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Group Actors. Why Social Science Should Care About Collective Agency

Thomas Gehring & Johannes Marx *

Abstract: »Warum die Sozialwissenschaften kollektive Handlungsfähigkeit ernst nehmen sollte«. This paper examines conceptual issues of the emergence and effects of collective agency. Collective agency seems to challenge the methodological individualist assumption that only individuals can act, but treating group actors, such as parliamentary committees or court chambers, as mere shortcuts for complex interactions among group members raises important theoretical, empirical, and normative issues. First, the paper discusses some fundamental issues of collective agency. We argue that analyses of collective agency must provide generative mechanisms that demonstrate how it arises from the interaction of group members. Second, the paper introduces major approaches to collective agency from analytical philosophy and sociology. They locate the source of collective agency in the formation of collective intentions through the adjustment of group members' attitudes, in the organization of group decision processes, or in the transfer of resources to the group level, which empowers a collective actor to act in its own right. Against this backdrop, this paper offers an integrative concept of collective agency characterized in terms of the degree of autonomy and the level of resources controlled by a collective actor. Third, this paper introduces the contributions to this special issue, which tackle a broad variety of issues, including the formation and consequences of collective intentions in small and unorganized groups, collective agency issues of institutionalized groups and organizations, collective agency of large and unorganized groups without defined memberships, and normative issues of collective agency.

Keywords: Collective intentions, collective agency, group actors.

1. Introduction

The emergence of collective agency in non-hierarchical groups is a puzzling phenomenon. Groups of individuals or of corporate members are frequently

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treated as actors, even in the absence of a formal hierarchy. “The jury finds man guilty of...”, “the Committee proposed to ...”, or “Parliament adopted.” Such expressions are ubiquitous in public discourse. Likewise, scholars frequently treat these entities as actors in their own right, e.g., the UN Security Council (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 20) or legislative chambers (Thomson and Hosli 2006; Sieberer 2011). However, it is highly disputed in the social sciences whether these expressions are mere “metaphors or whether they can be understood literally” (Beckenkamp 2006, 2). From a perspective of individualism, it seems puzzling that interaction among group members might gradually produce collective agency (Adloff, Büttner, and Weyand 2016).

Analytical philosophy and sociology offer a number of approaches to the emergence of collective agency from the interaction of group members. They challenge the broadly shared methodological individualist assumption that only individuals can act and that talk about group actors like states, committees, or international institutions should be understood as a shortcut for fully fleshed-out explanations based on human actors. A lively debate in analytical philosophy emphasizes the difference between acting in a group and acting as a group. It analyses issues of groups as actors (Tollefsen 2015; Tuomela 2013) and collective intentions (Gilbert 2007; Searle 1990; Bratman 2014; Roy 2010). While group intentions may not always be reducible to individual intentions (List and Pettit 2011; Epstein 2015, 217-8) and collective actors may enjoy a high degree of autonomy with respect to their group members (List and Pettit 2011), there remains a tight connection between the collective and the individual level. Coleman (1974, 1990) and Vanberg (1978, 1982) offer a resource-based theory of corporate actors located at the intersection of sociology and constitutional economics. It suggests that group members create a corporate actor when pooling resources for collective use and establishing a constitution, which comprises the formal and informal rules and procedures according to which these resources are deployed. These strands of scholarship offer abstract concepts for the micro-macro-link between the interaction of group members at the unit level and collective agency as a property of the group. They start from the primacy of individuals as actors over group actors and avoid crude holism. Hence, they adopt a perspective of ontological individualism while reaching beyond methodological individualism (on the difference between ontological and methodological individualism, see Epstein 2015, 21).

In contrast, the social sciences largely lack a reliable conceptualization of non-hierarchical collective actors (Pettit 2003, 191). For example, the rational choice-based political science literature conceptualizes committees, parliaments, or international institutions primarily as arenas for the interaction of group members without collective agency. This strand of research focuses on procedures of preference aggregation (e.g., voting, agenda-setting, bargaining, veto power, etc.; Müller and Sieberer 2014; Tsebelis 2002; Moravcsik

1998) and on principal-agent relations (Strøm, Müller, and Bergman 2003; Laffont and Martimort 2002; Hawkins et al. 2006), which result from strategically calculated cost-benefit analysis. Due to their rigorous methodological individualism, these authors treat a collective actor as an epistemic shortcut for the sum of its members and their individual actions, thus largely rejecting the possibility of autonomous group agency (Diermeier and Krehbiel 2003). Adloff (2011) identifies a similar gap in sociology on collective action and collective actors. Scholarship informed by historical and sociological institutionalism has not yet developed a clear concept of the emergence and nature of collective agency, although it focuses on endogenous processes of institutional change that are likely to matter for understanding such agency. Indeed, this strand of research discusses the formation of group identity partly under the heading of collective actors but limits its attention to larger and more diffuse crowds and movements, which tend to start from similar orientations of crowd members (Kavada 2015). Organizational research (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003; Scott and Davis 2015) has addressed issues of collective agency, but it focuses on hierarchically structured organizations, such as business firms and public administrations, to which it frequently attributes actor capability and a considerable degree of autonomy (Ellinas and Suleiman 2012). This perspective has been transferred to the secretariats of international organizations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, Bauer and Ege 2017). Finally, Scharpf's encompassing typology of "composite actors" (1997, ch. 3; and 1991) lacks a theory of collective actors (see also Schimank 2000, 306-22).

To address this lacuna, this special issue brings together theoretical and empirical contributions on the emergence, effects, and normative nature of non-hierarchical collective agency. Non-hierarchical group actors are particularly well suited to explore fundamental issues of collective agency, because these groups must solve collective action problems from the bottom up. They attract attention to self-organizing processes within groups and to the mechanisms through which collective agency emerges from interaction among formally equal group members. This process contrasts with hierarchically structured organizations, such as public administrations, which can solve such problems by assigning collective decisions to one or more individuals at the top of the hierarchy. When establishing the Bamberg Research Unit on the Emergence of Collective Agency (RUECA),¹ we identified the wide gap between the wealth of theoretical conceptions of collective agency, especially from analytical philosophy, which are often highly abstract, and the struggle of scholars from political science and sociology with empirical phenomena of collective agency or its normative consequences. All contributions to this special issue focus on sources, forms, and effects of collective agency that arise from the interaction of group members. Contributions explore sound

¹ See <https://www.collectiveagency.de> (Accessed 1 June 2023).

and empirically applicable conceptions of collective actors, the mechanisms driving group agency, as well as empirical forms and the normative consequences of group agency. Empirically, they focus largely on institutionalized groups, which are not primarily structured through formal hierarchy (henceforth non-hierarchical group actors), for example, court chambers, parliamentary committees, or member-driven bodies of international institutions.

This introductory article is organized as follows: In the second section, we discuss the theoretical, empirical, and normative relevance of collective actors and the resulting issues and puzzles. The third section introduces a number of existing approaches from analytical philosophy and sociology that offer – often highly abstract – conceptions of the emergence, nature, and effects of collective actors. The fourth section briefly introduces the contributions to this special issue.

2. Theoretical, Empirical, and Normative Relevance of Non-hierarchical Collective Actors

Non-hierarchical collective actors (or group actors) raise important theoretical, empirical, and normative issues. In contrast to hierarchically structured organizations, e.g., state bureaucracies and agencies (March and Simon 1958, 35-112), secretariats of international organizations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), or political parties (Michels 1911), it is theoretically unclear by which mechanisms non-hierarchical groups gain collective agency, if and how they become agents in their own right, and how we should treat such group actors in normative perspective.

Theoretically, concepts of non-hierarchical collective agency must provide generative mechanisms that demonstrate how the collective agency of a group arises from the interaction of group members (Adloff, Büttner, and Weyand 2016). It is puzzling that interaction within groups might gradually produce collective action capability because both the social mechanisms and the agency of collective actors are immediately tied to individual group members' decision-making behavior and action capability. However, those mechanisms should lead to collective agency that goes beyond the mere aggregation of the activities of these members. How can institutionalized entities act and influence their environment in meaningful ways distinct from the individual preferences of their members? To analyze this, concepts of collective agency need a strong micro-foundation. From an actor-centered perspective, it is particularly intriguing to explore the social mechanisms by which interaction among group members produces group-specific effects. Such mechanisms provide the foundation for the emergence of some group-specific organizational culture that, in turn, affects collective decisions. A social

mechanism may be conceived of as a set of logically connected statements that provide a plausible account of how a given cause creates an observed effect (Schelling 1998). It is part of the “nuts and bolts” of the social sciences (Elster 1989; Hedström and Swedberg 1996) and helps elucidate the micro-macro link (Opp 2014; Alexander et al. 1987) between the interaction of the constitutive group members at the micro level and the emergence of collective agency at the macro level.

Any attempt to grasp the phenomenon of non-hierarchical collective agency raises the theoretical problem of *emergence*, which refers to a process by which a system of interacting subunits acquires qualitatively new properties that cannot be understood as the mere addition of their individual contributions (Camazine et al. 2001, 31). Group agency as a collective (or social) phenomenon emerges from interaction among group members. Phenomena of emergence are widespread both in the natural and in the social world and are perfectly compatible with methodological individualism (Sawyer 2001; Klein, Marx, and Fischbach 2018, 12-6). For example, water, with its distinct qualities, emerges from the combination of hydrogen and oxygen, both of which have rather different qualities. Social organizations, companies, or states are examples of emerging social phenomena. James Coleman, one of the most important contemporary sociologists, emphasizes that the emergence of social phenomena can be accommodated with a rational choice perspective: “Interaction among individuals is seen to result in emergent phenomena at the system level, that is, phenomena that were neither intended nor predicted by the individuals” (1990, 5). They are emergent because they result from social organization, not simply from the aggregation of individual orientations, attitudes, beliefs, or behavior (Coleman 1987, 157; also 1990, 22). Likewise, Robert Axelrod (1995), a pioneering political scientist in the field of computer simulations, derives “a model of the emergence of new political actors” by modeling the interaction among group members in non-hierarchical settings.

The philosophical concept of *supervenience* helps to clarify some crucial implications of an individualistic concept of emergence. It implies that all macro phenomena arise from (are supervenient on) events on the micro level and that changes at the collective level, as a necessary condition, need changes at the individual level. Supervenience provides a “no mystery” constraint on social facts and avoids crude holism (List and Pettit 2011, 66; List and Spiekermann 2013, 633). However, it does not imply that all social phenomena are clearly related (i.e., fully reducible) to *one particular* configuration of individual actions, much like a particular mental state is not always clearly related to a particular physical brain state. In their attempt to develop a reconciliation of methodological individualism and holism in political science, List and Spiekermann (2013, 639) identify two conditions under which a social phenomenon does not directly relate to a particular configuration of

individual actions, both of which are relevant for collective agency. On the one hand, a particular higher-level property may be constituted in different ways (multiple realizability). Consider a non-hierarchical group actor that adopts a decision by some procedure involving majority vote, say the United Nations Security Council. While this decision certainly arises from collaborative actions of lower-level actors (in particular voting behavior of the members), a particular decision may be adopted by different sub-groups forming the majority. Hence, the decision as a macro phenomenon depends on the actions of group members. However, it can only be re-described in terms of *one particular* lower-level constellation of group members and their specific actions by losing essential characteristics in the description of the collective agent on the macro level. On the other hand, a particular group decision may be robust against changes at the micro level (micro-realization-robust causal relations). For example, the entry of a new member or the replacement of an individual representing a corporate member state does not necessarily affect the decision, despite changes at the micro level.

Empirically, one reason for the relevance of studying collective agency in modern societies comes from the joint occurrence of two interrelated features. (1) Many political, economic, and social decisions in contemporary societies are elaborated by, or subject to, the approval of institutionalized non-hierarchical group actors, such as parliaments, committees, assemblies, company boards, or teams. Scholars frequently treat these entities as actors in their own right, e.g., the UN Security Council (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 20) or legislative chambers (Thomson and Hosli 2006; Sieberer 2011). These decisions are based on preceding acts of delegation of decision-making powers to the collective body. Constitutional documents assign collective decision rights to parliaments and parliamentary committees or to the conferences of the parties of international institutions rather than to the members of these bodies. Hence, control over the use of such powers is centralized. (2) Decisions of non-hierarchical group actors are frequently not entirely determined by the aggregated individual preferences of their members. Consequently, such group actors are likely to develop some specific decision rationale (Wildschut, Lodewijkx, and Insko 2001). Group effects are widespread and likely to arise from many sources. Empirical research suggests that members of European Union committees develop surprisingly high levels of consensus-orientation and an esprit de corps (Lewis 2005) into which new members are socialized (Quaglia, De Francesco, and Radaelli 2008). Despite their hostile operation conditions, Security Council sanctions committees seem prone to precedent-based informal rules and fairly consistent decision practices when managing sanctions imposed upon a target state (Gehring, Dorsch, and Dörfler 2019). Parliaments may gain enhanced autonomy vis-à-vis outside actors (Saalfeld 1988), thus creating “a fairly autonomous field of political action with (mostly informal) rules for access and reward” (Cotta and Best 2007, 14).

Moreover, we find collective agency on different levels. Collective agency exists in smaller social contexts on the micro level (be it in families or small groups), on a meso level in associations and organizations, and even in mass movements and social currents on the macro level. Experimental studies in game theory provide reasons that even in situations characterized by the structural incentives of a prisoner dilemma, participants behave cooperatively and maximize the outcomes of the group (Colman, Pulford, and Rose 2008).

While the existence and functions of non-hierarchical group actors are often taken for granted, little is known about their relevance as a separate factor influencing collective decisions. They will gain relevance as separate units of empirical analysis if their internal decision processes significantly affect their externally relevant action (for international organizations, see Rittberger, Zangl, and Kruck 2012). However, we lack systematic knowledge of the driving forces that produce group-specific effects. Also, little is known about the conditions under which collective orientations of non-hierarchical group actors differ systematically from the aggregate individual orientations of their members. Thus, we cannot readily explain phenomena related to group effects, such as the high rate of consensus decision-making in some parliamentary committees, despite the committee composition of members from competing parties (Loewenberg 2003; Petersen 2000). We do not know the conditions under which some international institutions produce decisions based on collectively shared beliefs (Gehring and Ruffing 2008) or why even parliamentary rebel groups are rapidly socialized into the parliamentary process (Barnett 1999). Likewise, we do not know whether group agents are subject to gradual processes of increasing autonomization and expanding resources similar to those observed for hierarchical agents (Coleman 1974, 33-54; Brown 2010). The broad universe of non-hierarchical group actors suggests that they are not only established as an alternative to bureaucracies and other hierarchical agents to limit the risk of forfeiting control, as might be suggested from a principal-agent perspective. They may also offer specific advantages regarding governance problems not susceptible to hierarchical or decentralized (market-based) coordination (Ostrom 1990).

Only in some areas, we find contributions that raise issues of collective agency: Research on *governance networks*, for example, systematically takes into account non-hierarchical actor constellations as topologies of decision-making beyond hierarchies (Jordan and Schout 2006; Torfing 2007). While many contributions focus on the structure of such networks (Klijn and Koppenjan 2015) and offer ideas of the advantages of horizontal coordination over bureaucratic and hierarchically structured organizations (and their limits), some authors argue that networks may become actors (Kahler 2009; Stegbauer 2016) or institutional entrepreneurs that might gain autonomy (Boeger and Corkin 2017; Egeberg and Trondal 2009). However, a clear concept of

collective agency is missing, and it remains unclear whether the network itself becomes a collective actor or enables a subgroup of network members to gain collective agency. The discussion on the *European Union as an actor in international relations* struggles with the origins and nature of EU agency. While the EU is typically conceptualized as a horizontally structured group actor composed of its member states (Jupille and Caporaso 1998; Niemann and Bretherton 2013), a well-founded theoretical concept of EU agency (labeled “actorness” in this context) is still lacking. Some contributions suggest that the international relevance of the EU as an actor in its own right relies primarily on the control (and use) of resources that matter for external addressees (Gehring, Oberthür, and Mühleck 2013; Urbanski 2022). Likewise, international relations theory struggles with the emergent *agency of international institutions*. It has been “among the most intriguing questions for students of [international relations]” (Haftel and Thompson 2006, 254) whether these institutions should be treated as actors or merely as arenas of the acting member states. Due to the “renewed attention to IOs [international organizations] as actors in their own right” (Lake 2007, 221), IOs are by now recognized as distinct actors of international relations. However, their agency is predominantly attributed to their secretariats (Bauer and Ege 2016; Brown 2010; Barnett and Finnemore 2004), thus largely ignoring group effects of member state bodies and “informal IOs” (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger 2020) with small or no secretariats.

Normatively, non-hierarchical group agency raises important questions. It matters whether and to what extent politically or socially relevant decisions and activities of institutionalized groups are influenced by a specific organizational logic that shapes the intra-group behavior of group members and interferes with their ability to pursue their own preferences. It is questionable and discussed in this issue whether collective actors may have rights on their own and can be treated as legitimate addressees of moral duties. Increasing autonomization of group actors raises issues of attributing responsibility to the collective body as a whole instead of the individual group members (Bovens 2007; Braham and Van Hees 2012). This is likely to be most relevant for institutionalized groups with a decision-making apparatus, such as committees, parliaments, or international institutions, especially for ones with complex internal structures (List and Pettit 2011, 153-69). For example, US voters blame Congress as a whole for their dissatisfaction with policy and representation rather than individual members (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). International institutions, like the UN Security Council, are blamed for failing to act morally appropriately and may institutionally adjust in the wake of moral failure (Erskine 2004, 2020). Theories of governance in complex systems emphasize that autonomously operating collective actors develop their own systemic logic and partially escape direct control (Jessop 1998). Their collective decision-making rationale may be distorted, as discussed, e.g.,

under the notions of infostorms and informational cascades (Hansen, Hendricks, and Rendsvig 2013). Thus, collective actors that operate with some autonomy from their members may undermine fundamental principles of democratic control and contribute to institutional inertia and non-adaptability of institutions to changing societal demands. However, they may also help to overcome the restrictions of collective decision-making based upon the mere aggregation of diverging preferences that do not always produce problem-solving results (Elgström and Jönsson 2000). Decisions of court chambers or scientific committees are likely to produce results with a higher degree of output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999) when operating according to their specific legal or scientific rationales distinct from their members' individual preferences (see Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002; on deliberation processes, see Risse 2000; Deitelhoff 2009).

3. Some Approaches to the Emergence and Nature of Collective Agency

In this section, we sketch a number of general approaches to collective agency that illustrate how we can think about the emergence of group agency from interaction among group members. Indeed, we cannot do justice to the wealth of scholarship on this fundamental issue of social theory, nor can we discuss the various approaches in detail. The purpose of this section is twofold. On the one hand, it introduces some general approaches to collective agency to readers that are not familiar with the often highly abstract theoretical discussion. On the other hand, these approaches constitute a common point of reference for the authors of the special issue, on which the contributors draw selectively. We proceed in four steps. *First*, we introduce some approaches to collective agency from analytical philosophy, which focus on the formation of group intentions at the individual level. *Second*, we sketch List and Pettit's philosophical approach that addresses larger and more institutionalized groups and organizations. *Third*, we present the concept of corporate actors by sociologist James Coleman, which discusses the sources of action capability of organizations as corporate actors. *Fourth*, we introduce an approach developed by the Research Group of the Emergence of Collective Agency (RUECA), which seeks to grasp the collective agency of institutionalized, but non-hierarchical, collective actors that are relevant in political life, such as committees or international institutions, and brings together elements from these strands of scholarship.

3.1 Forming Group Intentions on the Individual Level: Gilbert, Bacharach, and Tuomela

Several philosophical approaches to the emergence of collective actors focus on the formation of group intentions on the level of group members. They have in common that groups-as-actors arise from group-oriented intentions of group members. The idea of we-thinking as a source of group agency is widely discussed (e.g., Tollefsen 2002; Akerlof 2016; Gold and Sugden 2007). Here we focus on selected contributions that play a significant role in the current discussion around collective agency and show high compatibility with empirical social science research, namely those from Margaret Gilbert, Raimo Tuomela, and Michael Bacharach.

Gilbert argues that a group of individual agents can form a plural subject.² In her paper, “Walking Together” (Gilbert 1990, 9), she develops this argument based on the example of two persons who go for a walk together. Suppose both persons agree to go for that venture. In that case, each of them, under the condition that the other person will join, enters into a commitment, implying that every group member now has a duty to realize the joint intention. The commitment is a social fact that reflects common beliefs and a common goal. Accordingly, it cannot be reduced to the individual intentions of the group members to go for a walk with the other person. Thus, it constitutes a crucial component of a theoretical explanation of such group action. Moreover, the commitment has normative implications because it provides a standard for the appraisal of the behavior of the group members.

In Gilbert’s conception, the conditional commitment of group members to joint action works as a basic social mechanism that constitutes group actors (“plural subjects”). Such commitments are located at the collective (group) level. They emerge from the individual intentions of the group members and are yet distinguishable from them. Due to their normative implications, they may require behavior from group members that differs from the individual intentions of a given group member in a particular situation. While Gilbert focuses in her examples mainly on small and unorganized groups, such as two people walking together, commitments among group members constitute a cornerstone of many cooperation situations. Arguably, it is present in all institutionalized groups and organizations, which commit group members to organizational goals, rules, and procedures. Accordingly, Gilbert’s conception suggests that the minimum level of organizational sophistication for the formation of group agency may be remarkably low. However, it is important to note that this approach focuses primarily on the emergence of collective intentions, like all other philosophical concepts of group actors. Gilbert notes that “collective agents, as I understand them, act through their members” (2006, 12).

² See also Gilbert’s contribution in this issue (Gilbert 2023).

Similarly, Tuomela (2020) develops a conceptual framework of we-mode thinking to explain group behavior. As he understood them, groups can be seen as social collectives capable of action:

Accordingly, such typical kinds of social groups as task-groups, teams, and organizations are understood as something capable of making group-commitments (shared “we-intentions”), and thus having goals, which they are disposed to strive for by means of their actions, performed either by all (or at least many) of their members acting as members of the collective or by some members or other persons acting on behalf of the collective. (Tuomela 1992, 286)

He argues that a classical explanation in terms of methodological individualism falls short in explaining group action and “an adequate description and explanation of social life requires we-mode thinking in addition to I-mode thinking” (2020, 11). Such thinking in the we-mode is not reducible to I-mode reasoning and therefore implies “a change of agency from individual agents to collective (quasi-) agents” (2020, 12). Tuomela discusses three criteria leading to we-mode reasoning of group members: authoritative group reason, collectivity, and collective commitment. If a group, for example, has authoritative power, its members will participate in doing their part of the group action that the group demands of them. We-mode reasoning, additionally, can become possible if the group members collectively agree to a commitment. Then, the group members jointly intend a group goal, i.e., they start reasoning and acting from the group perspective. While the joint intention lies on the level of the group agent, the individual parts of such behavior are the we-intentions held by the individual agents. Under such circumstances, even an unorganized group can be understood as a group agent capable of acting in her own right. However, group members do not necessarily act in the “we-mode.” It is always possible that they fall back into the I-mode and pursue individualistic goals. Only we-mode group members act for the sake of the group and are free from egoistic motives. Tuomela discusses the tension between individual and group motives and analyzes mechanisms that lead to more collectivistic orientations among group members. He also discusses the role of group ethos and solidarity (collectivity). His focus is not only on small groups. Instead, his considerations can also be applied to large groups and those with strong social differentiation and hierarchy.

Bacharach develops a general theory of team reasoning, following up Gilbert’s and Tuomela’s concrete mechanisms driving the emergence of collective agency.³ The theory of team reasoning (Bacharach 1999, 2018) takes its starting point in well-known anomalies of orthodox game theory, namely the empirical evidence that cooperation rates in game-theoretic settings are surprisingly high. For example, in one-shot prisoner’s dilemmas and

³ For a more detailed description and analysis of Bacharach’s theory of team reasoning, see the article of Noichl and Marx 2023 in this special issue.

coordination games, human behavior consistently shows a higher level of cooperation than game theory would expect. Bacharach argues that we can better understand and explain human behavior in strategic interaction situations if we account for how actors conceive of or “frame” decision situations, which influences their decision-making processes and, ultimately, their behavior. Hence, Bacharach incorporates the concept of framing into game theory. Strategic actors cannot only behave as individualistic rational utility maximizers but also as cooperative team players. There are various reasons why actors may switch to the “we-mode” frame, including psychological processes and game-induced effects. The concept of team reasoning suggests that complex coordination and strategic interaction problems can be solved by introducing the idea of an imagined central coordinator who determines the best outcome for the group and assigns tasks to each agent accordingly. This coordinator, referred to as the team player, represents a perspective that individual players can adopt if they follow the “we-frame.” When actors adopt the “we-frame” perspective, they change their view on the given decision problem. This shift involves an agency transformation, where agents identify with the team, and a pay-off transformation, where pay-offs no longer represent individual utility but instead the pay-offs for the team as a whole. According to Bacharach’s framing theory, the shift in perspective from individual to collective interests is a result of how individuals conceive of a decision problem.

This position challenges the assumptions of methodological individualism. Instead of asking what is best for me in a given situation, team reasoners ask what is best for us and what role I need to play in achieving this outcome. Thus, according to the theory of team reasoning, the “we-intentions” of team reasoners cannot be traced back to the original given individual intentions of the group members.

Team reasoning is a theoretical approach that can be applied to many situations. Whenever groups face coordination or cooperation problems, there is an opportunity for cooperative team reasoning. Team reasoning means taking the perspective of a fictitious coordinator who asks what would be best for the group and what role individuals would need to play to achieve this. In this sense, the group of agents that coordinate their actions against a background of a fictitious team coordinator becomes a collective actor. Since Bacharach’s work targets unorganized groups and models the emergence of collective intention, the emergent group actor need not be identical to the total number of all actors. Accordingly, formally institutionalized groups, such as international organizations, are not necessarily identical with the group actor as Bacharach understands it. Instead, only the subset of cooperative team reasoners would form the group actor. In this respect, there are differences between Tuomela’s concept of group agency and the position of Pettit and List, who do not define the collective actor by the criterion that all members share the collective intention.

In institutionalized groups, this process of team reasoning may become more accessible as organizational structures and role differentiation take the place of the fictitious central coordinator. However, the introduction of team reasoning does not require that the idea of strategic action becomes obsolete. While team reasoning shows some similarities with the concept of prosocial motives in game theoretic reasoning, Bacharach stresses that team reasoners are still rational actors who are only willing to engage in cooperative team reasoning on the condition that enough others do so likewise.

3.2 Collective Intentions as Organizational Effects: List and Pettit

List and Pettit (2011) choose a different perspective on group agency. They focus on complex group actors with a distinct organizational structure beyond single interactions of group members and distinct decision situations. Their theory of group agency sets out to prove that it matters to treat group actors as agents like individuals. List and Pettit share the assumption that group agency arises from, and is entirely based on, the activities of group members. However, they argue that the operations of group agents are not readily translatable into activities of group members. While their argument is rooted in an individualist ontology, they claim that

often the ascription of agency to groups expresses a correct and important observation, both in common and in scientific discourse; a correct observation because there are really group agents; and an important one because to overlook their presence would be to miss out a significant aspect of the social world. (List and Pettit 2011, 4)

List and Pettit make the analogy to the agency of individuals, which depends wholly on the configuration and functioning of biological subsystems and argue that “the agency of group agents depends wholly on the organization and behaviour of individual members” (ibid., 4). Their theoretical interest focuses on non-hierarchical groups in which decisions are made by the group members collectively, not on “degenerative” (i.e., hierarchical) groups that assign decision-making to a single group member (ibid., 8).

Agency of any entity, including individuals, is usually understood as the ability to act purposively. This comprises three features (List and Pettit 2011, 20-5). First, purposive action relies on “representational states,” which depict how things are in the environment. Accordingly, actors must have the ability to develop beliefs (“attitudes to fact”) that should be true. *Second*, actors must have “motivational states” that specify how their actions should affect things in their environment. Accordingly, they must develop desires that should be realistic to avoid mere utopia and meet standards of rationality as, for example, transitivity. *Third*, actors need the capacity to make decisions based on their beliefs and desires. Actions will be rational to the degree that their beliefs are true, that their desires are suitable to guide their choice of actions,

and that their decisions are consistent with the two (“attitude to action”; *ibid.*, 25). These conditions of intentionality can be reached by relatively simple non-reasoning systems, such as robots. Furthermore, the actions of each rational actor should be consistent with each other to avoid contradictions (“attitudes to attitude”). Reasoning implies the additional capacity of actors to reflect abstract propositions or to make causal inferences.

List and Pettit (2011, 31-9) argue that it is methodologically defensible to regard a group as an agent only if it makes sense to ascribe intentional attitudes to it that are distinct from the intentions of its members. Therefore, not every group counts as a group agent. Group agents have a distinct identity and can survive changes in membership. They can be distinguished from both collections of actors and “mere groups.” *Collections of actors* like the voters of a party or the consumers on a market may have joint intentions and may act interdependently, but they do not act together. *Mere groups*, like the randomly founded group of rescuers of a swimmer at the beach, have joint intentions and act together, but they do not have distinct systems of beliefs and desires. Their beliefs and desires can be immediately reduced to the beliefs and desires of their members. Moreover, such groups are composed of particular members. They usually do not survive changes in membership, and they are likely to dissolve after a single joint action. In other words, the above-mentioned rationality standards cannot be ascribed to collections of actors and mere groups. List and Pettit emphasize that consistency of group action over time arising from a distinct group system of beliefs and desires is a necessary condition of group agency. Only then does group agency become relevant in the form of distinct group attitudes, which are partially inconsistent with otherwise plausible attitudes of group members (*ibid.*, 37).

The distinctiveness of the group agent’s system of beliefs and desires and its partial inconsistency with group members’ beliefs and desires is illustrated by the “doctrinal paradox,” which appears in various forms (List and Pettit 2011, 44-6). Consider that a court chamber of three judges is called to hold a defendant liable if the defendant was obliged not to do a particular action (premise 1); and if the defendant did that action (premise 2). Now suppose that the judges position themselves on the three propositions as follows:

	Obligation (premise 1)?	Action (premise 2)?	Liable (conclusion)?
Judge 1	Yes	Yes	Yes
Judge 2	Yes	No	No
Judge 3	No	Yes	No
Majority	Yes	Yes	No

All three judges reach internally consistent conclusions from their opinions on the two premises. Judge 1 believes that both premises are true and therefore concludes that the defendant is liable. Judges 2 and 3 believe that one of the premises is false and consequently conclude that the defendant is not liable (last column). If the group decision were made by aggregating the

individual conclusions, the court would decide “not liable” (conclusion-based procedure). However, a majority of judges believe that premise 1 is true, and a majority believe that premise 2 is true (bottom-line). Accordingly, a consistent group decision would require judging the defendant as “liable” (premise-centered procedure). Hence, the group agent could not decide consistently with its own group beliefs and desires if it followed the aggregated conclusions of the group members. So, “knowing what the group members individually think about some proposition does not generally tell us how the group as a whole adjudicates that proposition” (List and Pettit 2006, 86). Similar difficulties can occur from a diachronic perspective if a group makes judgments over a period of time:

Sooner or later such a group is bound to face an issue such that how it should judge on that issue is determined by the judgments it previously endorsed on other issues. And in such an event the group will face the old choice between adopting a conclusion-centered procedure and adopting a premise-centered one. (Pettit 2003, 173)

Under such circumstances, groups face the risk of choosing a position that is inconsistent with past choices. Alternatively, they let decisions of the group level of the past dictate their view on this new issue.

Based on these mechanisms, List and Pettit (2011, 59) claim that group agents may gain “a surprising degree of autonomy” through their internal structures. Organizational structures produce distinct group decisions that differ from mere aggregates of group members’ attitudes. While formal decision rules (like majority voting) are part of a group agent’s structure, the doctrinal paradox illustrates that majority voting alone does not create much group agency. Group autonomy is only likely to emerge if majority voting comes along with a specific structure of the aggregated desires or beliefs or in combination with informal rules that suggest certain group decisions are more important, for example, precedent-based or rule-based decisions, which create consistency requirements. Organizational feedback structures may give rise to group-level reasoning.

Group decisions according to organizational structures rely (“supervene”) on attitudes and activities of group members. However, they cannot be reduced to a particular configuration of group members’ attitudes and activities because they may be realized in a number of lower-level ways. Hence, the members of two group agents may individually have exactly the same intentional attitudes on some propositions, while the two group agents hold different attitudes and act differently due to their different organizational structures (ibid., 66). The group agent is not ontologically autonomous. Nevertheless, it is autonomous in a relevant way to the extent that the features that make it an agent – particularly its attitudes – are not readily reducible to the individual members (ibid., 77).

3.3 Towards Group Action: Coleman's Theory of Corporate Actors

Sociologist James Coleman (1974, 1990) provides a general idea of how group actors may gain the ability to act in their own right and thus become powerful actors in modern society. His "combining resources model of corporate actors" has been further developed by Viktor Vanberg (1978, 271-85). Like many contributions from analytical philosophy, Coleman's theory of corporate actors is rooted in the individualistic rational choice paradigm. It seeks to explain the macro-effect of corporate agency from the interaction of strategically acting members at the micro level. However, in contrast to the philosophical debate, the focus shifts from the formation of collective intentions of group members to the emergence of group action capability and the power sources of corporate actors.

The cornerstone of creating a corporate actor is the pooling of resources. This can be advantageous for a group of single agents to overcome coordination or cooperation problems. Whenever a group of actors pools some resources and submits them to centralized collective management, it founds an organization in the sociological sense (Coleman 1974, 38-44). Pooling resources means that the group members assign the right (competence) to employ these resources to the new organization and sacrifice the previous right to employ them unilaterally. What matters is not the immediate physical possession or ownership of such resources but the authorization (right) to employ them (Coleman 1990, 45-53). In essence, it is the purpose of organizations to deploy centralized resources according to organizational decisions to realize collectively agreed-upon goals. The members combine resources for joint use "with the hope of receiving a return on that investment" (Coleman 1974, 36) because they expect that in doing so, they gain greater benefits than by using these resources individually.

Although resources originate from the group members, the combining resources model allows distinguishing between resources that are (still) under the control of the group members individually and other resources that have been transferred to the group level and are thus under the control of the group as a whole. By combining resources, group members transfer the right to use some of these resources to the group level, thereby empowering the group "per se." As a corollary, they lose immediate control over these resources and give up some freedom of choice. They can no longer make direct use of the centralized resources and are instead bound to the votes of other group members. It is important to notice that these costs occur regardless of how collective decision-making is organized; they occur even if the collective decisions are adopted unanimously (Vanberg 1978, 282).

Pooling resources creates demand for group decisions. Centralized resources can only be used according to group decisions. Possible cooperation gains may also need to be distributed by group decisions. Whenever group

members pool governance resources under corporate control, they must adopt formal or informal rules and procedures according to which group decisions are made. These rules and procedures form the “constitution” of the group as a corporate actor (Coleman 1974, 43-4) and establish a collective decision-making system. Henceforth, the group adopts decisions on the use of transferred resources according to the rules of this decision-making system. The rules and procedures may envisage unanimous decision-making, which ensures that collective decisions are not adopted against the will of any group member. However, unanimity is cumbersome and threatens that centralized resources cannot be used at all if group decisions are blocked. This creates an awkward trade-off between control and flexibility, which Coleman (1974, 38-44) calls the “dilemma of the organization” (also Buchanan and Tullock 1992). Group members may advocate unanimity to protect themselves from undesired organizational decisions but increase the threat that pooled resources under organizational control remain unused and expected cooperation gains are not realized. To avoid decision stalemate, they may flexibilize decision-making in one of two basic ways or a combination of the two. On the one hand, they may delegate decision tasks to intra-institutional agents, such as a chairperson or a secretariat. Wherever there is a corporate actor with delegated authority, the combined resources are in danger of being used in ways that do not reflect the interests of the group members and become, in this sense, “alienated from their source” (Coleman 1974, 44). Hence, delegation separates ownership from control. It raises principal-agent issues because agents may develop their own interests and create “agency slack” (Laffont and Martimort 2002; Hawkins et al. 2006). Delegation is widespread in formal organizations, such as firms, political parties, trade unions, or international organizations. For the present volume, it is less interesting because it solves the collective action problem by empowering, ideally, an individual group member or a hierarchy with an individual at the top (Coleman 1993, 64-5). On the other hand, group members may accept some sort of majority voting to flexibilize collective decision-making but then risk that pooled resources are used in individually undesired ways (Hooghe and Marks 2015).

Coleman’s combining resources model of corporate actors sheds light on the sources of the – possibly far-reaching – power of group actors. Coleman’s corporate actors closely resemble legal persons (Coleman 1974, 11-31) that are invested with the authority to use centralized resources, comprise distinct organizational decision-making systems, and become increasingly widespread in modern societies. However, organizations in this sociological conception do not depend on a particular legal form. The model is applicable even to small-scale groups, such as two friends, who invest as resource time to be spent together (Vanberg 1978, 270; Coleman 1993, 64). On the one hand, the concept draws attention to the resources invested by the group members and assigned to collective disposition by the group members; it suggests that

corporate actors may gain the ability to act on their own rather than merely “through their members,” as Gilbert (2006, 12) and Tuomela (1993, 17) hold. On the other hand, it points to the constitution of an organization, which comprises the decision-making rules and procedures, as a source of organizational independence that may gradually influence decisions and “marginalize” group members (Coleman 1974, 35-8).

3.4 Bringing Collective Intentions and Action Capability Together: Authority and Autonomy of Non-hierarchical Collective Actors

The Research Group of the Emergence of Collective Agency (RUECA) set out to develop a theoretically founded and empirically fruitful concept of collective agency that captures institutional sources of the agency of institutionalized and non-hierarchical collective actors (Gehring and Urbanski 2023), such as committees, parliaments, or international institutions. While these institutions are highly relevant in political life, the nature, sources, and effects of their collective agency are largely uncharted territory. In contrast to more fluid collections of actors like social movements, they are characterized by their clearly defined membership, their – more or less – well-defined purpose, and their ability to make collective decisions. Ideally, they may be conceived of as lean organizations, whose members operate in the absence of hierarchy at the same level. The RUECA concept draws on the highly abstract conceptions of collective agency, which have been discussed in the previous sub-sections, and relates them to one particular type of collective actor.

To become an actor in its own right, any group must acquire action capability and a minimum of autonomy. *First*, it must have some action capability, or what Hofferberth calls “efficacy” (Hofferberth 2019, 132), which allows the group to influence its environment. No entity qualifies as an actor if it is incapable of performing activities that “make a difference” beyond its confines (Giddens 1984, 14). Groups have action capability if, and to the degree that, they can influence their environment through their own actions. This does not imply that the action is successful. Actors have agency, even if their action fails or if they choose not to act in a particular situation. *Second*, groups need a degree of autonomy to become actors in their own right. Autonomy implies the existence of some capacity for autonomous decision-making, without which an actor could not meaningfully choose among available options. It creates organizational intentionality (List and Pettit 2011, 20; Wendt 1999, 218) and captures the “common-sense notion of purposive action” (Coleman 1990, 13). Groups are autonomous if, and to the degree that, their policies cannot be explained simply as a compromise of their members (Reinalda and Verbeek 1998, 3). This definition reflects the widely shared understanding of organizational autonomy in political science. Autonomy traditionally denotes the distance of an actor from immediate control by other actors. IO scholars

conceive of the autonomy of international bureaucracies and other intra-organizational agents in terms of their ability to act independently from member state governments (Abbott and Snidal 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Haftel and Thompson 2006, 256) or to create undesired agency slack (Hawkins et al. 2006). Administrative science scholars argue that organizational autonomy involves a shift of decision-making capacity from external actors to a corporate body, which reduces the extent of ex-ante instructions and regulations (Verhoest et al. 2004, 104-5). Hence, organizational autonomy reflects the ability of IOs to develop distinct organizational rationales that shape and affect organizational decisions. These two dimensions of agency are reflected in many conceptions of agents within political science. For example, Scharpf (1997, 51) holds that actors are generally “characterized by their orientations (perceptions and preferences) and by their capabilities.” Bauer and Ege (2014, 72; also 2017, 23-4) argue that autonomously acting administrations need the capacity to develop autonomous preferences (“autonomy of will”) and the ability to translate these preferences into action (“autonomy of action”). To theorize the agency of member-dominated IOs, we must demonstrate how group actors can gain action capability and autonomy from the institutionalized interaction of group members.

Action capability: Following Coleman’s resource-based theory of corporate actors, institutionalized group actors are equipped with action capability whenever their members authorize them to make decisions that are intended to be binding (Cooper et al. 2008, 505) or to create effects beyond their confines. When doing so, their members transfer resources to the collective level that can henceforth be deployed by collective decisions. This is a crucial insight into the combining resources model developed by Coleman (1974, 1990) and Vanberg (1978). What matters is not physical control of resources but the formal or informal right or authority to deploy them (Coleman 1990, 45-53). Relevant are both material resources (e.g., money, personnel, or troops) and immaterial ones (e.g., regulatory competencies, authoritative interpretation of technical or scientific knowledge). Hence, a transnational economic institution may be authorized to regulate a given area of economic affairs, and a parliament is authorized to enact laws. Centralization of control over resources changes the situation for the members, even if they adopt all organizational decisions by unanimous agreement. Henceforth, the members cannot employ the centralized resource unilaterally anymore, as had been the case before, because its employment is now subject to collective decisions. Accordingly, any transfer of control over resources implies a loss of sovereignty of members and a gain of sovereignty on the part of the group actor. Consider that several actors have each spent a given amount of money unilaterally to realize a project of joint concern, e.g., abolish an environmental risk, thus retaining individual control of this resource without creating collective agency. These actors may also transfer the same amount of money to a

common fund that is deployed upon collective decision. In this case, they sacrifice unilateral control over the money and replace it with the right to participate in the collective decision about how the fund is used.

Non-hierarchical group actors may gain control over resources that generate collective action capability in two different ways. On the one hand, their members may invest them with control over such resources (bottom-up), thus raising typical public goods problems (Gavious and Mizrahi 1999), as occur when several actors found a new interest group or international institution (Keohane 1984). On the other hand, group actors may be set up and invested with control over action resources by a superior body to fulfill specific tasks (top-down), as occurs when a parliament or the conference of parties of an international institution establishes a committee and assigns particular tasks and competencies (decision rights) to it. Once established, group actors might generate additional resources through their internal processes, i.e., gradually expand the scope of their activities and tacitly acquire new competencies (Burley and Mattli 1993).

Autonomy: Following List and Pettit, institutionalized group actors may gain autonomy through their internal structure, which comprises the formal and informal rules and procedures that govern collective decision processes. Like other organizations, they are likely to operate to some degree “according to their own rules” (the literal translation of the Greek term *autonomia*). Consequently, collective decisions do not merely reflect the aggregated preferences of their members. They are influenced by a group-specific rationale, which originates from the rules and practices that shape and constrain the behavior of actors in the organizational decision process, i.e., from the “constitution,” which every organization has (Coleman 1990, 325-70). The degree of autonomy enjoyed by a group actor denotes the relevance of its internal structures and processes for determining the shape and direction of its action. With growing autonomy, internal processes increasingly influence collective decisions and gradually gain relevance in explaining outcomes (see List and Pettit 2011, 77-8), while group members and their preferences become gradually more “marginal” to the collective decision process (Coleman 1974, 35).

Autonomy, or a group-specific decision rationale, may arise from different sources. The contingency of indeterminate decision situations with multiple equilibria (Schimank 1992; Bardsley 2007) creates collective demand for the identification and stabilization of one solution among several possible ones. It gives rise to the emergence of self-enforcing conventions (Lewis 1969; Schotter 1981), routines and standard operating procedures (March and Olsen 1989; Olsen 1991), lasting social practices (Adler and Pouliot 2011), or to specific roles, such as formal or informal leaders or agenda setters (Tsebelis 2002; Sieberer 2006). Over time, group actors “generate a history of judgments that is on record” (Pettit 2003, 176), within which new decisions have to be consistently accommodated. If the members act under uncertainty, group

interaction may trigger processes of collective fact-finding or the collective appraisal of available (e.g., scientific) knowledge (Gehring and Ruffing 2008). They may also develop procedures for observing and evaluating the consequences of their initial collective actions, adjust subsequent actions accordingly, and, thus, “learn” by developing common beliefs and/or desires that guide subsequent collective decisions (Coleman 1979, xi-xv). Likewise, group members may seek to avoid inconsistency among their decisions over time (Pettit 2007). As a result, interaction among group members is likely to produce common orientations that shape collective decisions (List and Pettit 2011, 107; Tuomela 2013). The doctrinal paradox sketched above, which constitutes an important point of reference in the debate in analytic philosophy (List and Pettit 2011, 43-7; Tollefsen 2002, 34-5), illustrates the implications of such group effects.

This two-dimensional concept of collective agency is open to empirical investigation. *First*, collective agency presupposes that some action resources are centralized and put under collective control. Non-hierarchical group actors control different types and amounts of resources that they may deploy. With a growing amount of resources under their collective control, they can increasingly exert influence on actors in their environment. *Second*, non-hierarchical group actors may gain autonomy, which reflects a group-specific rationale and typically distances their internal decision-making from a mere aggregation of members’ preferences. The degree of autonomy enjoyed by a group actor correlates with the relevance of its internal constitution for determining the shape and direction of its action. With growing autonomy, its internal constitution increasingly influences collective decisions and gradually gains more relevance in explaining outcomes compared to the preferences of the group members (see List and Pettit 2011, 77-8). These two dimensions of collective agency, i.e., collective control of action resources and group-specific autonomy, reflect different forms of sovereignty loss suffered by the group members.

4. Organization of the HSR Special Issue

The contributions to this special issue discuss a wide variety of issues related to collective agency. They are organized into four clusters. Articles of cluster 1 examine the formation and consequences of collective intentions in small and unorganized groups. Cluster 2 contributions address collective agency issues of institutionalized groups and organizations, such as international organizations and parliamentary committees. Cluster 3 comprises articles examining the collective agency of large and unorganized groups without defined memberships. Finally, cluster 4 articles discuss normative issues of collective agency.

The articles in cluster 1 draw on and elaborate important theoretical approaches from analytical philosophy. They examine the formation and consequences of collective intentions in small and unorganized groups and elucidate basic mechanisms of the emergence of collective intentions. (1) In her paper entitled “Real Team Reasoning,” *Margaret Gilbert* elaborates her theory of group agency and focuses on a kind of reasoning that differs from Bacharach’s theory of team reasoning. She argues that groups may have goals on their own to which group members are committed, as in the goal of a football team to win a game. Starting with four challenging observations on what is, and is not, involved in acting together towards a collective goal, she provides an account of a collective goal that accords with these observations and is reflected in a joint commitment of the parties. (2) Based on Bacharach’s theory of team reasoning, *Maximilian Noichl and Johannes Marx* (“Simulation of Group Agency – From Collective Intentions to Proto-Collective Actors”) investigate the conditions under which cooperative team reasoning arises and stabilizes in complex social structures. They outline the idea of team reasoning, i.e., a theory that explains cooperative behavior in social settings of strategic choice, even in situations where classical game theory fails. By simulating the emergence of cooperation via team reasoning, they analyze the performance of team reasoners compared to classically rational agents and individual reasoners. Simulation results show that cooperative team reasoning is viable and stabilizing under favorable conditions in mixed-game settings. The authors conclude with some ideas on how their framework might be extended toward collective actors that gain further stability through processes of self-formalization and inner-organizational redistribution. (3) In their paper entitled “Team Reasoning from an Evolutionary Perspective: Categorization and Fitness,” *Leyla Ade and Olivier Roy* address the question of the evolutionary stability of team reasoning, which has been answered in multiple, even opposing ways. They provide a conceptual categorization of existing answers along four dimensions, namely the unit of selection, the notion of fitness for team reasoners, the stage of decision-making, and the ludic ecology. Beyond affording a better assessment of the different modeling choices underlying the existing results, the categorization highlights important conceptual questions for the evolutionary foundations of team reasoning. The paper illustrates this by looking in more detail into what should count as fitness as a measure of success for team reasoners.

Cluster 2 comprises six articles addressing institutionalized groups with defined memberships as collective actors. Three of them discuss collective agency of international institutions, other international actors, and local government associations. (4) *Thomas Gehring* examines “International Organizations as Group Actors. How Institutional Procedures Create Organizational Independence without Delegation to Institutional Agents.” Drawing in particular on List and Pettit’s theory of group actors and Coleman’s theory of

corporate actors, he investigates how organizational rules and procedures gradually shape organizational processes and produce collective effects that do not arise from the aggregation of member state activities. He argues that international institutions can gain a high degree of independence from their member states, even if all organizational activities arise from member state bodies. Member-dominated IOs can produce collective beliefs about relevant parts of the outside world that differ from the aggregated beliefs of member states. They can comprise institutionalized organizational goals and criteria that indicate collective intentions of organizational action and differ from the aggregate preferences of member states. They can comprise decision-making procedures that foster organizational decisions according to collective beliefs and intentions and reduce or abolish the relevance of bargaining and preference aggregation. Finally, they can act in ways that do not immediately rely on implementation action by the member states or by other lower-level actors. (5) In their article entitled “Claims and Recognition: A Relational Approach to Agency in World Politics,” *Matthias Hofferberth and Daniel Lambach* discuss the emergence of new actors in global governance. They conceptualize agency as the ability to act in a specific situation and draw on a relational framework from sociology. From this conceptual perspective, they reconstruct the agency of actors involved in global governance, which emerges from their relations with other actors. Through these relations, entities-in-the-making advance agency claims or are ascribed agency by relevant others. The authors argue that different types of agency claims paired with different recognition dynamics determine the outcome as to who is accepted to “sit at the table” for a particular issue. (6) In their paper entitled “Understanding Collective Agency in the Long-Term Perspective: A Historical Comparative Case Study of Local Government Associations in Germany and the United States,” *Nathalie Behnke, Jonas Bernhard, and Till Jürgens* examine collective action problems, which local government associations representing cities or districts at higher political levels must overcome. To become collective actors, these associations need to solve two types of collective action problems, namely, first, attracting and keeping a broad membership and, second, arriving at joint decisions in spite of potentially conflicting interests of their members. Their analysis of six local government associations from Germany and the United States reveals that the similarity of collective action problems triggers largely similar mechanisms for their solution, while country-specific context factors create persistent differences.

The other three articles of cluster 2 address parliamentary committees and parliaments. (7) *Elena Frech and Ulrich Sieberer* examine “Coordination Committees and Legislative Agenda-Setting Power in 31 European Parliaments” with a focus on the authority (action capability) of these bodies. Many parliaments assign the task of coordinating parliamentary business to coordination committees that have agenda-setting power and determine whether and how

topics are discussed and voted on in parliament. Assessing the existence, composition, and institutional powers of coordination committees across European parliaments, the paper demonstrates that coordination committees are group actors with a relatively similar composition that control relevant, albeit strongly varying, resources. (8) In their paper entitled “The Role of Rituals in Adversarial Parliaments: An Analysis of Expressions of Collegiality in the British House of Commons,” *David Beck, Yen-Chieh Liao, and Thomas Saalfeld* address parliaments as group actors and focus on their autonomy, which they locate in formal and informal parliamentary rules. They examine whether the members of the British House of Commons act merely “in a group” or adopt Tuomela’s we-mode attitudes and act “as a group.” For this purpose, they take the highly ritualized rhetorical style emphasizing collegiality and mutual respect across party lines as an indicator for the shared attitudes of the members of parliament as belonging to a distinct group, despite the adversarial character of debates in the British House of Commons. They argue that these rituals are historically located in the pre-democratic conception of parliaments as corporate bodies. Based on a large corpus of parliamentary speeches in the British House of Commons, they assess references to collegiality in the stylized and ritualized language of parliamentary debate in the House of Commons. They find that such references indicate a considerable degree of common belonging but are also used strategically, especially by members of government parties. (9) In their article entitled “Perception of Collective Agency and Networks of Relations: The Case of Regional Parliaments in Four EU Member States,” *Elisabeth Donat and Barbara Mataloni* examine networking activities of members of regional parliaments as informal attempts to make agency claims in the European Union multi-level system of governance as a main driver for the perceived collective agency. They employ a relational perspective that takes into account various stakeholders and environments, which regional parliaments have to deal with in the EU and argue that engaging in such networks can enhance collective agency. Survey results point to the importance of such activities for the perceived influence of regional parliaments on political decision-making in their regions.

Cluster 3 comprises two articles that examine the emergence of collective agency of large and non-institutionalized groups from a sociological perspective. They address the issues of both collective intentions and collective action capability. (10) Focusing on social movements, *Thomas Kestler* examines in his article entitled “How Imagination Takes Power. The Motivational Foundations of Collective Action in Social Movement Mobilization” why individuals are willing to contribute to a common goal, even though their contribution may have little impact. He explicates two mechanisms that elucidate the underlying conditions and processes that motivate individual group members to participate in joint action, called imagination and plural self-awareness. He argues that these mechanisms create the mental prerequisites for

collective action by modifying two crucial determinants of action orientations, namely self-efficacy and intentional control. Recurring to the case of the German environmental movement, he demonstrates that collective agency arises when a shared imaginary takes shape, and plural self-awareness gives way to common action orientations through the catalyzing effect of an external synchronizing stimulus. (11) *Frank Meier* discusses “The Agency of Scientific Disciplines” and reconstructs it as representative agency. He argues that in the case of disciplinary representative agency, individual and organizational actors are committed to the reflexive interests of a discipline and act on their behalf. The paper explores the basic forms and arenas in which this type of agency is exercised and discusses the implications of some recent trends in science and higher education for the collective agency of disciplines.

Cluster 4 comprises two articles dealing with normative issues of collective agency. (12) *Maïke Albertzart* discusses whether there are joint moral duties of individuals to act together with others in order to prevent serious harm. In her article entitled “Being Jointly Obligated: A Reductive Account,” she argues that existing attempts to understand these duties as duties of the group, as irreducible joint duties, or as duties to collectivize fail. She offers an alternative account according to which individuals are jointly obligated to prevent the harm in question. However, the state of being jointly obligated is reducible to two individual duties: the conditional duty to participate in the joint action if sufficient other individuals also participate and the unconditional duty to show readiness for the joint action. The respective agents not only provide each other with a means to perform a joint action; they are also linked through their mutual power to change each other’s normative situation by turning each other’s conditional duties into unconditional ones. In this way, the interlocking individual duties create a state of being jointly obligated. (13) In his paper entitled “So What’s My Part? Collective Duties, Individual Contributions, and Distributive Justice,” *Moritz A. Schulz* finally raises the problem of the distribution of individual obligations to fulfill a collective duty. While collective duties require individuals to act in order for the collective duty to be fulfilled, the action needed can be allocated differently to the group members. Accordingly, deriving individual duties from a collective one requires distributive schemes, which raise separate normative questions. Those questions can fruitfully be tackled by drawing on literature on distributive justice, establishing a link to largely separated debates. In addition, such distributive schemes will often be reflected in the institutionalized structure of organizations, intentionally or unintentionally.

We hope that this special issue provides an impetus for the rich and productive debate on collective actors, currently carried out primarily in philosophy, to find its way into empirical research in the social sciences. Intensifying the dialogue between the philosophical discussion about collective actors

and the empirical application of concepts from this discussion in the social sciences seems to be promising for both sides. The social sciences can gain an idea of how collective actors matter without abandoning an individualist ontology in which individuals are the primary actors, while collective actors emerge from interaction among group members. Analytical philosophers can refine their highly abstract concepts, which they predominantly derive from small and unorganized groups, based on applications to a broad variety of larger and more institutionalized collective actors, such as parliaments, international institutions, or even social movements.

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Thomas Gehring & Johannes Marx

Group Actors. Why Social Science Should Care About Collective Agency.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.23](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.23)

Contributions

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Margaret Gilbert

Real Team Reasoning

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