Preface

I first came across the notion of actorness in the summer of 2012. Thomas Gehring asked my opinion on a working paper which sought to explain why the European Union (EU) became an actor in some policy areas but not in others. Thomas used the notion of actorness as a shortcut to refer to the EU's quality of being an autonomous international actor. Furthermore, Thomas argued that not just the EU, but any organisation could potentially acquire actorness.

The idea of an international organisation to become a separate acting entity was both fascinating and puzzling. My neoliberal institutionalist understanding of international politics suggested that states were the key actors in international affairs. States create and maintain international organisations to their mutual benefit. Accordingly, the activities of international organisations ought to be explained primarily by the interests of their members and the institutions through which these interests are mediated. Autonomous agency could only emerge as a corollary of delegation. The employment of organisational agents like the Commission, the Court and the Council Secretariat may certainly produce policy outputs and outcomes that are not in the interest of the Member States. But for what reason should we refer to any such activities as 'actorness'?

There are several compelling conceptual and theoretical contenders for the idea of actorness. All provide a reasonable understanding of how Brussels' bureaucratic machine impinges on the overall activities of the EU. Among the most prominent contenders are principal-agent theory, new institutionalism and the bureaucratic perspective on international organisations. Taken together, the idea of actorness seemed not to add an additional layer of understanding to the operation of international organisations. To the contrary, for me, actorness even seemed to blur sharp established concepts and eschew a precise definition of the phenomenon or problem that it pretends to address.

Some colleagues with whom I discussed the idea denied that actorness had any substantial meaning. One colleague even called it a stupid idea that helps mediocre scholars to fill pages. Yet, actorness is anything but a pointless concept resulting from the facile thoughts of some EU scholars. The idea of actorness was developed and discussed in a reflective and multifaceted debate that has lasted for almost 50 years now. Whilst the debate has certainly tapered off and shifted its focus primarily to the EU, the original problem was stated in

rather universal terms: How and why can international organisations become separate acting entities that distinguish themselves from the interests and preferences of their members? And how can we conceptualise this ‘capacity to act on the global scene’ (Cosgrove and Twitchett, 1970: 12) in a clear and meaningful manner?

When the problem of actorness was initially framed in the early 1970s, scholars tried to make sense of a new phenomenon that was at odds with the then predominant realist perspective on international politics. International organisations like the United Nations and the then European Economic Community seemed to have become autonomous ‘actors’ capable of exerting influence on international politics in their own collective right. Considering that today’s theoretical and conceptual toolbox is much better stocked than it was in the early days of actorness research, it becomes clear that actorness could not initially be defined in relation to—and in distinction from—concepts like agents, corporate agency and international regimes. Instead, actorness research established itself as a separate branch with its own quirks and vocabulary. While I found myself delving ever deeper into the diverse and rich literature on the subject, it became clear to me that actorness’s genesis explains much of its conceptual and theoretical indeterminacy.

From today’s perspective, it seems as if the theoretical basis of actorness is still stuck in the 1970s. Because actorness was never re-integrated with the conceptual and theoretical developments in the broader field, it is very difficult for outsiders, like I was back in 2012, to fully understand the problems and implications of international organisations that act in their own collective right. Moreover, the shallow theoretical underpinnings of actorness gave rise to ‘some kind of cottage industry’ (Drieskens, 2017: 1537) that employs variants of actorness to analyse and explain a variety of different empirical phenomena and problems. Yet, without a clear notion of what actorness refers to *precisely*, it remains unclear how the concept can be employed in an instructive and universal manner. Only if actorness helps to unveil and explain phenomena which would otherwise remain mysterious or unrecognised, is it still worth pondering over adequate conceptualisations.

This book is an attempt to bridge the gap between actorness research and established International Relations theories. The main proposition is that actorness constitutes a distinct variant of corporate action that established concepts and theories cannot comprehensively grasp. I demonstrate that actorness can be modelled as corporate agency which integrates consistently with established theories of international cooperation, international institutions and European integration. My take on actorness is thereby primarily inspired by the works of James Coleman, Thomas Gehring, Patrick Kenis, Volker Schneider and Viktor Vanberg. Whilst James Coleman’s extensive work on corporate actors provides the basis for my own argument, I owe a special intel-

lectual debt to Thomas Gehring. Thomas drew my attention to the similarities between actorness and corporate agency and thus shaped my approach to the problem of actorness in the most fundamental way. Corporate agency became my conceptual anchor without which I probably would have gotten lost in the complexities and intricacies of the actorness debate.

The writing of this book would also not have been possible without the intellectual, professional and personal support of many others. To the many colleagues and critics whose comments and thoughts aided the writing of this book I owe a special debt. Out of so many a few nonetheless stand out. From the very beginning of this project, Simon Fink was a critical and inspiring companion with whom I had intensive discussions on the function and nature of concepts and mechanisms. Without Simon's constant questioning of my ideas, the integrative character of my argument would have certainly been less distinct. I would also like to thank Manuel Becker for many helpful discussions on institutionalism and realism. Since I have chosen the case of EU sanction policies for purely methodical considerations, I was initially not quite familiar with this type of European foreign policy. Hence, I owe much to Anthonius de Vries and Clara Portela who provided indispensable insights into EU sanctions politics and the inner workings of the European Commission.

I must also record my considerable debt to Catherine Elgar and Harry Fabian from Edward Elgar. Catherine initially saw the value of this manuscript and Harry diligently guided me through the publication process. Three anonymous reviewers provided excellent comments that helped in improving the manuscript. Julia Dinkel, Thomas Dörfler, Claudia Genslein, William Griffin, Monika Heupel, Megan Koevoet, Sebastian Krapohl, José Magone, Johannes Marx, Vérane Meyer and Daniel Odinius have all provided the encouragement, improvements, insights and points of disagreement that have shaped the text in various ways. All remaining errors are of course my own.

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