What is the Actor in Organizational Institutionalism?

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INTRODUCTION

It is easy to find actors. We can go to a theatre and (most of the time) we are ushered to our seats, the lights are dimmed and the curtain will probably rise to reveal a stage on which people will appear before us and act out roles. There is a programme listing the actors, director, producer, scenographer, costume designer, sound designer, and so on. The actors on stage are dressed in a certain way, they may speak in an unusual manner, their mannerisms are grossly exaggerated, and visual effects are accentuated. We call it a play, although the subject may be comedy or tragedy, since they are doing something that is not part of their reality (whatever that may be). The production repeats itself as a nearly exact copy for however long the play runs.

An alternative perception of the actor is in performances where the actors decide the fate of the production in their interaction with props and even with the audience. Innovative experimental theatre re-defines the role of writer/director into a collective production that has an emergent narrative; the beginning, middle and end all evolve in the experiment. In principle, experimental theatre never repeats itself because every performance has its own dynamics and development. In practice, though, what keeps it in a theatrical frame is the way roles and performance are perceived and enacted, even though so many other material and organizational properties that signal ‘performance’ are absent.

Even if such innovative acting is not announced, we may recognize that everyday conduct in everyday environments for example a shopping mall or
an office is violated to such a degree that we can figure out that it is staged in some way. For an audience, viewer or spontaneous participant, there is a division between play and non-play, but the fewer signs we have around us to signal what is what, the harder it is to know the difference. This is very telling when something outside the script occurs in a theatrical performance and we are not sure whether it is supposed to be that way or not. A heart attack or stroke, malfunctioning pulleys, unwanted audience participation or actors no longer acting – are all variations in which the audience is not sure of what is and what is not acting. The audience’s perception of the artistic ambition to surprise collides with the truly surprising involvement of externalities beyond the control of the production. A similar yet opposite situation is when everyday behaviour is mimicked without it being revealed to other people that they are playing roles in a production. This could be the case in investigative journalism, ‘walrapping’, ethnomethodological method, the activities of confidence artists, candid camera entertainment or just very odd behaviour.

These depictions of actors in the act have ranged from an established form of play surrounded by a multitude of signs and signals, to a near or total absence of tells. Goffman (1959) considers the division between the front-stage and back-stage relationship between presentation and play in an analogy to secret agreements where teams play out an act on a front stage arranged according to a back-stage agreement. In a structured version of play, there is a clear delineation between front and back that all participants are aware of and play on. In more experimental play there is a process in which front- and back-stage relations evolve, although the need for some degree of cohesion within the back-stage team will never eradicate the difference between stages.

Criteria for judging the quality of performance thus vary between these two types of performance. Within the walls of the theatre, quality of performance is often assessed according to an element of improvisation and the audience’s experiences of surprises on front stage. In experimental innovative versions, the perception of quality is inverted as the norm is an unconventional road to a recognizable end. The two forms share a basic property; the end of the play makes the distinction between front and back stages apparent. In this way acting, as a performance, becomes appreciated because it makes sense to its surroundings (even if the sense it makes is to break with expectations of sense-making as in *le Théâtre de l’Absurde*). Acting makes sense as ‘acting’ because it complies with institutionalized perceptions of what the performance is or what the performance should lead to.

The social science usage of ‘the actor’ leans substantially on such concepts of institutionalized properties of acting. Any definition of ‘actor’ implies two things: an attributive definition by an observer or in self-perception, and a
subject’s intention of action. Acting does exist, of course, that is not revealed as acting and perhaps not even perceived as acting. ‘Acting’ in social science has to be perceived and attributed by someone in terms of following an intent to achieve something, which is the criterion Kenneth Burke laid down for defining an act (Burke 1969).

As students of ‘the social’, we perceive everyday life in terms of staged performances. We decide that the theatre is wherever we perceive actors. We understand their conduct as a following of cues, reading of scripts and use of props, and (in the best of cases) they are rewarded for their performance. We see people acting out small dramas according to scripts of general knowledge and near-instant recognition. Yet it is also fair to say that the institutionalizing that occurs is not only of the actual structure of interaction in the form of expectations in social relations and storylines, but as much in our desire to interpret their interactions as episodes of drama. We observe a certain performance and give it a known classification or label of drama in order to describe it and make sense of it.

The combination of institutionalized forms of social interaction and the way we choose to bracket time and space into perceived dramas allows the actor to enact performances both free of the materiality of the theatre and without any expectation of a final act and closing scene. This also has the consequence that though we make sense of fragmented perceptions as dramas, we never know what ‘production’ actors outside the theatre are involved in, or indeed if they are involved in a single production or concurrent productions that are enacted simultaneously with numerous other productions. A further (inherent) problem with displacing the actor from the safe stage of the theatrical world is that we make our roles of writer, director and audience become one and the same, yet the other elements in the production – the actor, the cues, the props and the scripts (to mention only a few) – are impossible to control (at least in the long run). Thus we cannot know whether a ‘Chekhov’s gun’ will appear in an early scene and become significant later. We do not know whether there will be a happy ending or it will all end in tragedy, because there is no end, nor is there a beginning or middle or prelude or intermission or epilogue.

The Actor in Institutional Theory

This paper’s main character is the actor. The story concerns what the actor was, is and should/could be through writings that are categorized within institutional theory. I propose that there are four different kinds of actors (or ‘avatars’, as I call them in this paper) who are consistent with both the concept of embedded agency and the social constructionist epistemology that characterizes institutional theory. These avatars are the actors presented in the writings of sociological institutional theory, categorized according to variations
of properties and functions. The purpose of this categorization is to achieve the possible advantage of clarity with regard to the particular properties of respective avatars. In my opinion, the matching of labels with descriptions of agentic activities has been ambiguous. Different writings have different definitions of the properties of ‘entrepreneur’ or ‘translator’. Increasing the determinacy of definition could strengthen the arguments made through institutional analyses of empirical materials.

Although I have used a variety of influential references in order to move towards this purpose, much of my focus is on the recent SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism, which is an attempt to create a theoretical identity with a sociological flavour freed from the rather obscure and easily mistaken neo-institutional or new institutional labels that also have a standing within economics and history. The editors consider the book an ‘appropriate moment to take stock’ as they have gathered 62 categorized institutionalists to participate in an institutionalizing of organizational institutionalism.

The reason for focusing on (the diverse writings of) organizational institutionalism is that this area of study is characterized by a somewhat paradoxical mix of being a popular and successful direction of academic research yet still being heavily criticized as overly determinant without respect for change generated by action(s) on a micro level of analysis. This latter point of being overly structured in collective iron cages of perception (DiMaggio & Powell 1983) builds on the ideas of isomorphism and legitimization through institutional conformity, thus leading to a treatment of change in a social system as an anomaly. In theatrical terms, the performance is complete with every line, action and setting perfectly produced in the right place and at the right time. If someone or something interrupts the order of the script, cues or expected scene changes, the performance breaks down and needs to leave its theatrical self in order to restart itself. The performance in itself cannot deal with change.

In this sense the use of agency in institutional theory is an indication of a significant presence of the agent only in terms of a breakdown in roles, leaving the actor as an enactment of the script. The breakdown of the performance and an acknowledgement of the agent represent a drop in the level of abstraction to a unit level of intentionality, focusing on acts that pursue and achieve. Through breakdowns, the performance becomes perceived as an ongoing process of connecting acts between agents. (Llewellyn 2007). Meyer & Jepperson (2000), though, make the point that even such a process with seemingly autonomous intentions of individual actors is in itself part of a ‘larger cultural project’ enacting an unacknowledged social agency in pursuit of a prevalent cultural framework, i.e. institutions that exist at a deeper and more fundamental level. In this perception, innovative experimental theatre may break a perfect order, yet will still always be recognized as a play
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This perception of overarching institutions has been continually discussed and has been opposed from different perspectives within the internal development of institutional theory during the 1980s in particular, culminating with *The New Institutionalism of Organizational Analysis* (Powell & DiMaggio 1991), which gathered varying directions in institutional theory. The main directions of this new institutionalism have been considered ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ and ‘deinstitutionalization’ (Jaffee 2001; Greenwood, Oliver et al. 2008). The latter was developed by Christine Oliver as ‘the erosion or discontinuity of an institutionalized activity of practice’ (Oliver 1992), while the perception of entrepreneurship has a strong agentic emphasis. Greenwood, Oliver et al. (2008) point to other developments that complement these directions with *institutional logics*, *legitimacy* and *diffusion/isomorphism* (paying particular attention to the Scandinavian school of perceiving the diffusion of ideas as translations).

DiMaggio & Powell (1991) consider cognitive psychology and ethnomethodology as the two forces that have generated these directions and thus have changed institutional theories of social action. These influences entailed, in part, an increased recognition of the construction of meaning linked to cognitive processes, but also of the process of social order through the course of everyday action. The construction of inter-subjectivity is perceived as a shifting of ‘the image of cognition from a rational, discursive, quasi-scientific process to one that operates largely beneath the level of consciousness, a routine and conventional “practical reason” governed by “rules” that are recognized only when they are breached’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1991).

In terms of processes, the object of research becomes the forms with which the interaction proceeds rather than possible forces that could intern and externally form institutions (thereby moving away from theories of resource dependency and contingency). Erving Goffman considered this the difference between *the situated* and *the situational*, where the former is ‘incidental’ while the latter is the emergent interaction order that can and should be studied (Goffman 1983). Studying the situational is a method of understanding the situated as a staged performance. The actor is thus no longer purely dependent on the set stage, but is perceived as bearing the performance in different institutionalized scripts and patterns of action along with other actors who are sharing the scene and collectively recreating a stage away from the physicality of theatrical structures. The existence of a back stage becomes more a question of institutionalized scripts and schemata than of elaborate plans of action.

This cognitive transformation of agency means that the innovative actor might take individual action to change the performance, but that the action taken will be in line with methods that will work within the boundaries of the...
full production. An individual actor might need to ad-lib to save a certain situation, but only in accordance with rules of ad-libbing that other actors can understand and that function with the existing props and settings.

**Embedded Agency**

‘Old’ institutionalism positioned itself against a rational-choice perception of the individual agent, leading to ‘a focus […] on aspects of institutions that tend to prevent actors from recognizing or acting upon their interests’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1991). With new institutionalism’s openness for performance being related to cognitive processes vibrant (or dormant) in the situated interaction of the performance, or indeed of the full production of acting, acts, sets and props, agency in different interactions received more attention than previously.

If the actor is innovative, intentions and plot development will emerge. Control over space, time and plot is generated in the interaction between all of the possible participants of the performance. The actor plays out prescribed or emergent scripts as part of a larger collective play. Yet these enacted relationships carry with them numerous institutionalized behaviours and expectations, and thus should not be perceived as degrees of freedom in action. This discussion of structure and agency is known in institutional theory as the problem of *embedded agency*: how can intended actions lead to institutional change when actors are applying a logic derived from the existing institutional structure? In this sense, Powell & Colyvas (2008) consider the portrayal of the actor in institutional theory to be reduced to that of either a ‘cultural dope’ (with reference to Garfinkel) or a heroic actor.

*Embedded agency* gives a name and a framework to the discussion of divisions of structure and agency that has followed new institutionalism ever since its early development (Garud, Hardy et al. 2007). The mix of embeddedness and agency has been referred to in institutional theory by Granovetter (1985) as a criticism of the presumption of atomist individuals in economic action. Granovetter’s writings rejected both undersocialized and oversocialized accounts of social action, highlighting instead the relational nature of all social action which was inferred into institutional theory (Krippner & Alvarez 2007). The use of embeddedness has gradually caught on in institutional discourse, and in Seo & Creed (2002) the concepts of *embeddedness* and *agency* were merged into the term *embedded agency*, thereby labelling a theoretical (and practical) problem as ‘the paradox of embedded agency’.

Literally, being embedded means being enclosed and an integral part of the surroundings. The concept of being embedded requires a context. Holm (1995) uses the term ‘nested systems’ with a similar intent. The consequences on an individual level are that the intentions of the embedded agent are predetermined within the attributive properties of a single discourse. On an
aggregated level, the actions of populations are constrained and can only vary according to the properties of the social system.

Although embedded agency is easy to see as institutional theory’s version of the theodicy problem, the term itself is abstract enough to lead to ambiguity. How embeddedness actually works is difficult to pinpoint at a low level of abstraction as it is also matched by subjective and discourse-coupled variations in perceptions of the degrees of freedom that are involved. Embedded is in itself a relative term, which can also be said of agency. The rhetorical questions that remain can be compared to Baron von Münchhausen’s feat of pulling himself out of a swamp by his hair. Can institutional change be understood from within the conceptual world of institutionalism?

Holm (1995) perceived two orders of action: a first order well within the grasp of institutions and a second order of consciousness of being able to act outside institutions and being open to change within the nested system. Seo & Creed (2002) focus more on the praxis of action as a complexity of institutional arrangements that when put into practice prove to be incompatible. Most of the writers recognized as contributors to the term embedded agency have, in fact, also discussed the iron cage and often offered ways of escaping it, of departing from institutional thinking within institutionalism and instead thinking about processes of institutionalizing. In more developed texts, this is an ontological shift in the perception of process, meaning that even what appears to be stable is actually discourse and practice being enacted repeatedly to form a stability in expectation and casual attribution. Change is not an anomaly but is continuous.

This can be considered a constructivist view of social life as relational definitions of structure, embeddedness, agency and action emerge and are expressed as dualities in discourse. There have been two main directions within this performative perception of agency, which Llewellyn (2007) attributes to the respective ideas of critical realism (in the version of Margaret Archer) and Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory. Both offer directions of social thought that consider processes of institutionalizing rather than institutional thinking.

Emirbayer & Mische (1998) offer a link between perceiving processes and embedded agency with the idea of ‘relational pragmatics’ as a perception of acting with intention as ‘a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action’. This iteration of back stage and front stage within an ensemble contains the expectations of what should be as well as what could be as it is played out (‘projection’ and ‘practical-evaluation’ in their terms). In this way the field gains stability and the stage is set to match the interaction that is expected (i.e. the situated that will match the situational). Kenneth Burke’s pentad is based on the same idea but contains the full perception of
the theatre, as the constituent parts (Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose) need to be balanced in ratios of pairs (for example 'scene-agent', 'act-purpose' or 'agent-agency') in order to become meaningful. If an agent acts in keeping with his nature as an agent (act-agent ratio), he may change the nature of the scene accordingly (scene-act ratio), and thereby establish a state of unity between himself and his world (scene-agent ratio) (Burke 1969). Despite the fluidity of the world of actors and the process of institutionalization, balance and stability are sought and reached in order to make the play work. Agency is embedded, not because it is that way in any kind of objective natural state, but because it makes the play easier to understand and makes the ideas evoked more convincing.

Fielding the Field

The perception of embeddedness requires contexts that embed, making it possible for structure and agency to make sense as performances of social action. Wedlin (2006) offers a definition of the field as 'an area of social life or group of organizations that compete for the same resources and legitimacy, as well as live by the same institutional frameworks in terms of laws, regulations, normative rules, and cognitive belief systems'. This bringing together of material and cognitive elements embeds all interaction in that area.

The importance of the field in new institutionalism was outlined by DiMaggio & Powell (1991) in a distinction that demarcates 'old' institutionalism from 'new' by stating that the field replaces the organization as the 'locus of institutionalization'. The main difference is in the cognitive perspective, which recognizes the lack of correspondence and correlation between institutions and organizational boundaries. Institutions transgress such structures through relational processes of ideas and practices that, from a social psychological perspective, are a shifting away from socialization as the diffusion of values, norms and attitudes, towards an attributive mode of shared habits through routines, scripts and schema.

Wooten & Hoffman (2008) offer a storyline of organizational fields in institutional theory as a two-staged development. The first period was based mainly on perceptions of legitimacy, where mimetic and regulative forces sought community through similarities. The idea of isomorphism, though, took on a sort of life of its own, as an over-socialized diffusion of ideas that could not be resisted. The obvious evidence that organizations in the same field were, in fact, not identical was damning for that version of isomorphism and led to an interest in change and variation. There is also a current trend to broaden the complexity of the field with a refocus 'on field-level dynamics, collective rationality within these fields and the behaviour of individual organizations as integral parts of these processes' (Wooten & Hoffman 2008). Johansson (2002) describes the Scandinavian development of institutional
The basic point of a relational ontology is to avoid a dualistic understanding of what ‘is’. One can argue that social science has mainly been a discussion about dualisms, heavy on references and empirically argumentative. Much theoretical development is a continuous balancing on a dualistic edge between micro/macro, subject/object, agent/structure and qualities/quantities. Most studies on the nature of institutional environments have not considered the construction of the field as a sense-making process of interactions between organizations (Powell & Colyvas 2008), but have assumed that the field is an empirical finding accorded by ‘the theoretical concept of societal sectors’ (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008). This does not mean that an actor does not correlate identity, legitimacy, logics and an organizational field in dualisms, but that correlation in analysis separates entities according to classification and categorization and disregards the relations in processes and the blurred boundaries between related organizations (see for example Hernes 2008).

The field offers contextual meaning; it expresses closure in conceptual inclusion and exclusion. The theoretical term field relates to the physicality of a field as a plot of land that is defined as different from its surroundings. Like structure and agency, field is also perceived as a social construction in institutional theory. Establishing a definition and identification of the field also pre-empts any need either to enact relationships or to follow processes of emerging relationships. Defining field in this way connects with network ideas:

Networks are essential to fields because they are both the pipes through which resources circulate and the prisms that observers use to make sense of action. Fields, though, are associated with particular logics of action and it is those logics that make networks efficacious by determining which sorts of relationships participants can conceive. More tellingly, the dominant logics in a field define which sorts of connec-
tions will have what types of effects for different kinds of partners. In this sense, the relational and structural embeddedness of economic action depends not just on networks but also on orientations of participants to the fields and logics that render ties sensible and help determine the shape and effects of structures. (Owen-Smith & Powell 2008)

The fielded field meets the demand for a sense-making context in the creation of coherent argument, rhetoric and discourse. Every action with every prop, every setting and every cue, every word by every actor, gives sense to the scene in relation to all the other elements that participate in the scene. The relations between the theatrical properties (for example in terms of Burke’s pentad) are constantly negotiated back stage, yet balanced in related ratios front stage. The idea of the field assumes the existence of relations between language and actors that go beyond the epistemological limitations of institutional theory, yet through balance and closure, a laboratory of social science is erected and offers a place to stand in order to raise the earth.

THE THEORETICAL EMPIRICAL

The Avatars of Embedded Agency

The purpose of this paper is to identify the different ways in which actors are portrayed in relation to the seeming paradox of embedded agency. In an empirical analysis of theoretical discussion, I seek to assess at what level of abstraction and in what sense of agency the actor appears in organizational institutionalism. The level of abstraction concerns the view from ‘above’ of what is situated, as a high enough level removes focus from incidental occurrences and focuses instead on situational logic.

The situational emerges in patterns that are recognized and make sense according to previous conceptions. This can be linked to the unacknowledged agency of a larger cultural project as mentioned in Meyer & Jepperson (2000). The interpretation of action into patterns of correlations forms a perception of an institutional framework that constrains and, to some extent, determines what happens at lower levels. At the situated level the embeddedness of agency is much more difficult to discern, yet due to the focus on acting (rather than the past tense ‘acted’ which is required in order to pattern the situational) individual initiative acquires a more prominent role.

The second dimension of assessment concerns the division within institutional theory identified by Boxenbaum & Jonsson (2008) as between an agentic tradition that seeks similarity and isomorphism among organizations in a diverse and disparate complexity of actions at different levels, and a non-agentic tradition that starts with similarity and seeks variation. The latter includes Scandinavian institutionalism. These traditions are thus institutions in themselves, and are less a matter of choice and more a question of
scripts and schema (or of norms and values from an *old* institutionalism point of view).

The level of abstraction and type of agentic tradition shape the role of the actor within the constraints and opportunities of embedded agency. In this paper I have chosen to describe the different actor characteristics of organizational institutionalism in the form of *avatars*. Literally, the word means ‘descent’. In their descent to worldly life, the embodied deities of Hinduism showed only one face of a godly existence. We can use ‘avatar’ in its own right as a single face of a more complex perception as well as in analogy to a Platonic shift from the idea world of institutionalism downward into a shadowy existence of reality through different forms of agency. The avatar relates the representation of an idea of intent with a situational social character as a dressing of the actor in costumes, setting the scene and offering scripts that are appropriate for particular tasks. The avatar does not act in a theatre, but rather brings the stage to everyday life.

To some extent, each avatar can be said to represent a particular discourse. As organizational institutionalism has several concurrent discourses, the question ‘What is the Actor?’ will have several answers. This paper offers four answers or discourses or avatars to that question.

The *situational* perspective of a non-agentic tradition has a contradictory agentic tradition. The *translator* represents a non-agentic tradition, while the *entrepreneur* is agentic. In the more *situated* perspective, the *mediator* is non-agentic while the *change agent* is agentic.

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Although these terms are used in institutional theory, their definitions in the many variations of institutional theory does not necessarily correlate with their use in this paper. A ‘mediator’ in a SAGE chapter might not be categorized as a *mediator* in this paper. The criterion of categorization is that the mediating actor of that particular writing matches the *mediator’s* situated non-agentic tradition. The same is true of both translation and institutional entrepreneurship when used with little theoretical stringency.

**Dissecting Organizational Institutionalism**

I take liberties in describing organizational institutionalism. Most writings studied and referenced are discussions of theory, and in this respect actors are depicted in a multitude of ways. My question is which of those can be perceived as avatars of embedded agency.
In order to find distinguishing categories and thus specific avatars, I have focused on the expressed ideas as intentions on the actor level. Seeking the ‘who’ and ‘how’ of a discourse signals agency, where actors are described as prominent in changing and structuring aspects of institutions. There is acting going on, i.e. enacted intentions that have bearings on institutions. Thus I have excluded three types of actor/agency discourses from the dominion of embedded agency: discourses without actors, discourses with nominal inclusion and discourses of a relational ontology.

In the writings of organizational institutionalism, there are numerous discussions that do not involve actors at all. Although there may be aspects of those discussions that do involve actors and structures, they are at a level of abstraction that pushes perspectives well away from discernible individual or organizational intentions and actions. It is possible that agency might be discussed, but only on a theoretical level that offers no place for the actor.

Another discourse involves discussions about organizations, groups and individuals acting, yet with no mention of agentic intention. Actors are no more than cardboard cut-outs that belong to the setting or are props; they are merely there and may signal something, but no institutions depend in any way on the actors; it is a nominal inclusion. Thus the theatre is assumed to be up and running, fully functional. Actors are needed to put it all into action, but there is no need for initiative, deviation or change.

The main kind of nominal inclusion is that of actors perceived as powerful through societal position. The ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ are not really considered, and the field is assumed to be the equivalent of an industry as a purely societal sector (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008). An example is the role of professional groups in terms of conferring legitimacy. Deephouse & Suchman (2008) write briefly of legitimacy agents that confer legitimacy, yet their discussion is not based on the actions but rather on the social role of the professional organizations. Another example is the argument in Washington, Boal et al. (2008) for institutional leadership as a strategy to gain legitimacy, focusing on the leader embracing existing institutions.

In nominal inclusion, agency is already existent in the actors’ formal identities and is not part of a change process. Perceiving ‘the State’ as an actor is a perspective close to resource dependency theory: ‘… unless they show how regulatory frameworks embody, enact or transmit societal norms and values’ (Greenwood, Oliver et al. 2008). The somewhat one-dimensional actor interacts with other actors and props with an organized form of influence and power. As a form of acting, it is reminiscent of the theatrical morality of the 15th and 16th centuries where personifications of morals (characters like Death, Kindred, Cousin and Penance) guided the protagonist (for example Everyman) to a correct, godly way of life. There is no opening for a cognitive sociological institutionalism.
Another perspective that falls outside the limitations of embedded agency is that expressing a relational view which addresses fields as emergent perceptions in action and interaction. The theatrical performance that redefines what theatrical performance is might not even be recognized as such. The front stage is innovative, the play experimental, and the actor emergent. The ideas about critical realism and structuration mentioned above are prominent in this perspective. Both Barley (2008) and Powell & Colyvas (2008) state clearly that there is an absence of analytical stringency in not perceiving the role of actors in the everyday structuration of institutions. This approach is paralleled by Cooper, Ezzamel et al. (2008), who use critical theory to consider agency in institutional theory, suggesting ‘a way of developing some critical distance from which to appreciate the particularity and limits of institutional theory’ (Cooper, Ezzamel et al. 2008).

This relational perception is the study of the processes of institutionalizing, and not institutions per se. It deconstructs embedded agency by adding the situatedness of the situational and situated. As in the relational pragmatics of Emirbayer & Mische (1998) or the methodological balancing with the pentad (Burke 1969), it is a study of the construction of the stage and the design of the scenes: a fielding of the field.

Translators
In the book Translating organizational change (Czarniawska & Sevón 1996) there is reference to translation as an important concept in offering a localized understanding of the way institutions spread (as opposed to the idea of diffusion). Although the main references are to Actor Network Theory (which has even been called a Sociology of Translation), the use of translation in institutional theory has never had quite the same consequences as in ANT. The etymological meaning, ‘carrying across’, can be said to emphasize this sense of the word, as ANT’s relational ontology considers both the context of each party’s cognition and their relationship, while also making sense of the subject/object communicated. The translation is the creation and change of a relationship.

Translation in institutional theory has in general not been constructivist, but rather has worked with social constructionism (Scheuer 2006). The field has remained stable with little or no effect on relations between fielded actors. The most common use of ‘translator’ is not categorized as such in this paper, but as ‘mediator’. Instead I choose to use the idea of translation expressed in Czarniawska & Joerges (1996) to categorize translators here, which entails a re-embedding of global ideas in ‘translocal’ space as localized relationships are developed. It is a version close to ANT, although with greater field stability. In the theatrical analogy, the back stage is not in constant negotiation with the front stage, but it is present on the front stage in the form of scripts that can be improvised according to situational order.
In the SAGE handbook, Hardy & Maguire (2008) consider the translators ‘active interpreters of practices whose meaning is, as a result, negotiated in ongoing, complex processes’. The ideas of negotiation and complexity tie in with relations between field members where, for example, a form of best practice implementation of ‘predominant practices’ emerges (Wooten & Hoffman 2008).

Owen-Smith & Powell (2008) discuss the concept of networks as logics of action where stable fields are formed and upheld in particular networks of actors, thereby forming a localized institutional mix. These networks develop the interaction of heterogeneous actors (individual as well as organizational) in various ways, for example with the development of local traditions and identities. Such developments will eventually have implications for more extended (less local) fields.

Entrepreneur

The idea of embedded agency has in recent years mainly been discussed with regard to institutional entrepreneurship. The literature on institutional entrepreneurs, however, is extensive and shows great variation. A definition of entrepreneur is given in Hardy & Maguire (2008) as ‘those actors to whom the responsibility for new or changed institutions is attributed’. This attributive definition can be complemented by the idea of an actor-centric narrative that focuses on the ‘activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones’ (cited from a book Hardy co-wrote in 2004).

There are two basic versions of entrepreneurship united in a broader perception of ‘institutional agency’ (Lawrence 2008). One considers initiative and change within field stability, but complicates other dimensions such as power relations and framing (Khan, Munir et al. 2007) or temporal processes (Buhr 2008). This type of entrepreneur acts on a set stage where the end has already occurred and all scripts, props and actors are involved in a performance of institutional changes. The study of an institutional entrepreneur consists of determining who can be considered an entrepreneur and the ways in which he or she acted in order to be so defined. This type of entrepreneur is identified at the end of the play as the emergent agent that pushed the storyline along. The final act may still be a surprise with unintended consequences of activities due to the complexity of many entrepreneurs and the many institutional logics involved.

The other version of entrepreneurship broadens the perspective of agency beyond institutional constraints, for example in terms of embedded practices as part of a political struggle where the desire for change is expressed and opposed. Lounsbury & Crumley (2007) write that ‘less strategic efforts’ to change practices can be seen as ‘fundamentally constituted, but not deter-
mined, by institutional rules and beliefs that are embedded in those existing practices. This raises the level of abstraction to 'broader cultural frameworks', thus connecting changes in practices to the complexities of how culture forms and changes.

Although acting within situational logics, this type of entrepreneur can also be found in discussion of social movement theory. Social movements are movements that oppose existing institutions and that promote an explicit change in institutions (or as Schneiberg & Lounsbury (2008) put it, 'self-conscious mobilization around alternatives').

Mediators
Perceiving actors as mediators means combining a self-interest agenda with the diffusion of ideas that influence institutions at a local level. This gives the actor the role to attribute intention and causality, as well as enact a process of diffusion. For example, the term 'carriers' has, according to Sahlin & Wedlin (2008), two definitions. One common definition is that 'carriers' have a passive function of simply facilitating the spread of ideas and practices. The other is in accordance with a criterion of intervention in sequences of an institutionalized pattern of social behaviour. The perception of legitimacy is strong in this respect, because regardless of whether the mediator is a passive carrier or acts through intervention, the focus is on enacting institutions and institutional change in local settings.

As discussed above, many of the actions described as translating fall under this idea of mediating. Meyer (2008) writes of modifications of meaning between originating and adopting contexts, while Zilber (2008) perceives space for mediation (translation) in the possible distance between the source of an institution and the imitating organization.

Sahlin & Wedlin (2008) explain the nature of what is transferred not as an idea or a practice, but rather as 'accounts and materializations of a certain idea or practice'. In their discussion of standards and templates, there is an allusion to an actant/actor relation of intervention. A standard forms a way of doing things that is difficult to resist as it becomes part of the logic of the field, and similarly, a template makes compliance difficult to avoid.

In legitimacy studies, although Deephouse & Suchman (2008) focus on the professional group as a powerful actor that will act in its own self-interest in terms of regulation and standards, they also touch on the cognitive and cultural side of institutions through social influence and communication in seeking legitimacy that goes beyond mimetic and regulative compliance.

Change agents
The term change agent does not really have a place in institutional theory, yet it is a term that fits many of the descriptions of the actors striving to
change some aspect of organizations, but not to change institutions per se. Hardy & Maguire (2008) describe this perception of a duality of action where intentions to act are based on a micro-level of incentives and motivations, yet where acting affects institutions. This is a process-centric narrative that refutes a simplistic intention-action relation of agency and structural change.

The situation of the actor within conflicting institutional logics is an example of this, as there is no simple assessment of an institutional environment that is enacted and can be changed. The actor might not perceive incoherence, but acts according to a subjective cognition that does not necessarily match that of other actors in the same field. There is a freedom from structure because of a fragmented and contradictory institutional logic (Thornton & Ocasio 2008). Djelic & Quack (2008) discuss the infusion of transnational perspectives in institutionalism as a way to 'highlight and look for the degrees of freedom that economic actors may enjoy within a given institutional framework'. Actions could be based in, as well as lead to, alternative and contradictory institutions. The actions thus initiate and drive processes of institutional change without a grand plan of institutionalism.

THE CLOSING CURTAIN

Curtain Call

The translators and entrepreneurs have descended to the front stage of embedded agency from more abstract institutional ideas, as have the mediators and change agents. As they take their curtain calls, it is relevant to ask: what is the importance of the actor in organizational institutionalism? Quite clearly, the stage of embedded agency is not that of the cultural dope or the autonomous rational man. It is a stage upon which the play is enacted according to certain logics, which despite a lack of physical signs or tells is possible to understand according to the way and place where it plays out. As Erving Goffman says, the situational meets the situated as the back stage and front stage evolve in relation to each other. Some organizational institutionalists feel there is no reason to consider this construction of performance (the absence or the nominal inclusion of the actor), while others feel there should be more recognition for the processes that change the situational and the back stage (the relational perspective).

The majority of writings within this sociological institutionalism, though, find a stability of expectation that offers strength to the performance. Palmer, Biggart et al. (2008) ask rhetorically, 'How much further should the new institutionalism go?' as a criticism of what they understand as the non-compatible relation between new institutional theory and other modes of theorizing that are being explored by institutional theorists. Their opinion that their own field of study should be developed on its own merits is in opposition with
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Others’ ideas of broadening, widening and changing the field of theory, and offers a belief that new insights can be found from within the present strong position. This perspective is echoed in the section of the SAGE handbook called ‘Interfaces’. Although many of these chapters only nominally deal with the actor and matters of agency, there are recurrent discussions on the strengths of institutional theory that offer mutual gains in alignment with other theoretical directions or styles, whether it be in terms of organizational economics (Roberts 2008), population ecology (Haveman and David 2008) or narrative techniques and methods (Czarniawska 2008).

Epilogue

The actor standing on a stage with props and a setting performs. As an audience we understand the situation, we understand the role, and sometimes we actually know the scripts. We, the audience, enjoy seeing the same dramas in different plays. Sometimes they are too similar for our liking, and sometimes they are too different. Sometimes both newly written plays and old classics surprise us. Sometimes they do not.

Not everyone wants to see innovative actors in experimental theatre. Actually, it is likely that very few people do. People like coming to a theatre and being presented with a complete production. They can recognize features in storylines and in the way the roles are played out, and admire the skill of those who built the production from assorted elements. The function of the theatre is not always to push at the extremes, but often to present ideas in a familiar setting.

The actor of and in social life is involved in the setting of a stage and enactment of drama in everyday life. The audience’s appreciation of what is on the front stage is also an exercise in sense-making. The fewer signs and tells there are, the greater the confusion will be in the delineation between back and front stages, and the more attention will be directed to the playing out of the performance (the situational) rather than to the ideas of the performance (the situated).

In this sense, the actors of organizational institutionalism celebrate the possibility of making sense of contexts. Organizational institutionalists are able to use other theories of social science in order to strengthen their findings and arguments as institutional theory offers a firm ground to build on. Institutional analysis must be based on and within fields that make sense to those identified as field members. The role of the actor as translator, entrepreneur, mediator or change agent depends on what story/play the institutional theorists/writers/producers want to perform, and to which audience. I concur with the opinion of Palmer, Biggart et al. (2008) that developing institutional theory, for example, beyond the situated and situational studies of embedded agency results in something that is no longer institutional theory.
Embedded agency is not a problem of institutional theory. Embedded agency is the strength of organizational institutionalism.

To conclude with an answer as to what the actor is in organizational institutionalism within the perception of embedded agency: the actor is a cast member of a performance that offers ideas to the audience and is understood in accordance with signs and tells in the performance. The proof is in the play, as either the story-lined argument wins over the directed audience or … it does not.

NOTES
1 Discussed in Powell & DiMaggio 1991, yet still ambiguous due to their (unexplained) use of variations of the ‘neo’ and ‘new’ prefixes. The connection between the 1991 book and the SAGE handbook has been made through extensive references of the introduction chapter and, in particular, the inclusion of Meyer & Rowan 1977 and DiMaggio & Powell 1983 (although the latter were slightly edited for the 1991 publication). These two papers are referenced by almost every contribution in the SAGE handbook.
2 Arguably any research that is popular will be heavily criticized.
3 This quotation from Archimedes (‘Give me a place to stand and I will raise the earth’) is paraphrased in Latour (1983) as ‘Give me a laboratory and I will move the world’, an early paper on the work of Pasteur.

REFERENCES
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ABSTRACT

The actor is found both in the theatre and in the study of ‘the social’. In the sociological study of institutions and organizations (recently named organizational institutionalism) the actor has been considered according to the paradox of embedded agency, suffering the incompatibility of structure and agency. This article focuses on the constitution of the field and its stability in embeddedness. Through the study of writings within organizational institutionalism, a number of perceptions of the actor emerge. Using the idea of the avatar, Erving Goffman’s ideas on interaction and performance, and an internal theoretical distinction between similarity and variation, four avatars of embedded agency are identified in a clarification of distinctions between
types of actors. The conclusion is that with a theoretically stringent use of mediator, translator, change agent and entrepreneur, the concept of embedded agency is not a problem or weakness, but rather the strength of organizational institutionalism.

**ABSTRAKT**


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