INSTITUTIONAL PARASITES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we conceptualize the institutional parasite and examine its role in institutional change and maintenance. Institutional parasites are a widespread group of illegitimate actors that undermine the institution their livelihood depends on. Through their illegitimate activities, they may alert institutional functionaries: elite institutional actors capable of maintaining and changing the institution. Depending on the functionaries' reactions we show there are three potential outcomes: institutional drift, layering, or reform. Through our theorization of the institutional parasite, we point to the role of deviant actors in maintaining institutional arrangements, driving unintended institutional change and highlight the ambiguous relationship between institutional change and maintenance: sometimes maintaining an institution requires changing it.

INTRODUCTION

Research has revealed that one in six students worldwide self-report having paid someone to undertake assignments for them (Newton, 2018). These assignments are produced by essay mills, which write work for students who are unable or unwilling to complete their assignments themselves. Essay mills occupy a strange place in the institution[1] of higher education (for a discussion of higher education as an institution, see Meyer, Ramirez, Frank, & Schofer, 2007). They rely upon the university for their survival and can enable higher student intake and graduation rates, yet they undermine the institution on which they rely. Essay mills are not alone in relying upon an institution that they undermine. Tax advisers specializing in aggressive tax avoidance rely upon the taxation system for work, yet continually search for loopholes (Harrington, 2019). Similarly, some audit consultants in garment supply chains specialize in helping factories pass human rights certificate audits without the factories complying with the standard in question (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021; Soundararajan, Spence, & Rees, 2018). In both cases, we see an actor undertaking deviant behavior[2] that fulfils a function, but eventually will damage the institution it relies upon. We label these actors institutional parasites.

In this paper, we theorize the institutional parasite, and articulate their role in processes of institutional change (Ansari & Phillips, 2011; Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012) and maintenance (Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010; Lok & De Rond, 2013). We ask *how and why do institutional parasites emerge, and what effects do institutional parasites have on institutions?*

[1] We conceptualize institutions as "regulative, normative and cognitive structures that shape the behavior of organizations and their members in a delimited 'field'" (Palmer, 2017: 3).

[2] In this paper, deviance refers to actions and behaviors that go against institutional expectations, norms, or the law in a given context (Piazza, Bergemann & Helms, 2022).

Institutional parasites are actors who can exploit and maintain an established institution in the short term but, through their deviant activities, undermine the institution in the long term. The legitimacy threat posed by institutional parasites tends to attract the attention of institutional functionaries – a cadre of elite actors responsible for the operation of the institution (Stoltz, Taylor, & Lizardo, 2019). Institutional functionaries will typically seek to eject the parasites through various efforts. The dynamic relationship between parasites and functionaries creates an interesting tension between institutional maintenance and change. We know that powerful, core institutional actors tend to favor stability in the institutional arrangement, the set of formal and informal rules, norms, and practices that shape behaviors. This is due to their position being contingent on the rules, norms, and practices of the institution (Seo & Creed, 2002). Interestingly, the same is true for parasites. However, despite the parasites and functionaries favoring stability, we will argue that through their interaction, they create unintended change within an institution.

In our theoretical model, we trace three interlinked conditions for the emergence and proliferation of institutional parasites. To emerge and thrive, parasites require an environment in which the institutional arrangement is sufficiently complex to allow the parasite to exploit the institution without being easily detected. The second condition is demand for parasites within an institution. The third and final condition is a supply of actors with sufficient institutional expertise who are willing to conduct parasitic activities. If the number of parasites grows too large, institutional functionaries will start to monitor and police their activities leading to changes in the institution. We outline three potential consequences the proliferation of parasites may have. First, institutions may undergo *drift* which entails the deterioration of institutional rules (Voronov, Glynn, & Weber, 2022). This happens where institutional functionaries lack capacity

or interest in enforcing the rules (Onoma, 2010). In cases where institutional functionaries respond to the parasite problem, we theorize two potential institutional developments. When institutional functionaries concentrate their maintenance efforts on the institutional arrangement (Raynard, Kodeih, & Greenwood, 2021), we see a potential for institutional *layering* which entails gradual accumulation of rules on top of rules (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b). If these rules are not adhered to, this can lead to the hollowing out of an institution. Symbolic policies and rules start to overshadow substantive practices. However, when functionaries focus their efforts on maintaining the integrity of institutional processes and outcomes (Ansell, Boin, & Farjoun, 2015) instead of the technical arrangement, they may *reform* the institution. They do so by altering the institutional arrangement in ways that will directly address the conditions that enabled the emergence and proliferation of parasites in the first place.

By developing this model we make three contributions to existing literature. First, we contribute to discussions of the different types of roles actors play in institutional change (Hwang & Colyvas, 2020). We do this by conceptualizing the institutional parasite as a new, distinct, and widespread class of institutional actor. Second, we contribute to discussions of how unintended institutional change can be brought about through mundane interactions of individual actors (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Voronov et al, 2022). We argue that parasites themselves generally do not cause changes to the institution, but they motivate institutional functionaries to exact changes. Thus, unintended change can be driven by the interaction of different actors who tend to prefer stability. Third, we contribute to debates on institutional maintenance. We point out that deviant actors may be an important part of a constellation of actors that partake in institutional maintenance. In addition, we build on existing work that highlights how institutional maintenance and change can be co-constitutive (Ansell et al., 2015; Farjoun, 2010; Lok & De

Rond, 2013; Reinecke & Lawrence, 2022). We do this by pointing to how actors might seek to change the formal institutional arrangement to maintain institutional integrity, the purpose or character of the institution.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Institutional Maintenance and Change

The relationship between institutional change – how institutions are "created, transformed, and extinguished" (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002: 45) – and maintenance – "(the) supporting, repairing, and recreating" of institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 230) – remains a core topic in institutional research (Furnari, 2016; Micelotta et al., 2017). Change can be created through actors such as institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006) who escape the structuring force of the institution to "(1) initiate divergent changes and (2) actively participate in the implementation of these changes" (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009: 68). Institutional change can also come from mundane practices and interactions between individuals that are more or less without intention or strategy (Ansari & Phillips, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Smets et al., 2012; Voronov et al., 2022).

How institutions are maintained has received less attention than how institutions are created or changed (Raynard et al., 2021). Some of the limited work on institutional maintenance has focused on how the 'taken-for-grantedness' of an institution is maintained by actors following scripted patterns of behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), for instance, how socialization, routines and common interactions combine to create an institution that can reproduce itself automatically. An alternative perspective has highlighted the entropic potential of institutions and their tendency to atrophy without some form of active involvement from institutional actors (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001). Such

maintenance work involves "supporting, repairing or recreating social mechanisms that ensure compliance" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 230) and can involve formal maintenance via the policing of rules (Dacin et al., 2010) as well as reinforcing norms, beliefs and myths about an institution (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Scholars have also identified those actors who typically engage in such maintenance activities. One important type of actor who participates in maintenance work is the institutional functionary. Institutional functionaries are a small group of actors through which "the majority of the activities and knowledge relevant to the reproduction, maintenance (and possible modification) of the institution is more or less confined" (Stoltz et al., 2019: 4).They include high-ranking administrators, managers, and officers in executive and oversight bodies such as the pontifical council for the Catholic Church, state-level departments and ministries, and various types of governance organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Institutional functionaries are not only capable of socializing, maintaining traditions and enforcing rules. They are also capable of making changes within an institution to defend the institution from unwanted disruption and deviant activities and practices[3].

Traditionally, institutional change and maintenance have been seen as distinct processes. Recently, however, scholars have highlighted the interconnected and interdependent relationship between change and maintenance (Lok & De Rond, 2013). Some scholars have analyzed maintenance as a response to institutional change efforts. For instance, Raynard and colleagues (2021) examined the resilience of the recruitment model of elite French business schools despite widespread contestation around it. The authors show how fragmented, uncoordinated

[3] Several types of actors have been outlined that perform functions that partly overlap with those of the functionaries, such as defenders (Levy & Scully, 2007), guardians (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014), and custodians (Dacin, Dacin, & Kent, 2019; Dacin et al., 2010). Based on our definition, we would consider that these actors can be functionaries. However, not all defenders, guardians and custodians are functionaries.

maintenance efforts repel repeated change efforts over time. Others have asked what exactly is worth maintaining, pointing to the importance of the purpose, or character, of the institution (Ansell et al., 2015). Rather than seeing institutional maintenance as a response to institutional change, maintenance and change can instead be considered a duality, "mutually enabling and potentially compatible" (Farjoun, 2010: 205). Examples include how formalized bureaucratic policies and rules can enhance responses to novel and uncertain situations (Klein, Ziegert, Knight & Xiao, 2006; Moynihan, 2008) by providing certainty and structure within which to act in innovative ways (du Gay, 2005).

Drawing on the idea of the plasticity of institutions, Lok and De Rond (2013) outline a more nuanced approach to change and maintenance. Rather than seeing institutional maintenance being a one-dimensional process that sees divergent actions corrected via a custodial maintenance response, institutional practices, values, norms and the like can be temporally stretched through particular forms of maintenance work. In other words, there is a dynamic interplay and interconnectedness between change and maintenance. This suggests institutions are in constant flux with only temporary instances of stability (Smets et al., 2012), with institutional actors participating in mundane, strategic, thoughtless, and imaginative actions that are both constrained and enabled by the institution (Farjoun, 2010).

One powerful driver of institutional change and stability are deviant actors. These are agents which are judged as being out of line with predominant institutional norms (Bitektine, 2011; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). Such actors may engage in institutional work to protect their legitimacy or the institution their livelihood depends on. This may result in various outcomes, such as disruption or maintenance of the institution. As an example, many small businesses in the manufacturing end of global supply chains evade

institutional demands for compliance with human rights expectations (Soundararajan et al., 2018). Broad application of such evasive work can undermine trust in supply chains in general. Another example is tax advisory experts who seek to re-categorize tax avoidance practices as virtuous; by doing so, they seek to maintain the legitimacy of the wealth management industry within which they operate (Harrington, 2019). The threats posed by deviant actors often rouse the interest of institutional functionaries. In the wake of clearly deviant activity, actors may attempt to repair the institution in question (Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011) or increase policing efforts (Crawford & Dacin, 2021).

Despite the valuable forays into the relationship of deviant actors and institutional change, there are still many questions to be answered. Deviant actors are especially interesting because of their capacity to prompt dominant institutional actors to engage in institutional change efforts (Crawford & Dacin, 2021). However, we do not know much about the mechanisms or consequences of such efforts. In an attempt to shed some light on these problems, we explore a specific group of actors who have insider knowledge and resources yet are not legitimately embedded in the institutional arrangement. We call these actors institutional parasites. In some cases, these actors play an almost symbiotic role in the maintenance of an institution by aiding and even performing core routines and rituals. However, they do so despite their existence being based primarily on breaching the norms and values of the institution. Through this performance, they can maintain the institution in the short term and go undetected for a very long time. Furthermore, in the spirit of attempting to understand unintended consequences of institutional change efforts (Khan, Munir, & Willmott, 2007), we contend these actors can (unwittingly) initiate institutional change despite it being against their interests.

Institutional Parasites

The word parasite comes from the ancient Greek word *parasitos* (παράσιτος) and originally pertained to a class of priests who ate together (Musolff, 2014). This later widened to refer to anyone eating at a table at the expense of others. In charting a history of the concept, Musolff (2014) notes the use of the term in religious and social terminology far outdates its scientific use. The parasite/scrounger became a stock character in both classical Greek and Roman comedy (Liddell, Scott, & Jones, 1996). The first recorded use of parasite in English appeared in a translation of a Latin comedy in the 1530s where the "parasite" lived at the expense of others, repaying the host with flattery and sycophancy. Towards the 18th century, the term parasite became a metaphor commonly used to talk about migrant communities or ethnic minorities as "others" or the "enemy within" (Corner, 2013). In scientific discourse parasitism was understood as a relationship between organisms whereby one organism (the parasite) benefits at the expense of another (the host). Scientific work explored how parasites can live inside an organism for long periods of time, for example a tapeworm, or on the outside for shorter periods of time, like a flea. Here a parasite may be noticed very quickly, due to the negative effects it causes, or live inside or alongside its host without any detection at all. In some cases, parasites may even cause a desirable effect in the short term. For example, in the past, tapeworm eggs have been sold to individuals looking to lose weight. According to the hygiene hypothesis, human beings have eliminated many parasites that used to live alongside and within us. This absence of parasites has been linked to an increase in allergies (Kupferschmidt, 2015). Further, studies have shown how roundworms can be useful for fertility in women (Blackwell et al., 2015) and infections caused by parasitic worms can decrease the chances of inflammatory bowel disease (Ramanan et al., 2016). However, despite the desirable effect in the short term, if left untreated, parasites, worms

in this case, can grow too big or start to move to other parts of the body causing serious complications.

In philosophy, Michel Serres' book 'The Parasite' (Serres, 1982) provides some cues for understanding institutional parasites. Serres offers a positive view of parasites, seeing them as disruptors who do their host some good. Serres explains that "the parasite gives the host the means to be safe from the parasite. The organism reinforces its resistance and increases its adaptability" (p. 193), even if it "takes without giving" (Brown, 2013: 91). The parasite does this through predictable and needed disruption of their host. "The parasite adopts a functional role; the host survives the parasite's abuses of him [sic]*"* (Serres, 1982: 168). This suggests that parasites and hosts live in a kind of symbiotic relationship with one another. The parasite feeds on the host, but the host is strengthened by the parasite. That said, the removal of a parasite can also be celebrated by the host it has been draining, following a similar social function to "scapegoating". Serres points out that when parasites are removed, host communities try to remind themselves that a sense of order and rationality have returned.

Bringing these ideas together, we see the productive potential of a parasite. We note the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between parasite and host. However, we highlight the negative impacts of parasites: if a parasite grows too large or multiplies too much, it can eventually overwhelm and destroy the host. In their influential book, Mahoney and Thelen (2010a) sketch the concept of the parasitic symbiont as a type of institutional change agent. For them, parasitic symbionts "exploit an institution for private gain even as they depend on the existence and broad efficacy of the institution to achieve this gain" (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b: 24). These actors are associated with institutional decline if allowed to proliferate. The authors maintain that these parasites emerge in environments where the capacity for enforcing

institutional expectations is low, but where compliance is expected. Furthermore, parasitic symbionts will not persist if "institutional supporters are able to shore up institutions." (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b: 24). It should be noted that though Mahoney and Thelen (2010b) label these actors as symbionts, they are in fact not symbiotic: the parasitic symbiont does not provide any benefits to the host. In this paper, we build on this concept in three ways. First, we develop the concept and show how institutional parasites, in some cases, initially prop up and maintain institutional arrangements by participating in key institutional processes. Indeed, by virtue of existing and operating in an institution, parasites effectively become part of the institutional arrangement. Second, we theorize how institutional parasites will often persist despite attempts at "shoring up" of institutions. This is due to their capacity to adapt to changes. Further, although Mahoney and Thelen (2010b: 24) note that parasites are associated with slippage between institutional rules and practices, we argue that the potential for slippage is already there, and parasites can play a key role in making this slippage worse. Third, we develop a temporal understanding of parasites and their effect on an institution: parasites may support the institution for a limited time at an early stage but will tend to erode it over the long term. They do so by triggering an institutional legitimacy crisis that can threaten the survival of the institution.

To illustrate our concept of institutional parasites, let us look at two paradigmatic cases: essay mills and certification schemes. According to one survey, 17% of all UK students have used the services of essay mills (BBC, 2020). Essay mills are businesses that offer 'advice' or 'consultancy services' for university students as they write essays, assignments, and presentations. Often, however, students simply buy assignments from the essay mill, which they submit as their own. These assignments can range from off-the-rack answers to generic questions through to highly tailored answers to specific questions; essay mills even offer to write PhD

theses. Essay mills rely on higher-education providers to create work for them, at the same time, they fabricate academic outputs that casts doubt over the value of degrees, which may ultimately undermine the legitimacy of higher education. Essay mills violate the basic assumption that assignments are the students' own work. However, they also enable the production and subsequent grading of assignments that is a core routine of the institution. Essay mills thus help to maintain the symbolic appearance of the institution, at least in the short term, as they allow universities to recruit more students, give them good grades and graduate them at a high rate, irrespective of the underlying quality of students or their learning experience.

Another example can be found in the supply chain institution. Global supply chains are often highly complex and opaque (Kim & Davis, 2016). Certification plays an important role in giving assurance in the face of such opacity. Certification confirms to external stakeholders that the organization is functioning as it should. Without certificates, manufacturing organizations in supply chains would find it practically impossible to supply products that they can show meet the standards of global brands. Furthermore, certification provides a benchmark stating that the practices, processes and structures of a particular organization are of equal standard to others with the same certificate. However, scholars have contended that certification often acts as a symbolic gloss that covers over the messier realities of institutions (MacLean & Behnam, 2010). The garment production industry presents a particularly fitting instance of parasites invading the supply chain. According to a recent estimate, about half of all garment factory human rights audits cannot be trusted. In one study of a sample of 40,458 audits, 45% were judged unreliable (i.e., based on falsified or unreliable information; Kuruvilla & Li, 2021). This lack of reliability is attributed in part to audit consultants that help manufacturers create a façade for the auditors

that allows them to receive certification whilst not changing their substantive practices (Kuruvilla, 2021; Soundararajan et al., 2018).

Other examples of parasites include counterfeiters of luxury products (Hietanen, Murray, Sihvonen, & Tikkanen, 2020), rogue waste treatment companies (Cavotta, Palazzo, & Vaccaro, 2021), predatory journals and publishers (Dobusch & Heimstädt, 2019), accountancy firms that falsify accounts (e.g., Enron and Arthur Andersen), and auditors that produce questionable audits (Sikka et al., 2018). In all these examples, we see a group of actors engaging in deviant activity in a way that undermines the institution their existence depends on. The examples shown above are not typical instances of corruption, defined as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016: 36). Essay mills or certification schemes and the consultants that may help cheat the system do not occupy roles that would grant them institutional power to coerce other actors. Rather, they operate on the sidelines and in the gaps within an institution, carving covert roles for themselves that are not recognized by institutional rules. Indeed, parasites can play a symbiotic, yet potentially, dangerous role in an institutional arrangement. Parasites are drawn upon by various institutional actors to provide support in the production of routines, norms and practices of institutions. They do so by breaking with the spirit and the ethos of the institution (Voronov & Weber, 2016). They are aware of the routines, beliefs, practices as well as cognitive, normative and regulative pillars of an institution and they play within these and game the symbolic elements of an institution. Using their knowledge of an institution, the parasite can find ways to access and find subsistence by feeding off a host institution. In the rest of the paper, we develop our concept of the institutional parasite and then elaborate a theoretical model (see figure 1) theorizing the emergence and proliferation of institutional parasites and the implications for an institution harboring these actors.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

FROM PARASITE EMERGENCE TO INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The Emergence of Parasites

The first part of our model (Figure 1) concerns the emergence and proliferation of parasites. There are four primary conditions associated with the emergence of parasites: complex institutional structures, opportunities for decoupling symbols from practices, a demand for the services of parasites, and a supply of parasites.

Complex institutional structures. Complex institutional structures generate high degrees of opacity (Haack, Martignoni, & Schoeneborn, 2021). As long as high levels of opacity are maintained within an institution, it tends to be difficult to determine the relations between symbolic and substantive practices (Wijen, 2014). This is important for the emergence and proliferation of parasites in two ways. First, opacity – whether at the organizational or institutional level – enables institutional parasites to hide. Second, opacity increases ambiguity (Cappellaro, Compagni, & Vaara, 2021; Greve & Teh, 2016), making it difficult for observers to determine whether or not an actor is a parasite. Take the institution of the university as an example. The institutional arrangement is highly complex, with a variety of different types of actors including other universities, ranking organizations, government ministries, global education organizations, publishers and writing services providers. An essay mill may pose as a legitimate writing support provider, and many within the institution would be none the wiser. Similarly, an advisor that helps firms fake audits may pretend to be a legitimate consultant, and a company helping clients to avoid tax may present themselves as simply providing taxation

advice within the various grey areas provided by the complexity of an institutional arrangement. We argue that parasites exploit this ambiguity in their efforts in evading rule enforcement.

Opportunities for decoupling. Decoupling describes situations where a gap emerges between formal procedure and actual, substantive practice (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Organizations may engage in decoupling as a defensive measure when they face new regulation but fear that complying with the regulation may conflict with technical efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) or undermine financial benefits (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). But decoupling is not necessarily organizational; as actors partake in institutional processes, decoupling may also take place at an institutional level, provided there are opportunities for it. A student may have someone (or something) write a course essay or a dissertation for them (Lindebaum & Ramirez, 2023). A company may present falsified certificates to clients that suggest it offers toxic waste treatment services but burns the waste instead (Cavotta et al., 2021). Both are examples of institutional parasites engaging in decoupling: the student presents a symbol, the essay, supposedly representing their underlying knowledge. The waste-management company offers falsified certificates to represent its waste treatment practices but forgoes the practices.

Parasite demand and supply. Demand for parasites is another necessary condition for their emergence. Demand can increase when an institution provides access to important resources, but an actor lacks the capacity to fulfil institutional requirements. The gap between aspirations and ability creates a strain that invites the breaking of norms and rules (Palmer & Yenkey, 2015; Vaughan, 1999). Similarly, actors in a field may find much higher gains from symbolic rather than substantive compliance (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021). This may invite demand for parasites who know how to navigate the (missing) link between symbol and substance.

Fulfilling institutional requirements usually requires institutional expertise. Consequently, as the final condition for the emergence of parasites, a supply of experts willing to conduct parasitic activities must be available. One source of parasitic experts may well be the institution itself which, especially if the institution provides a desirable vocation or position within society, will tend to overproduce actors with the knowledge and expertise valued by that institution. An example of this is under-employed journalists writing content for a bogus news outlet (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Tandoc, 2019) or the under-promoted wealth manager taking an opportunity to advance their professional prospects by assisting the very wealthy in illegitimate tax evasion practices (Harrington, 2019). Many of the risks of such activities are mitigated by the complex structures of the institution, although the risks will be higher when parasites engage in illegal and not just deviant activities (Cappellaro et al., 2021; Greve & Teh, 2016).

Proliferation of Parasites

As parasites proliferate, parasitical practices are tolerated, normalized and, in some cases, can become integral to an institution. The proliferation of parasites is enabled by ignorance, tolerance or in some cases institutional capture. Ignorance can stem from the complexity or opacity of the task undertaken (Wijen, 2014) or in some cases from parasites hiding their practices from view (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Tolerance comes from apathy or an awareness that the rules do not really matter (Hodson, Roscigno, Martin, & Lopez, 2013). It can also come from a lack of awareness of the parasites' existence or the seriousness of the problem. Irregularities, especially if they are initially seen as minor, can be normalized over time in organizational and institutional settings such that members will tolerate them even if they object to them (Fleming, Zyglidopoulos, Boura, & Lioukas, 2022; Piazza et al., 2022; Vaughan, 1996). Likewise, institutional regulations may not have yet caught up with parasites and their practices hidden

from view (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012). This can leave enforcers powerless and/or blind in the face of institutional parasites. This has been the case for some time with essay mills that were legal in the United Kingdom until spring of 2022. Institutional functionaries may also be aware of leaks in the system that allow for parasites to emerge, but commitment to existing arrangements and other forms of inertia may prevent them from intervening. Finally, parasitic activity is often lucrative. Thus, more parasites will continue to be attracted if there is promise of resource extraction with a low enough likelihood of getting punished (Grodal, 2018; Piazza et al., 2022). There is also the possibility that institutional functionaries and other powerful actors may be co-opted and partake in such activities. For instance, when parasites began taking advantage of a newly institutionalized land ownership rights system in Kenya, government officials eventually participated in the exploitation (Onoma, 2010). Similarly, it may prove attractive for struggling universities, dependent on tuition fees, to turn a blind eye to essay mills, thereby becoming complicit in their activities.

Parasites and Functionaries

The next part of our model focuses on the interplay between parasites and functionaries (see Figure 1). As parasites continue to proliferate, their presence is likely to be eventually acknowledged. When exactly this takes place is context-specific; fields differ in how strictly rules are observed, the consequences of breaking rules, the general norms around rule-following, and the capacity of functionaries to monitor and intervene. Parasites may be exposed when shared awareness and concern becomes severe enough to spark a concerted response from institutional inhabitants who voluntarily bring a problem to the public eye (Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001). There may also be a public scandal that can trigger widespread moral condemnation by other institutional actors and outsiders (Desai, 2011). A public scandal may take place when a

single organization or a small number of organizations end up in the spotlight due to the presence of parasites. This kind of organization-specific scandal can spill over to other organizations in the field. In some cases, this can simply be guilt by association – whereby actors operating in the same field are punished (Roulet, 2015; Yu, Sengul, & Lester, 2008). In other cases, publicly shamed organizations can point to others that are plagued by the same problem to alleviate negative reputational effects (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012). Another way for a scandal to break is when the presence of parasites becomes publicly framed as an institution-level problem. This can happen when several actors are exposed simultaneously in the same wrongdoing case. An example of this is the scandal involving Petrobras and Odebrecht in Brazil, which undermined various institutions and organizations and brought down the government (Signor, Love, Vallim, Raupp, & Olatunji, 2019).

Acknowledgement of extensive parasites can cause legitimacy threats to the institution itself and organizations operating in relevant institutional fields. For example, contract cheating by university students in Australia became widespread enough that an investigation was conducted, leading to the discovery of over 1,000 students from 16 different universities who had employed the services of an essay mill (Visentin, 2015). Media pressure prompted the government to order the Australian body overseeing higher education standards to review student plagiarism across the sector (Van Onselen, 2014). This case came to be known as the MyMaster scandal, named after the now defunct essay mill in question. The MyMaster scandal generated legitimacy threats for the implicated universities as well as other Australian institutions of higher education and science more broadly (Bretag, 2019).

In cases where the number and/or impact of parasites remains low, parasites will likely not draw attention or reactions from institutional functionaries. However, in such situations, the

presence of parasites will also likely have a relatively small impact. If parasite numbers grow, institutional functionaries will start to take note, monitor, and perhaps begin policing activities. In response, parasites will try to evade and hide, perhaps tweaking some of their practices or offerings within the institution. As we will go on to show, in some cases functionaries do little more than monitor parasites, due to a lack of motivation or resources. The bottom line is, however, that when parasites are widespread and they become noticeable to insiders as well as outsiders, changes in the institution will tend to follow.

Parasites and Institutional change: Drift, Layering, and Reform

The proliferation and discovery of institutional parasites will tend to lead to institutional change processes. As shown in Figure 1, we outline three potential change pathways: drift, layering, and reform. Drift refers to situations where institutional functionaries are disinterested in or incapable of reining in parasites, leading to the gradual degradation of an institution and the normalization of parasites. Layering is the introduction of new rules atop old ones to intercept parasites and preserve the institution, but often leads to a hollowing out of institutions. Reform is the reshuffling of extant institutional arrangement by removing rules and routines as well as adding new ones that aims to target the root cause of parasite emergence and revitalize the institution.

Institutional Drift. In cases where there is a lack of capacity or interest in intervening, parasites are likely to continue proliferating. The consequence of this tends to be institutional drift: actors participating in institutional practices stop adhering to institutional rules and turn to deviant practices (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b). These deviant practices drive changes in actor roles and behaviors within the institutional arrangement, eventually leading to the erosion of trust in the institution and its elite actors (Voronov et al., 2022). For instance, with emerging evidence suggesting that close to half of all human rights audits in garment supply chains are unreliable

(Kuruvilla & Li, 2021), it is conceivable that the trust of the public, politicians, and other stakeholders towards supply chain governance and ethical garment production may deteriorate to the point where such audits lack any legitimacy. When trust in institutional practices is undermined, an institution can become permanently stigmatized (Vergne, 2012). The upshot is that even if functionaries manage to push parasites out, the institution can still have a reputation of being plagued by parasites. This can mean even reformed institutions can remain stigmatized for years after the parasites have gone (Fine, 2012).

Onoma (2010) recounts a case of institutional drift as a result of an influx of parasites. A newly institutionalized land documentation system in Kenya was exploited by deviant actors posing as legitimate sellers of land who would forge the land documentation required in purchasing new lands and sell them to unsuspecting citizens. This scam was made possible by a shared belief in such documents as guarantors of land rights. The state did not intervene in the parasites' activities and as a result, the property rights regime in Kenya underwent drift. Politicians began engaging in similar practices as these deviant actors, further damaging the legitimacy of the land rights regime. In the case of essay mills, we see institutional drift occurring when institutional functionaries in universities turn a blind eye to contract cheating. This could undermine trust in university degrees as guarantors of a certain skillset. Consequently, it is easy to imagine how the entire university institution could be placed in jeopardy. These examples demonstrate what institutional drift might look like in practice; a reluctance to intercept the parasite problem will tend to lead to parasitic practices becoming more widely accepted and adopted by legitimate actors eventually leading to institutional decline. Institutional functionaries are likely to identify drift, with the passage of time at least. It may be possible to reverse the course of institutional drift when new functionaries are appointed and are

put under external pressure to ‘clean up’ an institution or, for example, motivated functionaries are provided with sufficient resources to stop the parasites.

Institutional Layering. Institutional layering refers to an institutional change process where new institutional rules are introduced atop existing ones, generating new concurrent institutional processes and actors (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b). Multiplying layers of rules tends to eventually alter the logic of the institution, which potentially jeopardizes the production of substantive outcomes and leads to a hollowing out of the institution. Layering happens when institutional functionaries who are capable of the enforcement of institutional rules recognize the proliferation of parasites and seek to address the problem in a way that maintains the institution. Considerable enforcement capacity by institutional functionaries is a necessary condition for layering to take place. These maintenance efforts may take the form of field-configuring events (Hardy & Maguire, 2010) such as conferences and roundtables, which show institutional functionaries are ‘doing something’ about parasitic threats. For instance, the emergence of essay mills was followed by a flurry of discussions, panels and studies calling for action (Newton, 2018). Sometimes these initiatives can simply remain as talking shops. But in other contexts, they can provide impetus for enforcement along with policy proposals for specific types of policing and repair.

Policing comprises various types of attempts to pre-empt, monitor, and catch parasites. It aims at “ensuring compliance through enforcement, auditing, and monitoring” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 230). This is often costly for legitimate actors partaking in core institutional processes, as has been the case in the global banking industry, where tax evasion and avoidance practices of rogue wealth managers have led to increased scrutiny by institutional enforcers, which in turn has generated higher costs for banks working with international clients (Muzio,

Faulconbridge, Gabbioneta, & Greenwood, 2016). Previous research tells us that when an institution is faced with severe disruptions, institutional functionaries may attempt to reverse undesirable developments through repair efforts (Herepath & Kitchener, 2016). An example of repair can be found in the field of media, which has come under legitimacy threats from fake news producers and organizations (Tandoc, 2019). Institutional functionaries such as media associations have responded by pushing media organizations to undertake various types of measures to deal with the problem while attempting to police fake news providers. Aside from policing activities such as intensifying fact-checking measures (Graves, 2016), media organizations have been compelled to place increasing focus on high-quality journalism through use of explanatory reporting (Maheswari, 2016). They have also collaborated with other actors generally considered legitimate such as academics (Ireton & Posetti, 2018) to increase the transparency of the digital information ecosystem and rebuild trust among their audiences (West, 2017).

When functionaries seek to maintain an institution and simultaneously get rid of parasites, they can preserve the institutional arrangement that parasites rely upon. Tweaks to institutional rules made by functionaries may drive gradual institutional change, but these changes are unlikely to eject the highly adaptive parasites that know their way around the extant institutional arrangement (for an account of actors adapting to gradual institutional changes, see Lamberg & Pajunen, 2010). This leads to a game of cat and mouse (Ozcan & Gurses, 2018) where parasites attempt to out-flank the ever-increasing enforcement efforts of functionaries. This is reminiscent of the process of sedimentation suggested by Cooper and colleagues (1996) whereby the introduction of a new organizational archetype results in an oscillation between order and disorder as actors vie for their preferred arrangement.

The typical result of this cat and mouse game is further layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b) of the institution: new bureaucratic functions and policies requiring new types of expertise and staff training; new intermediaries designed to prevent parasites; new technologies to spot and protect against parasites. As more rules, regulations, and standards are introduced, the complexity of institutional structures increases. This, in turn, produces more opacity as well as opportunities for decoupling and thus can create new openings for parasites and a hollowing out of the institution, as highlighted in our model. For instance, as essay mills have faced increasing policing through plagiarism software, they have also become more sophisticated to avoid detection. Prosecution of contract cheating cases has become more difficult as the most obvious sources of detection (file metadata and seemingly plagiarized writing) are now taken into account by many essay mills (Newton, 2018). This has led to more sophisticated features in the misconduct tracing software as well as more intensive faculty training in many universities. Despite all these policing efforts, essay mills are not deterred, and continue to bombard new student cohorts with their services.

The cat and mouse game may also lead to the generation and creation of actors whose existence is dependent on the existence, and removal, of parasites. These actors are brought in to address a parasite problem and, if they fail – which they often do – become part of a "food chain" that feeds off existing parasites and, subsequently, the host. One example of this is fact-checking organizations such as Snopes and BBC Reality Check that have grown in size and funding in the past decade in response to increasing concerns about 'fake news'. More recently, tools for checking the authenticity of photographs or algorithm-based software for identifying fake news have been developed (Tandoc, 2019). Though these make the media institution more

robust, they also add layers of complexity on to various organizations and make it more laborious for media consumers to make sure the content they view can be trusted.

Institutional Reform. Institutional functionaries' responses to parasites may drive institutional reform. Reform entails reconfiguring the existing institutional arrangement by removing rules that benefit or enable parasites and instituting new rules that work against them. Reform is a considerable, intentional change process that often requires functionaries with significant resources and authority. Institutional reform is usually an alternative to layering. However, it may also take place after layering, if previous efforts of functionaries were ineffective. Reform and layering may also take place simultaneously if some systems are changed while some old structures simultaneously persist. As the literature tells us, moments of crisis may rouse arguments and action against the prevailing institutional arrangement, even among powerful insiders (Clemente & Roulet, 2015; Dansou & Langley, 2012). Institutional reform begins with institutional functionaries acknowledging that parasites benefit from the extant institutional arrangement.

Institutional reform targets the root conditions of institutional parasites: the complexity of institutional structures, the demand for and supply of parasites, and opportunities for parasitism. In global supply chains, one of the central problems related to the emergence of parasites is that the factories in low-income countries need to hold a broad variety of certificates because different clients require a different certificate mix (Kuruvilla, 2021: 48-64). The costs associated with this certificate mix combined with low-cost requirements imposed by clients (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021) generates demand for parasites as a cost-reducing solution. Indeed, one longitudinal case study has demonstrated that when supply chains were simplified, there were increases in audit compliance and a reduction in audit violations (Kuruvilla, 2021: 235). The

European Union has begun taking steps to simplify the certificate field by creating one set of standards that are mandatory instead of the myriad voluntary certificates currently in place (EU Commission, 2022). This simplification of the field is likely to alter the institutional arrangement of global supply chains, and potentially drastically reduce the demand for audit cheating consultants. This could potentially bring about the decline of this type of parasite.

Continuing with the example of essay mills, institutional reform could target various conditions that enable parasite emergence. Opportunities and demand for parasites could be diminished by moving to face-to-face evaluation and assessment. This would prevent the provision of course assignments written by someone else. Decreasing class sizes would allow lecturers to know students better and follow their progress more closely. This would make them better judges of each individual student's ability. As a more drastic reorganization of the institutional arrangement, reducing or eliminating student tuition by moving to different funding models would dampen incentives for universities to attract ever more students. This would diminish both opportunities and demand for parasites.

The global supply chain example also suggests institutional reform is a potential pathway to institutional renewal. Institutional renewal refers to processes that improve the delivery of formally stipulated, desired outcomes of an institution (Montgomery & Dacin, 2020). The removal of complications from the institutional arrangement in global supply chains allows for a more efficient production of goods and services by actors in the field. Some persistent human rights issues are at the same time alleviated, which translates into fewer legitimacy concerns for the field and the institution more broadly. In Montgomery and Dacin's (2020) study of the restoration of Detroit's public water services, it was crucial that the new system was designed so that water was delivered to Detroiters in ways that corresponded to specific purposes –

reinforcement of public employment, affordable access to water, and so on – that various groups held important. It was not only important that water was delivered, but that it was delivered in a way perceived appropriate by the institution's inhabitants. This highlights the importance of the institution's purpose or spirit in successful institutional reform (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b).

The measures taken when reforming an institution can range from modest to severe; what is important is that the measures target the root causes of parasite emergence and proliferation whilst maintaining the purpose of the institution. Rather than leading to a cycle of parasitism like drift and layering, institutional reform has the potential to lead to institutional renewal (Ansell et al., 2015; Montgomery & Dacin, 2020). The implication here is that parasites can activate institutional change processes that may revitalize an institution.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have shown how institutional parasites emerge due to complexity, opacity, and decoupling and develop due to tolerance, normalization and functionality. Eventually, however, the potential for threats to the institution leads institutional functionaries to engage in repairing and policing activities. This can trigger three change pathways: drift, layering and reform. In this paper we make three interrelated contributions to the literature on institutional change and maintenance. Firstly, we conceptualize the institutional parasite as a new type of institutional actor that simultaneously maintains and undermines an institution. Secondly, observing the interactions between parasites and functionaries, we theorize how institutional change can be a result of a blending of bottom-up and top-down drivers. Finally, we highlight the complex dynamics and blurred boundaries between institutional change and maintenance by focusing on the distinction between institutional structures and purpose.

The Parasite as a New Type of Institutional Actor

Mahoney and Thelen (2010b) explored how parasitic actors emerge where the capacity for enforcement of institutional rules is low, though expectations for compliance are high. They argued parasitic actors carry out actions that contradict the "spirit" of an institution, thus undermining the institution to the point it might collapse. An example of such parasitic actors are the deviant actors in Kenya (Onoma, 2010) who exploited a newly institutionalized system of land documentation to sell fake documents to citizens. We show how certain parasites can maintain an institution in the short term but can cause incredible damage in the long term. Simply put, the actors in Onoma's study (2010) are significantly different to essay mills in the same way that a leech is different to a roundworm. A leech is visibly sucking blood from a body and tends to be removed rather quickly. However, a roundworm may go unnoticed for fairly long stretches of time, but, if they move into other areas, or if they proliferate too much, they become life threatening.

We have also demonstrated how institutional parasites are more prevalent than originally thought (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010a). Our examples from strongly institutionalized contexts with high-enforcement capacity such as higher education (Newton, 2018) or taxation (Harrington, 2019) shows that a lack of enforcement capacity is not a necessary condition for the emergence of institutional parasites. We have argued that this is because parasites are elusive, and they tend to be difficult to detect in complex institutional environments (Wijen, 2014). They are also very good at adapting in the face of increased enforcement efforts (Lamberg & Pajunen, 2010). Parasites have a unique relationship with institutional values, norms, and practices. They know very well how to comply with norms and perform practices, but only tend to do so to the extent that compliance is required to extract resources. Some parasites, such as predatory academic publishers or journals, tend to be peripheral to the field. Other parasites can be more central. For

instance, a university professor may moonlight as an essay ghost-writer. Whatever the parasite's position in the field, it can play a role in core institutional processes, and it can be (covertly) linked to core institutional actors. The institutional parasite can be characterized as a rogue actor which dismisses the ethos (Voronov & Weber, 2016) and spirit (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b) of an institution, yet takes part in core institutional processes and thrives on the preservation of the status quo.

Research has highlighted the role of custodians in maintaining institutions (Crawford & Dacin, 2021; Dacin et al., 2019; Montgomery & Dacin, 2020). However, this approach overlooks the variety of actors that can play a role in maintaining an institution be they rank-and-file members reconciling breakdowns via institutionalized scripts (Lok & De Rond, 2013) or simply through the regularity of everyday interactions (Voronov et al., 2022). An institutional parasite is an actor with no authority or power; however, they can play a role in maintaining an institution when they enable processes that help legitimate actors in an institution to improve particular outcomes, at least in the short term. This can be seen in the cases of essay mills, which may enable an increased intake of tuition-paying students. It can also be seen in audit cheating agents that enable a larger supply of products in global supply chains. A further example is tax evasion-enabling wealth managers which facilitate exchange in the global finance system. Despite the role institutional parasites may play in maintaining an institution through interactions with institutional functionaries, they can inadvertently create changes in an institution.

Parasites as sources of institutional change

Unlike institutional entrepreneurs (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), parasites do not seek to transform institutions or create new ones. On the contrary, it is in the interests of parasites to preserve the status quo and maintain the institutions they inhabit. However, parasites can be

instigators of institutional change if they proliferate. When this happens, they can inadvertently prompt powerful actors to respond to their deviant behavior. By introducing the concept of institutional parasites, we join others in pointing out how institutional change is not necessarily brought about by 'heroic' actors (Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Levy & Scully, 2007). At the same time, we resist explanations of change that emphasize 'natural' institutional evolution (Hoffman, 1999). Instead, our model highlights the role of interactions between actors as a source of institutional change, building on recent interactionist approaches (Voronov et al., 2022; Voronov & Weber, 2016). This strand of literature focuses on the micro-foundations of institutional change in the form of interactions between individuals who inhabit institutions. However, unlike most literature theorizing interactionist approaches to institutional change, our focus is on organizational and organization-like actors.

Our model shows how parasites trigger change through a blending of bottom-up (Smets et al., 2012) and top-down (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006) processes. We show how various types of actors are present and active in institutional change processes involving parasites, yet often there is little intent to exact change. This is because both parasites and functionaries benefit from stability. The tension that results from the preference for stability and the (eventual) disruptive threat of parasites tends to lead to a mix of intent-driven and unreflexive reactions to change initiatives.

At the outset, the institutional parasite observes opportunities for exploiting an institutional arrangement. These opportunities may be a result of changes in the institutional arrangement, or a parasite may have spotted a pre-existing opportunity. As parasites take advantage of this opportunity, they can proliferate and become perceived as a threat that can prompt functionaries to act. The change that follows can be institutional drift, layering, and/or

renewal. In the case of drift, parasites are the (unintended) driver and the executor of bottom-up change that arises from parasites going about their usual business. In the other two pathways, changes are driven by institutional functionaries. So even though the change processes are set in motion by parasites, functionaries take deliberate efforts to eliminate the parasite presence. In these cases, change is instigated from the bottom, but driven from the top. These insights contribute to our understanding of the variety of ways that institutions are in constant flux due to actors seeking to perform activities that are at the core of their own existence (Reinecke & Lawrence, 2022; Voronov et al., 2022). In particular, we show how change is driven by the extraction of resources by parasites and attempts to stabilize the institution by functionaries. However, in thinking through the idea that change is created through a desire for stability, we note a final contribution to the literature that sees change and maintenance as dynamically inter-related (Farjoun, 2010; Lok & De Rond, 2013).

Institutional maintenance and change

Our theorization of the parasite has several implications for understandings of institutional change. We focus on institutional change processes that take place as a result of the appearance of deviant actors and note the variety of change processes that parasite emergence may trigger. We suggest that, somewhat unusually, institutional drift may tend to unfold in a fairly linear manner (Amis, Slack & Hinings, 2004). When faced with no enforcement, the proliferation of parasites leads to gradual institutional deterioration. The deterioration is further exacerbated in cases where institutional functionaries join in with the parasitic activities (Onoma, 2010). Institutional layering, in turn, points to a dialectical account of change (Cooper et al., 1996); functionaries set up new rules to repel parasites, who, in turn, counteract these new rules, and so on. The situation never stabilizes, but rather there is an oscillation between periods of new rule

introductions and adaptations. Institutional reform, finally, is best characterized as a transformational change process (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012, 164-165), though with dialectical qualities: functionaries seek to transform the institutional arrangement in a way that would address the root conditions of parasite emergence. These outcomes show how the same phenomenon may prompt various kinds of institutional change – sometimes concurrently – depending on the context. This highlights the open-endedness of institutional change, along with the importance of actor constellations for both institutional change and maintenance.

Importantly, our theorization points to a conundrum in the institutional maintenance (and change) literature that is often overlooked. This is the distinction between maintaining the institutional arrangement (Raynard et al., 2021) and maintaining the integrity of an institution (Ansell et al., 2015; Selznick, 1957: 20). Actors may partake in maintaining the specific constellation of actors, procedures, and rules that keep institutional processes going, especially in situations where the institutional arrangement brings benefits to these actors (Raynard et al., 2021). However, some scholars have noted the importance of the principles according to which institutional outcomes are produced when maintaining institutions. This has been called ethos (Voronov et al., 2022), character (Ansell et al., 2015; Selznick, 1992: 35), as well as purpose and spirit (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010b).

The change processes set off by parasites – drift, layering, and reform – highlight the role of purpose in institutional maintenance as well as rules and norms. Drift is associated with disintegration of purpose in institutional processes due to lack of enforcement (Voronov et al., 2022). In the case of layering, preserving the formal institutional arrangement is given primacy over any corrective action regarding the purpose of an institution. In other words, new rules are

laid down, but maintenance efforts are typically concentrated on maintaining the stability of the institutional arrangement often with little consideration for what the institution is supposed to do.

The reconfiguration efforts we highlight in the reform pathway can also be thought of as a form of institutional maintenance (Heaphy, 2013; Micelotta & Washington, 2013). However, with institutional reform, there tends to be a deeper consideration of the purpose of the institution, and not just a focus on formal arrangements, or technical rules. It may be advantageous to change an institutional arrangement so that institutional rules are effective in ensuring desired outcomes. However, when actors attempt to maintain the purpose of the institution by exacting changes in the arrangement, the lines between institutional maintenance and change become blurred. This blurring shows how, instead of treating institutional change and maintenance as separate constructs and practices, they can be considered mutually constitutive (Farjoun, 2010; Reinecke & Lawrence, 2022). This can give rise to the kind of situation captured in a well-known quote from Lampedusa's novel 'The Leopard': 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will need to change'.

Implications for Future Research and Concluding Remarks

Our theorization of institutional parasites opens several potentially fruitful avenues of future research. The most obvious direction is to explore institutional parasites in different contexts. How do parasites emerge differently in different contexts? Are their ways of concealing themselves different? In what ways, and why? Within institutional fields, do parasites target specific organizations? If so, why? Can there be different types of parasites linked to the same institutional processes?

We have explored parasites as actors and their relationship to institutional change but have paid much less attention to the actors that employ parasites. This begs the question about

what sorts of factors and motivations may drive specific actors to enlist the help of, or at least tolerate, parasites in completing institutional tasks. In a recent essay, Long Ling recounts her experiences in navigating the Chinese People's Party membership, which entails a variety of time-consuming tasks, including government-surveilled online studies, or trainings (Ling, 2022). The aim of such training was to immerse the members deeper into the party values, norms, and general line of thinking. According to Ling, these time-consuming training courses are broadly considered somewhat useless. There are now applications – such as TechXueXi and Xuexi Little Bear – that complete the training on behalf of party members without them having to be present at the computer. In the short term, party members appear to have undertaken their training. However, in the long term, the values of Chinese People's Party will degrade. This example poses questions about the requirements inhabitants (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) face when navigating institutions: when, why, and how do institutions encumber their inhabitants beyond coping, and what kinds of consequences arise from it? It also raises questions about the relationships between different institutional actors and parasites: who do parasites provide benefits to, and in what kinds of situations and contexts? What happens to considerations of parasite threats, or usefulness thereof, if we apply different value bases in evaluating them? We think it makes sense to explore such issues theoretically and empirically.

Another future research direction we identify concerns the institutional work conducted by parasites. Researchers could start by asking whether parasitic activities can be called institutional work. We have suggested parasites tend to be unlikely to seek to influence institutions. However, some might. Certain parasitic actors might have insurrectionary attitudes. Fake news organizations, for instance, may harbor genuine resentment and distrust towards media incumbents, and may seek to shake up the status quo via their activities. Or, a particular

audit cheating consultant might consider supply chain arrangements colonial and justify their activities by such beliefs. Exploring how actors operate despite depending on the institution one wishes to topple might yield interesting insights into institutional contradictions (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010).

Institutional parasites might also provide an interesting empirical context for the study of social evaluations of organizations (Roulet, 2022) and organizational and industry-level stigma (Hudson, 2008). A recent review of the subject has highlighted the relative lack of understanding of stigmatization processes (Zhang, Wang, Toubiana, & Greenwood, 2021). Empirical studies of institutional parasites might yield important insights into the social evaluation processes of parasitic organizations as they commit deviant actions (Piazza et al., 2022): how do they (potentially) become stigmatized over time as they proliferate, become defined, and understood as problematic? Similarly, the relationship between organizational and industry or field level stigma could benefit from studying parasites (Slade Shantz, Fischer, Liu, & Lévesque, 2019). For example, how and under what conditions do parasites stigmatize the field in which they proliferate? And how do organizations manage field-level stigma stemming from parasite proliferation? Furthermore, parasites may offer interesting new observations regarding de-stigmatization (Siltaoja et al., 2020): how do fields or industries shake off the stigma parasites may incur on them?

There is also the question of different responses to parasites. In other words, a better understanding of functionaries is important for learning how to deal with parasites effectively. How do functionaries become aware of a parasite presence? What kinds of processes or conditions lead to functionaries activating in cases where parasites are observed? How do they decide on their responses to parasites? And how do they reinforce their monitoring and

enforcement capacity? Empirical investigations of such questions would allow institutional functionaries to deal with parasites more effectively in the future.

We think there is a connection between parasites and organizational wrongdoing. Parasites tend to be wrongdoers that support an institution in the short term and may be helpful for (supposedly) legitimate organizations, as essay mills demonstrate. Empirical studies of organizational responses to parasites could help us better understand the various types of consequences of responses to wrongdoing (Hersel et al., 2019). On the other hand, empirically studying parasites could offer insights into wrongdoing and institutions – for instance, how wrongdoing may preserve institutional arrangements (Palmer, 2017). Another interesting avenue could be to focus on the types of functionaries that are also social control agents, and how their reactions to wrongdoing by parasites may have unintended consequences (Palmer, 2012).

Finally, regarding one of our core examples, the essay mill, the elephant in the room is of course generative artificial intelligence. We do not think generative AI will replace essay mills, as there are many students out there who are willing to pay someone to take their mind off studying completely. However, studying generative AI and the ways in which it is used in different contexts – such as student cheating – could provide interesting avenues of research into parasitism, and how parasitic practices may spread without the presence of human parasitic actors.

Institutional parasites are a widespread class of deviant actors that may have significant ramifications for institutions. By theorizing such actors, we want to draw attention to the various types of roles deviant actors may have in institutional processes. Parasites remind us of the dangers of overburdening important social systems with too many rules and procedures. But they

also demonstrate how such actors can trigger the revitalization and renewal of an institution. We would, of course, hope our paper will inspire the latter.

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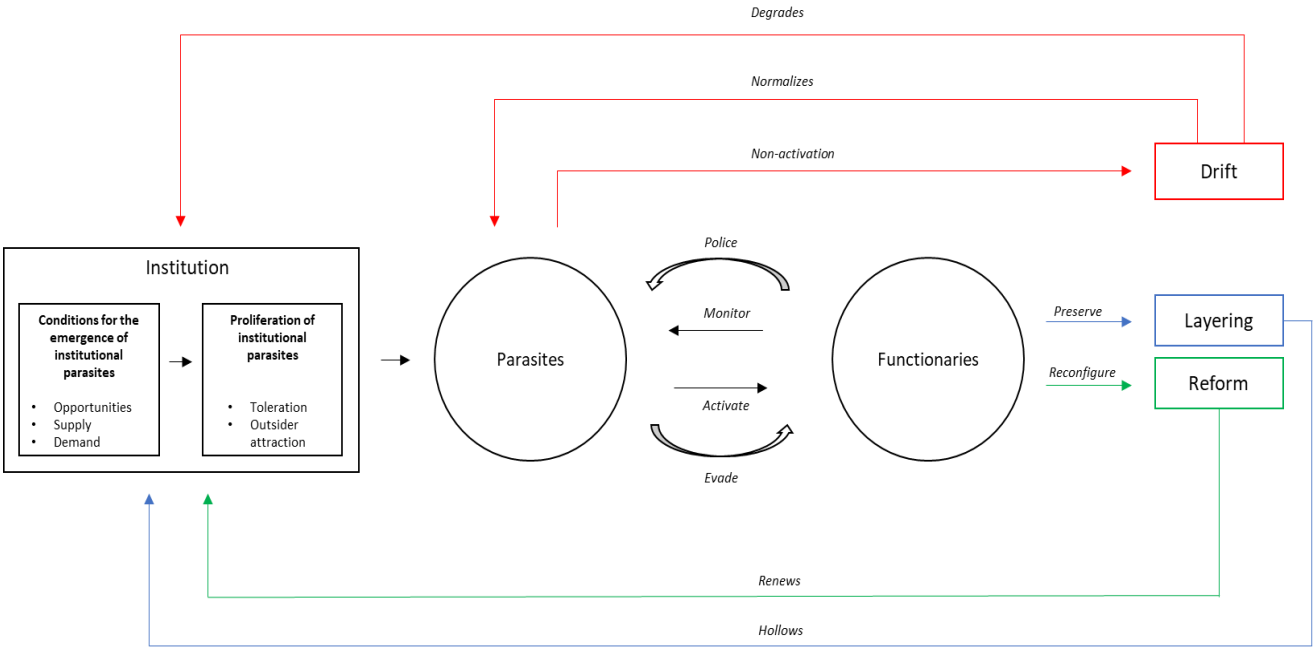

Figure 1. Institutional parasites and their consequences.

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