insofar as observers single it out and place it into the context of its environment. From this continuous flow of events, identities emerge through establishing relations between events and the concatenation of sets of relations into things (Abbott 1995). Building an identity, then, is like building a form in a loosely coupled medium (cf. Heider 2005 [1926]). These forms turn into actors as soon as they are treated in social systems

as processors of communication. That is, neither persons nor things as such "are" actors. Only insofar as they are observed as introducing difference in the world, actors come into "being".

Analyzing the production of identities in interaction includes the identification of relevant types of events, the way relations are established between events, and the manner in which they are tied together by observers. Except for cases where identities are born, analyses deal with already established identities and, thus, with established structures of events that they follow in their reproduction and transformation. But even if fixed identities enter a situation: "What comes out are new actors, new entities, new relations among old parts." (Abbott 1995, p. 863)

The initial formation of identities as well as their reproduction is supported by processes of categorization (cf. Hacking 1987). Categories suggest sets of relevant types of events and the nature of relations that assemble events to form identities. Building on this process of forming identities, categorization also stabilizes identities by establishing relations of equivalence between identities (Boltanski & Thévenot 1983; Mervis & Rosch 1981). It attaches labels to identities and thereby structures the space of possibilities of their (self-)observation and gives them relevance beyond the immediate situation. In the case of identities observed as actors, categories also suggest typical kinds of actions coming with specific categories of actors (Schegloff 2007).

With identification and categorization, I have singled out two sensitizing concepts that can orient the analysis of the micro-foundations of actors. Actors emerge as soon as relations of events are concatenated, labeled and attributed with responsibility for introducing difference in the world. This view of actors emphasizes both social structure (as observed in events) and culture (in terms of categorization). It also highlights the processual aspects of the formation of actors in action.

Institutional theory is intimately linked to understanding the process of actor formation. It analyzes the institutional templates or categories of actors that can be used in social process in order to produce actors (Meier 2009, p. 77f.). It also enables us to understand the modern proclivity to identify "the individual person as the modern source of all meaning and action" (Frank & Meyer 2002, p. 92) and helps distinguishing types of actors with specific "vocabularies of motive" (Mills 1940) in distinct institutional spheres (Friedland & Alford 1991). Since institutions legitimize actors and their actions

(Meyer, Boli, & Thomas 1987), institutionalist research also provides clues for solving the puzzle how single events are conceptualized as actions by observers.

For institutionalist theory, then, Niklas Luhmann's conceptualization of actors provides a way of radicalizing the intention behind both, the turn to micro-foundations as well as the analysis of templates of actors. It allows delving deeper into the micro-analytics of social process as it calls for reconstructing the ways in which institutionalized actors are formed out of events.

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