Get your act(ors) together.
Actorhood and agency from a pragmatist-inspired perspective

Work in progress – Please do not cite without author’s permission – Comments are most welcome!

Matthias Hofferberth
University of Texas at San Antonio
Department of Political Science and Geography
One UTSA Circle
San Antonio, TX 78249
matthias.hofferberth@utsa.edu

Abstract: Actorhood in International Relations Theory, i.e. which actors are considered as actors, is commonly defined in substantial terms as all canonical IR theories offer concluding answers which actors they look at. At the same time, these theories – implicitly or explicitly – include assumptions about the agency of their respective actors. Thus, IR theories combine actorhood and agency, creating specific actor images such as “states competing for power”, strategic interest groups, the “hyperrational corporation” or the “norm-entrepreneurial civil society group”, too name just a few. The paper argues that while logically consistent, these specific combinations (1) are not exhaustive and (2) can be re-conceptualized by theoretical elaborating which entities can be considered as actors and how they act. Instead of assuming on the ontological level as advocated by IR theories, this paper discusses actorhood and agency from the social theory perspective of American Pragmatism. Specifying agency, corporeality and reflexivity as predispositions for actorhood, the paper offers a theoretical answer to the question of actorhood. Drawing on the notion of social, creative and contingent agency, the paper further discusses how one can look at individual acts and explain them. Theorizing actors and their agency along the lines offered in this paper enables to think of actorhood and agency anew and, according to research interest, specify old or develop and justify new combinations of actorhood and agency. Going beyond the level of contending paradigms by drawing on pragmatism, thus allows one to be more precise and reflective upon why and how one analyzes a specific actor group which in term could contribute to more dialogue between individual scholars to further develop our understanding of which and how entities constitute world politics.

Keywords: theory of action, pragmatism, International Relations theory
1. Introduction

Besides other potential similarities, the US, China, and Cyprus, George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin and Bill Gates, the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union, the US Congress, the German Bundestag and the British Parliament, the United States Chamber of Commerce, the National Rifle Association, and the National Association of Wheat Growers, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Royal Dutch/Shell and ExxonMobile as well as al-Quaida and the Taliban share at least one thing in common: they are all considered, by one or another IR theory, as actors of international relations.\footnote{This unstructured list of “accepted” actors within the discipline already indicates a plurality which goes far beyond international relations. Therefore, the paper uses the term “world politics” to describe and discuss phenomena and interaction that exceed national borders.} In other words, these entities serve as substantive answers to the question which actors are influential in world politics and therefore legitimately considered and analyzed within the discipline. Depending on which actor group is championed, one can differentiate between IR theories as each school of thought defines its primary actors. Answering the question of actorhood in IR therefore has become one of the many practices by which theories engage in “paradigm battle” as they question and rebut other theories on the basis of their own assumptions. This discussion on actorhood, thus, has become one of the disciplinary “fault lines”, dividing the discipline into different and presumably irreconcilable schools of thought (Sil/Katzenstein 2010; Jackson/Nexon 2009).

Obviously, due to the necessity of giving meaning and structuring an ambiguous world out there, one can easily think of and thereby theoretically construct within a particular world-view empirical instances for all mentioned entities in which they exercised influence on world politics. In fact, this is why they are considered as actors in the first place: all phenomena mentioned receive attention as actors because they matter within the given framework which compel the scientist to consider precisely these actors. Actors are then further defined by describing them as national, non-state or transnational actors without any other specification as to which qualities these entities need to have to be qualified as actors (Ringmar 1996: 66ff). While one cannot help but be surprised by the obvious circularity – a specific entity is considered as actor because it makes a difference according to a specific theoretical “wager” on primary actors (Jackson/Nexon 2009: 317) – the real problem of this practice lies in the substantialized answer to the question of what constitutes an actor in world politics. One of the first to note and criticize but in the end not overcome this peculiar practice within the discipline was Wolfers (1959). By defining
actors along the line of state and individual actors, he argued that anything can be an actor as long as it has an impact on or in world politics. Further theorization of actorhood for him was not necessary (Wolfers 1959: 105ff).

Instead of providing this theorizing on the dispositions of actorhood, IR theories combine their substantive answers – most often states, as in realism (Waltz 1979: 95ff), institutionalism (Keohane 1988: 380ff) and constructivism (Wendt 1992: 424) or a unspecified plurality of state and private actors as in the global governance paradigm (Avant et al. 2010) – with different logics of action. Thus, IR theories not only specify which actors to consider but also include assumptions on how they act. They basically combine assumptions on actorhood with assumptions on agency without specifying either. This leaves the discipline with peculiar combinations, some of which are contended as different theories claim explanatory superiority, some of which are taken for granted. As an example for the former, both realist and constructivist approaches explain state behavior by relating it to different variables and factors. Therefore, we have two very different state images, one framed in consequentialist explanations based in material terms (i.e. the competing state in a self-help system) as well as one based in a logic of appropriateness which draws on ideational aspects (i.e. the norm-entrepreneurial state sensitive to its recognition as a accepted member of international society). Other, within the discipline’s narratives less important actor groups receive attention only within one paradigm, creating images such as the hyperrational corporation (Amoore 2006) or the norm-driven civil society group (Florini 2000).

Although logically consistent, these specific combinations (1) are by no means exhaustive nor conclusive and (2) can therefore be reconsidered and cast differently. In fact, the argument of this paper is that these combinations and the prevalence of setting actors and defining their behavior constitutes a problematic practice since one should rather start with the phenomenon instead of applying abstract theory to it. While this argument to some extent echoes the idea of Analytic Eclecticism, it also contents that IR Theory could very much benefit from engaging with theories of action on what constitutes an actor and agency. In fact, although being among the first questions one needs to answer, for whatever reason, these questions have for a long time been relegated to the sidelines of theorizing leaving us with an “unspecified core of actorhood” (Meyer/Jepperson 2000: 100). Drawing on the tradition of American Pragmatism in the spirit of Franke/Weber (2012), the paper discusses one version of how actors and agency can be theorized. Such a foundation in social theory enables to think of actorhood and agency anew and allows, according to research interest, to specify old or develop and justify new combinations of
actorhood and agency. Moreover, it provides an elaborated answer to the question what constitutes an actor and does not rely on substantive terms derived from a theory. More specifically, I believe that a pragmatist-inspired perspective as outlined in this paper can go beyond the rather general statement of mutual constitution between actors and structures. Going beyond both an individualistic voluntarism and a structural determinism, agency as it is introduced in this paper is at the same time structuring and structured. Initiating such a theoretical debate about actorhood and agency beyond the level of contending paradigms, I believe allows one to be more precise and reflective upon why and how one analyzes a specific actor group which in term could contribute to more dialogue between individual scholars (Hellmann 2003).

2. **Reality in the making – a pragmatist-inspired perspective**

Disregarding the common practice of self-marginalization, one can argue that pragmatism has found its way into the discipline of IR and is currently enjoying, at least among some scholars, a fair deal of popularity. Labeled as such first in the *Millennium* special issue on “Pragmatism in International Relations Theory” in 2002, pragmatist-inspired thoughts and assumptions were lately discussed in an *International Studies Review* forum (Hellmann 2009), introduced in an edited volume (Bauer/Brighi 2009) and, prominently within the “flagship publication” of the discipline, outlined in terms of their value for doing research and methodology (Friedrichs/Kratochwil 2009). However, although pragmatism has been and is currently introduced to IR on different avenues, because of the broadness and richness of the tradition as well as the specific interest by which it is introduced, to some extent it remains unclear what it is and what it can provide for IR (Franke/Weber 2012: 671).

Following the suggestion of Hellmann (2002), pragmatism in this paper is not understood as (yet) another contender for the last variable standing in the IR paradigm battle. Rather, it is introduced and situated on a different level. As such, pragmatism can be un-

---

2 Obviously, since there is an argument to be made in this paper but limited space, the following section should by no means be understood as a general introduction of pragmatism as a social theory of thought and action. For IR, this has been done convincingly by Hellmann (2010) and by Bauer/Brighi (2009). For a more philosophical introduction beyond IR see Putnam (1995) and for an introduction along the line of individual pragmatists see Nagl (1998).

3 Obviously, these contributions are only examples of explicit drawing on the tradition of Pragmatism. One can easily argue that there are other, more implicit ideas derived from Pragmatism which have become influential within the discipline. Examples of these would, among others, include Wendt’s recourse to Mead as he introduces the notion of socialization (Wendt 1999: 170ff) or Waltz’ criticism of deduction and induction (Waltz 1979: 11ff).
understood as a “theory of thought and action” and therefore be “advertised as an attitude to be adopted in our daily academic labour of trying to understand and explain the world” Hellmann (2002: 2). For the question of actorhood and agency, pragmatism is particularly attractive because it implies both epistemological as well as action-theoretical arguments. In fact, it negates the difference between the two and considers the “primacy of practice” as the starting point for both. It is even more attractive because it specifically theorizes agency and by drawing on pragmatist thinking, one can develop various dimensions of it. At the same time, it provides a logic of reasoning that does not understand one’s own position as superior to others. Pragmatists consider decisions and vocabularies developed in the process of doing research as necessary but not final. Because of the approximative nature of any research, scientists have to become “liberal ironists”. The challenge for them is to be aware and reflective of the contingent character of one’s knowledge while, for the time being, retain and argue for ones commitments Rorty (1989: 73ff). It is along this line that the following remarks should be considered as an “offer” whose final value depends on whether and how one can make use of it.

While different authors emphasize different aspects of pragmatism, fundamental for this paper is the pragmatist understanding of reality as being constantly “in the making” (Shalin 1986). Because of its fluid, processual and indeterminate character, reality can only be thought of as the sum of actions meaningfully oriented towards each other. In other words, it is only in action that reality is constructed and perceived since, as far as the pragmatist is concerned, we do not know (and need not know) about reality beyond the activity of human being. Different actors act upon different realities, each of which are subjectively “structured by our capacities for, and experiences of, action” (Joas 1996: 158). This understanding of reality as by definition being constantly in flux marks one of the critical differences between pragmatism and other, more rational understandings of reality:

“The essential contrast is that for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future.”(James 1975: 123, emphasis in original)

This conceptualization of reality has immediate consequences for understanding human action. In the pragmatist perspective, human action is always grounded and anchored in specific situations and concrete contexts of decisions because here reality becomes so pressing that actors need to act upon it (Friedrichs/Kratochwil 2009: 711ff). This anchoring is described as the constitutive primacy of practice by which the dualistic separation of perceiving subject and perceived object is negated. This dualistic notion inherent in
much of Western philosophy is replaced by the idea of the situative “unity of action”, in which perceiving and acting are linked through processual continuity: neither do we act upon finite perception nor is our perception independent from our actions (Putnam 1995: 52). Nevertheless, despite the fact that reality presents itself in an continuous stream of situations, actors are capable of fixating individual situations by ascribing temporary meaning to them. As Blumer (1969: 4f) puts it, “actions operate to define the thing for the person”. As such, actions create reality, at least to that extent that we in never-ending sequences react to the actions of others which, in that moment, becomes real for us.

Individual actions at the same time, however, do not create reality in a voluntaristic way but rather depend on some sort of shared understanding of reality. Picking up the idea of a continuous sequence of interaction, we react to a momentarily fixed portion of reality while reproducing this very reality at the same time, depending on how you look at an individual act. Defining which of the infinite aspects of reality are important and thereby specifying the situation is indispensable for action: only by situatively giving meaning to an otherwise unspecified situation does the actor constitute his or her horizon of possible actions. It is then through acts of interpretation (i.e. acts of ascribing meaning) that actors decide which of the infinite aspects of reality are constitutive for the specific situation at hand. Based on these interpretations, which might change throughout the process of carrying out the action, possible options for action are generated from which the actor then chooses one to be realized (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 967f).

These approximative and temporary fixations of meaning are being made in so-called “as if”-assumptions, by which, (some aspect of) reality is first assumed and fixed for the purpose of acting and then, once realized in action, confirmed or rejected (Hellmann 2009: 640). While some of these “as if”-assumptions are general in nature and become more robust beliefs we hold, they still have to be applied and specified to individual situations because it is here that we have to rely on them. In other words, situative acting becomes a permanent process of experimentation in which our assumptions and beliefs are proven or rebutted since there is no finite or rationalizable reality which could serve as background for action (Peirce 1965b: 229ff). Although being permanently challenged, beliefs and assumptions in this process still serve as “rules for action” and we find ourselves consciously or unconsciously drawing on these beliefs when we have to act. As general notions about the world and the self, beliefs thus constitute a pool of interpretations which are realized situatively in the shape of “as if”-assumptions about the very situation.

Once again, it is important to note that although being more general in nature and more firmly sedated within the actor, even beliefs are constantly questioned and cast into
do not hallucinate.

 RAW TEXT START

Matthias Hofferberth – “Actorhood & agency from a pragmatist-inspired perspective”

doubt, specifically so in situations of crisis. Such situations, in opposition to routinized situations, appear to be more the rule than the exception because of the “obdurate character” of the world out there Blumer (1969: 22). While situative “as if”-assumptions and their deeper beliefs have proven their worth in previous situations and much of our everyday interaction appears to happen in routinized forms, many actions take place in “individualized and unique situations, which are never exactly duplicable and about which, accordingly, no complete assurance is possible” (Dewey 1960 [1938]: 6). As such, from a pragmatist perspective, it is only a matter of time until our assumptions and beliefs are no longer sufficient to ensure acting. Thus, our very beliefs about reality are constantly “in the making”, just as is the reality itself.

While there are many other important aspects to the pragmatist tradition – the abductive logic of inquiry, the emphasis on practice, the complete rejection of a representational understanding of truth as well as the implications of all of this for methodology and methods and for our practice of “doing” science, to name but a few – and there is the grave danger of isolating and pick-and-choosing single thoughts from a much richer tradition here to make an argument, I believe the notion of a fluid, processual and indeterminate reality as well as the primacy of practice and its ideas about “as if”-assumptions, beliefs, meaning fixations, routines and crises offer enough of a conceptual foundation to fruitfully engage with questions of actorhood and agency. In a first step, the paper will discuss the dispositions as in prerequisites, so to speak, of what constitutes an actor, before it will turn to the question how to conceptualize and explain agency by looking at its different dimensions.

3. A pragmatist-inspired perspective on actorhood

In the last section, pragmatism for the purpose of this paper was introduced as a theory of thought and action. By doing so, it was situated on a different level than other, more ontologically defined theories. It is along this line that pragmatism offers an alternative view on actorhood and provides a valuable alternative to substantive answers for the question of actorhood. Such a perspective is dearly needed since any substantive claim is logically preceded by “foundational commitments” which “serve as the often-unacknowledged basis on which empirical claims are founded” (Jackson 2011: 41). Pragmatism as a theory of

4 It is important to note that foundational in this context should not be understood in a way that commitments “provide unshakable grounds that universally guarantee the validity of claims that are founded on them” but rather in the sense that these commitments “provide the conditions of intelligibility for those claims.” (Jackson 2011: 41).

6
thought and action, this paper argues, provides precisely such foundational commitments as one can specify dispositions of actorhood. Among the dispositions to be discussed here, we find (1) agency as in the will to act and influence the world out there, (2) corporeality as the bodily fixation necessary to exercise this influence and (3) reflexivity as the capacity to reflect upon oneself and the world in order to abduct.

All three dispositions are considered necessary for an entity in order to be considered as an actor – one cannot imagine an actor without agency, corporeality and reflexivity. However, at the same time, none of these should be understood in a substantialized way as being fixed dispositions actors carry within them. The idea advocated here is to consider dispositions of actors as relational to the extent that they are “ascribed” to actors by other actors (Emirbayer 1997: 293ff). In other words, actorhood in its three dispositions is the product of social interaction. Empirically, one can look at any entity and specify whether or not in a particular case this entity can legitimately be considered as an actor since it is recognized as such by others. Obviously, with this in mind, very different entities potentially “fulfill” these dispositions and can therefore justifiably be considered as actors. As a broad perspective on actorhood, it is the narratives of social interaction which makes actor, be it the “West”, the “Islamic world”, Royal Dutch/Shell, the American President or individuals (Ringmar 1996: 75ff). Put differently, pragmatism does not offer a conclusive answer on which entities are actors. Instead, it offers theoretically derived dispositions to develop case-specific “as if”-assumptions about different entities. With these assumptions at hand, one can that look at the world and see whether or not different entities are to be considered as actors and more specifically, what made them actors by “checking” the three dispositions. To make this abstract statement more comprehensible, some thoughts on each disposition are due to follow.

Virtually across all theories of action, agency is considered to be the constitutive element of actorhood. Actors are the executing unit of action as agency is thought of as “making a difference” (Sachweh 2008: 25f). Speaking grammatically, any “entity that is able to serve as the subject of a sentence with an active verb – an entity constituted as the author of a particular action or set of actions that is performed in the name of the actor” – can be considered (Jackson 2003: 55, emphasis in original). Tied into this assumption is the idea that actors have causal influence and effect their environment. Agency then, as the ability to make a difference, can be identified and linked with “human will” as a property or vital principle that ‘breathes life’ into passive, inert substances [...] that otherwise would remain perpetually at rest” (Emirbayer 1997: 294). Therefore, agency is often seen exclusively to lie with individual human beings. While a classical
pragmatist reading would not contradict this notion, the same perspective also offers enough freedom to consider the competence to act as the product of relational ascription, meaning that agency can be constituted beyond the individual. As such, for all intents and purposes, a collective actor exercises agency because of institutionalized corporate practices (Franke/Roos 2010: 1065ff).

In the Weberian tradition, the notion of agency is further specified along the division of intentional and meaning-oriented action vs. reactional and stimuli-generated behavior (Jackson 2011: 90f). In addition to having an effect on the world, agency in this understanding is equaled with purpose and intention. This notion of purpose and intention as further elaborated (and misunderstood at the same time) by Parsons (1967 [1937]: 43ff) sees rationality and purposiveness within individualistic actors whose agency is constituted by the fact that they act separately from their environment. Given the pragmatist background, these assumptions are not shared here. Instead of constituting agency in terms of a methodological individualism by situating means-end rationality within individuals, one of the pragmatist assumptions lies precisely in dissolving the separation between acting and perceiving which serves as the logical foundation of individualism. In other words, while sharing the notion that an actor has to have some sort of capacity to act as defined in terms of agency, pragmatists do not consider rationality or purposiveness as part of this disposition since they do not lie within individual actors. Neither of these are to be thought of in absolute terms as action remains a process of experimentation by non-teleological actors. In other words, that what is rational is determined through interaction (Joas 1996: 148). While this idea is elaborated further in the next section, for now one can conclude that while agency marks the will to make a difference and while this is necessary to even think of an entity as an actor, it does not rest within the individual but is constituted socially.

Now to the second disposition of actorhood. While most theories of action share the idea that agency is a prerequisite for actorhood and go into lengthy debates about it, the second aspect of actorhood advanced from a pragmatist-inspired perspective – corporeality – appears to be far less elaborated and discussed. On a general note, corporeality can be considered as the bodily fixation of an entity. Only because of this fixation in the “here and now” can actors perceive and act upon the indeterminate and infinite flow of events. Therefore, corporeality marks the “complex of physico-chemical interactions” and as such allows the “connection with processes which are going on outside the body” Dewey (1968 [1931]: 306). Along this line, corporeality can be thought of as the capacity to “determine indeterminacy” by bodily being situated within it and enacting this situatedness through
acting (Shalin 1986: 12). In other words, the intent to exercise agency alone does not constitute an actor. Rather, agency has to be realized through an entity which has the capacity to influence the world by being part and fixating part of it. The anchoring in time and space thus marks the necessary precondition to physically make a difference (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069).

While it is the body which puts us into a situation where we need to act and “permits us to choose between various modes of perception and action, to switch from one mode to another and to substitute one for another” (Joas 1996: 159), one should not misunderstand the notion of corporeality by essentializing and limiting it to individuals. While such actors have by definition an anchoring body, it is by no means the only body which entails actorhood. For example, Dewey (1968 [1931]: 141ff) discusses the notion of legal bodies and corporate personalities. Through processes of incorporation – note the etymological closeness to the Latin word *corpus* – very different actors can be given a body. Thus, corporeality can also not be thought of in absolute terms but is defined in relational terms. In other words, the biological body schema of individual human beings just marks one body while there can be many others. In fact, not extending the notion of corporeality beyond the individual runs the danger of understanding the body in either an activist or an instrumental way. On the other hand, extending corporeality beyond the individual means to think of a body not “as a permanently available instrument of pure intentionality” “[167]joas1996.

Now to the final disposition – reflexivity – which is immediately derived from pragmatist thinking. Mead specified the term by referring to the capability to think of oneself as an object. This reflective process entails changing the perspective and consider one’s own acts in terms of their effects on other (Mead 1967 [1934]: 135ff). This reflection breaks with the temporality of action by anticipating future reactions before the act takes place. In other words, reflexivity marks the projective element of actorhood as constant hypothesization of social experience for future instances (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 983ff). Crucial for the ability to reflect is the aptitude for abductive reasoning by considering known routines and potential effects of acting this way or another. Based on both, through reflection then new rules for action are created (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069). In other words, only through constant thought experiments of reflecting oneself is future acting made possible in the present:

“When […] we speak of reflective conduct we very definitely refer to the presence of the future in terms of ideas [and action].”(Mead 1967 [1934]: 119)

In its projective dimension, reflexivity is by no means limited to either before or after act-
ing. Instead, it is precisely done in action (Joas 1996: 159ff). While an actor performs his action, she has the capacity to permanently perceive oneself and ones acts from the perspective of others and it is in these moments of reflexivity where intentions are developed and changed (Mead 1967 [1934]: 173ff). In other words, intentionality and rationality are not completely negated but they no longer rest within the individual. Rather, it is always reflected upon, contextualized in social interaction and thought of in dynamic terms as it is the product of abductive reasoning in unknown situations. Because of this abductive capacity to reflect, actors become active, searching and problem-solving. In other words, it is the capacity to reflect and not the individualistic idea of intentionality which distinguishes meaning-oriented action from stimuli-generated behavior. Only because of reflexivity can we develop and change intentions and meaningfully orient actions towards those of others. This abductive reasoning becomes crucial for actorhood as it marks the “competence to act and [allows] for a departure from structurally fixed routines of action” (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069).

In sum, with these three dispositions at hand, one has the theoretical tools to specify which entities are justifiably considered as actors within a specific research setting and interest. Obviously, in the further analysis, the case-specific “as if”-assumptions about the actorhood of different entities need to be “tested” by carefully looking at the interaction and shared understandings about the respective entity. As there is no absolute notion of actorhood, it is something which is bestowed to entities within a context of meaningful interaction. Depending on research question and research perspective then, different entities can rightfully be considered as actors as long as in the specific situation they have the will and ability to make a difference as well as the capacity to reflect upon this difference. While these three dispositions by definition lie within the individual human being, in most situations, at least on a micro, everyday level, we can refer to individuals as being actors. Thus, human beings are considered as “primary actors” within pragmatism (Franke/Roos 2010: 1070). However, these qualities can also be transferred through processes of incorporation and collective practices to very different phenomena. While individuals might be “primary actors”, the social sciences rightfully consider other entities too:

“This [pragmatist] view of human action applies equally well to joint or collective action in which numbers of individuals are implicated. [...] Such instances of societal behavior, whatever they may be, consist of individuals fitting their lines of action to one another. It is both proper and possible to view and study such behavior in its joint or collective character instead of in its individual components. Such joint behavior does not lose its character of being constructed through an interpretative process in meeting the situations in which the collectivity is called on to act. Whether the collectivity be an army engaged
in a campaign, a corporation seeking to expand its operations, or a nation trying to correct an unfavorable balance of trade, it needs to construct its action through an interpretation of what is happening in its area of operation.” (Blumer 1969: 16)  

To determine then if something is an actor or not, one needs to look at the relational practices and meaning ascriptions resolving around this entity. The bottom line on actorhood then is that while three specific dispositions are necessary to be considered as an actor, it is in interactional sequences where actorhood is negotiated and constituted (Emirbayer 1997; Jackson/Nexon 1999). While actorhood thus cannot be specified in absolute terms across different situations and across different research interests, at least not beyond the individual who is always an actor, defining the three dispositions allows to look more precisely at different entities, assess their influence in a sequence of interaction and come to a non-substantive specification of actorhood grounded in specific empirical settings. While this in itself allows a more sophisticated dialogue between scholars, none of the above tells us much about how agency is played out. To make up for this deficiency, the next section looks at the three dimensions of agency to further theorize and explain individual acts from within a pragmatist-inspired perspective.

4. A pragmatist-inspired perspective on agency

While the last section introduced agency as one of the three disposition for actorhood, it did not specify how the capacity to act is realized and played out in the pragmatist perspective. It is precisely here where pragmatism and its emphasis on practice promises to add to our conceptualization, especially so because IR as a discipline defined in substantial terms (i.e. the sum of interactions, processes and structures between different actors on a potentially global scale) to some extent understandably neglected these questions for some time. For the most time, the discipline took a vague notion of rationality for granted when looking at states and their competitive interaction.  

Being aware of the danger of presenting a familiar story in crude strokes here, of course this changed when constructivist ideas became popular within the discipline. In fact, among the many things this new “contender for theoretical supremacy” introduced to the discipline was a different logic of action: as constructivism challenged traditional IR theories, explaining action became divided along the line between the logic of consequentialism vs. the logic

---

5 Strauss (1993: 226) argues along the same line by stating that “[i]t can be individuals who do the acting, but for sociological purposes we want to locate them in some sort of social unit.”

6 Wolfers (1959), for example, did not “waste” time on the question what motivates actors to act since he assumed an underlying rationality.
of appropriateness (Fearon/Wendt 2002: 60).

Although Fearon/Wendt (2002) are skeptical of pushing the division of labor between the two logics too hard or too far, it still became common practice to explain a particular action by either positioning oneself within one logic or by letting the two logics compete in empirical testing. In either case, and despite March/Olsen (1998: 953f) warning, the two logics are often framed in a dualistic way. As Sil/Katzenstein (2010: 23ff) argue, this division has become one of the disciplinary “fault lines”, echoing an interdisciplinary and at the same time often stereotyped debate in which the two irreconcilable actor images of the *homo oeconomicus* and the *homo sociologicus* are pit against each other. By drawing on (and one can easily argue by misunderstanding) this debate, IR has burdened itself with the age-old sociological dispute between rational and normatively oriented action (Joas 1996: 4f). In rationalist accounts, agency becomes the consequentialist attempt to maximize preferences while agency in the logic of appropriateness is determined by reflecting upon one’s identity and the normative rule structure of the situation one acts in. Given the dualistic framing of most IR debates, with this one as with many others there seems to be little space to mediate between the two (Sending 2002: 447ff).

Being anti-foundationalist and anti-dualist, pragmatists question this account as they do not engage in this debate by trying to prove on or the other side. Rather, they problematize the debate in the first place as both rational and normatively oriented action presupposes the fixation of preferences or identity *before* acting. Thus, *perceiving a situation*, whether in terms of maximizing one’s preferences or by assessing and reproducing one’s identity, happens to be detached and isolated from *acting in a situation*. Put differently, from a pragmatist perspective, the dispute between the two actor images can be reduced to the question which assumptions about the individual actor is applied. Basically, the image of *homo oeconomicus* and the image of the *homo sociologicus* vary only in spelling out how the actor interacts with her environment. They both share the notion that definable actors are separated from the environment and act upon but do not act with it dynamically. In both instances, whether an actor acts rationally or with respect to her identity, the act itself does not play any role at all. In fact, it is considered as the result but not a constitutive aspect of agency (Schimank 2010: 37ff).

(Over-)Emphasizing the ontological difference between assuming rational preferences or an identity assessment based on a normative rule structure and framing the two as irreconcilable from a pragmatist perspective then downplays the basic problem both logics have: none of them can truly explain a specific course of action by itself. Instead of explaining, the different logics only look at action differently, emphasizing different reasons
and motivations which are then applied to the action at hand. I believe this is why none of the two logics can prevent the IR theorist from becoming “empirically lost” (Deitelhoff/Müller 2005). Both logics are applied to and thereby subsume a specific act under a theoretical argument. In other words, both the ambiguity and indeterminacy of acting are disregarded as “[t]he initial effort to understand reality [and action] will almost inevitably make it appear more solidly entrenched than before” since social science analysis works along the line of converting “the real into the rational or the contingent into the necessary” (Hirschman 1970: 339). In this context, both logics fail to explain action because both imply as the last instance of verification their very own logic. The flaw of arguing with either of the logics is that one disregards the fact that “[i]nitially, the ‘reality’ to be observed is constituted by the researcher” and her framing of the situation by drawing on either one or the other logic (Puchala 1995: 8f).

Following from this criticism, a pragmatist perspective on agency does not consider the dualistic juxtaposition between rational and normatively oriented action as a productive starting point for debate. Instead, both models of action are incorporated within the pragmatist account of agency. This does not imply that rationality and normative orientation for action are all together disregarded. Rather, the idea is to develop a model of agency that allows to “pinpoint the parameters for the meaningful application of the other models of action” (Joas 1996: 5). In this model, as will be discussed, both rationality and normativity are social expectations towards an actor to which she creatively reacts by developing her own beliefs and preferences while acting. Neither rationality nor normativity are conclusive enough to be defined in absolute terms as they are realized nowhere but through acting. In other words, what precisely is rational or normative is fixated within the act understood as the constant back-and-forth between acting and perceiving. Therefore, neither of it can be assumed to explain it (Shalin 1986: 11f).

Conceptualizing action and perception as two sides of the same coin, this view on agency can be further specified by elaborating its three constitutive dimensions: (1) primary sociality, (2) situated creativity and (3) twofold contingency. In the remainder of this paper, these dimensions will be elaborated, first individually and then taken together in order to develop an alternative perspective which understands agency as the “temporally embedded process of social engagement” (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 963). With this, the paper argues, one is in a position to specify how actors act, become aware of the indeterminacies, insecurities and vagueness of acting and explain different courses of action by reconstructing the social, creative and contingent moment of agency from within a specific sequence of action for a given case.
4.1. The primary sociality of agency

As argued before, the notion of individualist agency – be it from “truly” individual or collective actors – presupposes the existence of a fixed and independent world upon which the act is being carried out. Precisely this world is denied by pragmatists as they emphasize indeterminacy as well as the constituting effect of acting on the world, constantly remaking it. For pragmatists, meaning lies “in the process of interaction” (Blumer 1969: 4). In these sites of interaction, individual actions are not only meaningfully oriented towards each other. Rather, it is here that meaning is (re-)created and changed in the first place – “meaning is given or stated in terms of response” (Mead 1967 [1934]: 76). While this is assumed both for material and ideational aspects of social life, it is also true for agency itself as it can only be conceived of and be given meaning in relation to other actors and their social expectations (Emirbayer 1997; Jackson/Nexon 1999). By picturing the world as constantly being in the making and by understanding agency as the result of (inter-)action constituted by “reality” as well as constituting “reality” at the same time, this view on agency negates the notion of individualism deeply rooted in Western discourse and replaces it with the idea of permanently being entangled in socially constituted structures of meaning (Joas 1996: 184ff). This entanglement becomes the only source of agency as it enables actors to assess and choose between different courses of action as Granovetter (1985) already argued almost 30 years ago:

“Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations.” (Granovetter 1985: 487)

Taking the notion of embeddedness one step further, it is only in interaction where agency is “being made”. Because meanings are never fixed, the realization, affirmation and reproduction of the self is not only a prime motivation for social interaction. Rather, it can only be achieved there (Mead 1967 [1934]: 135ff). Primary sociality then defines the necessary dimension of agency which allows, despite indeterminacy and openness, to access and draw on intersubjectively shared meanings to structure and guide actors. In other words, the temporal fixation of meaning necessary for acting is the result of interaction through which the individual yet embedded actor is able to draw on meanings and rules which exist beyond her. While these meanings and rules are not independent of the interpretive performances of accessing these – in other words they are being (re-)produced in (inter-)action – drawing on them at the same time constitutes agency. Without this recourse to the intersubjective enabled through sociality, it would not be possible for the individual
actor to meaningfully orient her action towards others. The same can be argued for rationality and norms which can only guide our action because we draw on socially shared understandings of these things to “justify” our action as either rational or normative.

In this non-individualist concept of agency, socialization viewed as the process of developing sociality becomes the basis for “individual autonomy”. Quintessentially, it marks the process of becoming aware and enter interaction with others. Thus, it can be understood as the ability to socially enact agency which then, dialectically conceptualized, reproduces and modifies in ongoing interaction the rules and meanings which constitute society (Joas 1996: 188f). The dynamic and by no means one-directional notion of socialization indicates that sociality is an ongoing process. Put differently, every single action is the result of other social actions. The meaning of the current situation as well as the self-understanding of the actor and her perspective on significant others involved is the result of preceding acts. Agency, in the words of Dewey (2008 [1938]: 17,24), is played out “in a series of situations” and should be considered as an “experiential continuum”. Although agency presents itself as the consequence of individual dispositions such as experiences, preferences and intentions, in this continuum of acting these are constantly and socially (re-)created and modified. Because of being always and forever entangled in social interaction, “ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction of the part of the reflective intelligence” (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 967f). In other words, social coordination over shared orientation, evaluation and reconstruction of the situation (i.e. which shared patterns of interpretation and expectations of appropriateness apply) becomes constitutive for individual action. Only through coordination which is realized through primary sociality, is the individual actor capable of structuring her actions and convey sense to them:

“It is the discovery of our temporal and spatial location in a pre-existing social world [which] provides a central mechanism for pacing and placing each human actor in the ongoing stream of human events we call ‘society’. Through sequential engagement of ourselves with other selves, we enter into the swift-flowing river of social life […]” (Boden 1994: 53f)

Conceptualizing sociality and individual action along this line constitutes a promising alternative between “over- and undersocialized conceptions of human action” (Granovetter 1985: 483): neither is interaction reduced to a “frictional drag that impedes competitive markets” nor is it understood as determinate “processes in which actors acquire customs, habits, or norms that are followed mechanically and automatically, irrespective of their […] choice[s]” (Granovetter 1985: 484f). Rather, primary sociality marks the necessary ability to access shared universes of meaning when acting. However, while this argument
specifies the embeddedness of agency and outlines how it is constituted in the first place by being situated in and enacted through social interaction as the only site where meanings become temporally fixated, so far the paper has not discussed how the actor does this. Thus, the next section will outline the second dimension of agency as sociality is always played out in concrete (crisis) situations in which actors rely on their inherent creativity to act.

4.2. The situated creativity of agency

If one argues in favor of an indeterminate reality as the background for acting, this acting necessarily “involves defining that which is as yet undefined, rather than simply making a different selection from a reservoir of situation components that are either already defined or have no need of definition” (Joas 1996: 133). One can in this context distinguish between routinized situations and crisis situations. A routinized situation is characterized by the ongoing validity of our beliefs we brought to the situation in the first place. Put differently, a routinized situation does not challenge us fundamentally (enough) because our previous experiences are (still) sufficient to overcome the “obdurate character of the empirical world” (Blumer 1969: 22). Previously developed routines intended to ease processes of constant reflection and evaluation hold fast and remain valid (although not necessarily true). However, although many of the situations actors face are familiar and habitualized, due to the constant necessity to act it is only a question of time until doubt shakes our “thought[s] at rest” and turns them into “thought[s] in action” (Peirce 1965b: 255). Thus, a crisis situation is a problematic since indeterminate situation for the actor characterized by the fact that beliefs are not sufficient enough to stabilize action (Hellmann 2002: 9f).

Because of the outlined character of reality in flux, human action in the pragmatist perspective is always and forever caught in this interplay between unreflected habitualized action and acts of creativity made necessary through the experience of crisis (Joas 1996: 129).7 In this polarity of routine and crisis, situated creativity first plays an important role because the very perception of a situation already relies on creatively assessing the unknown. No two actors will define a situation the same, implying that one can always find diverging interpretations as these are based on individual sets of previous experiences and believes. Creativity therefore shows itself “in the fact that human beings interpret

7 Note that this image of crisis is by no means negatively connoted. Instead, crisis is considered the rule rather then the exception and the emergence of new beliefs can be considered as something positive (Oevermann 2000: 132ff).
or ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s action” (Blumer 1969: 19). Thus, how actors assess and define a situation at hand, which moral points of reference they choose and how they interpret and incorporate them into action by ascribing (potentially new) meaning to them depends to a great deal on imagination and inventiveness. In fact, the very basic notion whether a situation is considered a crisis or not depends on the perceiving and processing the situation by the actor. Neither of these are determined and it is easy to imagine examples from the social world where simply this task is already highly demanding. Thus, whether we can legitimately speak of a crisis situation or not cannot be concluded without considering the beliefs and the following acts of the actor involved. In a nutshell, “our perception of the world”, is “structured by our capacities for, and experiences of, action” and therefore by definition a subjective and creative act (Joas 1996: 158).

However, situated creativity does not only come into play when the situation at hand is perceived, processed, assessed and evaluated by the actor. It plays an even bigger role once an actor has to decide and act, especially so if she finds herself in a situation with no apparent course of action as in a situation of “real doubt”:

“[B]elief[s], and the routines of action based upon [them], are repeatedly shattered; what has previously been a habitual, apparently automatic procedure of action is interrupted. The world reveals itself to have shattered our unreflected expectations; our habitual actions meet with resistance from the world and rebound back at us. This is the phase of real doubt. And the only way out of this phase is a reconstruction of the interrupted context, Our perception must come to terms with new or different aspects of reality; action must be applied to different points of the world, or must restructure itself. This reconstruction is a creative achievement on the part of the actor. If he succeeds in reorienting the action on the basis of his changed perception and thus continuing with it, the something new enters the world: a new mode of acting, which can gradually take root and thus itself become an unreflected routine.”(Joas 1996: 128f, emphasis added)

In this sense, situated creativity can be considered as the necessary dimension of agency by which “we surprise ourselves by our own action” (Mead 1967 [1934]: 174). As argued, neither the interpretation of a given situation nor the ensuing action is determined by the environment. Creativity thus refers to the ability of agents to cope with crises by (re-)interpreting old and developing new beliefs in order to generate and uphold the capacity for further action. Continuous and lasting agency is simply not imaginable without this ability as it is precisely through creativity that activity is enriched, “bringing along with itself a release of further activities” (Dewey 1922: 143). Understanding agency as the

---

8 Note in this quote that situated creativity by no means implies automatic success in establishing new beliefs. It is not guaranteed that the actor is able to develop new guiding beliefs “as he may do a very poor job in constructing his act” (Blumer 1969: 64). Sometimes, while the actor still struggles, the immediacy of crisis simply wanes before a solution for it has been found.
product of situated creativity implies that goals are not a foregone conclusion to which means are accordingly adjusted. In fact, it is the nature of a crisis situation that both means and ends are not apparent for the actor. Rather, they can be quite diffuse and contradictory at the beginning of a sequence of action, fleshed out and specified only gradually or even retrospectively, as in the case of ex-post-rationalization (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 967f).

Accordingly, action is conceptualized as indeterminate and non-teleological as it “constantly encounters unexpected obstacles: goals show themselves to be unattainable; simultaneously pursued goals prove to be mutually exclusive; attainable goals have doubts cast upon them by other actors” (Joas 1996: 133). Both goals and the plans to realize them creatively emerge in the process of (inter-)action. As cognition is no longer divorced from action but happens at the same time, intentionality is disregarded and replaced by the notion of ends-in-view (Dewey 1922: 223). These ends are by no means finitely defined but change over the course of action from perceiving the situation, conceiving different courses of action and realizing one through the act. All throughout this course, previous ends are revised or abandoned as well as new ones emerge. Since acting involves both cognition and action, the actor constantly processes the changing situation by drawing on shared meanings, previous experiences and beliefs, reflects potential consequences of acting this way or another, and decides creatively instead of intentionally. Ends constantly change, do not precede the act and therefore cannot be specified without considering the dynamic nature of action (Joas 1996: 156ff). In the words of Dewey (1922),

“ends arise and function within action. They are not, as current theories too often imply, things lying beyond activity at which the latter is directed. They are not strictly speaking ends or termini of at all. They are terminals of deliberation, and so turning points in activity."(Dewey 1922: 223, emphasis in original)"  

Combining the two dimensions discussed so far, situated creativity can further be specified as not being voluntaristic as the horizon of possibilities from which an actor can creatively choose in a specific situation is constituted through her sociality. Beliefs and actions based on them are at the disposal of actors because they are perceived as such within a social context. One can imagine this context as a pool of interpretations from which the actor chooses. In a nutshell, one could argue that agency is structured by sociality and structures through creativity. The creative-structuring element lies within the actor and his actualization of specific interpretations while the social-structured element constitutes the reservoir of interpretations available in the first place. This “pool of interpretations” of

9 Obviously, the more a situation is perceived as a crisis the more likely is the drastic reformulation or even disregarding of previous ends.
course is dynamic and constantly in the making, too. Moreover, for each specific situation
only some interpretations are appropriate and applicable so that one can never choose from
the complete pool. Obviously, choices being made by creative actors to draw more heavily
on one interpretation then others and to use this interpretation to creatively engage in a
specific course of action in turn changes the horizon of possibilities for the next sequence
of action. Intersubjectively shared ideas, rules, norms and notions of appropriateness are
thus constantly in flux and as they are selectively being actualized through agency. This
then constitutes the contingency inherent in agency which is discussed in the next section.

4.3. The twofold contingency of agency

Arguing for the “continual permutation of action”, Strauss (1993: 54) emphasized that
“[p]henomena do not just automatically unfold nor are they straightforwardly determined
by social, economic, political, cultural or other circumstances”. Given the dynamic and
processual character of a reality in flux, one can specify its contingent nature along two
lines. First, the sequence of action itself presents as open and therefore contingent in
nature since each sequence involves a plethora of choices and alternatives of which only
some are actualized and others are not. Choosing a course of action changes the horizon
of possibilities by opening and foreclosing specific meanings (Oevermann 2000: 70). As
every single situation in the sequence contains both different courses to choose from as
well as the need to choose, the outcome of a sequence of action cannot by any means
be predicted or considered as determinate. Contingency in this sense then marks the
principal openness of outcomes of all social processes (Joas 1996: 228ff).

Instead of dismissing contingency, pragmatists are, even in the light of ex-post obvi-
ousness, very aware of the fact that alternative developments could have easily occurred
(Zeitlin 2007: 120ff). Thus, “[a]lternative ways of acting under an indefinite number of
different particular conditions or in an indefinite number of different particular situations”
are part of the pragmatist reasoning to explain action (Mead 1967 [1934]: 90). Embrac-
ing contingency conceptually can be done by counterfactual thought experiments or, more
specifically, by reconstructing the choices available in one sequence as well as the pattern
of realization by looking at a sequence of acts. Only with the sequential development of
an act considered, one can answer the question why a specific development happened the
way it did. Put differently, a “continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy” (Peirce
1965a: 70) gains conceptual primacy and constitutes the starting point for any analysis
of process. Even modern day taken-for-granted phenomena are nothing but “negotiated
order” which could have come in different form and shape as they, in the end, just mark one realization of the continuous interplay between actuality and potentiality of social meaning (Strauss 1993: 248ff). Bringing the different dimensions of agency together, one can think of contingency as being situated within every single course of action as actors creatively draw on some but never all socially available interpretations:

“Contingencies are likely to arise during a course of action. These can bring about change in its duration, pace, and even intent, which may alter the structure and process of interaction.” (Strauss 1993: 36)

This notion brings us full circle to the idea that only through realizing which means are at our disposal do we generate our ends in the process of acting (Joas 1996: 148ff). Since this depends upon creative acts, agency becomes contingent as opposed to being determined either by rationality or norms. As preferences and interests as well as the very notion of intentionality become contingent upon the act itself, neither rationality nor normativity can be considered as “terminal value[s]” of agency (Putnam 1995: 73). Instead, it becomes fluid, dependent on the situation and the actor involved. That of course implies that actors are by no means determined based on their dispositions. Rather, they permanently “consider alternatives, meaning alternative responses to the same situation and speculations about the relative possibilities of creating alternative situations” (Sabel/Zeitlin 1997: 10). Because of this twofold contingency – acting on contingent dispositions in a contingent sequence of (inter-)action “the identification and selection of optimizing strategies, as demanded by the rational actor model, [is rendered] impossible because the situation does not possess the characteristics presupposed by an action theory that is based on the identification of the causal relationship between the application of means (strategies) and outcomes” (Beckert 2003: 770).

Having said this, contingency does not imply that actors cannot in their own perception consider their actions as strategic or even as rational. In fact, collective actors such as states or corporations often base their justification for acting in rationality since this has become the constitutive fact of modernity. However, this should not confuse the social researcher and lead to the conclusion that it is rationality that drives the acting. This simply cannot be the case as the scope of strategic and rational acting is limited in its finality since these notions only mark constructs which are situatively actualized and stated by the actors. Put differently, the specific actions following from the notion of rationality are “only loosely defined at any given moment and constantly being redefined” (Sabel/Zeitlin 1997: 15). In light of this, pragmatism as an attitude implies a specific approach towards agency: instead of downplaying its contingencies, one should embrace
them and theorize them in order to better account for the emergence of new meanings (Oevermann 2000). Being aware of the twofold contingency inherent in agency then allows to go beyond (re-)tracing alternative developments as it enables one to explain through careful reconstruction how the emergence of one specific meaning was realized. Being aware of contingency and explicating these developments helps to improve the “quality of public debate about the range of strategic choices open to us in the present and future” (Zeitlin 2007: 135). It is along this line that the paper offers some further thoughts in the following conclusion.

5. Conclusion

The starting point for this paper was the observation that the discussion of actorhood and agency within IR is lacking a socio-theoretical foundation. While the question of actorhood is predominantly answered in substantive terms, it is rarely clear “what agency is, what it means to exercise agency, or who and what might do so” (Wight 2006: 178). While these questions have surprisingly received little theoretical attention in and of themselves, developing better answers to them greatly improves the quality of our discussions. It is argued in this paper that one way to try to answer them is by drawing from American pragmatism. This is specifically the case because this tradition argumentatively links theory and cognition on the one and practice and action on the other hand (Hellmann 2002). Interestingly, this appeals to many IR scholars as pragmatism currently enjoys some popularity within the discipline. At the same time, it is often introduced selectively and on different levels as well as with different intentions, creating confusion about its “proper” role in relation to existing IR theories and their respective meta-theories of action (Franke/Weber 2012). While this paper could not free itself from the very same practice, at the same time it was anxious to present a comprehensive story of how one could frame actorhood and agency within a pragmatist-inspired perspective without loosing the ease of the liberal ironist. As such, what is presented here should be considered as an offer made possible by situating oneself in the “foundational commitments” of pragmatist thinking but by no means as the final and conclusive answer to these matters. Having said this, there are some benefits from this perspective to be concluded on in this section.

First, by drawing on pragmatists commitments, one can understand actorhood not in conclusive and finite terms but as the result of relational interaction. However, going beyond that relational approach, one can further specify that through interaction agency, corporeality and reflexivity have to be ascribed to an entity to make it an actor. Instead
of predefining what actors one should look at, pragmatism presents a template to see if a specific entity in a specific context fulfills necessary predisposition to be considered as an actor. This creates new space for thinking as very different entities can develop agency, corporeality and reflexivity, given that significant others in interaction “accept” and “grant” these dispositions to the phenomenon.\(^\text{10}\) In addition, once these interactional processes of constituting actorhood are discovered, one can ask different questions about the entity, such as how is it constituted in relation to others, how is agency, corporeality and reflexivity being upheld and how are these dispositions realized and reproduced in action. Adding to the relational notion of actorhood advanced, among others, by Ringmar (1996); Emirbayer (1997) and Jackson/Nexon (1999), stating actorhood in terms of these three dispositions then makes individual research more transparent and intersubjective and thereby more communicable, intelligible and oriented towards dialog.

Second, once the actors of the story to tell have been specified and reason has been given for them, pragmatism offers us a deeper understanding of how their agency is played out. As cognition and action fall together in the “unity of action”, agency can be thought of as being constituted by and constituting socially shared meanings – it is structuring and structured at the same time. Agency by definition is creative to the extent that the ends guiding an actor constantly change as do the beliefs the actors brings to a situation as does his perception of the situation. This, in turn, implies that processes become contingent in their development as is the actor in each sequence of action. With this perspective on agency, one can reconstruct in close dialogue with the phenomena at hand why certain courses were taken and what that means for the actor in the first place. Different avenues for research open up here as one can reconstruct either the meaning and beliefs of actors (as in Grounded Theory) or their specific “case structure” by reconstructing their sequential choices of actualizations (as in objective hermeneutics).\(^\text{11}\)

Both of these approaches draw on a pragmatist theory of actorhood and agency as outlined in this paper. By doing so, they offer a viable alternative to rational accounts, specifically if we imagine actors more often in situations of crisis than in routinized situations. In other words, drawing on alternative theories of action, one can ask different

\(^{10}\) Obviously, significant others are relative to the phenomenon, meaning that US, China, and Greece have to be recognized along different processes than the United Nations, NATO, Royal Dutch/Shell or ExxonMobile.

\(^{11}\) A “case structure” in this methodology, one needs to add, marks the sum or pattern of sequential closings an actor performs through her actions. As such, experiences, preferences, intentions and other dispositions are part of the “case structure” which is analyzed under the question of potential transformation and which becomes visible by opening the horizon of possible action in one sequence and compare it to the realized option in the next sequence (Oevermann 2000).
questions and look closer and the plurality and indeterminacy of social phenomena. Given that the paper lacks any application of the theoretical remarks developed here, let me emphasize that the purpose here was to open up space for new and creative thinking on actorhood and agency. While this does not lift the paper out of this rather unsatisfying state, at least some further thoughts should be outlined as to how this model of actorhood and agency affects practical research within the discipline of IR. As argued in the introduction, IR as a discipline has specific combinations of actorhood and agency which, if one looks at them from the perspective discussed in this paper, do not convince at all. Why, for example, should multinational enterprises be conceptualized as rational actors (Amoore 2006) or why do we (mainly) frame NGOs as exercising normative entrepreneurship instead of acting strategically (Sell/Prakash 2004)? More generally, why do we have to draw on established theories to argue which actor we consider to be important when we could reconstruct the constitution of actorhood?

The purpose of this paper was to raise rather than answer these questions. A thorough and socio-theoretically grounded discussion of actorhood and agency seems unavoidable if one want to abandon the practice of letting theory decide which actors are relevant, even in a discipline which understands itself as being defined by substantial matters. Neither actorhood nor agency, it was argued here should be defined in absolute terms to be applied in our research. Instead, we should in a first step reconstruct how actorhood and agency is constituted in interaction. This should not be misunderstood as an “anything goes”-approach to either actorhood or agency. Instead, predispositions were specified and outlined along different dimensions. However, not considering these as absolute but rather situational, creates space for looking at different entities and give empirically-based reason for doing so. Being aware that this is by no means the final word on a topic as complex as this, it is still hoped that the arguments outlined here contribute to a more sophisticated dialogue between the different positions and contribute to clarifying the concepts of actorhood and agency. If not, at least the need to do so is stated.

References


