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Introducing "The Creativity of Action" Into Institutionalist Theory

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Abstract

Much has been written in institutionalist theory about the need to address and conceptualise action within its theoretical framework. For conceptual as well as political reasons, understanding how agency is related to institutions is indispensable to the study of institutions. In this paper, I will take the creative action theory developed by the German sociologist Hans Joas (1996) in his book "The Creativity of Action" and apply it to some unresolved problems in institutionalist literature. I have chosen Joas because he represents, in my view, one of the most sophisticated action theories currently available in sociology. Joas argues against rational actor models and bases his action theory on four concepts: creativity, situation, corporeality and sociality. If applied to institutionalist theory I believe his theory, centred on the notion of creativity, could help fight the pervasive rational-cognitive bias in institutional analysis, add more depth to concepts already discussed (such as skilled agents), resolve hitherto unresolved issues (such as the paradox of embedded agency), and open up some new avenues of thought (such as the inclusion of the corporeality of actors or institutional ecstasy).

Key words: action theory, corporeality, creativity, emotion, institutional ecstasy, Joas, motivation, paradox of embedded agency

INTRODUCTION

1. I use the term "institutionalist" as synonymous with "neo-institutionalist" throughout the paper. I will apply the latter only to distinguish the current school from older versions of institutionalist thought.

2. A note on the usage of the various terms in this paper: With Joas, I focus on "action", avoiding any further terminological narrowing beyond the every-day usage of the notion. I treat "actor" and "agent" synonymously as referring to an individual or collective entity capable of action. The capability I call "agency". Since my emphasis is not on the institutional construction of agency or its legitimacy – in contrast to Meyer and Jepperson's (2000) seminal paper – I do not use the term "actorhood". With regard to scholarly output on the topic, I follow the mainstream in not distinguishing clearly between "action theories" and "agency theories" when referring to an author's oeuvre. This is despite the fact that I agree with Joas' critique that action theory, in the narrow sense, is a "little known discipline".

Much has been written in institutionalist[1] theory about the need to address and conceptualise the actor[2] within its theoretical framework. If, as Suddaby (2010) reminds us with reference to Meyer and Rowan's 1977 contribution, the central puzzle of institutional theory is "to understand why and how organizations adopt processes and structures for their meaning rather than their productive value", then this central puzzle requires agents to produce and understand this meaning. If modern (Western) societies are becoming ever more institutionalised, we should ask how it is that institutions can be created, maintained and abolished by the members of these societies. In this double – conceptual and political – sense, the study of institutions cannot exist without the study of the agents that engage with them.

In response to this necessity, countless case studies have been published, especially under the heading of "institutional entrepreneurship", that describe individual instances of agency as relevant for institutions. The conceptual contributions to agency and action from the institutionalist field are, however, comparatively few (see below) and, what is worse, they remain relatively unconnected to each other. The challenge to incorporate agency into institutionalist theory can in principle be taken up in three different ways (Weik, 2011): First, by departing from the classic action theories of Weber, Schütz, Mead, Goffman and Garfinkel, to name just the most popular, and marrying them to the macro perspective that institutionalist theory has held traditionally. Second, by using theories that claim to have overcome the structure-agency dualism, most notably Giddens and Bourdieu, but also practice approaches inspired by the work of Schatzki (Schatzki, 1997, 2000, 2005; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001) or Turner (1994, 2001). Third, by taking neo-institutionalism's own brand of agency theory (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) and enriching it with classic issues of agency theory like purposiveness, intention, or free will, to name just a few. In this paper, I will follow the first suggestion. I will take the creative action theory developed by the German sociologist Hans Joas (1996) and show how his action theory can improve our understanding of institutions.

My contribution will focus on four issues in institutionalist theory. The first two – the interplay between institutions and agents and the paradox of embedded agency – relate to extensive discussions in the scholarly community. For them, Joas' theory can provide concepts to overcome some known difficulties and combat the rational actor bias still pervasive in many approaches. The second pair of issues – cognitive bias and the emotional-motivational dimension – addresses lacunae in institutionalist theorising. Here Joas can provide concepts to "kick-start" research and push it in a direction that avoids the pitfalls of cognitivism from the start, offering a more complex concept of human agency that encompasses emotions as well as the body. The notion of institutional ecstasy that I will introduce below seems to me a particularly exciting new avenue in this direction.

I have chosen Joas because he represents, in my view, one of the most sophisticated action theories currently available in sociology. His book "The Creativity of Action" is almost a compendium of all the major issues discussed

in action theory in the 20th century - issues which Joas describes with erudite scholarship and then integrates into an original theory. From Jeffrey Alexander's claim that it is "sociological theorizing at its best" on the back cover to Camic's (1998:283) verdict of a "masterly contribution" and a host of complimentary reviews from others, Joas' book has been recognised immediately as an important development in the theory of action. Just as importantly, Joas is one of the few authors who really concentrate on a conceptualisation of action as opposed to agents or practices. While both of the latter concepts have their role to play, Joas' focus on action allows him to draw on anthropology and philosophy rather than psychology as a basis for his concepts. In this manner, the theory retains a "human" face without retracing the well-worn paths of cognitive psychology.

In the subsequent sections, I will first give an introduction to the four issues and how they have been discussed in institutionalist theory. I will then go on to describe Joas' main concepts of creativity, situation, corporeality and sociality. Finally, I will revisit the four issues to show how Joas' concepts can improve analysis in these areas.

AGENCY AND ACTION IN INSTITUTIONALIST THEORY

Since the early 1990s, in the wake of the seminal papers of DiMaggio (1988) and Friedland and Alford (1991), institutionalist theory has dedicated much thought to the role of actors. At times, for example with institutional entrepreneurs (among others, Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Leca, Battilana, & Boxenbaum, 2008; Rao & Giorgi, 2006), this endeavour has almost dominated the field. A number of action-oriented perspectives focusing on different aspects of action have been developed, such as institutional work approaches (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009), collective action and social movements (among others, Fligstein, 2001; Hargrave & van de Ven, 2006; Hensmans, 2003; Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003), the interpretive aspect of agency (among others, Binder, 2007; Christensen & Westenholz, 1997; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Zilber, 2002, 2008), or actors as products of institutions (among others, Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2009; Meyer, et al., 1987; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

As is to be expected in such a large and research-active field, a host of problems is discussed. I will not even attempt to give a comprehensive overview here, but will instead focus on four issues or problems that I think can be remedied by integrating Joas' theory into institutionalist theory. These issues concern the link between actors and institutions, the paradox of embedded agency, a cognitive bias in institutionalist theory and the emotional-motivational dimension of institutions. In the next section, I will give a brief overview of the institutionalist literature on these topics. I will then present Joas' ideas, define his concepts and describe their function in his theory. Finally, I will show how Joas can help to tackle the aforementioned issues in various ways. With regard to well-established issues like the link between actors and institutions or the paradox of embedded agency, Joas' theory helps us to identify hidden rational actor assumptions and to combat them with a different conceptualisation of action. Since this different conceptualisation is based on philosophical and

anthropological traditions, it can also lend more theoretical weight to actors and portray agency in a more complex manner. With regard to the lacunae of corporeality and emotions that have been created by the cognitive bias of institutionalist theory, Joas' theory can establish conceptual points of departure for institutionalist analysis and empirical research.

The Interplay of Actors and Institutions

The first issue I would like to take up concerns the interplay of actors and institutions. Ever since the interest in agency flared up in the 1990s, this has been a core research topic in institutionalist theory. The results are, accordingly, impressive. Starting with institution building, we learn that powerful actors seeking to stabilise their own position confront each other over contentious issues (Fligstein, 2001; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Hoffman, 1999; Munir, 2005; Zilber, 2002). In the ensuing struggle, incumbents and challengers draw on material and symbolic resources to legitimate their own view and discredit the other. The proposals of all combatants include a mixture of rules and roles, invoking new or old identities and norms (Fligstein, 2001). They also justify certain resource distributions (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Dorado, 2005; Misangyi, Weaver, & Elms, 2008). On the symbolic plane, all groups draw on culture (DiMaggio, 1997; Hoffman, 2001; Johnson, 2007; Lawrence & Phillips, 2004), but quite often in a toolkit and bricolage manner (Colomy, 1998; DiMaggio, 1997). They produce discourses drawing on other (macro) discourses by producing texts and translating issues from other fields to suit their own cause (Lawrence & Phillips, 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Challengers quite often have to include elements of previously legitimated discourses in order to gain legitimacy for themselves (Colomy, 1998; Misangyi, et al., 2008; Zilber, 2002). All these activities require interpretation and meaning-making and are conducted in dialogical fashion with the warring groups modifying their own stance in response to the activities of their opponents. Depending on the outcome of the struggle, a new settlement (Rao & Kenney, 2008) may be reached in which all parties accept a shared definition of reality (Misangyi, et al., 2008; Phillips, et al., 2004), although this acceptance may be arrived at through suppression, co-optation or acquiescence (Beckert, 1999; Clemens & Cook, 1999; Fligstein, 2001; Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006). This then forms the basis of a possible institutionalisation once the discourses diffuse and are taken up by more actors in a reliable manner (Czarniawska, 2009).

The other side of the coin, i.e. the influence of institutions on actors and actions, has been researched in even greater depth. Here, we find quite well-known tenets such as that institutions provide legitimacy, authority (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000), power, rewards and sanctions (Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006; Phillips, et al., 2004), conceptions of agency and categories of actors (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Hensmans, 2003; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), rules, scripts (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; K. Weber & Glynn, 2006), positive models (Clemens & Cook, 1999; K. Weber & Glynn, 2006), logics of action (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), opportunities for identification (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), means, ends (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), and resources (Hensmans, 2003). Institutions constrain (both normatively and cognitively) and enable, even generate, action (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; K. Weber & Glynn, 2006). They constitute identities (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006; Rao, Monin, & Durand,

2003), structure interests and incentives (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Rao, et al., 2003), direct actors' attention through values (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; K. Weber & Glynn, 2006), reduce uncertainty (Beckert, 1999; Lounsbury, 2002), influence the cost-benefit-analysis of alternatives (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Edelman, Uggen, & Erlanger, 1999) and, through their ambiguity, pose puzzles that generate further sensemaking and action (K. Weber & Glynn, 2006).

In order to relate the "actors build institutions" and the "institutions influence actors" elements, many of the above authors draw explicitly or implicitly on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). In accordance with this theory, they view institutions as enabling and constraining action, as well as being both a medium and an outcome of action. Thus, institutions shape actors' schemes, actors interpret a situation within these schemes, then act, and these acts have an impact on the institutions involved. While this model certainly has helped to overcome the dichotomy of structure and agency, it still bows to the requirements of a rational action model. A rational action model needs stable preferences, resources and constraints at least in the moment the actor takes the decision to act in a certain manner. Giddens's model has preserved this stability by asking the researcher to analytically bracket either agency or structure in any given moment of the analysis. The researcher will hence either focus on agency, taking the structural setting as given, or focus on structure, taking agency as given.

The problems I want to tackle by introducing Joas are the ones relating to the (hidden) rational actor assumption: the sequentiality of an intention-decision-action model and the idea of motives as grounds of action. Joas' notion of dialogue, which is anchored in his concept of the situation, will rephrase this model in terms of a hermeneutic exchange rather than a sequence, thus according importance to the actor's ongoing sensemaking. It will also allow us to see institutional change as not just triggered by active intervention but also as a permanent and continuous feature.

The Paradox of Embedded Agency

The next problem, which is in many ways a sub-issue of the first, is the often-quoted "paradox of embedded agency" (Battilana, 2006; Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Beckert, 1999; Dorado, 2005; Garud, et al., 2007; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Levy & Scully, 2007; Wijen & Ansari, 2007). Although "paradox" is certainly a misnomer, the label refers to a real problem, viz. the question of how agents can modify or even abolish institutions if their interests and cognitive schemes have been created by these same institutions. Institutionalist authors have been trying to resolve the problem by focusing on actors from the periphery of the field, who have a strong interest in changing the field while at the same time being less socialised by its logics (Battilana, 2006; Fligstein, 2001; Misangyi, et al., 2008). A second line of argument (among others, Edelman, et al., 1999; Feldman, 2000; K. Weber & Glynn, 2006; Wicks, 2002; Zilber, 2002, 2008) centres on the inherent ambiguity of every institutional practice that leads to varieties in interpretation and thus to mostly "unintended" modifications. This need for interpretation and negotiation of meaning is perhaps currently most pronounced in the "inhabited institutions" view (Binder, 2007; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). A third group of authors starts from inherent contradictions in institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002) that ultimately force agents to reflect upon them.

As Joas' conception of the actor is grounded more explicitly in philosophical and anthropological traditions, he can provide us with a more complex notion of actors and avoid the apparent paradox by pointing to an inherent creativity based on the need to continually enact oneself. Rather than socially determined beings facing situations in a purely cognitive-rational manner, Joas' actors display a pre-reflexive, corporeal directedness (a "will").

Cognitive Bias

A third point of critique concerns what I perceive to be a lingering cognitive bias in institutionalist theory. This does not only result from authors favouring rational action models (Beckert, 1999; Edelman, et al., 1999; Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009), but also from the broad class of scholars focusing on the interpretive efforts of people within institutions. Meaning, schemas, scripts and rules may be unreflected by individual agents, but always speak to their cognitive capabilities. Emotions, bodily coercion or, in fact, most topics relating to the corporeal nature of agency remain underresearched. Body styles and their influence on mothers' decisions concerning birth practices have been analysed (Weik, 2009), and there is a book on institutions of cruelty (von Trotha, 2011). Overall, however, such contributions are few and far between.

Joas' notion of corporeality not only takes the body to be one of the pillars of agency but also seeks to give it equal conceptual weight and autonomy vis-à-vis the mind by avoiding the idea of the body as an instrument that is permanently available and perfectly controllable by the actor. He thus alerts scholars to the material stubbornness of the body and sheds light on the richly populated world of passivity and chance that a scientific community trained in Western notions of agency is inclined to ignore.

The Emotional-Motivational Dimension of Institutions

Institutionalist theory's rational-cognitive bias also becomes visible when we look for studies on the emotional or motivational dimension of institutions. Voronov and Vince (2012:58) summarise the state of play quite concisely by saying that "although the emotional underpinnings of institutional work have been acknowledged, they have not been systematically theorized or empirically investigated". Emotions are implicitly involved when scholars talk about the effectiveness of rhetoric, since rhetoric is the art of presenting an argument in a way that appeals to the audience. Similar notions of appeal are implicit in work on institutions, institutional logics and identity, where part of the reason why actors adopt/abandon logics or modify their identity can be found in the appeal of a new logic or identity element (Voronov & Vince, 2012). For both rhetoric and identity, appeal remains largely a black box that fails to explain why some actors feel attracted and others do not (Polletta & Jasper, 2001) – a problem that was pointed out as early as 1997 (DiMaggio, 1997). Without the emotional dimension, the adoption of a logic appears in a purely cognitive manner as a (rational) choice of the "better" alternative, while in respect to identity it seems like passive consumers adopt the identity suggested to them by institutional entrepreneurs (Lok, 2010). A wider recognition of the role of emotions in social processes can be found in the social movement literature (e.g. Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001). Here, emotions become explicit as the true mobilising force behind such concepts as collective identity or frames, or as the "glue"

of the social networks the movements draw on in recruitment. Quite often, however, this dimension is lost again when institutionalist theory imports ideas from social movement theory. The focus then is mostly on meaning and frames (e.g. Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Lounsbury, et al., 2003), collective action (Hargrave & van de Ven, 2006) or power and rhetorical strategies (e.g. Hensmans, 2003). Perhaps the only autochthonous discussion of emotions in institutionalist theory can be found in Weber's (1979) discussion of domination through charisma. He distinguishes charismatic domination from the other two types by categorising it as the devotion (Hingabe) of the dominated. The dominated form an "emotional collective" (emotionale Vergemeinschaftung). Domination through charisma, however, is a rather short-lived type and bound to wane to the extent that the life of the community becomes preoccupied with mundane, everyday concerns. Meyer and Jepperson (2000:109) collectivise the concept when they talk about the "spiritual charisma" of communities. In contrast to Weber's ahistorical ideal type, they, however, would argue that spiritual charisma is subject to a historical development and weakens as individual actorhood moves to the fore.

In addition to these thoughts, Joas shows how emotions acquire an institutional importance by encouraging actors to "go beyond themselves". This then forms an important motivation to join and defend institutional arrangements. Before I continue this discussion, however, I will now present Joas' main ideas in more depth and in a coherent fashion.

JOAS' THEORY

Shared Basic Assumptions

On a theoretical-systematic plane, it is quite easy to integrate Joas' concepts into institutionalist theory because they match important institutionalist assumptions and concerns. Joas (1996) argues against functionalism and structural determinism, and the institutionalist scholars I have identified above will follow him quite happily in this. If we perceive institutional change as a struggle in which culture and politics as well as contingent factors like mobilisation or actors' interpretations play a vital role, both functionalism and structural determinism seem ill-equipped to provide a theoretical basis for it. With regard to social order, Joas rejects both rational action and normative integration as cornerstones of a model. Although institutionalist theory from time to time tends to be seduced by one of these concepts – arguing either that actors choose rationally between competing logics or that institutional myths and taken-for-granted assumptions are enough to create social order and acquiescence – the above scholars quite clearly reject such quick fixes. Social order, to them, is a fragile thing that needs to be worked at continuously. Joas' explicit embrace of what he calls "constitution theories" (i.e. sociological theories focusing on social construction, negotiated orders, unintended consequences and contingent developments) is an open invitation to those institutionalist scholars using Giddens, Bourdieu or others to rethink or elaborate on their concept of action in Joas' terms. Finally, on a methodological level, Joas does not want to limit his action theory to the micro world of individual interaction but aims to establish a "non-functionalist macrosociology based on action theory" (Joas, 1996:198). This makes his theory well suited to merge with

institutionalist concerns and theory building.

The Creativity of Action

In his book "The Creativity of Action", Joas' (1996) aim is to construe a theory of action that integrates creativity as a core element. His idea is not to describe a special type of action, viz. "creative action", as one type among others, but to show that creativity should be taken to be a central element of any type of action (e.g. rational action, habitual action, collective action). The fundamental concepts he uses to make this point are situation, corporeality and sociality. These three, to him, are dimensions of every form of action. At the same time, all three spell out what creative human action entails. Creativity, in Joas' understanding, refers not (just) to the activity of the artistic genius, but to a common human feature which is displayed whenever an actor finds a solution to a problem in a specific situation. It is as such an everyday phenomenon and an anthropological constant rather than a special type of action displayed in a limited number of situations.

Creativity, however, is a complex attribute and thus cannot be defined in one or two sentences. To approach the concept, Joas (pp.70ff.) draws on contributions from philosophy and anthropology, devoting an entire chapter to discuss various metaphors used by authors who have made it the central concept of their theories. In particular, he concentrates on five metaphors to illuminate the concept in its various nuances: expression, production, revolution, life force, and intelligence.

For the poet-cum-philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, expression (Ausdruck) emphasises how the inner life is transported and made known to the outer world, sometimes to the extent that individuals learn something about themselves that had previously been hidden from them. In Herder's anthropology, human beings, when compared to animals, are deficient creatures because they lack the instinctive sureness of an organism in which everything is geared to the fulfilment of a limited number of purposes. To make up for this, humans are open to the world (i.e. not restricted to function in certain situations) and capable of learning. Openness and learning are supported by two phenomena unique to human beings: reason and language. Herder sees them less as biologically acquired faculties and more as special ways of dealing with the world that are unique to the human race. Since humans are, however, "no longer infallible machines in the hands of Nature", they need to actively unfold their inner core or telos in a process of self-realisation. This happens through creative action.

For Karl Marx, creativity translates into work and production. Through work, human beings manifest (entäußern) their inner powers. Pro-duction in the original sense is the bringing forth of something new into the world. The new object, however, still remains part of the producer's identity unless alienation converts it into a separate object. Marx' third relevant notion is revolution as the moment of political creativity and the establishment of freedom.

While Herder and Marx try to capture creativity by identifying one specific type of action, life philosophers[3] in France and Germany introduce the notion of life as an amorphous concept combining a biological perspective on life with the pragmatism of everyday life in its explicitly non-philosophical varieties. There is also a distinction of life versus form (something devoid of content), which echoes the concerns of Romanticism. Life here connotes dynamics, creation, immediacy and youth. Most important in the present context is Schopenhauer's

3. Life philosophy (Lebensphilosophie) was a relatively heterogeneous movement active in France and Germany between 1880 and 1930. Classifications vary, but Fellmann (1996) characterises Schopenhauer as the origin of the movement and Nietzsche, Dilthey, Bergson, Simmel and William James (who stands between life philosophy and Pragmatism) as its most important contributors.

conception of the will as something rooted in corporeal experience rather than a rational decision-making faculty. In later authors this will becomes more and more de-individualised and develops either in proto-personal concepts like sexuality or supra-individual concepts like a life force. What remains common to them all is the idea of a "force" or "energy" as the ultimate reason and motor of all human behaviour and the suspicion that rational action is nothing more than an ex-post justification of actions originating in this force.

Finally, Pragmatism adds the idea of intelligence and problem-solving. Here, creativity enters the picture whenever a disturbance or crisis appears in the unreflected flow of everyday life and people have to search for new ways of dealing with the situation. It is as such a rather mundane phenomenon. The new solution is to a certain extent determined by the constraints of the situation but also contains something new, a spark of spontaneity kindled, according to Mead, in the I of the agent.

Despite these early attempts, Joas argues, creativity has been relegated to the margins by 20th century sociology. Classic theories of action, like Weber's, have quickly moved from action to macro issues like domination. (Others, I would add, have, like Giddens, focused on the psychology of the actor.) Action itself has hardly been analysed, and Parsons' 1937 publication "The Structure of Social Action" remains "a little-known classic of a little-known discipline" (p.7).

When action is discussed in sociology, it is predominantly through a rational action lens, and hence Joas starts his argument with a critique of the rational actor (pp.146ff.). He holds that, first, rational action theory separates a single action from its context and thus eliminates essential features of it. Second, it creates an opposite category of non-rational, or worse, irrational, action into which a high proportion of empirical actions have to be dumped and, effectively, forgotten as they are, at best, imperfect renditions of the great ideal. Rational action theory is, third, a theory of rationality rather than a theory of action because it uses rationality as the single criterion for its typologies. In answer to this critique, Joas (pp.147f.) proposes not to abandon the concept of rationality – it has, after all, its uses – but to make its basic assumptions explicit and address them in a more appropriate manner.

The three basic assumptions of the rational action model he identifies are: first, that actors are capable of goal-oriented action, most prominently in the form of means-end-relations or more generally, as a teleological form of action. Joas' critique of this assumption is two-pronged. On the one hand, he maintains, once again, that it excludes a number of empirically relevant types of action, such as habitual, routine, existential or imaginative action. On the other hand, he points out that the means-end-schema makes it impossible to scrutinise ends in themselves, their selection and establishment or their preconditions. If we do that, we might find, as Dewey, Simmel or Heidegger have done, that humans are "non-purposive beings" (p.156) who design and modify their ends according to their means and to the demands of the situation, even, if necessary, ex post. A means-ends-schema requires actors to understand the situation before they act; the mental act of understanding is temporally and categorically separated from the action. This reflects the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, and it is no coincidence that the authors named above reject it. In a positive formulation, they maintain that intentionality and understanding are related to the situation. Perception and cognition do not precede the action

but are elements that develop as it unfolds. In the same way, planning is no pre-condition of action. Hence, "situation" is Joas' first basic component of an action theory (p.160).

The second basic assumption of rational action theory is that actors have full control over their bodies. Bodies appear, if at all, as tools of acting. Following the Cartesian dichotomy, qualities traditionally ascribed to the "body" part of the dichotomy, like passivity, sensitivity, receptivity and imperturbability, are missing from a theory of action. Again, important but often involuntary actions like blushing, laughing, crying, losing one's control, and body language are moved beyond the scope of analysis. Biological foundations of action, too, are hardly discussed in the sociology of action. This is despite the fact that prominent anthropologists like Gehlen and Plessner or philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and Mead have construed a powerful argument for the body as a very special kind of "thing", a thing that profoundly affects the way we think and act. In their wake, Joas suggests making corporeality the second basic component of an action theory.

The third basic assumption of rational action theory views actors as autonomous vis-à-vis their environment, as veritable individuals that can choose to socialise with others or not. In his critique, Joas (pp.187ff.) follows Mead to maintain that an individual identity is rather a product of the social world than of its author. More importantly, however, he follows Mead in viewing the "social act" as the primary unit of action theory (pp.189ff.). No individual act is possible without a background of shared language and knowledge; social structures and orders are more than an aggregation of individual acts. Sociality – Joas' third basic component of an action theory – is both a precondition and a constitutive element of every action.

As indicated above, I will now show how Joas' theory of action can be used to resolve the aforementioned issues in institutionalist theory.

REVISITING THE ISSUES

Revisiting the Interplay of Actors and Institutions: The Concept of Dialogue

Whereas Giddens proposes a sequence of alternating monologues (see above), Joas' concept of the situation emphasises the notion of dialogue. Dialogues influence the participants' constructions simultaneously instead of sequentially. To use an image, instead of a structuration circle, Joas uses the concept of the hermeneutic circle to make the point that the interpretation of a situation is never even analytically independent of the actors' plans, and vice versa. And as the hermeneutic circle is not a perfect circle but rather a spiral of increasing understanding, so the actors' plans and interests evolve with their understanding of the situation, and vice versa[4]. Joas thus not only criticises the means-end-schema of rational action but goes further, to reject the idea of motives as grounds of action that are internal to the actor and pre-established before the action starts. What is currently discussed in terms of motives or interests might, following Joas, be more usefully rephrased as actors' dreams and wishes. To label them dreams or wishes points, in my view, far better to the creative, potential, not-yet-finished, vague or "becoming" nature of these phenomena, which are shaped over time and concretised in the course of action rather than

4. An empirical exploration of such a process can be found in Christensen and Westenholz (1997), albeit without a deeper conceptual discussion.

being established beforehand, like a prefabricated bow to shoot the agentic arrow off. An increased awareness of the creative and becoming nature of all action could also, and perhaps even more importantly, promote the insight (proposed most explicitly by "inhabited institution" scholars) that institutional change is not only brought about by action as intervention (for example, Jepperson, 1991). What I explained above concerning the hermeneutic circle can also be applied to institutions: As actors develop their understanding of the situation, they also develop their understanding of the relevant institutions, which can lead to institutional change. If we define institutions as consisting (at least partly) of shared understandings, then almost by definition a change in understanding will entail a change in the institution. This is an interesting conceptualisation of change that is "untriggered" in the sense of being a permanent by-product of actors' sensemaking.

Revisiting the Paradox of Embedded Agency: The Concept of Creative Action

Joas' notion of creativity as the central element in an action theory speaks directly to the problem of embedded agency. Like Fligstein's (2001) skilled actors, Binder's (2007:549) "agentic, creative people" who "neither purely rationalize their action nor seamlessly follow institutionalized scripts", or Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006:219) "culturally competent actors with strong practical skills and sensibility who creatively navigate within their organizational fields", Joas' agents are inherently creative beings. He goes, however, further than the embedded agency authors in anchoring this proposition in philosophical and anthropological traditions[5]. This is important in order to lend actors theoretical weight vis-à-vis the sometimes quite oppressive emphasis on script-following and the construction of identity through institutions (see the overview for "institutions influence actors" below). Without it, propositions like the above often seem to come out of the blue, a fierce but ultimately unrelated "yes, but" statement trying to save agentic independence in the face of overwhelming institutions. Binder's article is a classic example when she argues that:

> *"By prioritizing the institutional logics that get carried into organizations by script-following actors, new institutionalism has a view of action that deprives people of generative creativity in their responses to their environments. Because it assumes that coercive, mimetic and normative forces are so strong that people in organizations have little choice but to adhere to these institutional scripts, it overlooks those actors' multiple and local meanings, which also shape their practices." (Binder, 2007:550)*

While I do not want to argue with her observation, I would note that she introduces an element of neglect and, by inference, the need for a different view of actors in the "yes, but" fashion I referred to above. What institutionalist theory lacks is a conception of actors that is anchored in anthropology rather than being introduced on the spot to remedy the problems at hand. More importantly, if we accept the problem that the "paradox" proposes, it is not enough to state "yes, but actors are, after all, free, skilled, creative, etc." If these skilled, creative actors take certain rules and practices for granted, the paradox persists. Joas' rich, anthropologically grounded notion of the creative actor can here be used to direct attention away from the dimension that causes the problem, viz. the cognitive one. After all, taken-for-grantedness, as initially

5. Fligstein's (2001) paper is an exception here for he refers to the sociological tradition represented by Giddens and Joas (!) in a footnote. Another one, drawing on Symbolic Interactionism, is Hallett and Ventresca (2006).

discussed by Zucker (1977, 1983, 1987), refers to a cognitive phenomenon, specifically to perceiving alternatives in decision-making. It would thus make sense to look to other sources of creative action to overcome the paradox.

Within his notion of creativity, Joas offers wider conceptualisations of both actors and situations than those that are normally found in the institutionalist literature. For institutionalists, the paradox of embedded agency arises because actors are, firstly, socialised to take certain ideas for granted. They then, secondly, find themselves in a situation that requires a departure from institutionalised practices and by changing them act, thirdly, in a way that violates the taken-for-grantedness of the ideas acquired in the first step. With regard to the first step of this process, Joas would argue that human actors are far more than socialised beings. Creativity, to him, is a ubiquitous, irrepressible, fundamentally human life force. Whether he talks about "expression" or "production", about "self-realisation" or "experience", he refers to human beings enacting themselves. Like in Heidegger's Dasein, these forms are never purely cognitive, but part and parcel of a person's ongoing action. In institutionalist theory it is perhaps the authors studying social movements (Hensmans, 2003; Lounsbury, et al., 2003) or identity (Glynn, 2008; Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006) that come closest to what Joas conceptualises here. However, these notions lack the anthropological depth that Joas aims at, a depth that warrants human actors to draw on sources of creative and surprising action rather than being reduced to socialised rule-followers or cognitive decision-makers. With regard to the second step in the process, Joas suggests that the relation between actor and situation should not be conceptualised in such a way. Actors do not come into an "external" situation with pre-fabricated "internal" mindsets (including taken for granted ideas). Rather, they find themselves to be part of a world of possible actions at every moment. Situations demand that we take action because of the way we perceive them which is, in turn, a function of our activity. Hence, there can be no clear separation into internal and external components. A purely cognitive perspective may suggest this, but Joas counters it with a notion of creativity that has a strong pre-reflexive component and is a mixture of body, will and action. This mixture constitutes a "non-teleological form of intentionality" (Joas, 1996:157ff.), i.e. a directedness of the actor that is not a cognitive, conscious directedness towards a goal. It is located in the body and in its different ways of relating to its environment. This is a notion that is, to my knowledge, lacking in institutionalist theory[6]. Summing up, both of Joas' accounts, whether taken individually or combined, offer a way of escaping the paradox. They imbue action with elements other than decision-making and portray agents as more than cognitive sense-makers facing a situation external to them. As a consequence, they reduce the importance of taken for granted ideas and resolve the paradox in this manner.

Revisiting Cognitive Bias: The Concept of Corporeality

The problem with theories which lack a conceptualisation and problematisation of the body is, as Joas points out, that the body is denigrated to a "permanently available instrument of intentionality". It becomes a tool perfectly under the control of the agent. Among other things, this view overlooks the long history of turning the body into an instrument, a history described by Elias and Foucault and worth reading in parallel to Meyer and Jepperson's (2000) history of the individual as a cultural construction since it contributes just as much to

6. Authors working with Bourdieu's habitus may come closest to what Joas intends here – if they use the concept in the corporeal, intentional manner Bourdieu intended and not, as often happens, merely as a posh word for socialisation.

an understanding of how individual actors function in modern contexts. The accounts of Elias and Foucault also qualify Meyer and Jepperson's account in one important respect, viz. the equation of agents with activism. As Joas stresses, this equation is already culture-specific and ignores agents' passivity, receptivity and susceptibility in many contexts. It also glosses over the role of fate and chance that may be more important to other cultural settings. In this sense, Meyer and Jepperson's supposed meta-view on agency and individualism in Western culture is already just as much a manifestation of it. Although Joas' emphasis is on the human body, his broader focus on action of any type implies that corporeality can also be studied with regard to collective actors. Topics here might be the materiality of institutions, the corporeality of group actors, and the (legal) ontology of the "corporation", to name just a few. As with human bodies, the decisive issue is that they are not mere instruments of a collective intentionality but have a life of their own that may get in the way of collective decision-making and action.

Revisiting the Emotional-Motivational Dimension of Institutions: Institutional Ecstasy

One reason why emotions are neglected in institutional theory is our intuitive understanding of them as individual-psychological features – features that institutionalist theory is, almost by definition, not concerned with. As Voronov and Vince (2012) argue, however, emotions also have a collective, supra-individual side to them, be it in the form of emotional scripts that actors adhere to, or as a collective experience that is embodied in the individual actor. Joas focuses on this latter idea to elicit the emotional-motivational dimension of institutions. I will call this particular aspect "institutional ecstasy". The term "institutional ecstasy" seems to be an oxymoron, for we normally conceive institutions to refer to everyday, routine, taken for granted, even dull, practices, exactly the opposite of what we term ecstasy. Joas, in contrast, presents it as a general and permanent, even necessary, feature of institutions. In his discussion of sociality, he points out that part of an institution's enabling features concerns moments when individual actors go "beyond themselves". And indeed, whether we think of epic heroes (e.g. Cincinnatus, Le Chanson de Roland, William Wallace) or heroes in everyday life (firemen, policemen), we see that their heroic deeds do not consist in departing from institutions but in sticking to them or reinforcing them under the utmost adversity. Many of the reasons these people would give for their action – a code of chivalry, the fatherland, comradeship – are either institutions themselves or contain institutionalised scripts at their core. The same applies to negative examples of institutional ecstasy, for instance crimes of the Nazi regime. Joas' argument, however, goes beyond extraordinary acts of heroism to touch the ordinary qualities of institutions. With Durkheim, he argues that this feeling of ecstasy, of losing oneself in the collective, is ultimately the reason why institutions can motivate actors. He would hence argue that institutions not only constrain action or enable it by providing resources, legitimacy and cognitive schemes but that human actors also find an emotional stimulus in subjecting themselves to institutions. For Durkheim (1964), this stimulus is created by a joy of abandon and the experience of something "greater than" and "transcending" the confines of the ego. It is, to him, the moment religion is born. The argument can, however, also be made outside of a religious context. As Durkheim states

(1964:211):

> "But it is not only in exceptional circumstances that this stimulating action of society makes itself felt; there is not, so to speak, a moment in our lives when some current of energy does not come to us from without. The man who has done his duty finds, in the manifestations of every sort expressing the sympathy, esteem or affection which his fellows have for him, a feeling of comfort, of which he does not ordinarily take account, but which sustains him, none the less. The sentiments which society has for him raise the sentiments which he has for himself. Because he is in moral harmony with his comrades, he has more confidence, courage and boldness in action, just like the believer who thinks that he feels the regard of his god turned graciously towards him. It thus produces, as it were, a perpetual sustenance for our moral nature."

This argument adds an important emotional component to the widely held view of institutions as entities born out of habitualisation or constructions to reduce cognitive complexity. It ties in with an anthropological need for institutions proposed by such authors as Berger and Luckmann (1967) or Douglas (1987). Neo-institutionalist authors, except in the field of religion (see, for example, Friedland, 2009), have largely ignored the emotionally based "force" of institutions or treated is as an outcome of primary socialisation. In opposition to this view, Joas (with Durkheim) stresses the fact that this "force" is not just present in the early stages of human development, but is continuously drawn upon and from time to time even explicitly enacted and reinforced through ceremonies and rituals during an actor's lifetime. It is, in Joas' terms, an integral part of the creativity of action.

DRAWING TOGETHER THE THREADS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOAS

Summing up, I think Joas' theory of action can provide institutionalist theory with an advanced conception of action. It permits actors and actions to be construed as internal to institutions and institutional change without reducing them to products of institutions. We might instead conceive them as co-construed with institutions in a permanent back and forth movement between the individual and the collective. Creativity, the perennial issue of action theory and probably what most people intuitively think of as the most important ingredient of human action, is brought in and reserved a central place. Since his concept, as I have shown above, is firmly grounded in philosophical and anthropological traditions, Joas can use it to create a "rounded" agent and to show the sources on which this agentic independence draws. This rounded agent stands in marked contrast to those institutionalist accounts that posit a rather one-dimensional free, skilled or creative agent in a "deus ex machina" manner (see my discussion of embedded agency above). Joas' concept of the situation criticises the sequentiality of many accounts that seek to bring agency and structure together in institutionalist theory. As these accounts follow Giddens's structuration model, they ignore the dialogical relationship of actor and situation. This is to the detriment of non-interventionist forms of institutional change, but also reintroduces rational actor assumptions. Joas, in contrast, proposes a hermeneutic model that gives more room to unfinished, developing

dreams and desires on the agents' side and to developing interpretations on the institutions' side. His third notion, corporeality, addresses a lacuna that is not only to be found in institutionalist theory but also in most areas of organisation studies. I have shown how it can be used to complement the individual actorhood account given by Meyer and Jepperson, but there are many other neglected topics around the perceived instrumentality and perfect control of the human body, not least the question of how symbolic institutional features imprint themselves on the body. Finally, I believe new and exciting spaces are opened up by exploring institutional ecstasy, a term I have created from Joas' ideas on sociality.

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