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# New Sociology of Knowledge: Historical Legacy and Contributions to Current Debates in Institutional Research

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## INTRODUCTION

When laying the foundations for neoinstitutional theory in 1977, both of the subsequent classic articles (Meyer/Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977) pointed to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*, first published in 1966, as a central theoretical foundation and inspiration for their research program. In the equally influential 'orange book,' DiMaggio and Powell (1991) underline that Berger and Luckmann's phenomenological approach, together with Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (another American scholar strongly influenced by Alfred Schütz; see also Psathas 2004), provides 'the new institutionalism with a microsociology of considerable power.'

Today, beyond doubt, Berger and Luckmann's 'new' or social constructionist

sociology of knowledge has become one of the classics in sociological thinking. In neoinstitutional theory, it is still among the most frequently quoted references and generally assumed to be one of the approach's main theoretical pillars. As with many classics, however, the current citation is often made in passing and is more frequently a tribute paid to their overall contribution to the field than as guidance in concrete theoretical, conceptual or methodological questions. Four decades after its first publication, the actual impact of the sociology of knowledge seems to be lagging behind its omnipresence in the bibliographies of institutional analyses.

The *Social Construction of Reality* was originally published in the United States, but Berger and Luckmann's biographical backgrounds<sup>1</sup> and their ambition to reconcile Max Weber's *verstehende* sociology, Schütz'

phenomenological analysis of the *Lebenswelt* and American pragmatism give their socio-phenomenologically oriented approach profound academic roots on both sides of the Atlantic and make it, as Dirk Tänzler puts it, the ‘heir and sister of philosophy.’ Despite their prominent position among sociological classics, Berger and Luckmann have not given rise to a specific school of thinking nor has it been their intention to do so. Apart from neoinstitutional theory, which was elaborated mainly in Northern America, in German-speaking interpretive sociology, a particular field of study has developed in this tradition especially after Luckmann’s return. Similar to organizational institutionalism, this field is more a research community that shares basic assumptions and research interests than a formulated and coherent theory: Luckmann and several other researchers (e.g. Luckmann 2002 or 2006a; Knoblauch 1995; Knoblauch/Luckmann 2004; Keller 2005a) have devoted a considerable part of their oeuvre to analyzing the role of language and communication in the construction of reality, a ‘turn’ evidenced by the labelling *communicative* or *discursive construction of reality*. The incorporation of hermeneutics into the sociology of knowledge (the *hermeneutic* sociology of knowledge or *social scientific* hermeneutics as it was previously called) is primarily tied to the work of Hans-Georg Soeffner (e.g. 1989, 2004), but has been taken up by several other scholars in the field (e.g. Schröder 1994; Hitzler/Honer 1997; Hitzler/Reichertz/Schröder 1999).

Although they have common roots, organizational institutionalism and the German branches of the new sociology of knowledge pay very little attention to each other, aside from cursory cross-references (e.g. Keller 2005a; Tänzler, Knoblauch, and Soeffner 2006a). While recent institutional research is exploring its common ground with a number of different theoretical approaches (e.g. Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field, or Michel Foucault’s discourse theory), the concern for organizations and organization theory has been of only minor importance in the

otherwise heterogeneous research agenda of the German sociology of knowledge. In addition, organizational institutionalism’s often quantitative research questions and designs are not easily compatible with a hermeneutic approach. And last but not least, the language divide – the German-speaking branches of the sociology of knowledge are unfortunately available mostly in only the German language – prevents the proponents of both approaches from entering into a proper dialogue.

In this chapter, I hope to make a contribution to such a dialogue by bringing together the literature from both currently disparate streams. The theoretical inspiration that the sociology of knowledge has provided is still alive in many of organizational institutionalism’s basic assumptions and core concepts that have incorporated much more of the socio-phenomenological legacy than might be apparent at first sight. The most prominent example is, of course, the overall focus on knowledge and, thus, on the cognitive dimensions of institutions that has become one of the ‘trademarks’ of neoinstitutional theory, in comparison to other more normative or regulative strands of institutional thinking (see Scott 2001). Equally important are the understanding of what institutions are and how they operate, the relevance of legitimacy, the conceptualization of the process of institutionalization, or the role of language and symbolism that owe much to this heritage. In the following sections, I will revive attention to these roots. However, I am not tracing solely the historic legacy and impact, but argue that by rediscovering and renewing the tie with the phenomenological sociology of knowledge, institutional theory could gain much inspiration for theoretical and methodological challenges that have dominated the debate in the last decade and for new directions in institutional research.

## MEANING, KNOWLEDGE AND THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INSTITUTIONS

Many critics of the ‘standard version’ of organizational institutionalism, especially

from Scandinavian institutionalism (e.g. Czarniawska/Joerges 1996; Sahlén-Andersson 1996; Brunsson 1998) or from other interpretively inspired branches of institutional thinking (e.g. Zilber 2002, 2006; Meyer 2003) have claimed that institutional theory devotes too much effort to analyzing the trajectories of macro-diffusion patterns while underestimating the meaning the spreading practices have in the originating as well as adopting context and the modifications – translations – they undergo in the course of their ‘travels.’ Several of the Scandinavian scholars, for instance Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) or Forsell and Jansson (1996), explicitly draw attention to the work of Schütz, in particular to his notions of typifications contained in the social stocks of knowledge.

One of the central assumptions derived from the Schützian legacy is that action is meaningful and that meaning is constituted through rules that are specific to the social field. To recall, Schütz’s objective was to give Weber’s interpretive sociology, which identifies the goal of sociology in the understanding of action from the subjective meaning of the actor, a phenomenological grounding (see especially Schütz 1967). In his appreciative, yet critical interpretation of Weber’s work, Schütz highlighted that Weber had failed to specify the concept of meaning. In particular, he asked how meaning is constituted by an actor and pointed to the concept’s inherent temporality. He emphasized the difference between the meaning assigned by the actors themselves and the meaning assigned by an observer, and raised the question how understanding is at all possible given the categorical non-accessibility of another person’s consciousness. The micro-sociological approach Schütz proposed by drawing on Husserl’s phenomenology focused on how ordinary members of a society constitute the everyday world they live in – the *Lebenswelt* – and on the conditions and principles according to which intersubjectively shared meaning is constructed and, thus, how mutual understanding is made possible.

Especially with regard to the *interactive construction* of social meaning and knowledge (as opposed to the subjective *constitution*) and the socialization of individuals, Schütz, at that time already living in the U.S., explicitly drew on the work of American pragmatists, mainly of George Herbert Mead, Charles H. Cooley, William James, and William I. Thomas.

Schütz elaborated that individuals work with *typifications* of actions, situations and persons that are generated in interaction and communication. They identify typical actors and identities, recognize typical actions and assign typical meanings. To interpret and understand the situation they face, individuals need to draw on the recipe knowledge that is provided by their *Lebenswelten*. This ‘social stock of knowledge’ that the members of a society share to different degrees is built up (‘sedimented’) from the experiences of the generations before them (Schütz/Luckmann 1973). Individuals are born into a ‘socio-historical a priori’, as Luckmann (e.g. 1983; see also Soeffner 1989) calls it, that makes available these institutionalized typifications, frames of interpretation, actor positions, patterns of action, etc., and thus delineates the boundaries and the ‘horizon’ within which people can meaningfully act – and beyond which it is impossible to see or understand: All interests and preferences, all rationalities, choices and decisions ever imaginable lie within these borders; all innovations, crises, shocks or whatever ‘triggers’ of change we assume have to be interpreted within this horizon to be taken into consideration and have impact. Building on this hermeneutic and phenomenological heritage of Schütz’s work, Czarniawska and Joerges postulate that ‘we cannot translate what is wholly unrecognizable’ (1996: 28).

Accordingly, the phenomenological sociology of knowledge is not primarily concerned with questions of epistemology and methodology, nor with scientific knowledge, the specialized knowledge of intellectuals, or the history of ideas and ideologies, but with

the processes and conditions by which a particular spatially and historically embedded social field defines what counts as knowledge and truth – and what does not (Schütz 1962; Berger/Luckmann 1989). The central object of the hermeneutic reconstruction is neither to search for a latent macro-structure that unfolds behind the back of the agents nor a singular individual perspective. Instead, it is the social stocks of knowledge that the acting subjects draw on when constituting subjective meaning, i.e. the socially approved typifications available in a concrete historical socio-cultural *Lebenswelt*. Thus, while departing from the Weberian assertion that the goal of sociology is to understand action from the subjective meaning assigned to it, the perspective is nonetheless not subjectivist but a structure analytic approach that attempts to reconcile structuralist and interactionist positions (Soeffner/Hitzler 1994; Reichertz 1999; Soeffner 1989, 2004). A focus on the cognition of actors and their stocks of knowledge does not – as is often brought up against the ‘cognitive turn’ in organizational institutionalism – necessarily entail a de-emphasizing of social structure.

Building on this tradition, Berger and Luckmann have elaborated how shared typifications become institutions through tradition, sedimentation, and legitimation. According to them, the reciprocity of typifications and the typicality of both habitualized actions, in the form of action scripts and of social actors who are expected to engage in these patterned actions, lie at the heart of all institutions – ‘(p)ut differently, any such typification is an institution’ (Berger/Luckmann 1989: 54). This interaction-oriented and type-based definition is still central for organizational institutionalism. It is mirrored in the early notions of institutions as ‘frameworks of programs or rules establishing identities and activity scripts for such identities’ (Jepperson 1991: 146; see also Meyer/Boli/Thomas 1994) or as ‘shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships’

(Barley/Tolbert 1997: 96), and is still being used as the main reference when it comes to the definition of institutions or the process of institutionalization (e.g. Zilber 2002; Dobbin 2004; Dorado 2005; Battilana 2006; Weber/Glynn 2006). As I will discuss in the following sections, it has lost none of its relevance in the decades since its publication: Apart from helping to overcome the conceptual ambiguity and to re-establish a common understanding of what is meant by institutions and institutional processes, a concern increasingly articulated by scholars, various facets of the classic conceptualization can contribute to unsolved issues and current debates in organizational institutionalism.

### **(a) Institutions and the construction of social actors and identities**

The reciprocity of the typified, scripted action and the type of actor who is expected to perform the script is central to the notion that institutions are constitutive for social actors and actorhood and for organizational institutionalism’s claim against rational choice models that actors’ preferences and interests are tied to and do not precede the institutional order they belong to. Instead of actors using institutions to foster their individual or collective interests, through institutionalization, not only patterns of scripted interactions are created, but also specific social categories of actors, whose social identities, worldviews and interests make sense only within the sedimented body of social knowledge that has given shape to them (Berger/Luckmann 1989). For instance, Meyer/Boli/Thomas (1994: 18; see also Meyer/Jepperson 2000 or J. Meyer, Chapter 34 in this volume) explicitly stress the close, in fact tautological, link between script and actor-type:

Both social actors and the patterns of action they engage in are institutionally anchored. The particular types of actors perceived by self and others and the specific forms their activity takes reflect institutionalized rules of great generality

and scope. It is in this sense that social reality – including both social units and socially patterned action – is ‘socially constructed’ (Berger/Luckmann, 1966). Institutionalized rules, located in the legal, social scientific, customary, linguistic, epistemological, and other ‘cultural’ foundations of society, render the relation between actor and action more socially tautological than causal. Actors enact as much as they act: What they do is inherent in the social definition of the actor itself.’

The phenomenological heritage is most visible in John Meyer’s notion of modern social actors, but it also surfaces in the more recent institutional interest in the multiple social identities that are a characteristic of the late-modern actor (see also Giddens 1991) and are seen to account for hybridization and endogenous institutional change (e.g. Rao/Davis/Ward 2000; Rao/Monin/Durand 2003; Meyer/Hammerschmid 2006; Westenholtz 2006). In pluralistic societies, multiple social identities go hand in hand with multiple reference groups (see below), or as James (1968: 42) notes, an individual has ‘as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares.’ A very similar *motif* is found in Luckmann’s recent work: The increasing functional differentiation of society and the fragmentation of the *Lebenswelt* more and more require the individual to master fragmented social identities from various specialized institutionalized domains. As he notes, ‘(l)iving in society always requires adaptation. However, in later modernity the social structure favors a particularly high degree of adaptability, not only of a cognitive but also characterological nature’ (Luckmann 2006b: 11). This, he observes, is happening paradoxically at the same point in history that the display of an autonomous and individualized self has become an ‘almost doctrinal obligation for the modern individual’ (2006b: 8).

### **(b) Institutional orders, social control and power**

In addition, the reciprocity of typifications of action and actors points to the substantial

borrowing Schütz and the sociology of knowledge have made from pragmatism: Being a social actor means to know what is expected as appropriate in certain situations. This, in turn, implies a definition of the situation that is compatible with those of others involved and rests on the ability of the actors to take the perspective of the others (significant and generalized others) (see Cooley 1964; Mead 1965; Thomas 1967; and Schütz, e.g. 1962). The focus on the reciprocity of perspectives stresses the necessity of overlapping relevance systems and an intersubjectively shared *Lebenswelt*, and, thus, of socialization and internalization. Successful socialization is the basis for the fact-like character of social reality and the degree to which institutions become taken-for-granted ‘background programs’ (Berger/Kellner 1984). By framing world-views and perceptions, institutions guide behavior prior to any visible sanctions. This creates the image of institutions being taken for granted and enacted almost naturally. Internalization mediates between objective and subjective reality and renders the objective world subjectively meaningful (Berger/Luckmann 1989). It is also the moment where individuals have to actively acquire specific segments of the social knowledge and sediment it in a unique way into their own subjective knowledge. Without paying enough attention to the complex and two-way relationship between social and individual stocks of knowledge, we run the danger of degrading individuals to determined ‘cultural dopes,’ or, on the macro-level, losing the stratified character of the knowledge distribution of a society and the related symbolic and structural power dimensions out of sight.

At least the fundamental institutional orientations are perceived as fact-like. Nonetheless, institutions are also supplemented by various mechanisms of social control – positive or negative, material or immaterial sanctions – to make up for the incompleteness of all socialization in fragmented societies. Individual deviance does

not unsettle an established institutional order. A more collective shift towards increasing reflexivity and attention to institutionalized patterns or the necessity to safeguard institutions by actually employing the sanctions provided, however, might be a first indicator of a commencing deinstitutionalization by making the contingency of the institutionalized patterns apparent (e.g. Berger/Kellner 1984). Although not elaborating the power and domination dimensions of institutions explicitly, Berger and Luckmann emphasize that '(i)nstitutions and symbolic universes are legitimated by living individuals, who have concrete social locations and concrete social interests' (1989: 128) and that the 'power in society includes the power to determine decisive socialization processes and, therefore the power to *produce* reality' (1989: 119; emphasis in original). Strikingly similar, when discussing the need to continuously reproduce institutions, DiMaggio (1988: 13f.) points out that '(a)n important aspect of institutional work is the socialization of new participants, which is undertaken most conscientiously by members with the greatest stake in the existing institutional order.' The social construction of reality is a power struggle over the definition of the situation with some interpretations succeeding over others. For Berger and Luckmann, it is, finally, the bigger stick and not the better argument that imposes the definition of reality (1989: 109), which, spun further, points back to the question of domination. In a later work, Luckmann highlights again that although social interaction requires, at least to a certain degree, reciprocity of perspectives and of relevance systems, this by no means entails symmetry of relationships but rather refers to the mutual exchangeability of perspectives that has to be presupposed even when fighting. He emphasizes that

reciprocity is not based on equality. The definition of what is an 'important' problem is not essentially the concern of 'democratic rationality.' The solutions are not necessarily devised by 'equitable' actors. Institutionalization as rational symmetric contract can be thought of as a

historically–empirically unlikely marginal case. Within the 'constitution analysis' of institutions, domination can be bracketed, but not power. (2002: 113, my translation).

For organizational institutionalism, DiMaggio (1988) noted almost two decades ago that there is no conceptual ignorance of interests and power inherent in the theoretical scaffolding of the approach. All institutional order is only a preliminary achievement and the temporary result of contest. Power is inextricably woven into institutional stability and change and institutionalization is a profoundly political process. Although, in the meantime, the challenge has been echoed by several scholars who draw attention to interests, politics and power struggles not only within established institutional frames, but particularly in the processes leading to the definition of what models, frames, criteria of rationality, subject positions and interests are appropriate (e.g. Dobbin 1994; Clemens/Cook 1999; Hoffman 1999; Fligstein 2001; Lounsbury/Ventresca 2002; Lounsbury 2003), an alleged power void has remained among the most frequently expressed points of criticism against institutional theory. I do not have the space to enter into a detailed discussion, but I hope to have shown that by taking seriously the question of what counts as knowledge and what doesn't, as well as the processes and mechanisms by which this is defined in a society (Schütz 1962), institutional theory has the potential to address all faces of power and domination. If they do not receive due attention, it is our current research foci that distract us and not shortcomings of the conceptual framework.

### **(c) Institutional and organizational fields**

Apart from the constitution of actors and attention to power and domination, the conceptualization of institutions in the tradition of the phenomenological sociology of knowledge could also help to come to terms

with the ambiguity in the use of the concept of 'field.' Reciprocity of perspectives requires that institutionalized practices be directed to some reference group (e.g. Shibutani 1962) or 'collective audience' (e.g. Suchman 1995) that shares the stock of knowledge and is entitled to assess the appropriateness and endorse legitimacy, in short, 'whose presumed perspective is used by an actor as the frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field' (Shibutani 1962: 132; italic in original). The definition of fields as connoting actors that partake in common meaning systems and share cultural-cognitive or normative frameworks (e.g. Scott 1994: 207f.) is closely related to this understanding. Since one of the core characteristics of institutions is their ability to bridge time and space, in this sense fields connect actors beyond their temporal and spatial co-presence. The second part of Scott's seminal definition – 'whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field', however, draws attention to network structures and interaction ties that do require some kind of spatial and temporal co-presence (see e.g. Giddens 1984 and his distinction between social and system integration).

In order to disentangle the multiple notions of field that currently inform institutional research, I believe it would be helpful to distinguish the two aspects analytically. In current studies, the terms 'institutional field' and 'organizational field' are generally used synonymously. I suggest using 'institutional field' to demarcate spheres of institutionalized meaning and 'organizational field' in order to refer to network ties between constituents that directly and indirectly interact with each other. They are both equally relevant and, in most empirical studies, intertwined, but encompass different phenomena: *Institutional fields* focus on shared typifications and mutual expectations and can provide insights into how institutional orders expand or contract or into how institutional logics, institutionalized practices and

rationalizations or legitimations differ across time and/or space. They encompass not only those actors who are expected to perform an institution, but include all those who expect the institution to be performed, that is, all actors who share the frame of reference. Institutional fields make homogeneity or heterogeneity of meaning and interpretations without institutionalized orders, forms and practices visible (see e.g. the research on translation or editing processes, Czarniawska/Joerges 1996, Sahlin–Andersson 1996) as well as the distribution of knowledge, subject positions and power inherent in institutions. Moreover, assuming that the borders of institutional fields are floating, the center(s) and peripheries of institutional orders could become observable (I thank Kerstin Sahlin for this point) – not only temporally, spatially/geographically or relating to life-spheres, but also in terms of the institutional order's strength or exclusiveness to define situations (see below), i.e. the extent of taken-for-grantedness, or – with regard to the inner composition – in terms of the various manifestations of institutional orders (i.e. central beliefs/institutions or peripheral beliefs/institutions). Apart from pointing to new research directions, this could also contribute to a more systematic approach to our current research on institutional change. *Organizational fields* focus on the degree to which a field of actors is characterized by a single predominant or by multiple, potentially competing institutional orders or logics. They draw attention to the heterogeneity of institutionalized patterns and interpretation frames in interaction fields. In a similar sense, social movement literature identifies 'multiorganizational fields' as complex, structured fields in which individual and collective actors in changing systems of alliances and conflict try to mobilize consensus for their claims (Klandermans 1992). Similarly, in the neoinstitutional tradition, Hoffman (1999) defines fields as 'centers of debates in which competing interests negotiate over issue interpretation.'

## ACTION AND INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURS

The failure to adequately account for active agents has for a long time been criticized as one of organizational institutionalism's weakest points, even by the theory's proponents (e.g. DiMaggio 1988; Beckert 1999; Mutch/Delbridge/Ventresca 2006). In the following section, I will draw attention to two aspects where organizational institutionalism could greatly benefit from a re-engagement with the Schützian socio-phenomenology: the general notion of action on the one hand and the conceptualization of institutional entrepreneurs and institutional work on the other.

Building on Weber as well as the philosophical approaches of Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl, Schütz (see especially 1967) developed the phenomenology in the direction of an action theory that centers upon the meaningfulness of action in general. He takes as a starting point the intentionality of consciousness (i.e. consciousness is always directed to some object) and the inherent temporality of all constitution of meaning. Action differs from passive experiences (i.e. reflexes) and spontaneous activities (i.e. to perceive a stimulus from the environment), insofar as it has a guiding project. For Schütz, action is any meaningful experience that is orientated towards a future state of affairs (in this sense, not picking the phone up is just as much an action as picking it up). In the action design, the individual imagines the action to be completed in the future ('modo futuri exacti'). Schütz points out, that 'we are *conscious* of an action only if we contemplate it as already over and done with, in short, as an *act*. This is true even of projects, for we project the intended action as an act in the future perfect tense' (Schütz 1967: 64, emphasis in original). Social action, and, in particular, interaction, does not merely include this projection, but rather a reciprocal orientation towards another agent and is situated in concrete socio-historical contexts.

The interactive dimension of this reciprocal orientation is encompassed in the project of the agents but also in the actual course of the interaction.

Schütz distinguishes between two different kinds of motives: The 'in-order-to motive' is reflected in the action project and in the outcome that the agent imagines. The primary subjective meaning assigned by an individual corresponds to this 'in-order-to motive.' The 'because-of motives' reveal why agents define the situation and design the action the way they do. Thus, while the 'in-order-to motive' is future-oriented and only fully comprehensible to the agent alone (due to the inaccessibility of consciousness), the 'because-of motive' can only be reconstructed by analyzing the action context and individual's past, i.e. the socio-historical a priori of the *Lebenswelt* and the individual biography. In this reconstruction, the actor has no privileged access compared to an observer. The distinction between the two kinds of motives bridges the dichotomy between oversocialized, determined 'cultural dopes' and undersocialized atomistic agents' free will: Individuals, in their biographical uniqueness of different sedimented experiences and different layers of sedimentation that result from the temporality of all these experiences, are never free from the socio-historical a priori of the established institutionalized order into which they are born, but equally never determined. While the 'in-order-to motives' reflect the freedom to choose and decide, the 'because-of motives' show the choices, decisions and interests that are historically and situationally available within the agent's horizon of meaning and from their actor position.

Drawing more explicitly on Mead and the pragmatists, but also on the socio-phenomenology of Schütz, Emirbayer and Mische (1998), whose contribution – which they refer to as 'relational pragmatics' – received much attention in the recent institutional theorizing about agency (e.g. Battilana 2006; Mutch et al. 2006). They distinguish between three temporal dimensions of agency – an

iterational (informed by the past), a projective (oriented towards the future) and a practical-evaluative (situationally contextualized) dimension – which, as they argue, dynamically interact in each instance of action. They stress that they do not denote different types of action, but only analytically different elements, and that, depending on context and actor, one or the other dimension may be predominant (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 972). According to them, situated actors assume variable temporal ‘agentic orientations’ in relation to the different action contexts they face and may switch between these orientations more or less reflexively. In contrast to these agentic orientations, in the Schützian conceptualization, the inherent temporality that simultaneously encompasses future, past and present is a definitional component of all social action and, thus, a constitutive characteristic. In this conceptualization, the specific orientation of an agent, no matter in what temporal direction, finds expression in the agent’s project of action, i.e. their ‘in-order-to motives.’ Therefore, projectivity may encompass the creative reconfiguration of structure or may equally entail their mainly routine incorporation into activities. In this sense, it is an interesting question, why celebrated modern actorhood is so frequently linked to future- and change-oriented action projects framed as ‘entrepreneurial,’ while projects that reflect past-oriented traditionalism are not highly appreciated (for a similar point see Hwang and Powell 2005).

In the socio-phenomenological tradition, meaning is an achievement of an individual’s consciousness and consciousness is intentional (Schütz 1967). Thereby, it is of little relevance whether the future state projected by the individual is actually realized or whether something completely different occurs. Moreover, the subjective meaning may change several times as the course of the (inter)action unfolds. In addition, the meaning assigned retrospectively when the agent is reflecting over the finished act is very likely different from the primary meaning assigned to the project. Luckmann (2006a,

my translation) highlights this intentionality and meaningfulness inherent in all action:

Social reality presupposes intentional activities. Social worlds are constructed, maintained, transmitted, transformed and, occasionally, destroyed through social action that is meaningful to those who engage in it. Interactions are meaningful when they lead to results that were intended by them. But they are equally meaningful in another, often painful sense, when the consequences of the action differ from those originally intended. Action is meaningful, whether the bridges and the marriages that were built for eternity, last or don’t. (2006a: 20f.)

To insist that all action is intentional and meaningful entails that all actions – no matter to what degree individuals rely on pre-given routines – are projected and comprise ‘in-pre-given order-to motives.’ Thus, even when enacting highly taken-for-granted institutionalized scripts, they assign subjective meaning and project some finished act into the future (but see Jepperson 1991). Through their actions, institutional patterns are maintained or transformed, sometimes as intended and sometimes institutions erode because they cease to make sense. However, this intentionality and projectedness does not mean that all action is strategic in the sense of rational choice theory or that different alternatives are weighed against each other in a utilitarian way according to individual preferences.

Institutions, by definition, denote a certain durability. However, this emphasis on the stability provided by institutions has to be seen in the context of the ever-present fragility of all order. Berger and Luckmann (1989: 103) underscore that ‘(t)he legitimation of the institutional order is also faced with the ongoing necessity of keeping chaos at bay. All social reality is precarious. All societies are construction is the face of chaos.’ Hence, the existence of order – on the macro-level of society, the micro-level of interaction as well as on the individual level of identity construction – cannot be taken for granted but is an ongoing achievement of the agents involved. Its reproduction and transformation are equally fragile. The focus on

the precariousness of order is shared with the negotiated order approach to organizations (e.g. Strauss 1978; Maines/Charlton 1985; Fine 1996) – an approach that builds on pragmatism and symbolic interactionism as well as the work of Everett C. Hughes, another forefather of neoinstitutionalism (see e.g. Zucker 1977; Scott 2001), but is mostly neglected in organizational research (for an exception see e.g. Hallett/Ventresca 2006; Walgenbach/Meyer 2008). Strauss stresses that social order is maintained in continuous processes of negotiating reality. For him (1978: ix) ‘rules and roles are always breaking down – and when they do not, they do not miraculously remain intact without some effort, including negotiation effort, to maintain them.’

In organizational institutionalism, the insight that not only the primary establishment or the transformation of institutions involves signifying activities, but that also the routine reproduction requires continuous efforts has led to renewed empirical and theoretical interest in ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ – actors with sufficient resources who see new institutions as an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly (DiMaggio 1988: 14; see also Dorado 2005; Battilana 2006; Greenwood/Suddaby 2006) – and ‘institutional work’ – ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence/Suddaby 2006: 218; see also DiMaggio 1988; Fligstein 2001). From these short definitions, it is evident that the concepts are not intended to provide general conceptualizations of actors and action, but to denote specific types. Hwang and Powell (2005) identify a discomfiting inflationary growth in the usage of the term ‘entrepreneur’ and a more general trend to label all sorts of activities as entrepreneurship that they link to essentially modern, yet under-analyzed, conceptions of empowered individuals. For institutional entrepreneurs to be an endogenous explanation of change, it is necessary to give the concept a firm institutional grounding. I suggest that drawing on

the Schützian concept of social action could contribute to such a foundation.

As they are referring to specific types, the central questions in this context obviously are how we identify institutional entrepreneurs and institutional work and in what respect they differ from other actors and their actions. One option would be to tie the identification to the outcome, i.e. to institutional change. However, this would be highly problematic for several reasons: First, as Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002) have highlighted, the relationships between actor, activities, interests and institutional change are often much more indirect. They conclude that ‘(t)he institutional entrepreneur is only one type of actor that is important in the processes of institutional change’ (2002: 294). While change may emerge without much effort from those individuals who, often retrospectively, get filtered out as initiators, it might take just as much resources and work to stabilize an institutional arrangement against opponents as it would to initiate new procedures. However, to tie the identification of institutional entrepreneurs and work to the necessity of defeating resistance or the potential or even the willingness to do so, would inevitably directly lead into a ‘multiple faces of power’ debate (Bachrach/Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974; Clegg 1989) and the argument that any institutional explanation has to be especially sensitive to all variations of structural and symbolic power that is prevalently manifested in the absence of any visible form of resistance.

Drawing on the different kinds of motives Schütz distinguishes could offer a promising option to embed the institutional entrepreneur within a more general conception of action and provide criteria for the identification of the type. I believe that it would be in the spirit of the research building on DiMaggio (1988) to use the term for agents whose action projects and subjective meanings (i.e. their ‘in-order-to motives’) are directed towards the institutional framework (both future- and change-oriented as well as

past- and stability-oriented). I interpret the 'purposive' in Lawrence and Suddaby's definition as leading the same way.<sup>2</sup> Whether they succeed or fail, whether they sponsor stability or change, is a different question, as is, by the way, the methodological challenge of coming to terms with the temporality of the subjective meaning and the categorical non-accessibility of consciousness in concrete empirical research designs. To endogeneously account for their specific resources and to explain how they come to have divergent interests and define the situation in a way that they see a window of opportunity requires the incorporation of the related 'because-of motives', i.e. the socio-historical *Lebenswelt* with its institutionalized knowledge and the specific (inter)action context, into the analysis.

### THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION REVISITED

Another prominent example of Berger and Luckmann's influence on the body of organizational institutionalism is the notion of institutionalization as a process in which, through repetition, routinization and transmission, ephemeral interactions become objectified patterns, and meaning, originally constituted by the individual consciousness, becomes part of the socio-historical a priori. This notion is explicit in the conceptualization of advancing institutionalization as sequence of the stages of habitualization, objectivation, sedimentation (Zucker 1977; Tolbert/Zucker 1996; Colyvas/Powell 2006) and implicitly implicated in studies that regard the broad diffusion or increasing density of some structure or practice within a field as an indicator for increasing legitimacy – the currently dominant model for empirically analyzing institutionalization. Recently, scholars have started to question the comprehensiveness of this model (e.g. Sahlin-Andersson 1996; Benford/Snow 2000; Campbell 2004; Meyer 2004; Lawrence/Suddaby 2006). A closer

look at the original conceptualization supports the skepticism: First, in the new sociology of knowledge, the three moments of the dialectical process of reality construction are, as is well known, externalization, objectivation (part of which are the sedimentation of meaning in a social sign system and its institutionalization) and, finally, internalization. The transmission to a third person who was not involved in the creation – no further quantitative spread – is required to complete the process of institutionalization. Secondly, the meaning of a form or practice is stressed on both the level of the individual actors who have to make sense of the situations they face and the level of society as a whole by linking institutionalization to some kind of societal problem.

The enactment of scripted action is tied to certain types of actors, i.e. prevalence of a certain already institutionalized practice is to be expected among actors belonging to the same social categorization. Thus, the question how far a practice can be expected to spread in terms of actors who perform it or situations in which it is to be displayed is dependent on the typification. Some institutions are frequently performed by many members of a society (e.g. institutions relating to meeting and departing, introducing, etc.); some are enacted by most members but, in general, only infrequently (e.g. institutions relating to birth or death). Others do not imply at all that the practices in question spread quantitatively (such as institutions relating to the succession of kings, presidents or the Pope). Prevalence within a social category does not entail a quantitatively wide spread of a form or practice if only a few actors are classified as belonging to this category, no matter how deeply taken for granted and widely shared the institution might be. Hence, neither is the absence of a wide diffusion indicative of the concept's lack of legitimacy, nor is the spread an indicator for the size of the institutional field. Moreover, the observation of a practice or form spreading might denote its primary institutionalization or its translation for other

types of actors or situations, i.e. the expansion of the institutional field's boundaries. Without understanding the meanings of a concept it is impossible to figure out what we are actually observing. Presence or absence of quantitative diffusion of forms of practices is too ambiguous to be taken as a measure of institutionalization. In addition, a wide spread in a quantitative sense is not equivalent to a high degree of institutionalization, as has often been shown with regard to management fashions. The sociology of knowledge, particularly research on *Deutungsmuster* (e.g. Oevermann 1973, 2001; Meuser/Sackmann 1992), a concept that is closely related to Goffman's frames (1986), links the strength of social expectations to the exclusivity with which they encompass situations (see also Goffman 1961, on total institutions) and, thus, their degree of latency (Lüders/Meuser 1997) which may range from reflexive availability to the complete taken-for-grantedness that characterizes the most powerful typifications. Thus, culturally powerful institutions are almost naturalized and drawn close to instincts (Douglas 1986; see e.g. Schütze's [1991], interesting analysis of the historical transformations of 'motherly love'). A high degree of latency makes it impossible for individuals to ignore the institutionalized expectations, as they are compelling even for those who deliberately try to defect. They, too, have to actively make reference, for example by feeling the urge to account for their non-compliance (e.g. Elsbach 1994), by pretending to adhere or by employing decoupling strategies (Meyer/Rowan 1977; Oliver 1991) or simply by feeling guilty. From this perspective, decoupling and symbolic window-dressing activities, merely rhetorical adoptions of practices, etc. are not necessarily antagonistic to institutions (but see Tolbert/Zucker 1996). On the contrary, they might point to socially powerful expectations that can not be neglected. The severity with which the disappointment of social expectations is sanctioned evidences the institution's relevance and centrality.

Organizational institutionalism has devoted much attention to show *how* practices get institutionalized, maintained or even deinstitutionalized. Very little attention has been dedicated to *why* they do. From a European's perspective, this might be a consequence of the anxiety of many North American scholars to get into the vicinity of functionalist explanations (for the relationship between Schütz and Parsons see their correspondence edited by Grathoff 1978). The sociology of knowledge ties the existence of institutions or new institutionalizations to the social approval of a situation as inherently problematic. In Berger and Luckmann's words (1989: 69f.), '(t)he transmission of the meaning of an institution is based on the social recognition of that institution as a "permanent" solution of a "permanent" problem of this collectivity.' Institutions are challenged if they cease to be seen as solutions or if the situation is no longer regarded as problematic, or, the argument turned around, if institutions persist, we can assume that they continue to reply to a societal problem, which, however, is not necessarily the original one (Soeffner in Reichertz 2004), nor does this say anything about a 'rationality' of this solution. Thus, not merely the spread of institutions, but rather the question of which societal problem the actors defined and attended to is of central concern. Societies only stabilize important forms of action, and, on the macro-level, the societal relevance system can be inferred from the repertoire of existing institutions (the 'institutional economy', Luckmann 2002). This emphasis on the close linkage between institution and context accounts partly for the heterogeneity of institutions and for the observation that concepts and their theorizations cannot be transferred 'wholesale' from one social sphere to the next. In Soeffner's words (2006, my translation),

(t)hey are all historical plants that owe their appearance to the cultural landscapes and regions in which they have grown. Their soil and their nourishment are the particular problems of

concrete societies, times and situations. They are the concrete answers to concrete problematic situations, that is, concerning their content and phenotype, they are bound to specific socio-historical contexts and are inexchangeable – unless they be transferred with political and/or ideological power and continuous surveillance from one culture to the other, superseding this culture's representations of order or pushing them into the background. (2006: 64)

Again, there are obvious similarities especially to research conducted in the tradition of the Scandinavian institutionalism on translations and editing processes, but also to studies on contesting institutional logics (e.g. Reay/Hinings 2005) or on framing processes (e.g. Benford/Snow 2000). In addition to this overlap of research questions, the sociology of knowledge provides a rigorous repertoire of hermeneutic procedures to be used in empirical analyses that follow strict rules of interpretation and documentation and warrant a 'monitored and controlled understanding' (Soeffner 2004; see also e.g. Soeffner 1989; Flick/von Kardoff/Steinke 2004; for an English-speaking example in organization research see Lueger/Sandner/Meyer/Hammerschmid 2005). This could contribute considerably to enhancing the appreciation for qualitative research methods in organizational institutionalism.

### LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND COMMUNICATIVE INSTITUTIONS

Language is a main focus in current research, both in organizational institutionalism and in the phenomenological sociology of knowledge. Institutionalization, apart from the transmission from one generation to the next, is bound to social knowledge that is intersubjectively available through its sedimentation in all sorts of symbol systems. Language plays a crucial role in several respects: It is the most important sign system and 'reservoir' of typifications and institutional knowledge, although by no means the only one. Artefacts, such as factories or churches,

jewellery, clothes or graves, or rituals are other forms in which social knowledge is sedimented. Further, language is the prime instrument for the transmission of knowledge, thus, for socialization and internalization. Moreover, the mobilization of legitimacy is a mainly discursive process. Berger and Luckmann (1989: 64) stress that 'the edifice of legitimation is built upon language and uses language as its principal instrumentality.' In a later publication, Luckmann (2006: 22, my emphasis and translation) asserts that, although it would be too narrow to confine knowledge to discursive knowledge and all human praxis to communicative interactions, 'the human social world is at least *mainly* constructed in communicative interaction.' Just like every other form of social action, communicative actions also get habitualized and institutionalized. This requires looking beyond the actual content of communication and examining the formats in which it is produced – the communicative genres (Luckmann 2002, 2006a; Knoblauch 1995; Knoblauch/Luckmann 2004). Genres, such as jokes, greetings, prayers, job interviews, emails, exams, parliamentary speeches, performance appraisal, or gossip are more or less obligatory interaction patterns that are available to actors as part of the social knowledge stocks. The stabilization of communication into genres serves the same purpose as institutionalization in general. It 'frees the individual from the burden of "all those decisions"' (Berger/Luckmann 1989: 53). Genres give orientation and help in coordinating and structuring interaction by providing typical expectations with respect to the synchronization of actors and by standardizing the interaction sequences. They are the 'communicative institutions' of a particular society, and, taken together, constitute a society's 'communicative economy' (Luckmann 2002).

In organizational institutionalism, language and symbolism have always had a central role – too central in the eyes of some critics (e.g. Perrow 1985). Here, a focus has

been on the availability of accounts that actors do not have to invent anew when trying to legitimate their proceeding, but that come 'ready-made' with the theorization of the concepts in question (e.g. Meyer/Rowan 1977, Strang/Meyer 1993; Elsbach 1994; Lounsbury/Glynn 2001; Creed/Scully/Austin 2002; Meyer 2004; Suddaby/Greenwood 2005). Zucker (1977: 728) points out that when acts have ready-made accounts, they are institutionalized. Scott and Lyman (1970: 93), who had a strong impact on organizational institutionalism's understanding of accounts, explicate that they introduced the concept in order to bring together Schütz's emphasis on taken-for-granted social recipes 'everyone knows' and C. W. Mills' (1940) 'vocabularies of motive.' The repertoires of such 'vocabularies of motive' are distributed within a field according to social position and identity, and, thus, are tailored for specific categories of actors to use in typical situations. In the terminology of the phenomenological sociology of knowledge, they are ready-made because they are part of the socio-historical a priori (Luckmann 2006a).

More recently, a number of institutionalists have suggested drawing on discourse analysis (e.g. Phillips/Lawrence/Hardy 2004) or rhetorical analysis (e.g. Suddaby/Greenwood 2005) to strengthen the micro-foundation of institutional processes. In order to overcome the micro-bias and to encompass the ongoing political processes related to the production, circulation, transformation and manifestation of knowledge at the meso- or macro-level, researchers in the tradition of the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (e.g. Keller 2005a, 2005b; Keller/Hirsland/Schneider/Viehöver 2001, 2005) also direct attention to discourses as analytic devices. Keller (2005a) suggests integrating the work of Gusfield (1981), the social movement research particularly in the tradition of Gamson (e.g. Gamson/Modigliani 1989) and, further, Foucault's discourse theory into the phenomenologically oriented sociology

of knowledge. The replacement of the *communicative* construction of reality with a *discursive* is meant to underscore this emphasis.

It is evident that especially the communicative and discursive strands of the sociology of knowledge have amazing overlaps with the current agenda of organizational institutionalism and could contribute considerably to future research. In the context of organizational studies, communicative genres as social institutions have been analyzed, e.g. by Yates and Orlikowski (1992), who, building on rhetorical theory and Giddens' structuration theory, come to a strikingly similar definition of a genre as 'a typified communicative action invoked in response to a recurrent situation' (Yates/Orlikowski 1992: 301). In organizational studies, interesting new genres abound (e.g. emails, homepages, sustainability reports, hearings, accreditation reports). Like all institutions, genres attend to fundamental and recurrent communicative problems that are typical for a particular field. Since these problems and the socially approved way to attend to them are own to a specific field, different communities use different communicative economies (Luckmann 2002) or genre repertoires (Orlikowski/Yates 1994), and like all institutionalized forms, genres can not travel from one social context to the next without translation or editing activities. Not only are genres closely related to institutionalized contexts, but often they are also constitutive of them, that is, these contexts 'may actually be defined through the use of such genres' (Knoblauch/Luckmann 2004: 306). Changes in the communicative economy of a field are, thus, indicative of transformations of institutional regimes or logics. Many of the analyses of the spread of new institutional logics into other fields focus on language and it would be interesting to read them in terms of the involved genres, e.g. Oakes, Townley, and Cooper's (1998) analysis of how the use of business plan in a public organization facilitated the shift from a cultural to an economic rationality. In addition,

it could be interesting to see if the different types of institutional work (Lawrence/Suddaby 2006) or legitimating efforts (Suchman 1995) rely on or constitute different genres, i.e. if the use of particular genres can be seen as a cue for institutional entrepreneurs at work, or to see how the global diffusion of rationalization according to the world polity approach (e.g. Meyer 2005) is displayed in the communicative economies.

## CONCLUSION

Organizational institutionalism and the various branches of the German-speaking sociology of knowledge share roots in the phenomenologically inspired *Social Construction of Reality*. My intent in this chapter was to assume an institutional standpoint and look over the fence to see what could be gained by reopening a dialogue. I have shown that neoinstitutional theory's main concepts still bear a strong socio-phenomenological imprint, even if this heritage has somewhat become the status of tacit assumptions. I have argued that in terms of core conceptualizations, such as agency, meaning, social and individual knowledge, or *Lebenswelt*, for a phenomenologically inspired approach like organizational institutionalism it is impossible to look back beyond the work of Alfred Schütz. A firmer grounding in his tradition could help to overcome the conceptual ambiguity that is currently being criticized by many of the theory's proponents. I have outlined that, apart from the historical legacy, many of the current research questions overlap with the work done in the German-speaking sociology of knowledge and have examined potential contributions the socio-phenomenology can make to current debates. I have shown that several of the current challenges do not require organizational institutionalism to 'import' concepts from other theoretical traditions; important impulses and potential new directions could be gained from

revisiting its own conceptual background and from a closer engagement with the socio-phenomenological tradition. For example, a closer adherence to the sociology of knowledge could help disentangle diffusion research and the analyses of institutionalization processes, overcome the power and agency void, or refocus attention on one of organizational institutionalism's core strengths – stability that is accomplished amid ever changing situations and constellations of agents after more than a decade of preoccupation with change and heterogeneity. In addition, we are reminded of other symbol systems besides language (e.g. artefacts, design, buildings, architecture, etc.) that transport institutional knowledge. For example the relevance of 'locales' for the evoking of institutional patterns is still underemphasized in institutional research. Further, an engagement with the distribution of knowledge on the level of the field relates sedimentation to discrimination and opens the view on institutionalized knowledge/power structures and domination. Finally, particularly with regard to a potential 'discursive turn,' the sociology of knowledge with its focus on genres and knowledge regimes has a much more 'indigenously' institutionally anchored agenda than institutional theory presently seems to have.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann both have Austrian roots as well as Alfred Schütz, who had to leave Austria in 1938.

2 Similarly, coming from the social movement research, Snow and Benford (2000: 624) conceptualize their frame alignment processes as '(s)trategic efforts by SMOs to link their interests and interpretive frames with those of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers' and Klandermans (1988) distinguishes 'consensus mobilization' (the 'deliberate attempt by a social actor to create consensus') from 'consensus formation' ('unplanned convergence of meaning').

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