Making Institutional Accounting Research Critical: Dead End or New Beginning?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review extant accounting research combining institutional and critical theories to examine whether the paradigmatic tensions associated with such research can be alleviated whilst engendering politically engaged scholarship aimed at facilitating processes of emancipation in organisational fields.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper provides a review of relevant accounting research and offers recommendations for how to combine institutional and critical research approaches in a paradigmatically consistent way.

Findings – Extant accounting research combining institutional and critical theories has not dealt effectively with the partly inter-related problems of ontological drift (i.e., misalignment of ontological assumptions and epistemological commitments) and the conflation of notions of agency and structure. If such problems remain unaddressed institutional research aimed at generating politically engaged scholarship and human emancipation is unlikely to progress in a paradigmatically consistent direction. Recommendations for how to address these issues, grounded in recent advances in critical realism, are elaborated upon. This results in a contingent view of the ontological possibilities of emancipation in organisational fields as well as the epistemological premises that need to be filled to engender processes of emancipation.

Originality/value – The paper reviews an emerging body of research seeking to radicalise institutional accounting research and enhance its contributions to democratic debate in organisations and society. It also outlines how some pertinent paradigmatic tensions associated with such research may be addressed.

Key words – Accounting, Critical realism, Critical theory, Institutional theory, Research paradigms.

Paper type – Literature review.
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Introduction

Theoretical pluralism constitutes the hallmark of the inter-disciplinary accounting research project (see Baxter and Chua, 2003; Llewellyn, 2003) and has recently been subject to closer scrutiny and debate (e.g., Hoque et al., 2013; Jacobs, 2012, 2013; Malsch and Guenin-Paracini, 2013; Modell, 2013). One important motivation for such pluralism is that it may give voice to a multiplicity of interests and mitigate the propensity of particular theoretical perspectives to privilege dominant constituencies and potentially oppressive social orders. As such, it may further democratic debate in organisations and society by challenging the hegemony of particular ways of seeing the world. Nevertheless, the views of how to accomplish this aim diverge. Whilst some scholars seem content with promoting ostensibly value-neutral approaches to inter-disciplinary accounting research (e.g., Covaleski et al., 2003; Hoque et al., 2013), others insist that such research needs to embody some critical, or emancipatory intent explicitly aimed at engendering democratic debate and dialogue (e.g., Bebbington et al., 2007; Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013; Roslender and Dillard, 2003).

The latter position is also reflected in various attempts to combine seemingly value-neutral social theories with critical approaches to render research more politically engaged. This tendency is particularly notable in recent institutional research on accounting as well as in the broader management literature. Whereas institutional theories have arguably tended to pose as relatively value-neutral and even apolitical (Cooper et al., 2008; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010), this position is increasingly being challenged by scholars seeking to imbue institutional research with a more critical dimension (e.g., Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; 2008).

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1 By institutional theories I mainly refer to new and neo-institutional sociology, which have constituted the primary targets for criticisms of failing to develop more critical insights (e.g., Cooper et al., 2008; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lounsbury, 2003) and which dominate institutional accounting research seeking to do so. However, I recognise that some of my arguments pertaining to the role of agency in institutional analyses are tangential to those elaborated upon in accounting research incorporating insights from other strands of institutional thought (e.g., Burns and Baldvinsdottir, 2005; Burns and Scapens, 2000; Englund et al., 2013). I briefly revisit these linkages towards the end of the paper.
Lawrence et al., 2011; Lounsbury, 2003; Marti and Mair, 2009). Accounting scholars following such a lead have strived to overcome the “elite bias” allegedly characterising much institutional research to better account for the interests of a broader range of constituencies than those being favoured by extant institutions or dominating processes of institutional change (e.g., Archel et al., 2011; Broadbent et al., 2001; Lawrence et al., 2009a; Malsch and Gendron, 2013; Modell, 2012; Rahaman et al., 2004). In doing so, they have drawn on a variety of critical thinkers to render institutional analyses more sensitive to the wider, social implications of the institutionalisation of accounting practices. However, concerns have been raised that such rapprochement might lead researchers to overlook important paradigmatic differences between institutional and critical theories which may, at worst, result in misappropriation of the latter (Cooper et al., 2008; Lok and Willmott, 2006; Willmott, 2011). Addressing these types of paradigmatic tensions is important to avoid charges of excessive eclecticism which may detract from more concerted and collective efforts to make institutional accounting research critical. As noted by Modell (2013), such charges may serve to de-legitimise the combination of diverse theoretical perspectives in individual pieces of research and need to be averted to defend it as a valid scholarly endeavour.

The objective of this paper is to gauge whether some pertinent paradigmatic tensions have been successfully tackled in accounting research combining institutional and critical theories and debate the possibilities of doing so. I am particularly concerned with whether the ontological foundations of such research are matched with compatible epistemological premises that are conducive to critical scholarship aimed at facilitating the process of human emancipation. This task is compounded by the availability of a broad range of critical approaches that straddle across the objectivist/subjectivist divide in the social sciences (Cooper and Hopper, 2007; Hopper and Powell., 1985) and vary in consistency with the ontological foundations of institutional accounting research. A first, major challenge is thus to identify combinations of critical and institutional approaches underpinned by reasonably similar ontological assumptions. A concomitant challenge is to ensure that such assumptions are matched with compatible epistemological positions such that research does not succumb to ontological drift. Such drift occurs where ontological assumptions become misaligned with the epistemological commitments of researchers (Thompson, 2011). Extreme forms of ontological drift would prevail if strongly objectivist, or structuralist, ontologies were combined with epistemological positions geared towards exploring human behaviour as a phenomenon infused with inherently subjective identity formation or vice versa. However,
this needs to be distinguished from minor shifts in both ontology and epistemology that ensure that the two remain reasonably aligned. Such shifts may be valuable for extending and rejuvenating particular research programmes whilst avoiding paradigmatic inconsistencies and tensions (Thompson, 2011).

Mobilising the concept of ontological drift enables me to eschew the epistemic fallacy of treating ontological questions as epistemological ones (Archer, 2007; Bhaskar, 1975). Rather than assuming that ontological assumptions will necessarily dictate epistemological commitments, I recognise that the problem of keeping them aligned resides in their very distinctiveness. This distinctiveness emanates from the observation that the social value systems in which scholarly communities are embedded are not necessarily static and that this may prompt transitions in paradigmatic premises (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). For instance, accounting scholars have demonstrated a notable propensity to transcend the ontological and epistemological boundaries demarcating received paradigms (see e.g., Kakkuri-Knuuttila et al., 2008; Lukka and Modell, 2010; Modell, 2009). A starting point for my analysis, however, is that any research aimed at mediating human emancipation necessitates an ontological position ascribing some capacity for agency and reflexivity to human beings. Whilst the notion of reflexivity is often loosely defined I subscribe to Archer’s (2007) conception of it as a mental ability of human beings to consider themselves and their practices in relation to their social context. Without such a capacity human beings have few opportunities to change the structural conditions affecting their lives and are structurally determined to reproduce dominant social orders. The epistemological implication of this is a need for researchers to adopt a position that assists groups and individuals in reflexively engaging with the world as a means of engendering emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Dillard, 1991; Laughlin, 1987; Neu et al., 2001; Roslender and Dillard, 2003). If the capacity for reflexive agency is not recognised as an ontological possibility and combined with such an epistemological position, there is an obvious risk of ontological drift detracting from the propensity and efficacy of critical research interventions.

The challenge for institutional accounting research is to avoid such forms of ontological drift whilst staying reasonably true to the ontological premises of institutional theories and

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2 Whilst this position is widely accepted in critical accounting and management studies (see e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Cooper and Hopper, 2007; Laughlin, 1987), I recognise the diversity of opinions as to whether critical accounting research has truly succeeded in engendering emancipation and how this may be brought about (e.g., Bebbington et al., 2007; Brown and Dillard, 2013; Cooper, 2005; Cooper and Coulson, in press; Gallhofer and Haslam, 2003; Neu et al., 2001; Sikka and Willmott, 2005; Tinker, 2005). However, the latter issues are beyond the scope of my analysis.
preserve the distinctly “institutional” identity of the quest for reflexive agency. This challenge pivots on the ability of researchers to maintain some sensitivity to the influence of institutional structures whilst avoiding the long-standing problem of conflation associated with notions of agency in social theory. According to Archer (1995), this problem manifests itself in downwards, upwards and central conflation. Downwards conflation occurs where notions of agency are effectively subsumed under structural conditions as may be the case where the epistemological choices of researchers bracket the recognition of human agency and result in overly deterministic portrayals of the world. On the other hand, upwards conflation implies that social structures are viewed as a largely unmediated product of agency and is often associated with the adoption of a voluntarist view of man as relatively independent of extant structures. Central conflation, finally, occurs where agency and structure are seen as inseparable and mutually constitutive without any clear temporal distinction being made between extant and emerging structures conditioning and resulting from agentic powers. From the point of view of engendering reflexive agency, all these forms of conflation are problematic as they either under- or over-emphasise the possibilities of agency or, in the case of central conflation, affords an ontological status on agency as structurally defined that severely restricts the capacity for reflexivity (Archer, 2007, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2007).

The more specific research task that I set before myself is thus to identify a non-conflating approach to accounting research that combines insights from institutional and critical theories without succumbing to ontological drift. I go about this by first revisiting emerging debates about the possibilities of advancing a more critical institutional theory. I then review extant accounting research combining institutional and critical theories to assess whether it has dealt effectively with issues of ontological drift and conflation. I answer this question in the negative. None of the extant research approaches have entirely eschewed such problems although they display considerable variations in the types of conflation and degrees of ontological drift resulting from the combination of institutional and critical theories. Rather than pronouncing a moratorium on such research, however, I go on to sketch the contours of a paradigmatically consistent research approach resting on recent advances in critical realism before closing the paper with some concluding remarks.
On the Possibilities of Critical Institutional Theory

Since the early 1990s, management and organisation studies evolving under the banner of institutional theory have been dominated by a transition from new to neo-institutional sociology. This shift is indicative of some change in the paradigmatic premises of the institutional research project from a position conceiving of institutions as relatively immutable and objectified structures to one that takes its more subjectivist, or social constructivist, pedigree more seriously. Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) seminal article firmly located the institutional research project in a social constructivist ontology based on a view of institutions as a product of human agency and social deliberations. However, the epistemology effectively evolving to examine processes of institutionalisation in the 1980s arguably tended to reify a view of the world as constituted by highly rationalised, or objectified, structures with a strongly constraining effect on human agency (see Meyer et al. 1994; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). This shift in ontology was arguably reinforced by the adoption of a pronounced macro-level perspective and the employment of quantitative techniques as the standard method of exploring tendencies towards institutional isomorphism in organisational fields and cross-sectional differences between fields (Greenwood et al., 2008; Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006). Given the epistemologically induced nature of this shift, it would be erroneous to refer to it as an instance of ontological drift. We rather see a concomitant movement towards ontological and epistemological positions that were broadly consistent with the positivist tradition dominating especially North American sociology at the time (cf. Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). However, the bracketing of notions of human agency reinforced tendencies towards downwards conflation at an early stage of the development of new institutional sociology.3

The advent of neo-institutional sociology marks an attempt to redress this development by first recognising the possibility of intentional and strategic agency (e.g., DiMaggio, 1988; Oliver 1991) and increasingly exploring processes of more subjective identity formation among distinct groups and individuals (e.g., Battilana, 2006; Reay et al., 2006; Voronov and Vince, 2012). However, this has occurred without rejecting the influence of institutional structures and has unfolded against the backdrop of some emerging consensus that human

3 Some commentators have pointed to some exceptions to this predominantly North American development, notably manifest in the concomitant evolution of “Scandinavian institutionalism” more closely wedded to a social constructivist position and paying more focused attention to human agency (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). However, the influence of this research tradition on the accounting studies reviewed in this paper is negligible.
agency constitutes an institutionally embedded phenomenon (see Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997; Holm, 1995; Seo and Creed, 2002). This implies a shift to an ontological position where agency is seen as intentional yet conditioned by extant institutions. This shift has been accompanied by a view of organisational fields as less homogeneous entities underpinned by strongly isomorphic powers to one that recognises their potentially fragmented nature as constituted by actors embedded in conflicting institutional arrangements (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz and Block, 2008; Lounsbury, 2008).

The emerging ambition to add a more critical dimension to institutional analyses can be traced to this growing recognition of agency as an institutionally embedded phenomenon. In particular, the insight that diverse actors may be embedded in competing institutional arrangements has led some institutional theorists to call for greater attention to the inequalities and social conflicts resulting from the concomitant stratification and fragmentation of organisational fields (e.g., Lounsbury, 2003; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). Similar to critical accounting scholars embracing the pluralism emanating from such institutional conditions as a basis for democratic debate (e.g., Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013), Lounsbury (2003) saw field fragmentation as a potentially powerful source of critique and emancipation. In contrast to the often quasi-consensual orders imposed on organisational fields through strongly isomorphic pressures, field fragmentation provides opportunities for challenging the status quo and the hegemony of dominant social elites. Thus, Lounsbury (2003, p. 216) urged institutional theorists to extend their traditional preoccupation with such elites to pay greater attention to how struggles for power create “winners and losers” in organisational fields. Yet he cautioned against attempts to make neo-institutional sociology too similar to critical theories. Whilst emphasising the need for enhanced dialogue between the two he saw their continued development as essentially separate projects.

A more wholehearted embrace of the integration of critical insights into institutional analyses can be found in the burgeoning literature on “institutional work” (see Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009b, 2011). Building on the notion of embedded agency, it portrays human behaviour as purposeful yet conditioned by extant and emerging institutions and aims at re-directing institutional research to the situated practices involved in creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions. Similar to many critical accounting and management scholars, the institutional work perspective sees some form of agency as a basic condition for human
emancipation. More specifically, its commitment to exploring the possibilities of such emancipation can be seen as resting on two inter-related, ontological premises.

First, the notion of embedded agency informing the literature on institutional work arguably represents a less apolitical conception of the motivations of diverse actors to maintain extant institutions or attempt to effect institutional change than that dominating earlier advances in neo-institutional sociology. For instance, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) took issue with the prevailing view of institutional change as representing some inherently progressive movement fuelled by institutional contradictions, such as inefficiencies or misaligned interests, and argued that such transformations are often thwarted by dominant actors with vested interests in maintaining extant institutions. In a related vein, they urged institutional theorists to pay closer attention to the counter-forces that may be set in motion through the exposure of attempts of dominant elites to conceal and defend institutional contradictions. Rather than assuming that marginalised actors have little choice but to acquiesce to dominant institutions, the institutional work perspective partly aims at engendering their ability to reflexively engage with the institutions in which they are embedded through critical research interventions (Dover and Lawrence, 2010; Lawrence et al., 2011). However, if institutional theorists are to fill a more pro-active role in mediating processes of emancipation, they need to subscribe to a more indeterminate view of the world that defies their allegedly innate instinct to take a lack of radical social change for granted. Arguably, it is only through a shift to such an ontological position that institutional theorists can credibly be expected to develop an epistemological commitment to politically engaged interventions in the field (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010).

Second, the view of institutional work as epitomising an indeterminate view of the world and a distributed notion of agency necessitates a notion of power as a fluid and relational property that is subject to continuous negotiation among embedded agents (Lawrence, 2008; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). The institutional work approach does not assume that specific actors always command the resources to dominate others and recognises that even marginalised actors may have some power to promote alternative institutional arrangements and challenge or resist extant ones (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009b). This might steer institutional analyses away from a view of actors as structurally determined to submit to the power of dominant institutions and coalitions of interests. However, consistent with the notion of embedded agency, the re-configuration of power relationships is not viewed as an unmediated outcome of intentional and strategic manoeuvring. Rather, the ability of different
actors to bring about and resist change is seen as contingent on their capacity to reflexively engage with and draw upon extant and emerging institutional arrangements in fragmented organisational fields. Again, institutional theorists may enhance the prospects of such reflexivity by assuming the role of politically engaged scholars actively involved in unmasking institutionalised patterns of domination and revealing the possibilities of emancipation emanating from field fragmentation (Lawrence et al., 2009b, 2011). Detailed methodological prescriptions to this end have been offered, notably in the form of participatory action research aimed at empowering disenfranchised constituencies (Dover and Lawrence, 2010).

The institutional work approach has thus laid claims to representing a transition towards a position where political critique and activism on the part of researchers are viewed as integral facets of the larger institutional research project. The ontological foundation of this transition is one that seeks to transcend traditional notions of objectivism and subjectivism such as those underpinning the views of human behaviour as either determined by institutional structures or driven by free will and intentional agency. This entails a movement towards a view of institutional structures and agency as mutually dependent and implicated in some recursive process of institutional change and reproduction (see Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009b). This may open up possibilities for reflexive agents to identify conditions under which radical social change is feasible and likely to be sustainable. However, the ambition to combine such an ontological position with a more critical, epistemological stance has not escaped criticisms that cast doubt on whether the institutional work approach has fully come to terms with pertinent issues of conflation and ontological drift.

First, the ambition to re-orientate institutional research to an ontological and epistemological position that takes notions of embedded agency as a basis for understanding the emancipatory potential of social actors has only been partially fulfilled. Rather than remaining altogether faithful to such a position, the institutional work approach has been criticised for over-emphasising the possibilities of agency (Khagan and Lounsbury, 2011) and celebrating a view of the individual that harks back to a rather heroic conception of actors as relatively unconstrained by extant institutions (Willmott, 2011). Indeed, in discussing the recursive relationships between agency and structure, Lawrence et al. (2009b) made plain that the main emphasis and unique contributions of their research programme reside in enhancing our understanding of how individual and collective agency affects institutions rather than vice
versa. Similarly, scholars refining Lawrence and Suddaby’s (2006) original taxonomy of institutional work have mainly concentrated on how different categories of work, or agency, may influence the institutionalisation of novel practices whilst paying little systematic attention to how such processes are conditioned by extant, institutional structures (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). Even though some concerted conceptual efforts have been made to expound the institutionally embedded nature of agency (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009 Voronov and Vince, 2012), the majority of empirical research on institutional work has tended to foreground the more actor-centric aspects of institutional maintenance and change (see review by Lawrence et al., 2013). A similar neglect of embedded agency is at least partly observable in emerging accounting research mobilising the idea of institutional work (see Goretzki et al., 2013). Taken together, this is indicative of research on institutional work tilting towards upwards conflation despite its ambition to advance a more balanced view of the interplay between agency and structures. More generally, it reinforces the concern that institutional theorists are caught in an infinite regress of “flip-flopping” in their emphasis on either structure or agency as the primary vessels of institutionalisation (Cooper et al., 2008; Willmott, 2011). Whereas the calls for greater attention to embedded agency may be seen as an attempt to overcome such tendencies towards either downwards or upwards conflation, they do not seem to have been consistently heeded in the emerging literature on institutional work.

Second, the degree to which the institutional work approach has emancipated itself from the seemingly value-neutral and apolitical position underpinning the epistemology of new and neo-institutional sociology remains in doubt. Historically, the air of value neutrality has arguably concealed a rather conservative tendency among institutional theorists to conform to the conventions and power structures prevailing in academic milieus disposed to valorise functionalist approaches to scholarship (Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). According to Cooper et al. (2008), this has had far-reaching implications for the view of knowledge production permeating institutional theories. Rather than engaging in radical social critique, institutional theorists have tended to appropriate particular ideas and concepts from critical thinkers in a highly selective manner in an ever-expanding endeavour to refine their conceptual frameworks. This arguably testifies to a cumulative and essentially positivist view of theory

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4 Whilst Zald and Lounsbury’s (2010) observations primarily pertain to North American business schools the barriers to critical management studies have been lower in other parts of the World, especially in the United Kingdom (Carter, 2008; Fournier and Grey, 2000). However, it is questionable whether institutional accounting research has fully benefited from such receptiveness to critical scholarship given the relatively recent rapprochement between the two.
development where scholars assume the role of “academic entrepreneurs” (Cooper et al., 2008, p. 690) working within a normal science tradition rather than reflexively engaging with the subjective, lived experiences of marginalised actors in a manner that is conducive to politically engaged scholarship. Even though leading advocates of the institutional work approach have repeatedly affirmed their commitment to moving beyond such an epistemological position (e.g., Dover and Lawrence, 2010; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006 Lawrence et al., 2011), most empirical research in the area has continued to concentrate on elite actors in organisational fields whilst paying scant attention to the plight of marginalised or under-privileged constituencies (see review by Lawrence et al., 2013). Whilst some notable exceptions to this pattern are discernible (e.g., Marti and Mair, 2009; Marti and Fernandez, 2013), most students of institutional work have continued to labour in a research tradition aimed at continuously refining and extending the conceptual underpinnings of institutional theories. Such an epistemological position is unproblematic in so far at it is combined with a view of the world as a reasonably stable and objectified entity that is amenable to cumulative theory development and generalisation and may lead institutional theorists to eschew tendencies towards ontological drift. However, it does not quite square with the espoused ambition to move towards a more indeterminate world-view as a basis for understanding the possibilities of human emancipation. Hence it would seem to blunt any efforts to radicalise institutional research.

Finally, the institutional work approach has been criticised for failing to articulate which particular veins of critical scholarship it sees as most fruitful for engendering more politically engaged research and that this may perpetuate the tendency to selectively incorporate aspects of diverse critical theories without much sensitivity to their unique epistemological commitments (Willmott, 2011). This may prevent institutional research from radically questioning the epistemology in which it is embedded and succumbing to ontological drift. However, it is also conceivable that such drifts may remain unarticulated and unaddressed as a result of un-reflexive and excessively eclectic blending of theories (cf. Thompson, 2011). Similar tendencies may occur with respect to the problem of conflation, especially if the current quest to incorporate a stronger sense of agency in institutional analyses leads researchers to bracket the influence of extant institutions. The following review of accounting research combining institutional and critical theories unpacks such issues in an attempt to engender greater reflexivity on the paradigmatic implications of pursuing such theoretical combinations.
Making Institutional Accounting Research Critical: The State of Play

The spectrum of what counts as critical accounting research is very broad and encompasses a variety of theoretical approaches united by some concerns with human emancipation (see Baxter and Chua, 2003; Cooper and Hopper, 2007; Roslender and Dillard, 2003). However, only some of these approaches have had a notable impact on institutional accounting research. The following review is confined to studies that combine institutional and critical theories with the explicit ambition of rendering research more politically engaged and enhancing its emancipatory potential. The review follows a largely “naturalistic” approach (see Kakkuri-Knuttilla et al., 2008) where the principal aim is to analyse whether tendencies towards ontological drift and conflation are observable in extant research practices although I also comment more generally on whether such problems may be overcome. Following such an approach, the review focuses on research combining institutional theories with insights gleaned from the works of Jurgen Habermas, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.\(^5\) The overall conclusion is that none of these extant combinations seem to be capable of fully addressing the problems of ontological drift and conflation. The question of how to make institutional accounting research critical without succumbing to such perils is then discussed further in the penultimate section of the paper.

**Habermasian insights**

Following Laughlin (1987), a Habermasian approach to accounting research entails a view of social development and progress as an evolutionary process ideally leading to increasing enlightenment and emancipation. Of key concern in this regard is the development of discursive practices enabling social actors to achieve such a state. However, this development is historically and structurally conditioned and can be expected to encounter numerous constraints preventing human beings from achieving the free-thinking, discursive states that are conducive to emancipation. The role of researchers in facilitating this process is to formulate critical theorems informing their engagements with the researched such that they

\(^5\) There have also been attempts to combine institutional accounting research with a political economy perspective (e.g., Hopper and Major, 2007; Hoque and Hopper, 1994, 1997). However, the primary purpose of these studies has been to extend institutional theories conceptually though theory triangulation rather than engaging in earnest with the issue of how institutional research can be made more politically engaged. Hence they are of more peripheral interest in light of the research questions pondered in this paper.
collectively achieve a state of enlightenment and gradually reach some consensus regarding appropriate strategies for change. This implies an epistemological commitment to exploring the conditions under which human agency can be activated and turned into a vehicle of social transformation (see also Broadbent and Laughlin, 1997). As explicated below, however, the more precise nature of such agency has tended to be obscured in empirical analyses combining institutional and Habermasian perspectives.

Research following such a lead has mainly focused on the varying levels of resistance that may occur as a result of conflicts between diverse institutional arrangements and how this conditions the possibilities of emancipation (Broadbent et al., 2001; Lawrence et al., 2009a; Rahaman et al., 2004). The most elaborate discussion of the implications of combining institutional and Habermasian approaches can be found in Broadbent et al. (2001). Mobilising Scott’s (1995) conception of institutions as constituted by regulative, normative and cognitive “pillars”, they argued that this represents a fundamentally structuralist view of how institutions shape organisational behaviour that, on its own, leaves little room for resistance and change. To address this limitation, they drew on Habermas’s (1984, 1987) view of societal evolution as entailing some steering media, such as money, power and law, causing organisational systems to become more or less aligned with the broader life-worlds reflected in societal norms and values. Organisational resistance, according to this view, may occur in two ways; either through changes in organisational systems that deviate from the values expressed through extant steering media or through organisational responses to changes in the steering media themselves. In their study of commissioning groups established as an alternative to general practitioner (GP) fundholding in the UK, Broadbent et al. (2001) mainly focused on the latter type of resistance and argued that this phenomenon may be understood as an organisational response to some “unwanted” changes in steering media brought about by regulatory reforms and the rapid diffusion of fundholding as a dominant practice. More specifically, they suggest that these changes conflicted with the normative pillar underpinning the professional values of some GPs and thus caused tensions between diverse steering media to which commissioning groups were compelled to respond.

What is bracketed from this analysis, however, is any elaborate and explicit theorisation of the role of agency in bringing about resistance. Whilst referring to the individual and collective agency exercised by GP commissioning groups and their national association, Broadbent et al. (2001) neither dwelled on its conceptualisation nor unpacked the processes through which it was made possible. Rather, resistance was seen as residing in the growing
fragmentation of the interpretive schemes of GPs as the changes in steering media caused regulative, cognitive and normative pillars to become misaligned. This is similar to the emerging view of field fragmentation as a source of resistance and indeterminacy in neo-institutional sociology. However, little attention was paid to the role of agency in mediating the processes through which particular structural arrangements were mobilised as a vehicle of resistance (cf. Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lounsbury, 2008). According to Broadbent et al. (2001, p. 581), organisational resistance was simply “inevitable” as a result of the misalignment of institutional pillars whilst the choices made by commissioning GPs to this end were “contextually determined”. At an ontological level, such a view is arguably consistent with early advances in new institutional sociology (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) from which Scott (1995) drew considerable inspiration. But this reinforces a very structuralist interpretation of the process through which resistance was made possible.6 Broadbent et al. (2001) justified their mobilisation of Habermas (1984, 1987) with reference to Oliver’s (1991) critique of new institutional sociology for failing to explore the wider action repertoires available to organisations beyond acquiescence to dominant institutions. Judging from their empirical analysis, however, it seems questionable whether a Habermasian approach is capable of imbuing institutional analyses with more innate concerns with the possibilities of agency.

Such doubts are reinforced by a review of more recent advances combining institutional and Habermasian approaches (Lawrence et al., 2009a; Rahaman et al., 2004). Rahaman et al. (2004) mobilised Habermas (1976) to argue that the institutionalisation of particular accounting practices gradually led to a legitimacy crisis in the Volta River Authority (VRA) in Ghana. Notions of institutional isomorphism emanating from the coercive powers exercised by the World Bank and the normative expertise of accountants were used to explain why the VRA initially adopted and continued to comply with such practices for legitimacy-seeking purposes. The authors document how this development fostered some “institutionalised blindness” (Rahaman et al., 2004, p. 49) to the plight of broader constituencies being disadvantaged and marginalised by these practices and how this threatened organisational legitimacy. However, few insights were provided into how this “blindness” came to permeate the more subjectively held views of organisational members

6 DiMaggio and Powell (1983) recognise that different types of institutional isomorphism may conflict with each other and generate contradictions fuelling processes of change and resistance. However, such explanations leave little room for explicit recognition of agency (cf. DiMaggio, 1988).
and how this prevented them from reacting to the unfolding legitimation crisis. Instead, Rahaman et al. (2004) reverted to an essentially structuralist, macro-level frame of explanation to argue that the crisis was reinforced by contemporary forces of globalisation imposing unavoidable constraints on the actors inhabiting the field under investigation.

A similar neglect of the deeper processes of subjective identity formation as a precursor of agency can be found in Lawrence et al. (2009a). Theirs was an analysis of how diverse management and accounting practices evolved through the influence of New Public Management reforms in a Fijian housing authority. Whilst less explicitly informed by Habermasian ideas, they invoked Laughlin’s (1987) general postulate that critical accounting research requires some recognition of “human agency as an active force” to explain historical developments (Lawrence et al., 2009a, p. 392). However, the more precise nature and roles of agency were obscured in their analysis and they found scant evidence of resistance to the changes initiated in the organisation. Instead, employees seem to have been either replaced or rather effortlessly co-opted into the new management and accounting practices through isomorphic pressures. Lawrence et al. (2009a) demonstrated how the concomitant commercialisation fostered a widespread conception of beneficiaries as “customers” and how this contributed to marginalise disadvantaged constituencies. It is conceivable that the propensity of employees to accept this development entailed some shift in their subjectively held views of the meaning of unfolding reforms. However, hardly any attention was paid to how such shifts conditioned the re-casting of beneficiaries as “customers”.

What emerges from the combination of institutional and Habermasian approaches in the accounting literature is thus a blend of insights that reinforces the structuralist, macro-level emphasis of early advances in new institutional sociology. Whilst recognising the possibilities of conflict and fragmentation in organisational fields, the conceptualisation of the role of institutions has mainly been confined to the mechanisms generating isomorphic behaviour. Indeed, Broadbent et al. (2001, p. 570) argued that such behaviour “can be seen as illustrating different processes of steering” in Habermasian terms. However, in mobilising such a conception of institutions researchers have tended focus on the more tangible and objective aspects of institutionalisation without paying much attention to how processes of subjective identity formation at the individual and group level condition the propensity for agency (cf. Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009; Voronov and Vince, 2012). This macro-level emphasis is perhaps not surprising given the strongly societal orientation of much of Habermas’s work, although some commentators have convincingly argued for its extension
to the examination of micro-level processes engendering emancipation (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Laughlin, 1987). As noted by Broadbent et al. (2001), Habermas’s model of how steering media interact with the societal life-world does not pay explicit attention to the more deep-seated cognitive processes implicated in the generation of institutional persistence and change. However, even in their case it is difficult to discern any deeper concerns with how such processes shape more subjectively held views of the world at the individual level of analysis. This contributes to bracket an important dimension that might otherwise enhance our understanding of how social actors may emancipate themselves from institutional constraints and how efforts to this end get implicated in struggles for domination and power (cf. Cooper et al., 2008).

We may thus conclude that there is little ontological drift in works combining Habermasian insights with new institutional sociology. Both perspectives seem to pull researchers towards an ontology that is rather structuralist in emphasis and fosters an epistemological position that detracts from deeper analyses of agency and subjectivity. Whilst this is not to question the commitment of the authors to the critical accounting project, it does mean that the lack of ontological drift comes at the expense of strong tendencies towards downwards conflation. The over-riding impression is that any emancipation that social actors can hope to achieve will be structurally determined and thus rather constrained. Discussions of the role of agency as a precursor of emancipation are limited and not focused on how to engender greater reflexivity. In so far as prescriptions for enlightenment are concerned, Broadbent et al. (2001) were at pains to emphasise the need for careful policy evaluation to enhance our understanding of how accounting interventions may threaten particular interpretive schemes and exacerbate undesirable outcomes. Similarly, Rahaman et al. (2004, p. 50) argued that “[a]ccounting practices should be based upon truly rational decisions” to avoid legitimation crises. However, this position may be seen as an expression of the rationalistic view of how societal progress may be accomplished that distinguishes Habermas’s oeuvre from other critical theorists such as Bourdieu and Foucault (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Calhoun, 1993) rather than an attempt to imbue institutional analyses with a stronger sense of agency. This rationalistic position may also reify the rather consensual view of how social conflicts may be resolved that allegedly permeates Habermas’s work and thus detract from concerns with deep-seated issues of power hampering democratic debate and emancipation (Brown,

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7 Broadbent et al. (2001, p. 566) hint at such concerns by referring to the more “private” forms of resistance of GPs observed in some of their earlier work. However, their analysis of GP commissioning groups was an explicit attempt to explore more “public” forms of resistance.
What is especially lacking in the studies reviewed above is any deeper engagement with advances in neo-institutional sociology bringing notions of agency and power to the fore. I now turn to review studies displaying a more pronounced orientation in this direction.

*Foucauldian insights*

The incorporation of Foucauldian insights into institutional research marks an explicit ambition to imbue it with a greater sense of agency and subjectivity through an engagement with notions of discourse and power. Whilst the ontological status of Foucault’s diverse accounts of how discourses exercise power is somewhat unclear (see Elder-Vass, 2012), they have been taken as a starting point for rejuvenating the social constructivist origins of institutional theories and furthering the conceptual development of neo-institutional sociology (e.g., Lawrence, 2008; Phillips *et al.*, 2004; Phillips and Malhotra, 2008). The key insights from such extensions pertain to the ways in which institutional discourses come to exercise unobtrusive forms of power and contribute to subjectify individuals by normalising constructions of self. Whilst the idea of normalisation is akin to that of institutionalisation, or the tendency to take certain practices for granted, greater attention to its subjectifying qualities may steer institutional analyses away from a pre-occupation with the objectified, tangible mechanisms fuelling institutional processes. For instance, such analyses may shed further light on how institutions are implicated in reinforcing notions of disciplinary power fostering a sense of self-governance on the part of agents (cf. Lawrence, 2008). Foucauldian arguments have also been invoked to inspire greater reflexivity as to how to evade normalising discourses and engender resistance and emancipation. For instance, in their original articulation of the notion of institutional work, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) mobilised Foucault (1977) to challenge tendencies to take institutional persistence and dominance for granted and compel researchers and research subjects to engage in discourses that counter the normalising power of institutions. However, such allusions to the emancipatory potential of discourses have reinforced, rather than alleviated, concerns that institutional theorists might inadvertently over-state the possibilities of agency without doing full justice to the role of disciplinary power as a normalising force conditioning the subject’s sense of autonomy (Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Lok and Willmott, 2006). In short, there is an
imminent risk of upwards conflation if Foucauldian ideas are misappropriated to ascribe a capacity for reflexive agency to social actors.

The Foucauldian influence on institutional accounting research has been rather limited and indirect and is mainly discernible in works seeking to enrich it with elements of discourse analysis without developing it in a more critical direction (e.g., Dambrin et al., 2007; Ezzamel et al., 2007). An exception to this pattern is Modell’s (2012) study of how the interplay between emerging management control practices and political regulation shaped strategy formation in a Swedish central government agency. Drawing on neo-institutional sociology and a Foucauldian perspective on strategy formation (e.g., Knights and Morgan, 1991; McKinley et al. 2010), he explored how evolving strategy discourses not only shaped the institutionalisation of strategic priorities but also contributed to marginalise social interests lying at the core of the organisation’s political mission. Regulatory pressures gradually reinforced this development as it contributed to narrow the strategy discourse and deflect attention from broader issues of social equality. This fostered some critical reflections on how discourses normalise strategic agendas and lead organisational members to rather unquestioningly accept them despite the emergence of adverse social consequences. Modell (2012) documented how this development was amplified by the unobtrusive, disciplinary power of emerging strategy discourses as they were enacted by individual managers in their everyday practices. This reveals some concerns with how institutions influence the propensity for embedded agency at a deeper, cognitive level and how this contributes to shape more subjective understandings of the world. However, Modell’s (2012) analysis is limited in so far as he did not offer much insight into how the marginalisation of particular social interests may foster conflict and resistance. Hence it is unclear whether he saw any scope for emancipation on the part of constituencies being marginalised by emerging strategy discourses. He also eschewed deeper reflection on the epistemological ramifications of combining institutional and critical perspectives and rather called for further debate on this topic.

Hence the incorporation of Foucauldian insights into institutional accounting research has barely started to engender any shift in epistemological commitments in favour of more politically engaged scholarship. Even though Modell (2012) seems favourably disposed to an ontological position that accepts a more indeterminate view of institutions and explicitly recognises the need to explore processes of subjectification, this was not accompanied by a corresponding change in epistemology to encompass clear prescriptions for how to unlock the
emancipatory potential of social actors. This may be interpreted as an indication of ontological drift detracting from radical social critique and political activism. However, Modell (2012) remained open to some questioning of the epistemology of institutional accounting research by reiterating that the value systems in which scholarly communities are embedded are not necessarily static (see also Lukka and Modell, 2010). A Foucauldian mode of researcher reflexivity may add momentum to radical epistemological changes as it typically seeks to denaturalise the present, or destabilise received bodies of knowledge by subjecting their foundational premises to sustained critique (Alvesson et al., 2008). When applied to neo-institutional sociology this may imply questioning the notion of institutions as a source of structural cohesiveness. But such a decentring of the role of institutions might threaten the identity of scholarly communities built around a conception of organisational practices and the potential of emancipatory agency as fundamentally structured by taken for granted principles of organising and prompt rejections of critical insights. At worst, such refutations might entrench rather than reform the value system and epistemology in which institutional theory is embedded. Hence it may well be that some elements of a structuralist ontology need to be preserved for institutional research to foster critical insights. This would moderate tendencies towards ontological drift by keeping the advancement of such insights and political engagements within the bounds of received ontological and epistemological premises. However, it is also likely to temper the radicalisation of institutional accounting research.

On the other hand, such moderation of the critical intent of institutional analyses may mitigate tendencies to over-estimate the capacity for reflexive agency and upwards conflation. For instance, there is little evidence of such conflation in Modell’s (2012) study as he was at pains to locate any normalising and subjectifying tendencies to the shifts between extant institutions and emerging notions of strategy. As such, he clearly took issue with notions of “unfettered, calculating agency as a vehicle of change” (Modell, 2012, p. 280) and advanced a view of organisational action that is consistent with the idea of embedded agency in recent strands of neo-institutional sociology. More generally, the recognition of such notions of embedded agency might restrain impulses to ascribe more radical, emancipatory potential to social actors as it draws attention to how the possibilities of reflexivity are structurally conditioned (cf. Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009). But then again, this raises the

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8 Support for this conjecture can be summoned from the observation that one of the few, critical attempts to denaturalise neo-institutional sociology (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000) has largely been ignored by institutional theorists (Cooper et al., 2008).
issue of how institutional accounting research can progress towards a more critical stance in the face of such constraints. This issue is pondered in greater detail below.

Bourdiesuan insights

The use of Bourdieu’s work to make institutional accounting research critical is of particular interest given its long-standing and increasingly explicit influence on institutional theories. Organisational sociologists have especially pointed to the affinity of the notion of organisational fields with Bourdieu’s conception of fields as evolving networks of social relations in which struggles for power and domination are played out (Dobbin 2008; Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008). Attempts have also been made to integrate this notion with one of Bourdieu’s other key concepts – capital – to render institutional analyses more sensitive to the structuring of power relations and how the identities of actors in organisational fields take shape (Oakes et al. 1998). The notion of capital, or the economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources accumulated by individuals and groups of actors, was here seen as an indispensible complement to that of fields in that it draws attention to what is at stake as actors vie for power in institutional processes. More recently, Bourdiesuan notions of capital and fields have increasingly been mobilised by institutional theorists to delineate the macro-level processes involved in structuring power relations and evolving practices (e.g., Friedland, 2009; Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). However, without an explicit link to the third of Bourdieu’s main analytical concepts, namely that of habitus, institutional analyses will be confined to the more objectified, or structural, properties of organisational fields and are unlikely to convey any stronger sense of agency and subjective identity formation (Calhoun, 1993; Swartz, 2008). Habitus refers to systems of lasting, transposable dispositions that structure, albeit not determine, individual and collective agency (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). As such, it is conditioned by the milieus into which individuals are socialised but often assumes an unconscious or semi-conscious character as it renders them predisposed to approach emerging tasks and situations in a particular way. Hence habitus is fundamentally a cognitive construct originating at the individual level of analysis although it can be aggregated to larger collectives and evolves in constant interaction with macro-level structures constituted by the capital available to actors and their positions in specific fields (Lizardo, 2004). This has compelled some institutional theorists to draw extensively on Bourdieu’s work to explicate how individuals and groups of actors are
constrained and enabled by institutional structures in elaborating on the ideas of embedded agency and institutional work (Battilana, 2006; Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009; Voronov and Vince, 2012).

This rapprochement between neo-institutional sociology and Bourdieu cements an ontological position based on a view of the world as inherently structured by evolving social relations that condition the propensity for agency (cf. Vandenberghe, 1999). Similar to extant accounting research building on Bourdieu (see Cooper and Coulson, in press; Malsch et al., 2011), however, this has only been partly accompanied by a shift to an epistemological position conducive to politically engaged scholarship (see e.g., Golsorkhi et al., 2009; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). One example of such research can be found in Archel et al.’s (2011) study of the institutionalisation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting and legislation in Spain. Mobilising Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and fields, they examined the unfolding processes of stakeholder consultation associated with various CSR initiatives. Attention was paid to how the position of various stakeholders was buttressed by diverse forms of capital and how this shaped their relative power and ability to influence the process of institutionalisation. This arguably caused the emerging CSR discourse to be captured by managerial and business interests whilst the voices of other stakeholders (e.g., non-governmental organisations, environmental pressure groups) were either silenced or marginalised as they withdrew from the consultation process. What is lacking from this analysis, however, is any deeper considerations of notions of embedded agency conditioned by the habitus of the actors concerned. Whilst Archel et al. (2011) provide a detailed, relational analysis of how shifts in power came about, only fleeting attention was paid to the role of habitus in the shaping of subjective identities and how this compelled actors to either produce or submit to the dominant CSR discourse. Hence, despite making explicit references to Cooper et al.’s (2008) critique of institutional theories, they do not heed their warnings against piecemeal integration of critical theories into institutional analyses. The result is an empirical analysis emphasising the relational and structural aspects of the process of institutionalisation whilst leaving the notion of agency and the capacity of social actors to engage in reflexive deliberations under-theorised.

Greater attention to agency and reflexivity can be found in Malsch and Gendron’s (2013) theoretical analysis of how recent struggles for domination in the field of public accounting have shaped professional identities and practices. Starting from the position that equal attention needs to be paid to capital, fields and habitus to imbue Bourdieusian analyses with a
stronger sense of agency, they charted the increasing commercialisation of public accounting epitomised by its expansion into a broader range of professional services. In doing so, they demonstrated how different forms of capital and the changing habitus of public accountants were integral in fostering institutional work that resulted in increasing field fragmentation. To capture the concomitant efforts of public accountants to combine conflicting practices they advanced the notion of “institutional experimentation” unfolding within the structural constraints of organisational fields. Malsch and Gendron (2013, p. 893) described such experimentation as a construct reflecting “the role of innovation, imagination and reflexivity in field transformation” whilst explicitly positioning it as an antidote to notions of unfettered, strategic agency. They also elaborated on how this concept may be employed in examining the struggles whereby agents achieve increasing domination or a degree of emancipation as a way of rendering institutional analyses critical.

Judging from these emerging attempts to combine neo-institutional sociology with Bourdieu’s work it is fair to argue that such research has only started to distance itself from a more structuralist ontology to recognise the possibilities of reflexive agency and emancipation. However, they do demonstrate a genuine epistemological commitment to advancing institutional research in a direction that is conducive to engendering emancipation within the structural constraints of organisational fields. For instance, Archel et al. (2011) advanced some prescriptions for how agents may advance alternative and more radical CSR discourses by taking advantage of the less regulated spaces often emerging in fragmented fields. Similarly, Malsch and Gendron (2013) cautioned against the tendency of institutional theorists to naturalise the present and urged them to pay more concentrated attention to the patterns of domination and power relations evolving as integral parts of institutional experimentation. Hence the incorporation of Bourdieusian insights into institutional accounting research may seem a promising avenue to rendering it critical whilst avoiding tendencies towards ontological drift. Yet considerable caution is required such that attention to the structural dimensions of Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus does not reinforce the occasional tendencies among institutional theorists to relapse into a rather structuralist, macro-level mode of analysis. Such tendencies are widespread in research drawing on his work (Dobbin 2008; Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008; Malsch et al., 2011) and may be amplified by the selective bracketing of notions of habitus as we see evidence of in Archel et al. (2011). At worst, this may fuel the long-standing charges against Bourdieu’s work for
conveying an overly deterministic view of the world (e.g., Jenkins, 1982; King, 2000; Lash, 1993) and subject analyses of agency to downwards conflation.

Even if such pitfalls are circumvented, we also need to recognise the problematic coupling of notions of habitus and reflexivity. Whilst Bourdieu devoted considerable energy to expound how the habitus of scholarly communities may inhibit and foster reflexivity (e.g., Bourdieu et al., 1991; Bourdieu and Waqquant, 1992), such epistemological deliberations were not matched with equal attention to reflexivity as an ontological quality prevailing outside of academia (Adams, 2006; Archer, 2007; Elder-Vass, 2007; Sweetman, 2003). Some commentators mainly see him ascribing a propensity for truly reflexive agency to actors experiencing a state of hysteresis, or severe misalignment between their habitus and the field, as may be the case where the field is disrupted by economic and social crises (Adams, 2006; Elder-Vass, 2007). This is similar to the view of exogenous shocks as important triggers of agency and radical change in neo-institutional sociology (e.g., Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Seo and Creed, 2002), but ignores the more mundane forms of reflexivity evolving as actors engage in everyday practices. To overcome such conceptualisations of reflexivity as an exceptional state of mind, Sweetman (2003) proposed the notion of “reflexive habitus”. This concept is based on the premise that individuals increasingly display an innate propensity for reflexivity and need to do so to cope with a fragmented world characterised by the demise of routine re-production of social life. However, it has been critiqued by Archer (2007, 2010) who questioned the possibilities of any socialisation process, on which the idea of habitus depends, to foster such inherent forms of reflexivity. She also pointed to its inconsistency with Bourdieu’s careful distinction between the semi-conscious dispositions constituting habitus and reflexivity as a phenomenon imbued with self-awareness of such dispositions.

Indeed, without such an analytical separation between habitus and reflexivity, or between structure and agency, there is an imminent risk of central conflation. Concomitant to the charges of determinism, Bourdieu’s work has not been immune to criticisms that it elides notions of agency and structure in a manner that detracts from their analytical distinctiveness. This is arguably due to his propensity to conceive of habitus as the key medium through which social structures interact with agency without making a clear temporal distinction between extant and emerging structures conditioning and resulting from this interplay (Archer, 2007, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2007). According to Archer (2007, p. 41), this leads agency and structure to “constitute an amalgam whose properties and powers are completely interdependent and ineluctably intertwined”. Similar indications of central conflation can be
found in Malsch and Gendron (2013, p. 893) when they argue that “institutions inevitably intertwine with agency” in fostering possibilities of institutional experimentation. This would seem to suggest that the reflexivity associated with such experimentation is inherently dependent on the structures in which agents are embedded, although the authors then go on to describe how it entails a distinct sense of self-awareness. However, this does not do full justice to the analytical independence of reflexivity from structures required to account for the varying circumstances under which individuals are able to reflect on and engage in actions aimed at altering the social milieu in which they are embedded. To achieve such independence, some separation of the objective, structural conditions facing individuals from the more subjective processes involved in their deliberations on them is necessary (Archer, 2007, 2010). Whilst such a separation can be found in Bourdieu’s epistemological works (e.g., Bourdieu et al., 1991; Bourdieu and Waqcuant, 1992), it is much less evident in his ascription of agentic powers to research subjects due to his propensity to consistently trace such powers back to their habitus (Archer, 2007). We are thus beginning to see tendencies towards ontological drift in his oeuvre. Whilst posing as a champion of academic self-awareness urging scholars to reflect on their own habitus and practices (see Brubaker, 1993; Golsorkhi et al., 2009), he affords little of the same qualities on the world around him as a result of his elision of agency and structure. Unless the latter tendencies towards central conflation are redressed, we may expect epistemological commitments to reflexivity to remain misaligned with the quest for reflexive agency as an ontological possibility other than in the rather exceptional circumstances of institutional crises and upheaval.9

Summary

We are now in a position to pass some overall verdict on whether institutional accounting research seeking to develop more critical insights has successfully addressed the partly inter-related problems of ontological drift and conflation. The answer to this question is by and large no. The summary in Table 1 illuminates how none of the three analytical approaches

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9 This is not to belittle Bourdieu’s growing stature as a public intellectual and activist towards the end of his life. However, the interventions associated with this role (see e.g., Bourdieu, 1999) were clearly driven by reflexive academics functioning as catalysts for mobilisation rather than any fundamental conceptual revisions of the idea of habitus to render it more amenable to reconciliation with notions of reflexive agency. Hence the lasting impression of his view of the possibilities of reflexive agency and political activism is that they are limited unless mediated by academics under conditions of pronounced social conflict (cf. Cooper and Coulson, in press; Golsorkhi et al., 2009; Shenkin and Coulson, 2007).
reviewed above have entirely eschewed such paradigmatic tensions associated with the combination of institutional and critical theories.

Starting with the integration of Habermasian insights into new institutional sociology, we have seen how this produces a union of largely compatible, structuralist views of the world resulting in little ontological drift. However, this occurs at the expense of strong tendencies towards downwards conflation as researchers display little interest in exploring the more subjective processes of identity formation conditioning the propensity for reflexive agency. This would, in turn, seem to detract from the radicalisation of the institutional research project and possibly reinforce the consensual or quasi-consensual tendencies associated with Habermasian ideals of rationality and enlightenment as well as notions of institutional isomorphism.

The combination of neo-institutional sociology with Foucauldian insights presents a largely opposite impasse. In particular, there are legitimate concerns about the misappropriation of Foucauldian notions of discourse resulting in an un-nuanced and exaggerated ascription of agentic powers to social actors and upwards conflation. Even though such tendencies have thus far been mitigated in extant accounting research due to the reluctance of researchers to move to a more radical epistemological stance, this implies a risk of ontological drift deterring from politically engaged scholarship. Whilst a highly structuralist ontology is being replaced by a more indeterminate view of the world affirming the possibilities of subjective identity formation, it has not been matched with an epistemological transition displaying more innate concerns with radical social critique and political activism. Indeed, following a Foucauldian path to this end might threaten to destabilise the institutional research project as it may entail profound questioning of its ingrained conceptions of social structures.

The combination of neo-institutional sociology with Bourdieu’s work presents a more complex and multifaceted picture. At one level, such a combination would seem to present a
promising avenue for rendering institutional research critical without submitting to ontological drift, although there is always a risk of downwards conflation if an overly structuralist reading of Bourdieu leads researchers to bracket the role of habitus. Bourdieu’s emphasis on agency as structurally conditioned through habitus would seem amenable to develop an epistemological position that is conducive to political engagement without negating the constraining influence of institutional structures. However, the tendencies towards central conflation due to the inexorable intertwining of agency and structure arguably enhance the risk of ontological drift. This risk is manifest in the rather paradoxical coupling of an emphasis on reflexivity as an epistemological necessity to engender politically engaged scholarship with an ontological position that ascribes little innate capacity for reflexive agency to research subjects.

The above discussion raises the question of whether institutional accounting research can indeed move towards a more critical position without generating paradigmatic tensions and inconsistencies. To avoid this pitfall requires an ontological position recognising how institutional structures condition albeit not determine the propensity for reflexive agency, coupled with some analytical separation between the two. The first of these premises is necessary to eschew tendencies towards either upwards or downwards conflation. Further, analytical separation between institutional structures and reflexive agency is required to avoid a view of the two as inherently intertwined and thus succumb to central conflation. The epistemology nurtured to this end also needs to be conducive to politically engaged scholarship within the boundaries of institutional structures. Without some intention to radicalise the institutional research project researchers are likely to be overly constrained by the value system in which institutional theories are embedded and possibly continue to labour within a normal science tradition privileging conceptual “puzzle solving” and refinement over political engagement. However, pursuing a more critical research agenda without due recognition of how institutional structures condition human agency would be inconsistent with the ontology underpinning institutional theories and is likely to reinforce tendencies towards ontological drift. In what follows, I outline a research approach grounded in critical realism that constitutes a useful point of departure for addressing these concerns.
Towards a Paradigmatically Consistent Research Approach

Ontological foundations

Recent advances in critical realism, notably represented by the works of Margaret Archer (e.g., Archer, 1995, 2003, 2007, 2010) and Dave Elder-Vass (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010, 2012), provide a promising starting point for addressing ontological issues such as those raised towards the end of the preceding section. Similar to Bourdieu’s work, critical realism constitutes an attempt to reconcile or transcend notions of objectivism and subjectivism within what may be described as a moderate form of ontological realism (Elder-Vass, 2012; Vandenberghe, 1999). This ontological position rests on the shared premise that human beings have a capacity to act and shape the objectified structures in which they are embedded. In contrast to Bourdieu, however, critical realists insist on the temporal and analytical separability of the objective conditions shaping the propensity for agency and the subjective processes through which individuals develop notions of identity and come to reflect on the world. The key to this lies in the “stratified” ontology originally advanced by Bhaskar (1975) and further developed by Archer (1995). Extant structures are here seen as constituted by objectified social mechanisms that are temporally distinct from human agents although they have the causal power, or potential, to condition their actions at any point in time. However, the influence of such structures on human beings is by no means law-bound or deterministic and does not negate the capacity for reflexivity. Rather, through their reflexive engagements with extant structures, agents have the power to either transform or reproduce them over time. This view of how shifts and continuities between extant and emergent structures are mediated by human agency rests on the premise that objective conditions external to agents are temporally distinct from the more subjective experiences and deliberations in which the propensity for reflexive agency resides. Rather than conflating the two by collapsing them into a single analytical category, Archer (1995) sees social structures as separate from the cognitive processes being activated as agents reflect on their objective life conditions and develop individual and collective strategies for changing such conditions. Further, both extant social structures and agents have the causal power to affect change and stability and it is only

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10 Moderate realism should be distinguished from stronger forms of empirical, or “naive” realism according to which the world exists as a relatively stable and objectively verifiable entity that is independent of any social deliberations on it (see e.g., Fleetwood, 2005). See Lukka and Modell (2010) and Modell (2009) for extended discussions of how such different forms of realism are manifest in contemporary accounting research.
by examining the often complex, temporal interplay between the two that we may arrive at some understanding of whether dynamising or stabilising tendencies eventually prevail. This fosters a view of the world as conditioned by extant structures yet sufficiently indeterminate to enable agents to change their life conditions.

The ontological position advanced by Archer (1995) provides for a multi-layered analytical perspective affording equal attention to social structures and the more subjective processes whereby individuals deliberate on their position in the world and develop strategies for emancipation. The key to unravelling such subjective, reflexive processes is to access individuals’ “internal conversations”, or their ongoing, internal dialogue with themselves about objective referents in the world (Archer, 2003, 2007). It is through such internal conversations that individuals make sense of the world and form personal strategies for action that may subsequently be negotiated into collective forms of agency aimed at changing structural conditions. However, Elder-Vass (2007, 2010) cautions that empirical analyses foregrounding such processes cede too much terrain to some universal capacity for reflexivity whilst bracketing the causal power of unconscious practices such as those associated with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. This, he argues, implies a risk of ignoring how variations in the social context in which individuals are embedded condition their relative propensity for reflexive agency versus more routine action. As an alternative to such under-specified conceptions of the possibilities of human agency and emancipation, he proposes some reconciliation between Archer and Bourdieu by advancing a view of agency as co-determined by reflexivity and habitus. This implies a shift towards an ontological position where the propensity for subjective identity formation to generate reflexive agency is seen as much more contingent and variable with the objective structural conditions in which individuals are embedded. Whereas some individuals may display a relatively high propensity for reflexive agency, others will be less likely to do so as a result of their socialisation into contexts rendering their habitus a more dominant constraint on action. It is also plausible to conceive of specific individuals as oscillating between reflexive agency and routine action under different structural conditions. Some structural conditions will be more conducive for individuals to emancipate themselves from their habitus although it would be fallacious to assume that such conditions are stable across time and space (Archer, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). Deeper analyses of such temporal and contextual variations may enhance our understanding of when and how emancipation is possible and likely to be sustainable whilst suppressing tendencies towards central conflation. However, care needs to be taken to
produce reasonably balanced accounts of the roles of structure and agency such that the risks of either upwards or downwards conflation are also avoided. Conscious efforts to produce such balanced accounts should curb the continuous tendency of institutional analyses to oscillate between the emphasis on either agency or structure as the primary vessels of institutionalisation (cf. Cooper et al., 2008; Wilmott, 2011).

It may be argued that some accounting scholars mobilising institutional theories have already started to move towards an ontological position such as that outlined above. Even though explicit use of critical realism to this end is still in its infancy and thus far void of intentions to render research more politically engaged (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013; Leca and Naccache, 2006; Modell, 2009; Mutiganda, in press), tangential developments are discernible in accounting research seeking to theorise the interplay between institutional structures and agency. For instance, Burns and Scapens (2000) cite Archer (1995) and clearly recognise the need to make an analytical and temporal distinction between extant and emergent institutions in outlining how their recursive interplay with human agency fosters change and stability in accounting practices. Building on their work, Dillard et al. (2004) and Hopper and Major (2007) further develop what may be described as a “stratified” ontology for examining how agency within organisations and organisational fields is conditioned by as well as involved in shaping objectified structures at higher levels of analysis. More recently, the problem of conflation has received explicit attention (e.g., Englund and Gerdin, 2008; Kilfoyle and Richardson, 2011) and empirical inquiries have started to examine how fragmented institutional environments foster an element of reflexivity and prompt agents to question the structures in which they are embedded (e.g., Abrahamsson and Gerdin, 2006; Burns and Baldvinsdottir, 2005; Englund et al., 2013; van der Steen, 2011). Collectively, these works represent an emerging view of agency as both deliberate and conditioned by extant institutional structures that is broadly consistent with the ontological position advocated by Archer (1995) although they do not aim at rendering institutional accounting research more politically engaged.

What is still missing from these accounts, however, is any systematic, contingent view of how objective, structural conditions interact with reflexive agency as a subjectively induced phenomenon at the individual level of analysis. One exception to this pattern is Yang and Modell’s (2013) analysis of how an individual manager balanced between extant and emergent conceptions of performance in a Chinese local government organisation. This balancing act was seen as resting on the subjective internalisation of both conceptions of
performance in the manager’s values and beliefs. This caused her to make deliberate, or reflexive, use of the emergent conception of performance as a vehicle of organisational change whilst simultaneously complying with more habitualised practices and firmly institutionalised conceptions of performance. Some temporal variations in her relative emphasis on the two conceptions of performance were also observed whilst careful attention was paid to how such variations were sustained by more objective, structural changes in the external institutional environment. Ultimately, however, the change efforts resulting from the manager’s balancing act were thwarted by a shift in such external, institutional conditions. Consistent with Elder-Vass’s (2007, 2010) contingent conception of agency as co-determined by reflexivity and habitus, this illustrates how reflexive agency and deliberate change efforts can co-exist with more habitualised practices at the individual level of analysis although the capacity for change varies and is also conditioned by more objective structural contingencies.

**Epistemological implications**

What remains to be done to imbue such emerging institutional analyses with more critical intentions and insights is to foster more innate concerns with how the emancipation of disadvantaged constituencies may be effected whilst avoiding tendencies towards ontological drift. This, to me, would seem to be more of an epistemological than an ontological question. The ontological position outlined above provides a useful starting point for examining the contingent, objective conditions under which emancipation is possible as well as the subjective processes of identity formation conducive to realising such possibilities. The concomitant epistemological questions concern what types of research interventions are possible to engender emancipation within the boundaries of such ontological premises and how this may become a more widely accepted, or indeed institutionalised, practice in scholarly communities subscribing to an ostensibly value-neutral or even conservative view of knowledge formation.

To address the first of these questions it is important to re-emphasise the need for researchers to be cognisant of the varying possibilities of emancipation presented by fragmented organisational fields as well as how the effectiveness of research interventions may be affected by extant, structural constraints. As noted in the foregoing, it is by enlightening social actors of the possibilities of change and resistance embedded in institutional environments that researchers can mediate processes of emancipation. However, consistent
with the contingent view of the capacity for agency and emancipation as codetermined by reflexivity and habitus, it is also necessary for researchers to nurture a sense of when one or the other dominates and to develop strategies of intervention that play on such contingencies. For instance, it would seem highly unlikely for radical social change to materialise quickly where extant institutional structures continue to exercise strongly isomorphic powers and the habitus of marginalised constituencies is such that it severely curtails their capacity for reflexivity. Under such circumstances, interventions aimed at engendering more radical forms of political activism challenging institutionalised practices may meet with little enthusiasm and are unlikely to be sustainable. Given the quasi-consensual tendencies often fostered by institutional isomorphism, researchers may need to settle for a more incremental approach based on whatever deliberations extant institutions allow for whilst trying to exploit any instances of mundane reflexivity emerging despite the constraints embedded in individuals’ habitus. Conversely, where the hegemony of extant institutions is weakened by the emergence of alternative institutional arrangements and organisational fields show signs of growing fragmentation, researchers may seek to intervene by embracing less consensual forms of democratic debate aimed at sustaining a plurality of adversary voices (cf. Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013). Under such conditions, buttressing voices calling for radical change may be more effective as a means of engendering broadly based reflexivity on the possibilities of challenging dominant social orders and redressing imbalances in power attributable to extant institutional arrangements.

Adopting such a contingent view of when one or the other strategy of intervention is likely to be effective represents an epistemological position that is consistent with an ontology that recognises how time- and context-specific differences in institutional structures interact with individuals’ subjective capacity for reflexive agency. However, it also underscores that the possibilities of sustaining various forms of democratic debate and pluralism in institutional environments is an inherently variable phenomenon that cannot be prejudged. A concomitant epistemological consideration is how researchers may muster broader political support for critical interventions under different field conditions. As noted by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), such interventions require a considerable broadening of researcher engagements from the social elites typically occupying institutional theorists to encompass direct and prolonged interactions with disadvantaged and marginalised constituencies. However, for critical research interventions to result in more sustainable forms of emancipation researchers and other social actors may also need to build alliances with powerful actors favoured by extant
institutional arrangements and accounting practices. Unless organisational fields are subject to radical upheaval and the positions of dominant elites are fundamentally challenged, it is difficult to see how institutional arrangements catering for the interests of disadvantaged constituencies may be stabilised and consequential without some support from such elites. Some critical accounting scholars may question whether engagements with elite actors are possible without researchers being captured by said elites. For instance, Archel et al. (2011, p. 341) were clearly sceptical of the possibilities of avoiding such capture and called for the development of “an entirely new discursive terrain” as an alternative to the discourses endorsed by dominant constituencies. As explicated in the foregoing, however, the nurturing of such pluralistic debates may only be an effective strategy of intervention in fragmented organisational fields. It is also worth noting that critical research interventions are always likely to be seen as failing if measured against overly strict and idealised notions of capture as entailing a complete severance of the ties to the institutional arrangements dominating organisational fields (cf. Baker, 2010).

The discussion above suggests that a paradigmatically consistent approach to the radicalisation of institutional accounting research needs to embrace a highly contingent view of when and how different types of research interventions aimed at emancipation are likely to gain traction in organisational fields. Turning now to the related epistemological question of how such interventions may become a more institutionalised practice and integral part of institutional accounting research, a useful starting point might be to turn such research back on itself to explore and challenge its premises of knowledge formation (cf. Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). Tuttle and Dillard (2007) adopted a similar approach by documenting the institutional isomorphism underpinning the dominance of “mainstream”, positivist accounting research in North America. However, such efforts have yet to be trained on the institutional accounting research project itself. Following the tenets of critical realism, this could take the form of mapping of the causal powers embedded in the value system underpinning the epistemology of institutional accounting research and under what contingent conditions such powers constrain or provide opportunities for individual researchers to reflect on and deviate from institutionalised research practices (Elder-Vass, 2012). Such exercises resemble the Bourdieusian practice of “think[ing] with a thinker against that thinker” (see King, 2000, p. 418) to unpack the habitus of particular research communities. However, a critical realist approach would extend such practices by reinforcing a view of the objectified social premises of knowledge formation as analytically distinct from
the more subjective inclinations of individual scholars. In so far as this reveals a dominant, objectified value system that is truly as conservative as some critics suggest (e.g., Cooper et al., 2008; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010), it may provide a basis for asking critical questions about whether this is a desirable state of affairs and what can be done about it. Provided that such deliberations become more widely practised they may result in increasingly institutionalised forms of reflexivity compelling institutional theorists to at least momentarily relax their normal science inclinations to continuously extend and refine their conceptual frameworks in favour of applying them to critical interventions in the field. However, it would be naive to assume that such a re-orientation of institutional research will invariably be enacted by all researchers with a commitment to institutional theories. A contingent understanding is also required of how the subjectively induced inclinations of individual researchers might foster sustainable emancipation from institutionalised research practices.

A potential danger of institutionalised reflexivity on research practices, however, is that it is confined to a routine and introvert intellectual task that detracts from rather than enhances engagements with the field. The challenge for critical realists is arguably to combine their commitment to reflexivity and abstract theorising about the potentialities of real but not always empirically observable mechanisms imbued with causal powers with empirically grounded understandings of their multifarious consequences (Tsoukas, 1989). The ontological view of the possibilities of reflexive agency and emancipation as contingent phenomena coupled with a similar view of the opportunities for critical research interventions advanced in this section offers a basis for doing so in a paradigmatically consistent way. On the one hand, this requires close empirical attention to the constitution of organisational fields and how it conditions actors’ current and observable propensity for reflexive agency. On the other hand, careful theoretical deliberations are required to understand what latent causal powers may be present in such fields and under which circumstances these powers may be activated and result in enhanced reflexivity and emancipation. However, such empirically and theoretically informed deliberations on what is ontologically possible in the field do not negate the need for deep reflections and debate on contingent epistemological premises such as those outlined above. Rather, a contingent view of the ontological possibilities of reflexive agency and emancipation necessitates an acute awareness among researchers of what types of interventions this may invite as well as how such interventions may be legitimised and pursued more widely within the scholarly communities of which they are part. Without some
alignment of such ontological and epistemological premises, there is an obvious risk of ontological drifts deterring from effective, critical research interventions.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper has pondered the question of whether recent attempts to make institutional accounting research critical may contribute to the furthering of human emancipation and democratic debate and dialogue in organisations and society. In doing so, I have paid specific attention to whether such research represents a scholarly impasse condemned to implode under the weight of paradigmatic tensions or a promising trajectory that may provide deeper insights into the wider social implications of institutional processes and a platform for effective, critical research interventions. I have demonstrated how extant research practices give cause for some concern in this regard. In particular, the failure to deal effectively with the issues of ontological drift and conflation may reinforce the view that institutional and critical research are better off as separate projects (cf. Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Lounsbury, 2003). However, I have sought to outline how a paradigmatically consistent approach to rendering institutional research more politically engaged can be nurtured and how this fits in with recent advances in critical realism as well as more general developments in institutional accounting research. Following the tenor of critical realism, I have argued that this requires the adoption of a “stratified” ontology that makes a clear temporal distinction between objective, structural conditions and subjective processes of identity formation. It is through the interplay between such structural conditions and subjective experiences and deliberations that varying degrees of reflexive agency become manifest and enable agents to engage in projects of emancipation. This results in a contingent view of the possibilities and sustainability of reflexive agency and emancipation in organisational fields. Similarly, I have outlined some epistemological implications pivoting on a contingent view of when research combining institutional and critical theories may foster sustainable interventions that facilitate emancipation and how this may be turned into a more widely accepted or institutionalised practice. Hence rather than constituting a paradigmatic “dead end”, it is helpful to conceive of such research as emerging from an embryonic state but certainly having the potential to form a “new beginning” for scholars interested in expanding the vistas of institutional analyses whilst becoming politically engaged.
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<tr>
<th>Theoretical combinations</th>
<th>New institutional sociology/Habermas</th>
<th>Neo-institutional sociology/Foucault</th>
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Table 1. Paradigmatic tensions in accounting research combining institutional and critical theories.