The Social Invention of Collective Actors

On the Rise of the Organization

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Since the middle of the 19th century, the formal organization has been constructed as a legitimate collective actor in and of itself. How did it rise to sit alongside the nation-state as one of the principal forms of collective action in modern society? The authors argue that the scientific epistemology of the Enlightenment provided a model in which the social world, like the natural world, was to be understood through the classification of forms and the enumeration of particular instantiations. Individuals deliberately created the modern organization by asserting a universal form through the symbolization of isomorphism and by enumerating individual identities through the symbolization of cultural identity. Neoinstitutional theory documents the first process, whereas organizational theory documents the second. The authors argue that these two theories highlight different aspects of a single process: the social invention of the organization as collective actor.

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of Levy-Bruhl, anthropology has always been interested . . . in the sciences of the Others: how come that for Them the cassowary is *not* classified as a bird, this was a legitimate question. How come that modern taxonomists do classify the cassowary as a bird was not in the purview of anthropologists. (Latour, 1990, p. 145)

Where is the actor in institutional analysis? Since the mid-19th century, Western society has constructed the organization itself as an actor. We ask how the organization has been socially constructed, alongside the nation-state, as one of the very few natural, universal collective actors in the modern world. We ask not *why* it happened but rather *how* it happened and continues to happen. And we ask how "individual" actor-members construct their organizations as legitimate universal forms of collective action.

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We argue, first, that the rise of the individual, the nation-state, and the organization as modernity's legitimate actors—to replace the clan, the city-state, and the Holy Roman Empire in the West and the huge diversity of actors (tribes, moeties, theater-states) that existed across the globe before the world was one—was shaped by the scientific epistemology that accompanied the Enlightenment (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987; Perrow, 1992). That epistemology orients modern societies to constructing reality through the dual projects of classification and enumeration, whether of species or of social groupings. The Enlightenment epistemology dictated that every entity be classified, fish or fowl, corporation or nation-state; that every entity be enumerated, Polaris or Sirius, Erie Canal or Sears & Roebuck.

Second, we argue that in consequence, members of social groups actively construct those groups *as* organizations, nation-states, political parties, and the like by classifying and enumerating them in these terms. They symbolize the features that their railroad, soccer team, or 12-step group shares with other organizations to demonstrate that it is an organization like any other. At the same time, they symbolize the unique monikers ("Big Blue"), mottos ("Quality Is Job One"), and cultures to demonstrate that theirs is a *particular* organization, clearly bounded from others. In so doing, members construct the meaning of the modern organization in general and in particular.

We argue, in short, that the Enlightenment produced a clear prescription for the construction of collective actors in the modern world. Like other entities— species or subatomic particles—classes of collective actors would be identified inductively. The organization/corporation emerged as a category only when sufficient numbers of exemplars had appeared. Unlike inanimate entities, social groups could actively construct themselves; thus members could mold their groups to fit emergent criteria (e.g., adding a board of directors) and could seek to expand the definition itself (e.g., to include soccer teams). The process has become quite stylized, such that modern collective actors seek formal isomorphism with other actors to classify themselves and informal distinctiveness to enumerate themselves.

Neoinstitutional analysts and students of organizational culture have together described this process of the social construction of the organization as a collective actor. Next we review the Enlightenment epistemology, which calls for classification and enumeration in the social construction of the natural and social worlds alike. We show that this epistemology shaped the historical construction of the nation-state and organization through two processes. First, it worked through the individuals who built early states and corporations, who were trained as scientists and engineers and thus brought the model of science to the social world. Second, it worked through overarching legal institutional rules, which encouraged social entities to declare themselves in universal terms as nation-states or organizations/corporations. The Treaty of Westphalia provided the legal blueprint for the nation-state; general laws of incorporation provided the blueprint for the organization/corporation.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT EPISTEMOLOGY: CLASSIFICATION AND ENUMERATION

How did a world comprised of countless different kinds of local collective actors—tribes, moeties, clans, matriarchal lineages, city-states, theater-states, empires, kingdoms—come to be composed almost exclusively of individuals, organizations, and nation-states between the dawn of the 17th century and the end of the 20th century? We argue that this occurred as social groups of all sorts sought to identify themselves not as unique social forms but, in the terms of the new scientific epistemology, as particular instantiations of wider classes of social entities.

Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* of 1620 set out the terms of this epistemology, challenging scholasticism's deductive approach to proving the existence of God and depicting the world as well as promoting the inductive method of drawing conclusions from observations about the world. The inductive method called for classifying and enumerating frogs and toads, atoms and molecules, planets and stars, helium and oxygen in the process of identifying the universal laws that governed each. Classification and enumeration were central to the task of discovering scientific laws, for helium was identified by its behavior relative to oxygen, frogs by their ability to breathe underwater, and so on.

The Enlightenment ideology suggested that the natural and social worlds would be apprehended through experience and that a unified canon of knowledge would build over time. The laws of nature would be discovered in time, but the laws themselves applied to distinct kinds of objects—to birds or mammals, to gases or solids, to planets or moons. Classification involved identifying groups of objects to which scientific laws applied. Classification and the discovery of scientific laws were thus intertwined, for entities belonging to a single class are governed by the same laws. Classification of entities that fell under common laws was the first step toward comprehending the world. In astronomy, the project of classifying and enumerating planets and solar systems was stimulated by the Copernican revolution of the 16th century, popularized by Galileo's *Letters on the Solar Spots* of 1613. In chemistry, Robert Boyle's *The Sceptical Chymist* in 1661 challenged the Aristotelian view that all of the world was made of four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and proposed an inductive and experimental approach to identifying the elements. In botany, Nehemiah Grew's *The Anatomy of Plants* in 1682 classified the parts of plants on the basis of their reproductive functions. In biology, Ray classified animal species into groups based on their teeth and toes in 1693. The first quarter of the 18th century saw tremendous progress in the classification of plants and animals.

The new inductive epistemology depended on classification of units based on their common structures and interactions with other units. Classificatory systems evolved as new scientific laws, and the groups of objects to which they applied emerged. "Caloric" (heat) was included as one of 23 chemicals in

Lavoisier's table of elements in 1789, but as science distinguished matter from energy it was reclassified as energy. Ray's system of classifying species based on teeth and toes gave way to a system based on evolutionary origins as science developed a theory of evolution.

Enumeration was as integral to this process as was classification—the tagging of wild animals to identify their migratory patterns, the enumeration of particular quarks to track their trajectories in subatomic collisions, the naming of the bright planet Venus to distinguish it from the star Polaris and of Halley's Comet to distinguish it from planets. Whether the units were solar systems or cells, the method called for naming or numbering particular isomorphic units to the end of identifying and differentiating them for study; solar systems tended to get names, whereas cells isolated in laboratories tended to get numbers. Enumeration established the empirical cases from which generalizations could be drawn.

THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION
OF COLLECTIVE ACTORS

The classificatory framework found in science served as a powerful cognitive model for thinking about the social world. The project of understanding the social world—at the time a world of tremendous variety of forms—involved classifying and enumerating entities. Participants in the emergent social forms—members of organized religions, nation-states, political parties—claimed their common status with other religions, nation-states, and parties (Meyer et al., 1987). Participants claimed unique qualities that would establish their identities.

Classification had been common before the Enlightenment, but it had been a local phenomenon. Durkheim and Mauss (1903/1963) surveyed "primitive" societies to conclude that the mental model for classifying things comes from the groupings of people into clans and tribes, and thus it is natural but is based in experience. Classificatory frameworks emerge, Durkheim and Mauss contend, as societies project social groupings onto the world around them. Thus the elk is distinguished from the mountain lion as each is identified with a clan. Over time, classificatory schemes become abstract (Durkheim & Mauss, 1903/1963), but both the salient axes of classification (male and female or sacred and profane) and the particular groupings remained idiosyncratic and local (Douglas, 1986; Geertz, 1983).

CLASSIFICATION OF COLLECTIVE ACTORS

The Enlightenment undermined the local character of collective actors by promoting the idea that the world was uniform across time and space. A single classificatory scheme was needed for the social world, just as a single scheme was needed for the physical world. Local forms of collective action were no

more possible than local forms of matter. The idea that natural laws governed human political and economic life gave immediacy to the search for true collective actors in these two realms. The nation-state was embraced by political philosophers such as Rousseau as given by natural law. The limited liability corporation eventually was embraced by economic philosophers such as Coase. Philosophers came upon these transcendent categories after human actors had constructed the nation-state and formal organization in practical terms.

ENUMERATION OF COLLECTIVE ACTORS

Groups enumerated themselves by constructing identities for their organizations and nation-states. They invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983) and imagined themselves to be communities (Anderson, 1983). They created identities that would distinguish collectivities from one another and provide bases for individual identification. They made "bounded clusters of individuals" who would "experience themselves collectively" and be perceived by others as "insular entities clearly separate from everyone else" (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 14). At the national level, they created compelling social fictions that could allow millions of isolated individuals in far-flung villages who, in many cases, had neither language nor religion nor cultural tradition in common to imagine themselves as a "people" and to think it entirely natural that they did so. Experienced in this fiction of collectivism, it would be easy for individuals to imagine themselves part of the "supermarket to the world" or "Big Blue."

Next we take the historical construction of the nation-state and the formal organization in turn, outlining how the Enlightenment epistemology led members of diverse social groups to classify themselves as nations and as organizations.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE STATE

The meaning of the modern state emerged as France, Belgium, Sweden, and the German states developed common characteristics that set them apart from the city-state of Milan, from the Holy Roman Empire, and from the Ndembu tribe. With some knowledge that other political entities differed in form, the Balinese theater-state, the Sioux tribe, and the Korean dynasty had been content to persevere in their own local forms. But this diversity of forms would be all but eliminated between the beginning of the 17th century and the end of the 20th century (Thomas & Meyer, 1984). This meant much greater isomorphism in form across collectivities than the world had ever experienced before. It was not only whole classifications of governance that would disappear, such as monarchy and empire, but also all unique forms—the Balinese theater-state (Geertz, 1980) and the Staandestaat (Anderson, 1974). By late in the 20th century, all such entities had been reinvented as states or provinces.

Meanwhile, the identities of modern states emerged through the explicit symbolization of differentiation as each distinguished itself from like entities.

The United States fostered and heralded the characteristics that made it unique—the free market, rugged individualism, the separation of church and state. The French state constructed a single linguistic and cultural heritage to replace an array of regional languages and cultures. Flags, anthems, cuisines, languages, and literatures were created by each emergent nation-state.

Scientist-Politicians and the Cognitive Framework for Classification

The scientific epistemology shaped the ordering of the social world in part because men of letters were the political architects of the 17th century. As Shapin and Schaffer (1985) point out, the political philosopher Hobbes was very much a scientist as well; the scientist Boyle was equally a political philosopher. The labor of science and politics was not divided, and hence the scientific epistemology shaped the construction of the state as a form. Scientist-philosophers sought to construct political order with a cognitive framework based on classification and enumeration. State making, in turn, stimulated the growth of science, for wealthy mercantilist states became the patrons of science and the academy (Wuthnow, 1987). The expansion of the state thereby bolstered the scientific worldview.

The Legal-Institutional Framework for Self-Classification

The blueprint for the modern nation-state may have been sketched out in Britain, but it was set out for the world to emulate in the Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648 and replaced the Holy Roman Empire with a system of sovereign, autonomous nation-states (Krasner, in press). The treaty helped to define the nation-state as territorial (not nomadic), sovereign (not subjugated), composed of subjects (not of priests or slaves), and constitutional (not Biblical or Koranic). It provided a prescription for European political systems embraced by Belgium, Prussia, and Italy. City-states defined themselves as nation-states; fiefdoms became permanent provinces or municipalities of larger states. The model diffused, through colonization and emulation, to the far corners of the earth. By the 1960s, it had extinguished virtually all other forms of political organization including its own subordinate order, the colony (Thomas & Meyer, 1984). The process of homogenization continues today as legal conventions and even constitutions become more and more elaborate and more and more alike (Boli, 1987).

Institutionalization of the Dimensions of Enumeration

Presidents and kings actively distinguished their nation-states from others, but they did so in routine ways. The dimensions of identity were clearly institutionalized. The Peace of Westphalia began the process of narrowing the

terms of national identity by relegating Rome, as a religious entity, to a symbolic role in the governance of the West. Nation-states might claim allegiance to different religions, but they could not claim identities as religious meccas.

The Enlightenment principles of classification and enumeration made it impossible to support "premodern" forms but also premodern *principles* of classification and enumeration—totems, mystical forces, even religious dualities such as good and evil. The dimensions of collective identity were narrowly defined to include secular cultural traditions (Anderson, 1983), secular political traditions (Bellah & Hammond, 1980; Hobsbawm, 1983), and secularized religious traditions. Islam is the surviving exception to the rule, for nowhere else is national identity formed around a messianic or spiritual vision.

The appropriate cultural artifacts of identity formation were traditions (e.g., language, couture, cuisine) and newly created symbols (e.g., flags, anthems, constitutions). The European states that rose during the 17th century promoted their own languages and cultural forms with the deliberate aim of creating uniform national identities out of disparate local cultural traditions (Anderson, 1983; Wuthnow, 1989, p. 167). As cultural practices in regions with diverse traditions were deliberately homogenized, even marriage and childbearing came to exhibit internal patterns (Watkins, 1991). Thus the nation-state came to have meaning through a process of isomorphism in form, and particular nation-states came to have meaning through a process of cultural differentiation and chauvinistic identity formation.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORGANIZATION

Neoinstitutionalists and organizational culture theorists have documented much the same pattern in the historical construction of the modern organization (Strandgaard Pedersen & Dobbin, 1996). Institutionalists find that managers actively copy the practices they see other organizations using. They find early corporate managers aggressively asserting common status with other corporations by adopting isomorphic structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). They find later managers seeking to refine the definition of the organization/corporation by constructing new practices as necessary for organizing. Meanwhile, culturalists find managers creating symbolic systems that distinguish their organizations from others. They find early managers identifying their corporations via distinct names, philosophies, and products. They find later managers deliberately developing unique cultures to bolster employee commitment and stock performance, most recently by creating departments to chronicle, diffuse, and enforce corporate culture.

We suggest that these two camps have identified different aspects of a single process: the social construction of the organization as a collective actor through self-classification and self-enumeration. Through this process, the formal organization became legitimate, and ubiquitous, in very short order. In 1850, America had just a handful of formal organizations—a few canals, railroads, and

textile mills. A century later, 9 out of 10 economically active Americans worked for formal organizations. Just a generation ago, Presthus (1962) in *The Organizational Society* and Whyte (1956) in *The Organization Man* described the change in the language of revolution. Now, it is difficult to conceive of modern society without formal organizations, for the organization has "absorbed society" (Perrow, 1991, p. 726).

Engineer-Managers and the
Cognitive Framework for Classification

Like the political philosophers who constructed the modern state, the entrepreneurs who constructed the modern organization were trained in science, most often in engineering. It was engineers who designed and managed early textile mills, canals, and railroads. It was engineers like Taylor who developed the first formal theories of organizing (Shenhav, 1995). These men brought the scientific project of classification and enumeration to the task. They actively classified the enterprises with which they were involved as corporations and later as organizations. They actively constructed boundaries and created identities, enumerating their enterprises as distinct.

Meyer (1994) argues that managers first classified corporations, schools, and philanthropies separately but that as management rose as a distinct profession its members created the generic "organization." The classification itself changed as managers in distinct fields defined "management" as a universal activity applicable to the general category "organization." Just as all sorts of disparate entities reconstructed themselves as modern nation-states over several hundred years after the Peace of Westphalia, all sorts of groups reconstructed themselves as formal organizations after the general laws of incorporation of the mid-19th century. Now the academic field is called "Organizations," and the entities classify themselves as universal "organizations" to which universal laws of management apply.

By generalizing psychological and bureaucratic laws beyond the corporation, the leaders of collective endeavors redefined the classification as "organization" and the profession as "management." Management principles applied not to "corporations" alone but to "organizations" more generally. The Enlightenment precept of the universality of knowledge lay behind this—the belief that "if scientific truths about effective materials techniques, organizational techniques, and psychological techniques arise in one location of the world and produce a bit of scientific consensus, then they should obviously be applied everywhere" (Meyer, 1994, p. 42). Thus, increasingly, the human resource management techniques pioneered in corporate America, performance evaluations and job ladders, spread to such nonprofits as the Audobon Society as universal tools for rationalizing management (Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, & Scott, 1993).

Institutional studies show, in fact, that managers in public agencies and nonprofits embrace new prescriptions for organizing more quickly than do

managers in corporations (Scott, 1987; Scott & Meyer, 1983). They are more likely to have personnel and affirmative-action departments (Edelman, 1992) and more likely to have formal due process protections for employees (Sutton, Dobbin, Meyer, & Scott, 1994). They are, in short, more eager than managers of corporations to dress their enterprises in the symbolic accouterments of the formal organization.

The Legal Construction of the Organization/Corporation

Organizations, and corporations in particular, became universal with great speed in large part because states, eager to promote industrialization, copied the general laws of incorporation they found in leading nations during the mid-19th century. The framework came from the earliest corporate charters for public-purpose enterprises (Creighton, 1989; Roy, in press). American states copied legal conventions such as limited liability from Europe in the belief, reinforced by Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, that ambitious nations should look to those they envy for models. As Western nations passed general laws of incorporation, they denied legal status to economic forms that might have substituted for the corporation such as the zaibatsu (Hamilton & Biggart, 1988) or the small firm network (Piore & Sabel, 1984). The private-purpose corporation quickly became the primary model for organizing economic activity.

The Law and the Evolution of the Classification

The classifications—both corporation and organization—have been revised in terms of their boundaries and internal characteristics (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991). The boundaries were redefined with the creation of the "multidivisional" corporation and the "conglomerate" corporation. These two boundary changes succeeded where others such as the trust had failed because they depended on the legal trappings of the corporation. Alfred Sloan popularized General Motors's multidivisional form by extolling its efficiency but also by giving it the legal form of a corporation (Chandler, 1977). Those who popularized the conglomerate from the 1950s on likewise created them in the legal mold of the corporation (Fligstein, 1990). Today, the ideas of "core competence" and the "virtual corporation" may be redefining the corporation once again as a node in a network (Davis, Diekmann, & Tinsley, 1994).

Legal changes have stimulated an array of changes to the definition of the organization. As Fligstein (1990) shows, changes to antitrust law during the early 1950s stimulated managers to seek new ways in which to expand and helped to popularize the conglomerate model, which would alter the external boundaries of the organization. Other legal shifts altered the defining internal features of the organization and corporation. The dominance of finance-trained executives (Fligstein, 1990), the poison pill strategy (Davis, 1991), the personnel department (Baron, Dobbin, & Jennings, 1986), and the grievance procedure

(Sutton & Dobbin, 1996) all spread following changes in the law, and all became defining features of the modern corporation or organization.

Enumeration and Identity Formation in Rationalized Terms

The process of the creation of formal uniformity has, in organizations as in nation-states, coincided with the creation of unique internal cultures. Selznick (1957) observed that the process is highly rationalized (in that organizations infuse local practices with rationalized meaning) but that it is also highly cultural (in that they infuse practices with value beyond their actual utility). Organizations depend on inductive epistemology to identify features of their cultures that have utility and use psychological and bureaucratic universals to explain the utility. The terms of cultural elaboration in organizations are defined by the Enlightenment epistemology. Organizations rule out divine revelation as an epistemology and spiritual forces as a cause. Actors constructing cultures engage in what Schutz (1962) and Weick (1993) describe as retrospective sense making, imposing sense on activity and attributing causality post hoc, but sense making within a framework of scientific reason (Geertz, 1983).

What organizations may vary to create local cultures is circumscribed, just as what nation-states may vary is circumscribed. Organizations construct local cultures by varying *informal* structure rather than *formal* structure. They create cultures around *psychological* precepts rather than around *formal structural* precepts. That is, they depend on shared experience, positive reinforcement, identification with the firm, and commitment (Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988). Thus Kunda (1992) found that a leading U.S. high-technology firm defined its culture around the ideas that people are inherently creative, hard working, and self-governing and that innovations emerge when people with diverse viewpoints interact.

Managers deliberately develop unique organizational cultures as part of the broader process of differentiation, but they necessarily draw on prevailing psychological ideas and employ practical recipes promoted by management journals and consultants. Hence the defining cultures of organizations come to resemble one another. Cole (1989) finds that work groups of various sorts, founded on psychological ideas about participation and empowerment and collective behavior, diffused in various forms across Japanese, Swedish, and American firms. Peters and Waterman (1982) describe internal organizational cultures that are cobbled together from shared cultural artifacts, causal models, and psychological precepts, and hence they find it easy to categorize a few dominant forms of "unique" organizational cultures. But managers underscore the distinctiveness of their own cultures, patched together from cultural artifacts though they may be. As Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983) point out in "The Uniqueness Paradox in Organizational Stories," the application of "work teams" and other components of culture actually varies dramatically across firms.

In short, the meaning and boundaries of the particular corporation are produced by the symbolization of polymorphism (Strandgaard Pedersen, 1991). The symbolization of polymorphism takes place even when organizations copy practices. Managers choose scripts and fads to adopt, and they transform those scripts and fads both at the stage of implementation and at the stage of local sense making and interpretation (Sevon, 1996). Managers thereby enumerate their organizations as distinct and unique within narrow limits, using highly institutionalized building blocks.

CONCLUSION

The premodern West was organized around an altogether different system of actors than that we know today—clans, city-states, the Holy Roman Empire. The individual, the corporation, and the nation-state replaced these forms. Each new form emerged through a deliberate search for, and subsequent modeling of, symbolic isomorphism across units. Each form also depended on the identification of legitimate realms of symbolic uniqueness. Leaders of nation-states could symbolize their distinctiveness through cultural and political traditions—flags, cuisines, languages. Leaders of organizations could symbolize their distinctiveness through informal traditions—cultures of innovation, of teamwork, and of commitment.

We have argued that the scientific epistemology that diffused in the West from the early 1600s is largely responsible for these changes and particularly for the dramatic elimination of all unique local kinds of collective actors—tribes, dynasties, empires, matriarchies. That epistemology depended on the classification and enumeration of the entities encountered in the physical world and on inductive logic to derive general laws that would apply to those classes and in the process help to refine the classifications. Science offered a model for thinking about the social world. That model made the social world subject to universal laws and demanded the classification of the social world in universal terms. It left no room for idiosyncratic local collective actors.

The findings of the two social constructionist schools in organizational theory document this process. Far from being at odds with one another, we argue, neoinstitutionalists and organizational culture analysts describe two aspects of a single process: the social construction of the organization as a collective actor. Neoinstitutionalists observe substantial isomorphism in form across organizations. They find that organizations imitate one another, that they deliberately model themselves on other organizations. Meanwhile, analysts of organizational culture observe substantial diversity in behavior and mind-set across organizations. They find that organizations celebrate their own uniqueness, that organizations deliberately create practices that make them unique. In the process, member-actors actively construct the classification "formal organization" and actively enumerate the particular organizations in which they participate.

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