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Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
Journal of Management Studies

DOI:
[10.1111/joms.13038](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13038)

Publication date:
2024

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Citation for published version (APA):
Meyer, R. E., Leixnering, S., Kornberger, M., Jancsary, D., & Höllerer, M. A. (2024). Ernst Cassirer and the Symbolic Foundation of Institutions. *Journal of Management Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13038>

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Download date: 11. Nov. 2024





Ernst Cassirer and the Symbolic Foundation of Institutions

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ABSTRACT In this Counterpoint, we introduce a conceptualization of the symbol that constructively contrasts the ideas presented by Phillips and Moser. We do not see the need to mobilize ideas and vocabularies from evolutionary biology, as they do, but instead propose to return to cultural approaches to the symbol that resonate more deeply and profoundly within our discipline. Specifically, we revisit the work of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer on the symbolic foundation of culture and society. To fully harness the potential of such a renewed approach in organization research, we encourage a conversation with foundational and more recent work in institutional organization theory. The aims of our article are to (a) offer an alternative understanding of the symbol; and (b) elaborate how such understanding can reinvigorate organizational and institutional analysis.

Keywords: Cassirer, institutions, organizations, philosophy, symbol, symbolic

IN SEARCH OF THE SYMBOL

Despite its ubiquity in organization and management research, the symbol has remained an ambiguous concept, lacking precise meaning and analytical depth. While Phillips and Moser (2023) and we agree on this diagnosis, we disagree with their remedy to use an evolutionary perspective that turns the symbol into the tapestry of a primarily

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psycho-biological cognitive niche. Rather, we will trespass the intellectual hinterland of the symbol, follow the humanist tradition further upstream, and mobilize the philosophy of the symbol of the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (2003, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). We propose and develop a cultural perspective and reconceptualize what the symbol could actually mean in, and for, our field. Inspired by Cassirer's oeuvre, we define the symbol as *relationally and reciprocally constituted unity of a sensorily perceivable phenomenon and a collectively shared conceptualization*. Such definition highlights three key characteristics of the symbol. First, we argue that the symbol has a *relational* – more specifically: a *reciprocal* – character. Symbolic meaning is neither fully immanent in the perceivable phenomenon, such as an artefact or a practice, nor in the abstract conceptualization, but emerges from the reciprocal relationship between the two dimensions that combines them into a meaningful unity (*Sinnanzes*; Cassirer, 2021c, p. 239). Second, the symbol has a particular *representative role*. Contrary to 'representation' as a reflection of some objective but absent reality, Cassirer uses the term for a performative process that generates, rather than indexes, elements of social reality. The symbol brings cultural phenomena into being by making conceptualizations sensorily perceivable in the 'here and now' and perceivable phenomena socially meaningful. Third, the symbol is malleable and inherently polysemic. It is in this way that its meaning and use are subjected to ongoing processes of power and politics, which makes each symbol an always only *preliminary outcome of contestations about collective signification*. We suggest that such relative durability and malleability are key to the foundational role the symbol plays across organizations, institutions, and society at large.

Such characterization differs from previous organization and management literature in consequential ways. Drawing on Cassirer, we do not simply understand the symbol as an object, artefact, word, or any other empirical phenomenon that is invested with meaning (e.g., Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Jones, 1996; Turner, 1990). Neither do we suggest that the symbolic denotes a layer of more or less ephemeral social meaning, such as discourse, logics, sentiments, beliefs, or attitudes. For us, the reciprocal relationship that weaves together the manifest and the conceptual into one cultural phenomenon is the key to the symbol. Take the example of a bookshelf as the background to a Zoom meeting: on the artefact-level, it is basically a lot of paper wedged in spaces between wooden boards. One classic approach would claim that the bookshelf becomes a symbol by acquiring surplus meaning related to wisdom and intellect. An alternative approach would suggest that the symbolic denotes the layer of meaning that 'latches onto' the artefact. In both approaches, the manifest and the conceptual are linked but essentially separate. In contrast, our approach stresses the 'primacy of relation' (Cassirer, 2021c, p. 241): The symbol is a thread, weaving together sensorily perceivable phenomena and shared conceptualizations as a *unity* that ceases to exist when disentangled. This is already evident in the etymology of the term symbol from the Greek *symbollein*: 'to put together'. In this symbolic relation, the separation of the material and the conceptual is dissolved. The symbol is the unity of the perceivable and material (i.e., wood and paper) and the invisible conceptual (i.e., cultural capital, the 'aura' of the intellectual).

Accordingly, we do not understand the symbol to be a type of conventionalized sign as in Peircean semiotics (e.g., Peirce, 1991; see also Rehberg, 2001). While signs unidirectionally *signify* something other than themselves, symbols *generate* what they

themselves represent. This differentiates our understanding of the symbol from that of Phillips and Moser (2023) in important details: For us, symbols *bring cultural phenomena into the world*, while our colleagues adopt the theory and terminology of Peirce and argue that a symbol ‘refers to something other than itself’ (Phillips and Moser, 2023, p. 13). By unpacking and translating Cassirer’s understanding of the symbol for research on institutions, organizations, and management, we provide a Counterpoint to Phillips and Moser (2023) that also positions the symbol at the core of organizational and institutional life – but does so starting from a distinctly cultural perspective that does not see the generative power of the symbol in its status as linguistic, cognitive, and social entity. We develop and illustrate the value of our perspective by discussing how symbols, understood in this way, can inspire a variety of contemporary debates in institutional organization theory and beyond.

First, our ideas have substantial implications for conceptualizing the symbol in relation to institutional arrangements. Symbols do not only index institutional arrangements but actually bring them into being. When symbols become institutionalized as glue or ‘connective tissue’ in institutional packages (e.g., Meyer et al., 2018), they make institutional orders accessible and experienceable. Our approach to symbols therefore extends research on instantiations of institutional logics (e.g., Thornton et al., 2012) and institutional substances (e.g., Friedland, 2009, 2013). By suggesting symbols as a crucial leverage point for institutional dynamics, we also provide novel impetus for recent approaches to social symbolic work (e.g., Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) and cultural entrepreneurship (e.g., Bacco and Dalpiaz, 2022; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2019). Second, our understanding of symbols as a unity of the conceptual and the sensorily perceivable can be generative for a variety of communities and conversations beyond institutional approaches that focus on topics such as materiality, space, embodiment, temporality, and multimodality. Through the lens of Ernst Cassirer, the symbol becomes the pivotal point between the world of the senses and the world of culture and meaning, an interface that is of crucial importance in these debates.

Our Counterpoint proceeds as follows. First, we provide a brief introduction of Cassirer and his philosophy of the symbol and expand on the three main characteristics of the symbol. We then position this approach vis-à-vis Phillips and Moser’s Point article. Finally, we relate our perspective on symbols to ongoing debates in institutional organization research by discussing the implications for institutions and institutional orders, relationships between individual and institutional order, and institutional dynamics.

THE SYMBOL: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Foundation: Ernst Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbols

Ernst Cassirer’s work on symbols has inspired many of 20th Century’s most influential scholars in sociology and philosophy, including Bourdieu, Foucault, Habermas, Goffman, and Ricœur, among others (for a comprehensive introduction to Cassirer in English, see, for instance, Mohr, 2010). On the one hand, Cassirer is acknowledged

today as ‘one of the first modern, systematic theorists of cultural studies’ (Mohr, 2010, p. 113) and recognized as *The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Skidelsky, 2011). On the other hand, many recent references to his work are ‘rather superficial’, leaving Cassirer ‘more often cited than read’ (Recki, 2013, p. 7).^[1] One reason for this might be that Cassirer’s writings were considered to be unintelligible in English, even though, after escaping from Nazi Germany, he taught at Oxford in the United Kingdom, and later at Yale and Columbia in the United States until his death in 1945. Instead of a translation of his work on the *Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms*, originally published in German in three volumes over the 1920s, the late Cassirer (2021d, p. xvii) decided to ‘make a fresh start’ and published his only book in English, titled *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, in 1944. It was then only after his death that the *Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms* became available in English in the 1950s. Recently, a new translation with the aim of making Cassirer’s work more accessible was published (Cassirer, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Cassirer’s philosophy is a little-used but, as we argue, extremely fruitful starting point to reconceptualize the symbol and to rethink its meaning in organization and management theory. The key to his oeuvre is the intellectual heritage on which he built his thinking: Cassirer was deeply committed to Kant’s philosophy of mind, which emphasized that one cannot cognize things in themselves; rather, when thinking, one takes an active part in constituting things as real. Accordingly, we bring a priori cognitive principles to the world that make the world intelligible in the first place. According to Kant, time, space, and causality are such principles that cannot be found in the world but are organizing structures of the world. This working of the mind as structuring force remained an important part of Cassirer’s philosophy (2021a, 2021d). What made him such an original thinker, though, was his encounter with Georg Simmel. In the 1890s, Cassirer attended Simmel’s lectures in Berlin and developed a fascination for the themes Simmel was working on, such as urban life, fashion, or the role of money (Skidelsky, 2003). From Cassirer’s perspective, the experience of these phenomena is an experience of objects in a culturally ordered world. These cultural phenomena, therefore, differ considerably from the natural objects that Kant had focused on. Cassirer applies Kantian thinking to cultural phenomena turning ‘the critique of reason’ into ‘the critique of culture’ (Verene, 2000, p. vii). One main pillar of Cassirer’s perspective is that whilst sensory perceptions are individual experiences, culture requires bringing together such individual perceptions with socially shared conceptualizations. Accordingly, liking or disliking a specific piece of art (an example Cassirer uses) requires collective sense-making of and sense-giving to sensory perceptions. Cassirer’s a priori is not located in the individual’s mind but between people (art critics, historians, gallerists, curators, etc.) and artefacts (artwork, museum, etc.). As we will endeavour to explain, this space between people and the world is structured by the symbol.

Cassirer therefore devoted his work to the conundrum of how exactly individual sensory perceptions and socially shared conceptualizations are interwoven, thereby extending the scope of the philosophy of the mind from natural to cultural phenomena. For him, the symbol plays the same role as space, time, and causality play in Kant’s philosophy. For Kant, these principles are the a priori cognitive filters through which we can navigate the material world. For Cassirer (2021d), the symbol as form

(*forma*, Latin for shape) works as the ‘general structural principle’ (p. 69) through which individuals can navigate the cultural world. In this sense, the symbol is an inherently social form of both constituting and interpreting culturally significant life-worlds (Paetzold, 1994).

Core Characteristics of the Symbol

Cassirer’s philosophy highlights that meaning (*Sinn*) and sensory perception (*Sinnliches*) are positioned in a co-constitutive, reciprocal relation with each other (Cassirer, 2021a, 2021c). For Cassirer, the principle that brings about this reciprocity and unity is the symbol. Inspired by Cassirer’s work, we define the symbol as the relationally and reciprocally constituted (*Wechselbeziehung, Wechselbestimmung*; Cassirer, 2021a, p. 23; 2021c, p. 142) unity (*Sinnanzes*; Cassirer, 2021c, p. 239) of sensorily perceived phenomena (*sinnlicher Eindruck, Wahrnehmungsphänomen, Wahrnehmungserlebnis*; Cassirer, 2021c, p. 239, 303) and collectively shared conceptualizations (*Vorstellung*; Cassirer, 2003, p. 282; 2021c, p. 303). In what follows, we will take this definition as starting point to develop and elaborate three main characteristics of the symbol.

The symbol as unity of the manifest and the conceptual. We start from Cassirer’s assertion that the reality of cultural phenomena is essentially two-dimensional: They have a manifest dimension, which is individually accessible through the perceptions of the senses, and, at the same time, a conceptual dimension, which relates to collectively shared meanings. The understanding of cultural phenomena therefore results from the reciprocity of individual sensory perceptions (e.g., a wooden cross, which we can perceive with our eyes and touch with our hands) with collectively shared conceptualizations that render these perceptions socially meaningful (e.g., the meaning that the cross bestows on the Christian believer). For Cassirer, the main role of the symbol in understanding cultural phenomena is interweaving *these two dimensions*, or the sensualization of meaning (*Versinnlichung von Sinn*; Recki, 2013, p. 32), since understanding social reality necessarily involves both the sensory and the conceptual. Shared conceptualizations that render sensory perceptions socially meaningful as cultural phenomena cannot be cognized and/or shared as such but need to be associated with something that can be accessed through the individual sensory apparatus. Accounting for his Kantian legacy, for Cassirer (2021c), relation is the ‘genuine “*a priori*”’ (p. 240; emphasis in original) for both giving sense to (i.e., creating) and making sense of (i.e., accessing) the cultural world. In such reading of Cassirer (2021c), the symbol constitutes nothing less than the texture of understanding, highlighting the ‘primacy of relation’ (p. 241) of cultural knowledge.^[2]

Phillips and Moser (2023, p. 10) seem to take a similar direction when they suggest that the symbol ‘is both a material object and at the same time an abstract representation of something else’. Four decades ago, Pfeffer (1981, p. 47), too, stressed that ‘[s]ymbols are effective only to the extent that meaning becomes invested in the symbols’. However, for us, the central idea is the primacy of relation, which means that the symbol is neither a physical object nor a conceptual idea but is the ‘general structural principle’ (Cassirer, 2021d, p. 69) that accounts for the interwovenness

of perceivable phenomena and shared conceptualizations of how these phenomena are understood. This relation is reciprocal and co-constitutive: The symbol as relationship brings cultural phenomena into being. According to Cassirer (2021d), the symbolic way of understanding and making sense of the social world is essentially human in nature and typical of humans as ‘symbolic animal’ (*‘animal symbolicum’*; p. 26; emphasis in original).

The symbol as representation of the absent. This leads to the second key characteristic of the symbol: The symbol mediates absence and presence. Through what Cassirer (2003, 2021c) calls ‘representation’, it sensualizes a shared conceptualization, that is, it makes it accessible through the sensory apparatus. Importantly, Cassirer does not use representation in the sense of a reflection of something existing objectively, or as a simple reference to something absent (e.g., as a sign in the spirit of Peirce, 1991). Quite to the contrary, for Cassirer (2003, p. 284), representation is a performative and generative process which refers to the ‘constitutive condition of all experience’; the represented is quite literally forced into presence in an almost archaic manner (Rehberg, 2001).^[3] By being interwoven in a symbol, the sensorily perceivable phenomenon invokes absent – that is, not perceivable by the senses – shared conceptualizations. It is in this sense that the symbol involves what Cassirer (2003, p. 281) called a ‘type of “transcendence”’. For Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 40), symbolic signification ‘attains the maximum detachment from the “here and now” of everyday life’, thus tapping into ‘regions that are not only *de facto* but *a priori* unavailable to everyday experience’ (emphasis in original). In contrast to signs (as used, for instance, in semiotics), symbols do not only indicate or refer to conventionalized meanings. The perceived phenomenon and the shared conceptualization become one and together generate the cultural phenomenon. The reciprocal symbolic relation is by definition two-directional, simultaneously involving representation and transcendence. Symbols are generative and performative; they give existence to what otherwise would not be.

The symbol affords giving presence to collective meanings that transcend space and time in the here and now. We see this aspect of the symbol illustrated in, for instance, Friedland’s (2013, p. 28) assertion that ‘you didn’t have to travel to Jerusalem to live there’. The sensory re-presentation is the present and manifest form of absent conceptual meaning. It is in this sense that the world ‘is veiled [...] as much as it is revealed’ (Cassirer, 2021c, p. 1) by the symbol: While the symbol brings into being cultural phenomena and renders them comprehensible (e.g., the Christian Cross), it simultaneously hides certain sensory and/or material affordances of these phenomena (e.g., the two plain pieces of wood of which the cross consists). For Cassirer, understanding cultural phenomena therefore involves a dialectical combination of sensory perception and collective meanings. Cultural knowledge is not only essentially relational but moreover the result of a loop of ‘back and forth between the “presenting” and the “presented”’ (Cassirer, 2021c, p. 240).

The symbol as site of ongoing contestation over meaning. The interweaving of sensory perceptions and shared conceptualizations is a highly dynamic process as meanings are always in flux and potentially contested. Hence, the ‘symbol is characterized not

by its uniformity but by its versatility. It is not rigid or inflexible but mobile' (Cassirer, 2021d, p. 36).

There are several foundations for such dynamism: First, as we have emphasized above, the symbol foregrounds the 'primacy of relation' (Cassirer, 2021c, p. 241), and relationships between conceptualizations and perceivable phenomena may change. In the symbol these 'two ends are combined into one' (Cassirer, 2021a, p. 24). Therefore, change may happen at either end. Conceptualizations may evolve over time, or they may become interwoven with different perceivable phenomena. Particular sensory perceptions may become imbued with new meaning. Second, perceivable phenomena hardly ever exhaustively or exclusively link to the conceptualization. Most conceptualizations can be interwoven with multiple phenomena that co-exist in different degrees of complementarity and contradiction. Finally, the symbol highlights certain features of the perceivable phenomenon and hides others: As symbol, the Christian Cross distracts from the profane affordances of two common pieces of wood, which may, however, be meaningful in other symbolic relationships. It is in this sense that, to paraphrase Ricœur (1976, p. 55), those who employ a symbol also supply the 'surplus' of its meaning.

Moreover, Cassirer (2003, p. 284) argues that the symbol works as reciprocal relation 'in a system of relations', meaning that symbolic relations always relate to other symbolic relations; cultural phenomena are embedded in a dynamic web of symbolic relations (see also Recki, 2013). Hence, the social orders of life-worlds reflect particular sets of symbols and are the result of the linking of and between symbols. Symbols are thus embedded in 'zones of meaning' (e.g., Meyer et al., 2021) with different degrees of sharedness, durability, malleability, and contestation. From a symbolic perspective, a key question is therefore how symbolic relations are configured and structured, and how symbolic orders develop over time.

Interestingly, Cassirer remains largely silent about the structures and processes of power constantly at play within zones of meaning. However, we suggest that an understanding of symbols as products of conflict and politics is fully compatible with his perspective. Cassirer extends the scope of Kant's philosophy of mind from natural to cultural phenomena. The novelty of his approach was that conceptualizations are not individual, but collective accomplishments. Shared understandings are more often than not a consequence of 'who has the bigger stick' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 109). As such, we add that symbols are the results of social negotiation processes and enmeshed in power and politics; they are only preliminary outcomes of *contestations about collective signification*.

Summing up, with Cassirer we define the symbol as the relationally and reciprocally constituted unity of the manifest and the conceptual by which sensorily perceivable phenomena transcend their immediate sensory and/or material affordances and become genuine embodiments of shared conceptualizations. Engagement with Cassirer's work allows us to develop three basic characteristics of the symbol: First, its *relational and reciprocal character* as a structuring principle that combines the manifest and the conceptual into a whole; second, its *representative role* in interweaving transcendence and manifestation, thereby bringing cultural phenomena into existence in the here and now; and third, the *malleability of and contestation* around the symbol that create varying degrees of stability and fluidity in the relationship between the manifest and the conceptual.

To provide an example from our field: Let us assume there is an office in the corner on the top floor of the building. Buildings are mostly rectangular and have corner rooms, so this corner office could simply be like any other office. However, it could, as spatial artefact, also be interwoven with the conceptualization of hierarchy. As the relationship between the perceivable phenomenon and collectively shared but abstract conceptualization, the Corner Office becomes a symbol. While no organization would seriously consider abolishing or not using the rooms in the corner of the building, as symbol, the Corner Office can become an object of political conflict and social change. The Corner Office is more than an artefact invested with meaning, it is a distinct cultural phenomenon created through a symbolic relation between the manifest and the conceptual. Additionally, large parts of these conflicts and negotiations become comprehensible only if we do not see the Corner Office as an isolated symbol but embedded in a web of other symbols that together bring into existence the hierarchical organization. A perspective building on Cassirer's thinking would neither start with the psychology of managers and employees or with the inherent 'logic' of hierarchy as an institution. Nor would it start with the material attributes of artefacts such as organizational charts, job descriptions, office space and layout. It would start in the middle; with that which is most obvious yet mysterious, individually experienceable and yet collectively meaningful; it means starting with the symbol.

Positioning our Arguments Vis-à-Vis Phillips and Moser

The common ground between Phillips and Moser's Point and our Counterpoint is that the symbol has much more positive explanatory power than extant research acknowledges, and that it needs a thorough reconceptualization in order to realize this potential. However, we disagree with Phillips and Moser (2023) in regard to how this potential can be best unlocked.

In their Point, the authors suggest drawing on evolutionary theory as a basis for a better and more systematic understanding of the role of symbols in organizational and institutional life. They argue that the symbolic in the social science is akin to the DNA in biology: an evolutionary fact that plays an essential role in unlocking the mysteries of social behaviour in general. This involves understanding the symbol as a central outcome of human evolution linked to the development of the human brain, which led to a uniquely human cognitive niche constructed via cognition, language, and sociality.

While we applaud their willingness to look outside the box of the social sciences for answers to the issues plaguing organizational and management literature with regards to the symbol, we do not see a necessity to look that far. In fact, as we have shown above, there is sufficient potential in drawing on classic texts in the social sciences and humanities to develop a more systematic understanding of the symbol. In the remainder of our Counterpoint, we will elaborate how our cultural theory perspective can contribute to pertinent debates in institutional organization theory and beyond.

In addition to this difference in approaching the topic, we see two further challenges with Phillips and Moser's (2023) Point. Their approach to the symbol as a biological response to human evolutionary needs builds on the assumption that there is a necessity for 'mutual

consistency between theories of human evolution and theories of management and organization' (p. 32). The authors suggest, for instance, that '[j]ust as theories of chemistry need to be consistent with theories of physics, theories of management need to be consistent with what we know about human evolution' (p. 34). They further demand that theories that 'are currently situated at different levels of analysis and across different empirical foci [...] need to be consistent with each other, and our understanding of *Homo sapiens* as a species with certain evolved capabilities' (p. 34). While we do not necessarily disagree with the idea that organization and management theories could be related to biological and anthropological insights, we are less convinced that an explicit import of evolutionary theories is a fruitful way forward. A variety of approaches to the symbol may be overall in line with theories of evolution. This does not require that we use concepts and terminology from the natural sciences. Additionally, we would be cautionary also with regard to specific ontological and epistemological assumptions that may go hand in hand with evolutionary concepts and vocabularies.

Hence, we call for a narrower understanding of the symbol than is suggested by Phillips and Moser. Building on DeLoache (2004, p. 66), they start from a very broad understanding of symbols as 'something that someone intends to represent something other than itself'. Such definition runs the risk of leaving little that is ultimately *not* symbolic. The question then is whether such broad definition of the symbol is indeed useful, and for what purposes. Phillips and Moser (2023) suggest that their definition is conducive to understanding and theorizing 'everything from the nature of organizations to innovation processes and organizational culture' (p. 5). While we also think that our proposed understanding of the symbol is relevant for a broad variety of applications and research questions, we restrict our theorizing to a cultural perspective and develop a definition that is parsimonious in its scope and, in consequence, also leaves room for many aspects that are not symbolic.

Summing up, we appreciate Phillips and Moser's innovative approach, but challenge the need to move beyond the humanities and social sciences to solve the conundrum. Our own approach is more easily reconcilable with predominant ontological and epistemological assumptions within our field of inquiry and differs from Phillips and Moser's suggestions in terms of (a) how the symbol should be defined; (b) how the symbol affords creating and accessing the cultural and institutional world; and (c) how and why the symbol matters for the study of organizations and institutions. It is this latter point that we will outline in more detail in the following section.

REVISITING THE SYMBOL IN INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION THEORY

In this section, we outline three central areas of study into institutions and their dynamics to which our understanding of symbols can contribute. These suggestions are meant to explore the relevance of Cassirer's thinking for our field and inspire other scholars to find additional areas of application. We will argue (in contrast to Phillips and Moser) that symbols do not cushion a cognitive niche – but essentially furnish our institutional world. Based on the three characteristics of the symbol outlined in the previous section, we suggest that (a) the symbol as unity between the conceptual and the manifest is the core *modus operandi* of institutions and institutional orders;

(b) the symbol foregrounds the relational; (c) the symbol is the central leverage point for both institutional maintenance and change. In short, we argue that the symbol as theorized here has the potential to complement and challenge the way we understand institutions; how institutions interact with organizations and individuals; and how change does (not) happen. We will discuss each of these claims as challenges to extant research, emphasizing that what follows seeks to open, not close, debates.

Challenge #1: Symbols are the Foundation of Institutional Orders

In the long history of its usage, the concept of institution has proven to be multifaceted and notoriously slippery. Early work in organizational institutional theory (see, for instance, Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977; Meyer et al., 1994; Barley and Tolbert, 1997) has strongly built on Berger and Luckmann's (1967) understanding of institutions as reciprocal typifications of habitualized actions by types of actors that become institutionalized as they transcend their context of origin, travel across time and space, and are passed on as social facts to actors who were not involved in the process of their typification. However, although symbols and symbolic relationships are frequently referred to in their seminal book, they do not explicitly theorize this relationship. While some strands of recent work cite Berger and Luckmann's seminal book as a major inspiration (e.g., Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Lounsbury and Wang, 2020; Meyer, 2008), others have developed alternative takes on institutions. For instance, in his influential book on organizations and institutions, Scott (2014, p. 57) defines institutions as 'multifaceted, durable social structures, made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources', noting that 'symbolic systems – rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive beliefs – are central ingredients of institutions'. Equally, in their conceptualization of institutional logics, Thornton et al. (2012, p. 10) state that 'the symbolic and the material are intertwined and constitutive of one another'. Theorizing institutions as 'social symbolic objects', Lawrence and Phillips (2019, p. 190) suggest that an institution is not to be equated with 'the practice, technology, or rule as such, but rather its shared, social understanding'. These approaches seem to limit symbols to the ideational aspects of institutions while downplaying their sensorily perceivable dimension. Maybe closest to our own understanding is Friedland's recent work (e.g., Friedland, 2009; Friedland and Arjaliès, 2021) on institutional logics and substances that are given face through symbolic practices and institutional objects.

With Cassirer's concept of symbol, we can sharpen and add analytical depth to the debate. In earlier work (Meyer et al., 2018) we have defined an institution as a package of ideational, cognitive, behavioural, material/visual, emotional, and normative elements that are co-constitutive of each other. Institutions are cultural building blocks that transcend their enactment. Importantly, the symbol as the unity of the conceptual and the manifest provides the glue or connective tissue that holds these institutional packages together, thereby accounting for the expressive and transcendental quality of institutions. This understanding takes inspiration from Cassirer and German sociologist Rehberg (who was familiar with Cassirer). Rehberg (e.g., 1994, 1997) argues that institutions are not merely mechanisms of coordination but first and foremost symbolic instantiations of the principles and validity claims of a specific

social order (1994, p. 56). Cassirer highlights that symbols do not only invoke cultural meanings and a social order (as signs may do), but actively create it. It is the relational and co-constitutive character of the symbol – the interweaving of the lived sensory experience and the collectively shared conceptualization – that brings together the manifest and the conceptual, and allows individuals to experience a social world as ‘objective’ reality. Take the example of hierarchy as institutionalized form of coordination: on an everyday level, an individual experiences hierarchy, among other things, through reporting lines, office size and office furniture, a secretariat in front of the office, or distinguishing job titles. These phenomena are inseparably interwoven with hierarchy and make the abstract idea tangible and ‘real’; at the same time, the abstract idea of hierarchy influences how we experience and engage with these phenomena. The symbol gives presence to an invisible institutional order; it brings it into the world. Hence, with Rehberg (1994, 1997), we argue that institutional orders are first and foremost *symbolic orders*. In other words, the validity claims of institutional orders are realized through symbols. Symbols do not only indicate institutions; they are at the source of institutions’ power, reach, and durability.

Since symbols exist whenever sensorily perceivable phenomena are reciprocally related to shared conceptualizations, there is a potentially unlimited number of symbols that are used in purely habitualized form and/or in small communities and never spread outside these communities as social fact (i.e., they never become fully institutionalized). For instance, a clique of friends may develop a variety of symbols imbuing certain practices and artefacts with shared meaning (for instance, a specific form of greeting ritual). However, whilst meaningful for the clique of friends, these symbols are never passed on as ‘the way things are done’. Importantly, what we are stressing here is that symbols are by definition social, but not all of them are institutionalized. However vice versa, all institutions are symbolic edifices.

Challenge #2: Relations and the Phenomenology of Institutional Representations

Institutional organization theory emphasizes that institutionalized expectations need to become available and tangible to individuals in their everyday life. Scott (2014), for example, suggests that internalized symbolic representations mediate between the world of stimuli and individual responses. He goes on to theorize that symbols shape the meanings attached to objects and activities and concludes that institutions become available to individuals through specific ‘carriers’ (Scott, 2014, p. 95): symbolic systems, relational systems, activities, and artefacts. In our approach inspired by Cassirer, symbols are not to be differentiated from relations, activities, and artefacts. In fact, all of these become part of symbols when they are reciprocally and co-constitutively interwoven with shared conceptualizations.

Given that symbols are a unity, the manifest is an ‘appresentation’ (a term Alfred Schütz uses to denote the forms that give presence to abstract ordering principles) that transcends material and sensory affordances in favour of broader cultural readings (e.g., a throne presents the institution of monarchy, not the notion of chair). From the perspective of organizational symbolism that thrived in organization research

in the 1980s and 1990s, Dandridge (1983, p. 71; see also Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Morgan et al., 1983) suggests that symbols ‘help to translate an unconscious or intuitively known internal world of feelings into the comprehensible terms of our visible reality’. Accordingly, the symbol renders, as we argue in agreement with Rehberg, Lepsius, and Schütz, the absent present. It makes the invisible visible (Friedland and Arjaliès, 2021) – or keeps it invisible or even mysterious (Bento da Silva et al., 2022). Therefore, symbols enable the lived experience of institutions, for instance by furnishing an individual’s place in the world and facilitating the internalization of institutionalized expectations (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). At the same time, they invoke meaning structures that transcend the individual: ‘Every enactment of an institution references the typifications it embodies and the *Leitidee* they signify [...] Every enactment of an institution is therefore a symbolic expression of the typifications it incarnates’ (Meyer, 2019, p. 39).

Institutional scholarship, in one way or another, has addressed both dimensions of the symbolic relationship, however, without regarding them as unity. On the one hand, the conceptual dimension, which relates to collectively shared meanings (e.g., Meyer et al., 2021; Zilber, 2017), has received a prominent role as root metaphor (Thornton et al., 2012), institutional substance (Friedland, 2009), or *Leitidee* (guiding idea) (Lepsius, 1997). For Thornton et al. (2012), root metaphors characterize the foundational logics underlying institutional orders; for Friedland et al. (2014), institutional substances are non-observable bases of rationality in institutional orders that need to be given presence through practice; Lepsius’ *Leitideen* are abstract ideas that are made concrete through rationality criteria – and eventually instantiated in a variety of manifest forms – in order to guide action. On the other hand, the manifest dimension that highlights sensorily perceivable phenomena has given rise to a number of typologies of symbolic manifestations. Organizational symbolism, for instance, distinguished between verbal expressions, activities, events, images, and objects (e.g., Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Jones, 1996; Morgan et al., 1983). Cassirer’s symbol, we argue, brings together the conceptual and the manifest strand and thereby speaks to current debates in organization theory.

For instance, types of symbols that involve the body, its placement, movements, or interactions (such as rituals, ceremonies, or other routinized forms of social action) can be performed and invite conversations with process and practice approaches. After Steve Jobs’ legendary performances (see Wenzel and Koch, 2018), keynote speeches have become notorious as ceremonial interactions that literally embody a specific kind of disruptive high-tech capitalism. We argue that both, the speech act as well as the abstract notion of disruptive high-tech capitalism can best be made sense of when studied through what connects them – the symbol.

Types of symbols that involve material artefacts (such as objects like a crown, a cross, a uniform, corporate art) or spatial manifestations (buildings like a church or parliament, or places like Tian’anmen Square or Silicon Valley) underscore the role of materiality and space/place in institutional organization theory. For instance, the Berlin Wall as a material artefact was made of bricks and mortar; yet, as a symbol, it gave presence to the insurmountable barrier between two opposing world orders and ideologies. Previous work has linked material manifestations to specific institutional logics (see Jones et al., 2012). We argue that symbols are those relations that,

at the same time, give logics presence and materiality meaning. As such, symbols also draw attention to the distinct spatiality (*Eigenräumlichkeit*; see Rehberg, 1994) that is characteristic of particular institutions (e.g., sacred sites, or, more profane, the prison panopticon or the Corner Office).

Some verbal texts manifest symbolic relationships that can be institutionalized (e.g., the first amendment of the US constitution, psalms, surahs of the Q'uran, but also mission statements, strategy documents, or corporate reporting regimes can assume this quality), as can texts that are perceived through other (aural, olfactory, visual) senses (such as national anthems, the smell of incense, or the Royal purple).

Symbols that build on time, such as the temporal structuring of processes or the interpretation of historical events invite a conversation between scholars of temporality and institutional scholars. Rehberg (1994) argues that, for instance, Eucharist in Christianity is a form of de-historization, monarchy is duration that transcends an actor's lifespan, or the strict daily routines in a monastery introduce a cyclical notion of time. This foregrounds that certain institutions are organized according to a distinct inherent temporality (*Eigenzeitlichkeit*) that deviates from metric time and symbolizes a specific institutional order. In a more worldly fashion, the rhythm of the conveyor belt or the temporal structure of the academic year are symbolically interwoven with specific forms and models of organizing. In this regard, we see fruitful links to work that focuses on, for example, the temporality of 'disruption' in management research and practice (Christensen et al., 2018) or lived experiences of time in organizations (e.g., Bailey and Suddaby, 2023; Dille et al., 2023).

Connecting invisible meanings, prescriptions, and orders to concrete sensory experiences by way of symbols as structuring principles has the potential to shed new and generative light on a variety of ongoing debates in organizational institutional theory and organization and management research more broadly. For instance, our understanding of symbols can deepen our insights into how the complex entanglement of the conceptual and the material works in cultivating and strategically mobilizing a firm's cultural and symbolic resources (e.g., Dalpiaz et al., 2010). Most institutions are given presence through a variety of manifestations that create a web of symbolic relations. As we will expand below, the ambiguity and surplus meaning generated in these webs have implications for theories on institutional maintenance and change.

Challenge #3: Symbols are Leverage Points for Institutional Dynamics

Institutional dynamics, that is, institutional maintenance and change, have been a core topic in organizational institutional theory since the 1990s and have been studied drawing on concepts such as institutional entrepreneurship (e.g., Battilana et al., 2009), institutional work (e.g., Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), or institutional logics (e.g., Thornton et al., 2012). Symbols are mobilized in favour of both stability and change. Scott (2014), for instance, contends that shared symbolic systems exercise unobtrusive controls, which support the stability of institutions. Symbols are also regarded as crucial for change. Zilber (2008, p. 161) highlights that 'symbols and meanings themselves are never stable' but involve a plurality of signification that cannot be finally stabilized. Friedland (2009) suggests that explaining the variability of institutional logics requires a theory of

symbolization. Despite the broad agreement concerning the relevance of symbols, a clear conceptual framework of the role of symbols in institutional dynamics or explicit mechanisms or processes are missing, which is not surprising given the ambiguity of the concept and its meaning. A conceptual lens sharpened by Cassirer's theory of symbols helps systematize both stability and change by making symbols potential sites of contestation.

As a first leverage point, we repeat that every single instantiation of an institution is necessarily incomplete and brings to life the *Leitidee* only ever partially (Lepsius, 1997). Rather, institutions are instantiated by a variety of artefacts, spaces, temporalities, texts, and other phenomena that are complementary, but also potentially contradictory. For instance, tensions may emerge when open office spaces symbolize flat hierarchies, while at the same time privileged parking spaces for board members disrupt such experiences of egalitarianism. This resonates with existing approaches that theorize contradictory institutional prescriptions (Greenwood et al., 2011; Raynard, 2016) or contradictions in the totality of institutional arrangements (Seo and Creed, 2002) as important enablers of institutional change. In an earlier article (Meyer et al., 2021), we have argued how such partial instantiation implies that at each point in time, an institutional order may be represented by a different set of sensorily perceivable phenomena, and that such multiplicity is an important source of institutional variation.

A second leverage point is the idea that the relationship between the manifest and conceptual dimensions changes over time, for instance, when symbols are re-appropriated in other contexts. This may lead to contestation and discursive struggles over the meanings inherent in specific symbols (for instance, the Confederate flag, or statues of colonial leaders). The magnitude and intensity of debates pro and contra absentee ballots (and even online voting) make clear that technical and legal questions alone are insufficient explanations. Rather, these practices are not (yet) regarded as legitimate forms of giving presence to the institutional order of democracy.

Finally, as a third leverage point, symbols may be institutionalized to different degrees. Highly institutionalized symbols (e.g., the Christian Cross) provide quick and direct access to the meanings and stocks of knowledge governed by an institutional order. If we theorize institutional orders as structured webs of symbolic relations, then those areas within the web where symbols are less institutionalized, or even eroding, may be particularly attractive entry points for challengers or change agents. For example, social movements gain traction when and where they focus on breaking relations between institutional order and lived reality (for instance, the ideal of democracy and actual policing practices): The police uniform – once potently enmeshed with conceptions of law and order – becomes increasingly interwoven with the conceptual world of discrimination and violence.

Seeing symbols at the heart of both stability and change opens up a set of interesting implications. First, strongly institutionalized symbols stabilize institutions by evoking their prescriptions in unobtrusive ways. At the same time, multifaceted and malleable relations between multiple symbols are gateways for challengers of the dominant institutional order. Second, a focus on symbols provides new insights into what actually changes. Either the manifest or the conceptual dimension of symbols

may shift, while the other remains stable. This points towards a mechanism where dynamicity within the symbol may enable stability *qua* change, for instance, when institutions are maintained by exchanging elements of the manifest dimension that have become tainted (that is, associated with illegitimate surplus meaning), or by updating shared conceptualizations to better match the *zeitgeist* while keeping artefacts, rituals, and spaces stable. Finally, we believe that the link between the social and the individual provided by a cultural perspective on symbols also contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between institutional order and actorhood (see, for instance, the Point-Counterpoint on actors and actorhood in institutional theory [Bitektine et al., 2020; Meyer and Vaara, 2020; Voronov and Weber, 2020]). This makes our approach interesting for research in the tradition of social symbolic work (e.g., Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) and cultural entrepreneurship (e.g., Bacco and Dalpiaz, 2022; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2019), because we theorize the symbol as the gateway through which the individual actor engages with institutional orders, and through which institutional orders are embodied.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The starting point for our Counterpoint article echoes Phillips and Moser's diagnosis. First, the concept of symbol is central in organization theory; it has been utilized as a crucial aspect of organizations and institutions in a broad variety of literatures. Second, existing theorizations of the symbol within this literature are fragmented and inconsistent, and the conceptual value of the symbol has become diluted as a consequence. Since we agree on these basic observations, and also on the assessment that this current state of affairs is less than optimal, it is of little surprise that we are also generally in agreement that there is much potential value in a more systematic theorization of the symbol, and that such theorization needs to show how the symbol is the pivotal point in explaining both institutions and organizations.

Our approach, however, differs from that of Phillips and Moser in a fundamental – and, as we have argued, highly consequential – aspect. Rather than drawing on evolutionary biology, we suggest that a cultural approach to symbols inspired by the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer has the potential to resonate more generatively with existing theories of organizations and institutions. Instead of focusing on the biological bases of processes of social construction, we highlight the role of the symbol as mediator between the individual and the social order. And instead of advocating the idea of a cognitive niche, our conceptual idea highlights the interweaving of sensorily perceivable phenomena and shared conceptualizations. In our approach, it is this idea of the symbol as unity created by reciprocal relations between the manifest and the conceptual, which creates the foundation for the existence of institutions and institutional orders. This is not to say, however, that our approach is diametrically opposed to that of our colleagues: In fact, when Cassirer classifies the human as *animal symbolicum* (2021d) and suggests that symbolic relations are the genuine human *a priori* (2021c), this suggests potential bridges to anthropological and perhaps even biological perspectives.

The contributions we wish to make with our manuscript are twofold. First, inspired by the work of Ernst Cassirer, we offer a conceptual clarification and systematization of the symbol. We identify and discuss three central characteristics of the symbol, which constitute the basis for a more systematic use of the concept in organizational research. The core of our suggestion is an alternative understanding of the symbol as a relationally and reciprocally constituted unity of the manifest and the conceptual by which sensorily perceivable phenomena transcend their immediate sensory and/or material affordances and become genuine embodiments of shared conceptualizations in the 'here and now'. We further suggest that the surplus meaning inherent in the symbol makes it a site for contestations over meaning, which become a source for dynamicity.

A second set of contributions relates to our suggestions on how to clarify the role of symbols in the context of institutions and institutional orders. With these ideas, we hope to start a broader conversation by tackling three central and intensely debated topics in institutional organization theory. To start with, we suggest with Cassirer that symbols are the metaphorical glue that holds packages of material, behavioural, cognitive, and affective elements together. Such packages become an institution if the symbolic relation becomes fully institutionalized, that is, goes through processes of typification, objectification, and transmission. Further, we theorize with Rehberg and Lepsius that the symbol mediates between individual and institutional order, that is, perceivable phenomena are a crucial form of giving presence to institutions in the realm of lived experiences. Finally, we argue that symbols represent three important leverage points for endogenous institutional change: The interweaving of the manifest and the conceptual is necessarily exemplary and incomplete, affording room for deviation and innovation; institutions and institutional orders are given presence by a multitude of symbols of different types, implying both complementary as well as contradictory relations among them; and different degrees of institutionalization of symbols within an institutional order's web of symbolic relations leave a constant potential for disorder and erosion.

Summing up, our paper rediscovers a path that early organizational and institutional theorists have sketched out but their successors have not travelled (Brodocz, 2002). With our Counterpoint argument we hope to offer a signpost and with Ernst Cassirer a trusted guide for future research to explore that path.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are grateful to the editors Daniel Muzio and Editor Elena Dalpiaz for their in-depth engagement with our ideas, their valuable suggestions, and their excellent editorial guidance.

NOTES

- [1] All translations from German into English are by the authors, if not indicated otherwise.
- [2] According to Bourdieu (1998, cit. Mohr, 2010, p. 115), Cassirer's relationalism much contributed to the 'philosophical style' of modern science.
- [3] Aware of the novelty of his approach, Cassirer (2003) also spoke of a 'transformation of the concept of representation' (p. 284) and often used the term representation (or re-presentation) in quotation marks. Whenever we use the term representation in this manuscript, it is in the sense outlined here.

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