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# Quiet unintended transitions? Neo-Durkheimian explanation of institutional change

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to resolve a puzzle in the explanation of organisational change, where change appears to be within-form but results unintendedly in a transition between forms, yet first appearances suggest the absence of “noise” of the kind expected during shifts between forms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses qualitative analysis of primary archival and secondary sources on an historical case, analysing the data by coding using categories derived from neo-Durkheimian institutional theory. It examines the case of the cabinet, treated as an organisation, in the British government led by premier Harold Macmillan between 1959 and 1963, when a strategy for increasing hierarchy resulted unintendedly in an isolation dynamic.

**Findings** – It demonstrates that the neo-Durkheimian institutional approach can explain such puzzling cases. Appropriately for a special issue in honour of Mars’ work, it shows that his method of following rule violation and an adapted version of his concept of capture can provide a method of causal process tracing and a causal mechanism for resolving the puzzle.

**Research limitations/implications** – The argument is presented for purposes of theory development, not testing. It examines a single case study in depth.

**Social implications** – The findings demonstrate some of the risks which arise in changing informal institutional ordering, especially within decision-making executives, from the process by which informal institutions shape styles of judgement and decisions driven by those styles then feed back upon those executive bodies.

**Originality/value** – This is the first examination of puzzling unintended between-form transitions, the first to propose an adaptation of Mars’ concept of capture to resolve such puzzles and the first detailed causal process tracing analysis of such a case using neo-Durkheimian institutional theoretic tools. It therefore offers a significant advance in institutional explanation of organisational change.

**Keywords** Institutional change, Cultural theory, Harold Macmillan, Neo-Durkheimian

**Paper type** Research paper

This paper examines a puzzle in the explanation of organisational change – namely, how can change from one institutional form to another arise from a process which might usually be expected to bring a deepening or radicalisation within an institutional form? The puzzle is examined within the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework introduced by the anthropologist and social theorist, Mary Douglas (e.g. 1978/1982, 1986), to the development of which Gerald Mars’s work has made some of the most important contributions. The next section introduces the framework’s theory of organisational change and sets up the puzzling type of case. Then three possible causal

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mechanisms for resolving the puzzle are considered, each taken from Mars's work. The empirical section considers the case study of the cabinet and core executive, considered as an organisation, during the latter years of Harold Macmillan's government in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The analysis section examines the case for evidence of any of the three mechanisms taken from Mars, concluding that his concept of capture can be adapted to enable the theory to explain cases of this puzzling kind. The conclusion draws out implications for the theory and for understanding institutional change.

### **Change in the forms of institutions: a neo-Durkheimian theory**

Most institutional theories of organisations explain adoption and diffusion of empirical forms of formal institutions (e.g. M form in firms, district general form in hospitals, cabinet government), using cost, ideational or regulatory factors (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995/2008; Scott *et al.*, 1994). Often, such frameworks predict only either gradual or catastrophic change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). By contrast, neo-Durkheimian traditions argue that informal institutions are causally key, that generic elementary forms are more significant than empirical ones, and that quite rapid informal institutional change is common. Building on his (1895/1982, p. 45) argument that institutions defined as “modes of action and [...] ways of judging which are independent of the particular individual will” are central to social change, Durkheim, 1912/1995) showed that elementary forms of institutions ritually cultivate ways of classifying; Goffman (1967) demonstrated that informal, quotidian conversation ritual interaction carries the same causal force. Douglas (1978/1982) developed a neo-Durkheimian typology of four elementary forms of institutions. She also shifted the explanandum to argue that each elementary institutional form (6, 2014c) of social organisation cultivates a distinct thought style (Douglas, 1986), meaning the manner in which people frame decisions – measured, for example, by their stance towards anomalies in classification, past and future, issue linkage, risk, fallback options in strategy, issue linkages (6, 2011). Thus, people paint their own social organisation in microcosm or in transposed forms on to ways of framing their problems, options, choices (Durkheim and Mauss, 1902-1903/1963, p. 11). Those elementary forms consist in basic structures of informal institutions, distinguished by the limited variation available on Durkheim's (1897/1951, 1925/1961) two dimensions of social integration and social regulation. Social integration is the degree to which relations and actions are governed by accountability to bounded groups or conversely by significantly reduced attachments, save those pursued or abandoned instrumentally; social regulation is the degree to which social relations and activities are governed by accountability to rule and role and constraint by given fact or immutable condition, or conversely by discretion and scope for less fettered choices.

The elementary forms of informal institutions are strong social regulation and integration (hierarchical ordering); weak regulation and integration (individualistic ordering); strong regulation and weak integration (isolate ordering); and weak regulation and strong integration (enclaved ordering) (Douglas, 1978/1982, using her corrected 1996 terminology; 6, 2011).

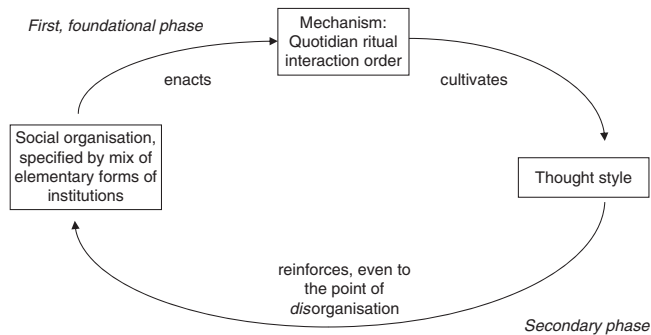
Institutions amplify biases, leading people to think of their world as being only as integrated and regulated as they themselves are socially integrated and regulated by their institutions. The theory therefore proposes a feedback loop, in which each elementary form of informal social organisation cultivates thought styles, which then leads people to act in ways that reinforce that form. This first phase of the theory's feedback loop is the fundamental one (Douglas, 1986, pp. 31-43). In the second phase,

though, these thought styles then lead people to act in ways which buttress those institutions (Figure 1; 6, 2014a).

Institutions cultivate biases in people to seek, deliberately or otherwise, to deepen, amplify and reinforce that institutional ordering, both by blinkering against imagination of other possibilities and by cultivating institutional imperatives to operate in prescribe ways. This is positive feedback (6, 2003; Deutsch, 1966, p. 192; Douglas, 1986, pp. 31-43; Douglas and Mars, 2003; Jervis, 1997, pp. 146-176). It gives rise to within-form change (6, 2003). Douglas and Mars (2003) emphasise these “ratchets” in radicalising dynamics in enclaves. Such transitions can be “quiet” in the special sense that few people within the zone governed by the prevailing institutional form of organising question the change by deepening and reinforcement: any “noise” takes the form of assertion of within-form imperatives (see Figure 2).

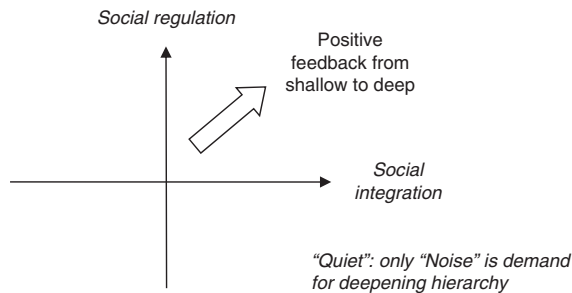
This deepening can even reach the point of their disorganisation, through the undermining of other offsetting institutions, through forcing out anomalies and by creating imperatives for excessive reliance upon the instruments offered by those institutions (Durkheim, 1897/1951, 1893/1984, Book III). Mars (2007) studied just such a process of reinforcement to the point of disorganisation in his work on an Italian family restaurant.

When people are disadvantaged, disappointed (a mechanism stressed by Thompson *et al.*, 1990) or cast asunder by institutional reinforcement in one elementary form of organisation, institutions cultivate reasons to try to behave in ways which will assert other forms of organisation against the first one. This is the case of corrective,



**Note:** A two-phase feedback loop

**Figure 1.**  
The structure of explanation in neo-Durkheimian institutional theory



**Note:** The example of hierarchy

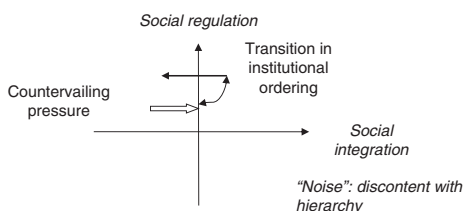
**Figure 2.**  
Positive feedback within elementary forms

dampening, countervailing or negative feedback (Deutsch, 1966, p. 88; Jervis, 1997, pp. 125-146), which is the key process for bringing about between-form change. Mars (2007) studied these dynamics in his work on the “takeover” of a group of consultants by one of its members, and in his early work with Mars and Altman (1983) on the emergence of individualistic ordering in response to the pursuit of hierarchy in Soviet Georgia. Normally, this sort of change is “noisy” in the sense that discontent is voiced by someone claiming to speak for the disappointed, disadvantaged or excluded (see Figure 3).

Similarly, it is straightforward to understand how both self-reinforcement and countervailing can take place unintendedly. In unintended negative feedback, noise will be “*sotto voce*” – that is to say, it will be evident in, e.g., evasive or circumventive or counter-exploitative behaviour.

But this account of the dynamics of change raises a fundamental theoretical and empirical puzzle. How are cases to be explained, which appear to be ones of unintended transitions between forms without any great evidence of the phenomena which are the hallmarks of negative feedback, even in their *sotto voce* behavioural manifestations, because people working under a given set of institutions believe that they are actually pursuing goals which amount to within-form change? Can the neo-Durkheimian institutional framework satisfactorily handle cases of quiet unintended transition between forms? Presumably, the approach must either explain them, by arguing that if we look carefully, we shall find either *sotto voce* behaviour or noise; alternatively, it must accept them as genuine but find different mechanisms from its repertoire to explain them.

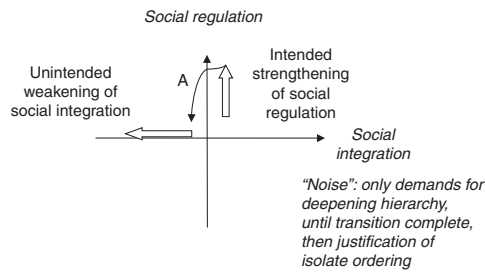
One apparently straightforward Durkheimian answer to the puzzle of whether and how within-form effort can lead unintendedly to between-form transitions is presumably inconsistent with the fundamental axioms of the theory. The theory holds that the four elementary forms are the sources of causal force for change, whereas Durkheim’s two dimensions of social regulation and social integration by which the forms are distinguished are measures of variation only. Neither strong and weak regulation nor strong and weak integration constitute separate causal dynamics that could, of themselves, bring about effects upon the other dimension. Rather, their combinations carry the two feedback dynamics. Therefore, it cannot be a full explanation that, for example, efforts to deepen hierarchy (which may well be intended in effect, although not people are unlikely to use that social science term) in fact reinforce only strong regulation but thereby weaken integration unintendedly to produce isolate ordering. This statement might be a correct neo-Durkheimian description of a trajectory (see Figure 4). Yet it must be given an explanation in terms of the interaction of elementary forms with empirical-level features of the means by which



**Note:** An example of transition from hierarchy to isolate ordering

**Figure 3.**  
Negative feedback  
between forms

**Figure 4.**  
At best a  
description, not an  
explanation



**Note:** An example of transition beginning in intended deepening of hierarchy but ending in transition to isolate ordering

intended action met particular constraints or answered the actions of others. In this case, it must be something about the particular way that people sought to deepen hierarchy that led to weakening integration. But what could the content of the directed causal arrow labelled “A” in Figure 4 be?

### Quiet transitions between forms, contrary to intentions: method and mechanisms

Mars’s work suggests three possible ways in which the neo-Durkheimian institutional approach could deal with the puzzle. The first explains apparent quiet unintended between-form change arising from intended within-form change as cases where actors are misled by their own blinkers about what counts as behaviour that will sustain within-form deepening or perpetuation. Mars’s (1988) explains transitions in Israeli kibbutzim from enclave to other forms in this way. He argues that blinkering effects of the enclaving were so great that boundary-spanning work was not recognised as blurring those boundaries and thereby changing the predominant organisational form.

The second possibility explains these cases by arguing, as Mars (2007) did in his study on the Michelin-starred family-run restaurant in Emilia-Romagna, that what where such noise as is evident appears to be within-form in character, what is really going on is self-disorganising positive feedback and that disorganisation opens space either for a recrudescence of the same form but in new units (e.g. schism in the enclaved family restaurant) or else for replacement by other forms when the first form is no longer effectively operative and so no longer needs to be revolted against, circumvented or evaded or controlled (e.g. new individualistically run restaurants by refugees from the former enclave).

A third strategy, which Mars also deploys in the 1988 study and also in his 2009 study on the East End warehouse, is again to explain the anomalous appearance of quiet contrary-to-intended between-form change by showing how the process of “capture” of key resources occurred, but was legitimated within the moral vocabulary of the first form while actually constituting a change in power relations which brought about a shift towards new forms. Both strategies resolve the anomaly by showing that what is really going is *sotto voce* or behavioural negative feedback.

If Mars’s strategy of explaining what appear to be cases of quiet contrary-to-intended between-form change is to be sustained, then it must not only deal with hard cases, but it must also enable us empirically to distinguish between “blinkering” as negative feedback presented as the “continued rhetoric” of positive feedback, self-disorganising

positive feedback which clears space for between-form replacement, and negative feedback by quiet “capture”.

Mars’s central claim about how, empirically, this might be done, as a matter of method, rests on the insight in his (1982) classic study, *Cheats at Work*. That book argued that each elementary form cultivates a distinct style in which rules are broken, and officially sanctioned norms are violated, circumvented or subverted. Violation of norms, just as Durkheim (1895/1982) argued in his scandalous claim about the “normality” of crime, is not only a feature of disorganised phases of the elementary forms, but of their organising and provisionally viable forms too. Throughout his career, Mars’s work on crime, deviance and unethical behaviour has not merely treated these things as interesting explananda, but as key issues for methodology. For Mars, social organisation must be measured in its register of rule-breaking, for attending to rule-making and rule-compliance alone is both incomplete and risks misleading the researcher, because differences of thought style are sometimes clearer in the register of rule-breaking than they are in the register of rule-compliance. Mars’s argument leads us to expect that understanding the different roles that routine and normal violation of officially sanctioned rules and norms play will tell us in cross-sectional analysis which forms is pre-eminent, and in diachronic studies help us distinguish causal pathways of within- and between-form change. Thereby, we are enabled to distinguish between cases of blinkering and continued rhetoric covering negative feedback, and capture and disorganisation which opens up space, by their different patterns of rule violation.

In quiet unintended transitions between forms by blinkering and continued rhetoric, we might expect rule violation to be of a kind that actually sustains blinkering and bias in, say, hierarchical mode, even when its effect on organisation is to shift informal institutions towards isolate ordering. In that case, it must reinforce misplaced trust. If, on the other hand, capture is behind what appear at first sight to be quiet contrary-to-intended between-form changes, then we might expect the process of capture itself to be a violation or else to lead to new opportunities for violation. It should rest more heavily upon power rather than on trust. In disorganisation, we should expect rule violation to be of a form which will undermine well-placed trust. The disorganisation and replacement mechanism is therefore the reverse of blinkering in the register of rule violation and trust, while capture lies orthogonally to them both. Table I summarises the contrasts among the three mechanisms.

Another possibility is that two or all three mechanisms might be operating simultaneously. In that case, the challenge of distinguishing between them empirically becomes both more important and more difficult, in the quantity of data needed and in the confidence that can be attached to coding.

This paper uses a case study of what appears to be a hard case of apparent quiet, contrary-to-intended between-form change, to examine whether any of these three strategies derived from Mars’s work might satisfactorily explain it either as a case of negative feedback (blinkering or capture) or as one of positive feedback leading to disorganisation and replacement. If any of these approaches can work on a hard case, then the neo-Durkheimian institutional approach is buttressed. If on the other hand, none provides a convincing explanation, then either a new strategy of explaining such cases is needed or else the neo-Durkheimian tradition would need to recognise such cases for what they appear to be, and find some way to accommodate them. In either situation, therefore, some gain in theoretical development should be achieved.

Mechanism	Feedback type	Content	Role of rule violation and trust	Explanation for the fact that between-form noise is suppressed
Blinkering and stolen rhetoric	Disguised negative feedback	Initial strength of hierarchy misleads actors, prevents recognition of entry into isolate ordering until much later (continued, rather than "stolen" rhetoric)	Rule violation reinforces misplaced trust	Actors generally do not recognise transition
Disorganisation and replacement	Disguised positive feedback in hierarchy, then disguised positive feedback in isolate ordering	Reinforcement of hierarchy proceeds so far as to lead to disorganisation of hierarchy, and people then reach for isolate ordering in the space opened up by the disorganisation of hierarchy	Rule violation undermines well-placed trust	Actors only recognise justifications for alternative institutional ordering when hierarchy has already reached disorganisation
Capture	Disguised negative feedback	Some actors in isolate ordering capture resources and recognise the fact that this does undermine hierarchical ordering, but are able to legitimate this with other actors in terms recognised in hierarchy ("stolen rhetoric")	Rule violation violates trust, in fact replaces power based on trust with power without consent	Disadvantaged actors do not recognise the transition

**Table I.**  
Candidate explanatory mechanisms which could be described by arrow "A" in Figure 3

### Case study, data, coding and background

This paper considers organisational change in Harold Macmillan's cabinet in British government between 1957 and 1963, with special reference to the final three years.

Cabinets are organisations: in constitutional law, they have defined status, tasks, powers and authority, responsibilities and internal structure of roles, a defined membership and rules for recruitment and dismissal. They are supported by a discrete secretariat under a Permanent Secretary like any other department of state. Full and committee meetings are regularised. Their external relations with parties and departments of state exhibit all the features of open systems. We shall see below how decision making is undertaken in response to events, feedback from public opinion and interest groups, etc. Yet government's interior cores are not passive, merely responding to external forces: they have a rich organisational life of internal dynamics and informal institutions.



Cabinets in British Government provide good case studies to test theories of organisational change, because we have rich sources of publicly available data about them. This paper draws on an extensive study using ministerial papers released into the National Archives after 30 years as well as ministers' private papers archived in Oxford, Cambridge and London, undertaken to test a neo-Durkheimian theory of political judgement in selected fields of public policy by comparing the impacts of contrasting social organisation upon thought styles in the three governments (6, forthcoming). To code governments for changes in informal social organisation, greatest use was made of ministers' and senior civil servants' diaries, memoirs, biographies, some secondary historical studies and archived personal papers; some information can be found in papers in the National Archives on changing formal institutions of social organisation. Almost every published diary, memoir and biography for a cabinet minister in these governments was read, numbering some forty books for Macmillan's government, as well as 50 articles and a similar number of secondary historiographical books. Each of these sources was therefore read and annotated for provisional codes indicating aspects of elementary form, and whether they applied to a whole government or a distinct zone within it. Codes for social organisation in governments were those of positions and relations within elementary forms (6, forthcoming), such as superior and subaltern in hierarchy, patron and client in individualism, structural despot and structural serf in isolate ordering. Diaries, memoirs and biographies reveal information about social organisation in government in a huge variety of ways, ranging from overt discussion of the issue through to presentation of events which exhibit the nature of relations, relative power, dependency and independence. Codes from the entire set of sources for each government were then identified chronologically, aggregated and compared. Inconsistencies in coding from different sources were resolved by revisiting the full set to sources to identify miscoding. Typically, miscoding arose from considering events in isolation rather than against the wider pattern of contemporaneous events in a government. High-level codes for elementary forms were assembled by aggregating measures of style and either identifying relative weightings or, where possible, relations between forms in each government's mix during each phase. Codes for thought style focused on the values taken on strategy schedule (e.g. fallbacks and reserve preferences: 6, 2015b), stance towards anomaly, risk, past and future, reliance upon guile, issue linkage, classification style: many are standard codes (e.g. Thompson, 1992, pp. 199-202), while others have developed specifically for studying political decision making (6, 2011). In coding for styles of judgement, greatest use was made of ministerial and cabinet papers released into the National Archives. This paper focuses particularly on industrial relations. For the Macmillan and Douglas-Home governments, 120 files from the National Archives were digitally photographed in whole or in relevant parts amounting to 18,000 photographs of documents, and 35 key Cabinet Conclusions downloaded. Some 30 books and 25 articles of secondary history were examined. All were read and all were annotated in detail, with provisional codes applied on measures of stance towards anomaly, strategy, risk, time, issue linkage. Again, these codes were aggregated for each government's work on each policy issue, compared, and where inconsistencies appeared, the sources were revisited and miscodings identified to eliminated inconsistencies. Again, styles of political judgement are exhibited in decisions rather than stated baldly. Therefore, coding cannot be mechanical but must be done inferentially. That is to say, alternative possible codes must be considered, implications derived for expectations about associated aspects of a decision

(including other codes), and full sets of sources re-examined to look for evidence of those expected associated aspects. The full monograph from the study (6, forthcoming) presents a number of these inferential arguments for and against candidate codings in detail.

Table II presents a list of key individuals who figure in the case study.

Macmillan acceded to the premiership in 1957 after Eden's resignation following the Suez débâcle. He quickly restored Britain's relations with the USA, going on in 1961 to develop excellent relations with President Kennedy. In 1959, Macmillan led the Conservatives to their third consecutive victory, with an increased majority. The government pursued an extensive programme of decolonisation, in which Iain Macleod played a key role. In cold war policy, Macmillan made important contributions to the achievement of the first Test Ban Treaty; the foreign secretary, Home, was pivotal in diplomacy over Laos at Geneva. As Chancellor from 1960 until 1962, Selwyn Lloyd introduced major changes in economic policy, including the establishment of the tripartite National Economic Development Council. In the last year of his premiership, Macmillan's government was deeply damaged by the Profumo affair, although De Gaulle's veto of Britain's first application for membership of the European Economic Community was a much bigger policy setback. In October 1963, Macmillan resigned due to ill-health, and the Conservatives continued in office for another year under Home, who disclaimed his peerage and became Sir Alec Douglas-Home to fight and win a seat in the Commons in order to enter Number 10.

Eden's administration had moved rapidly into isolate ordering in which Eden himself increasingly occupied the position of the "structural despot" (Coyle, 1994; 6, 2011, 2014a, b, 2015a), but after the Suez fiasco damaged him, the prime minister was effectively forced to retreat into a "structural serf" position. The leadership contest led, predictably, to a short period of predominantly individualistic ordering in which Butler and Macmillan and their cliques competed for power. On Macmillan's victory, the lightly refashioned government moved quickly into a largely hierarchical ordering. Butler accepted his subaltern position; by contrast with Wilson's Labour government, no other minister sought to develop a clique of personal clients; nor was there any personal "kitchen cabinet" in Number 10. After the 1958 crisis when the chancellor and junior finance ministers' resigned (Cooper, 2011) and after Lord Salisbury's early departure, there were few voluntary ministerial resignations until 1962. Macmillan's series of reshuffles were, until the drama of 1962, as much driven by hierarchical "fine-tuning" adjustments as the government's approach to managing the economy was. After Thorneycroft's departure, Macmillan rarely negotiated with ministers for their support. Macmillan's system of policy reviews set a framework, but he avoided micro-management. Disagreements among ministers, such as the famous ones that Macleod had with Home and Sandys were driven by departmental rather than personal interests. Yet a zone of individualistic ordering remained in high foreign policy matters of relations with the superpowers for the prime minister and between the premier and his foreign and commonwealth secretaries and, after 1961, the minister responsible for negotiating with the EEC over the British membership application. However, Washington's decisions over Suez had reinforced Britain's subaltern position in a western alliance which all Conservatives could now appreciate was hierarchically ordered. That experience, with the US disapproval of his 1959 Moscow trip (Mauer, 1998) curbed Macmillan's efforts to contravene directly expressed presidential views. Enclaving was confined to a marginalised imperialist clique on the backbenches around Salisbury; when Powell and Thorneycroft returned to government, even the possibility of a proto-monetarist enclave was extinguished.

<i>Name (title as it was in 1957-1963; subsequent titles not shown)</i>	<i>Role in cabinet 1957-1963</i>
Harold Macmillan RA Butler	Prime Minister, January 1957-October 1963 Home Secretary January 1957-July 1962; Deputy prime Minister July 1962-October 1963; Former Chancellor and Leader of the House. Had been rival to Macmillan for leadership in 1957
Iain Macleod	Minister of Labour and National Service 1955-October 1959; Secretary of State for the Colonies, October 1959-July 1961; Chancellor of Duchy of Lancaster and Conservative party chairman, October 1961-1963
Selwyn Lloyd	Foreign Secretary, 1955-July 1960; Chancellor of Exchequer, July 1960-1962
Earl of Home	Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 1955-July 1960; Leader, House of Lords, March 1957-July 1960; Foreign Secretary, July 1960-October 1963
Duncan Sandys	Secretary of State for Defence, January 1957-October 1959; Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, July 1960-1962; Secretary of State for Colonies, July 1962-October 1964
Peter Thorneycroft	Chancellor of Exchequer January 1957-1958 Resigned when cabinet refused to agree to his proposed expenditure cuts
Enoch Powell	Minister of Aviation, July 1960-1962; Secretary of State for Defence, July 1962-October 1964
Reginald Maudling	Financial Secretary, January 1957-1958; resigned with Thorneycroft July 1960-October 1963: Secretary of State for Health
Jack Profumo Edward Heath	Paymaster-General, January 1957-October 1959; President, Board of Trade, October 1959-1961; Secretary of State for the Colonies, October 1961-July 1962; Chancellor of Exchequer, July 1962-October 1964
John Hare	Secretary of State for War, July 1960-June 1963 Chief Whip, 1955-October 1959; Minister of Labour and National Service, October 1959-July 1960; Lord Privy Seal (responsible for EEC application), February 1960-October 1963
Richard Wood Robert Cecil, Marquess of Salisbury	Secretary of State for War 1956-January 1958; Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food January 1958-July 1960; Minister of Labour, July 1960-October 1963 Minister of Power, October 1959-1963 Lord President of Council and leader, House of Lords, 1952-March 1957, resigned over disagreements with Macmillan on decolonisation and handling of Cyprus
<i>Other persons mentioned in text</i>	<i>Role relevant to mention in text</i>
Anthony Eden	Prime Minister 1955-January 1957. Responsible for key decisions over Suez crisis 1956. Resigned due to ill-health
Richard Beeching	(First) Chairman of British Railways Board March 1961-1965; responsible for controversial closures of unprofitable lines and major reorganisation of rail industry

Table II.

Claude Guillebaud	Professor of Economics, University of Cambridge; after conducting review pay in NHS, appointed to review pay structures in rail industry 1959-1960
Edwin Plowden	Former Treasury official turned business leader, Chair Tube Investments; chaired 1959-1960 committee which recommended system of spending control later implemented as Public Expenditure Survey Committee from 1961
Charles De Gaulle	President of France, 1958-1969
John Fitzgerald Kennedy	President of USA, 1961-1963
Robert McNamara	Secretary of Defense, USA, 1961-1968

To show the relationship in Figure 1 between social organisation and thought style in judgement, the case study considers these aspects in turn before examining the change dynamic.

**Transition to isolate ordering: informal institutional organisation**

During 1961 and 1962, the government’s institutional ordering changed significantly, and the manner of that change appears at first sight to be a case of quiet, contrary-to-intended change from a predominantly hierarchical ordering to one in which isolate ordering was very significant; from now on, this will be referred to as an “isolation dynamic” (6, 2015a).

Within the limits of description rather than explanation, Figure 4 captures something of the dynamic. For in a series of respects, Macmillan and his colleagues together sought to increase social regulation within the cabinet after the 1959 election victory. Cabinet committees were restructured; reshuffles were occasions for clarifying divisions of labour; policy reviews were used to provide greater overarching coherence. Macmillan increased pressure on his chancellors to secure prime ministerial approval for their plans not only a greater extent than both he and his predecessors had done for many years. The rubric of “modernisation” was used for the series of policy reviews which, as Party Chairman, Macleod was asked to undertake, jointly with the Conservative Research Department (CRD); Butler given the role of coordinating cabinet committees to plan policy ahead using ideas from Macleod’s and CRD’s work.

This pursuit of social regulation was mirrored in the style of political judgement, where a more regulated approach was adopted in several fields of policy. Selwyn Lloyd’s “July measures” of 1961 represented not only the instituting of a growth target and the deepening of “fine-tuning” with the introduction of “regulators” in taxation, but the first steps towards what would become a clear incomes policy and a more dirigiste approach to investment and industrial policy (Pemberton, 2004).

The style of political judgement initially appeared to pursue greater social integration on the wider scale. The decision to establish the National Economic Development Council and to negotiate with the employers and trades unions’ representative bodies to secure their participation (Ringe and Rollings, 2000) was a high-profile example of a more socially integrated, tripartite approach to economic management. In machinery of government reform, the instauration, following the Plowden Committee Report, of the Public Expenditure Survey Committee (PESC) constituted a major innovation in seeking to integrate as well as regulate public spending management across the whole of government.

Yet the pursuit of integration in the style of political judgement was not matched by deepening of integration in the social organisation of the government itself; rather the reverse. Macmillan's relations with his ministers began to change from 1960 onwards. He made the initial decision to pursue EEC membership and pushed it through the cabinet, against considerable scepticism and reservation. Increasingly, he pressured Selwyn Lloyd at the Treasury for additional expansion, thus worsening his relation with his chancellor. Yet on the other hand, Macmillan also grew increasingly withdrawn (Lowe, 1997, p. 606), for two distinct proximate reasons – namely, increasingly frequent illness after summer 1961 and an increasingly punishing schedule of international travel and personal commitment to his reserved zone of individualistic ordering in foreign policy relations with the superpowers. Butler often had to resume the role of stand-in premier but without the authority of the office, and was left decreasingly secure, but also separated from his former protégés; unsurprisingly, Butler responded by showing less loyalty (Howard, 1987, pp. 249-294). Macmillan's health and travel meant that his micro-managing was spasmodic and unpredictable rather than continuous. In short, Macmillan's position was shifting towards that of a structural despot in an isolate ordering, but it never fully arrived there.

In early 1962, Macmillan began to lose faith in his Chancellor, although the policies on which his discontent focused were ones to which he had readily assented. By-election losses to the Liberals unnerved Macmillan and made him more critical of Selwyn Lloyd. He began to plan another of his limited reshuffles. Yet he dithered for weeks over its scope (Thorpe, 2010, pp. 519-525). In July 1962, Butler, whose loyalty had weakened, was indiscreet with a journalist, causing Macmillan to panic, to a degree that he had rarely done before the isolation dynamic set in. This led to the most drastic reshuffle in decades, dubbed "the night of the long knives" (Horne, 1989, pp. 339-550). Macmillan sacked seven senior ministers, including several longstanding friends. The reshuffle only served to make the premier even more dependent on the newly appointed ministers but it also undermined the capacity for trust among the new ministers, who had seen what had befallen their colleagues. Deference to prime ministerial policy preferences now became much more central. The episode did not mark the beginning of the isolation dynamic, but rather deepened it and provided an index of how deep it had already become.

Nonetheless, in rather separate field of foreign policy, the zone of individualistic ordering remained more or less intact. Macmillan continued to press actively for negotiated solutions to a variety of issues from Rhodesia to Laos, delegating the latter to Home. He and Home played constructive roles during the Cuban missile crisis, despite Britain's limited effective power. During 1963, Macmillan had the energy both to negotiate determinedly with Kennedy for Polaris, after McNamara's Pentagon had decided to scrap the Skybolt system on which the British had been encouraged to count. He played a significant role in negotiations for the Test Ban Treaty about nuclear weapons. These cases show that the issue was not one of declining personal competence in Macmillan individually, but of changing structure in the government. The deepest effects of the isolation dynamic were felt in domestic affairs, because in foreign affairs the patron-client relations which bound Home, Maudling (while still at the Colonial Office) and Heath (Lord Privy Seal, minister for the EEC negotiations) to Macmillan remained intact as a basis of social organisation on which the prime minister felt able to rely.

After the 1962 reshuffle, isolate ordering became, if anything, even more marked, but its character changed subtly during 1963. Cohesion among ministers atrophied still

further, as the Profumo affair showed, when it became clear that the war minister had not merely engaged in an affair with a call girl, but lied about it to his colleagues to try to hang on to his position, until he was exposed. Had Sandys not been prevented by little more than brute insistence from resigning over other allegations, probably true, of a sexual indiscretion, the government's cohesion might have broken down irreparably.

Whereas Macmillan in 1961-1962 had appeared to be drifting into a structurally despotic position, the damage done to his authority by sacking so many of his longest standing colleagues checked that process. When De Gaulle's veto of Macmillan's EEC application came in December 1962, the premier's authority was deeply damaged. Around this time, Macmillan was privately willing to contemplate not fighting the next election as prime minister and party leader, partly for reasons for failing health. The Profumo affair suggested to many that he now had less power over his ministers. These setbacks shifted him more towards the position of the structural serf, unable to attempt the kind of imposition by which isolate despots sustain themselves and falling back on improvisation.

### **Transition to isolate ordering: political judgement and feedback upon social organisation**

The isolation dynamic brought about corresponding changes, as Figure 1 leads us to expect, in the style of political judgement, the register in which thought style is articulated in government (6, 2011). The isolate style of political judgement affected many fields of policy making. But only in some politically very central fields did the changing style of judgement about particular policy problems exhibit sufficiently strong "second phase" or "lower loop" feedback effects upon the government's social organisation.

In the postwar decades, governments' authority rested heavily on their perceived capability to manage the nexus which linked micro-economic policy issues of industrial relations and wages and incomes policy with macro-economic ones of the balance of payments deficit, the sterling-dollar exchange and the timings of fiscal expansion and deflation. In 1959-1960, the increase in formalisation of hierarchical management had appeared reasonably coherent. In the following year, intellectual integration was deepened just as social integration among ministers was. The government held firm against the 1960 unofficial seamen's strike, while restraining itself from the kinds of restrictive legislation on trades unions which some Conservative backbenchers demanded. The Guillebaud report was commissioned in order to provide a comprehensive, integrated, rule-based system for the governance of pay relativities across the rail industry, to be a model for other nationalised industries but in fact a microcosm, in exaggerated form, in its thought style of government's own informal hierarchical relations; unfortunately, it was published just as the government itself was just beginning to move beyond those relations into its isolation dynamic; indeed, Macmillan's dismayed response to it reflected his recognition of the risks of ratchet effects in hierarchy. Nonetheless, the July 1961 measures still seemed to provide an integrated and regulated framework for economic policy.

Yet as the government slipped into its isolation dynamic, anomalies in its policy framework grew in significance which the government seemed unable to contain. The growing centrality of incomes policy norms left the Ministry of Labour's role as provider of good offices for conciliation increasingly anomalous. The prospect of Guillebaud's grand settlement gave incentives for the rail unions to threaten to strike to increase their leverage, knowing that Guillebaud would be likely to be generous. The British Transport Commission and the transport minister had strong departmental

incentives to pursue industrial peace, while the unions saw an opportunity for exploiting anomalies in any grand scheme in order to ensure the continuation of “leapfrogging”. Macmillan and Butler had to retreat, and accepted a settlement above their pay target for their industry. In each subsequent year, a similar story unfolded, especially when Beeching took over the rail industry and manoeuvred to support the unions demands, sometimes threatening to resign if his demands were not met. When Hare took over at the Ministry of Labour, he began the first tentative steps towards legal re-regulation of trades unions with his legislation to stipulate that threatening strike action constituted a termination of a worker’s employment contract, yet the government’s capacity to contain trades union wage pressure on a case by case basis augured ill for their ability to rely on such legislation. The very pursuit of a grand rule-based, integrated scheme opened opportunities for disintegration and the government’s weakening cohesion left it unable to respond save by coping and adaptation.

The 1961 “pay pause” in the public sector provoked trades union fury because it overrode arbitration and other existing dispute resolution machinery. Selwyn Lloyd felt forced to tell the unions that the government would review the pause “in the new year” (PREM 11/5159. 22.11.61)[1], which signalled clearly that the “pause” would not last the full planned year. Manoeuvres began immediately, in preparation to exploit the anomalies in relativities generated by months of the “pause”, and duly the “pause” broke down.

Managing the policy began to erode integration among ministers. In October 1961, Richard Wood, minister of power gave no instruction to the Electricity Council not to settle above the norm. Ironically, Minister of Labour John Hare, who had first suggested making concessions, rounded on Wood to cover his own position (PREM 11/4066. 17.11.61). Wood was left exposed by an official statement that the agreement violated the policy. Macmillan asked another minister to “keep an eye” on Wood in subsequent gas negotiations. When the pay pause broke down, the government felt unable to pursue a structurally despotic strategy of passing on constraints by imposition.

In the rail negotiations in 1962, the Treasury felt that Beeching’s threat to resign from the board effectively held them to ransom. Macmillan began to operate with some guile, meeting the rail director in secret. In what were effectively negotiations, Macmillan gave the rail unions a broad hint that settling within the 3 per cent offered in the spring would lead to a more generous increase in the autumn. To deal with a short-term problem, Macmillan unilaterally undermined his own policy (PREM 11/4003. 14.2.62). The consequential concessions that had to be made in 1963 only added to wage inflation (PREM 11/5131. 8.5.63). Macmillan blamed Lloyd for poor preparation of the replacement scheme, but his own ideas for what became the “guiding light” were no better a resolution. What had been intended as a ceiling soon became a floor (Dorey, 2009, p. 157) and ministers accepted that they would settle above the norm (O’Hara, 2004, p. 32). Macmillan sacked Lloyd in the July 1962 reshuffle for the thing of which he was himself guilty – namely inconsistency of signalling and incoherence in the relation between industrial relations and incomes policy.

By 1963, the policy incoherence was stark. Maudling’s expansionary macro-economic policy was clearly signalling to the unions their opportunities for demanding settlements above the government’s pay norm. Meanwhile, the government’s imagination for grand regulation and integration of policy went into overdrive, far ahead of political practicality. Grandiose schemes were developed for detailed governance of prices, incomes and even dividends in pursuit of a chimerical grand bargain with the trades unions at the NEDC. Yet even modest plans for a redundancy pay scheme could not be got through the cabinet

(O'Hara, 2004, pp. 32-37). Only after Macmillan had left Downing Street did ministers take an interest again in a strategic review of industrial relations law.

The fact that micro-economic policy came to be handled in ways that involved the use of guile, asking ministers secretly to watch each other for the prime minister, a premier blaming ministers for decisions to which he was himself a principal party, cutting secret deals with key stakeholders without telling ministers, show the extent to which political judgement in the field of micro-economic policy fed back to reinforce the isolation dynamic within the social organisation of the cabinet.

**Rule violation**

The isolation dynamic exhibits several important kinds of rule violation, in distinct roles. Some constitute violations of informal rules of social organisation under hierarchical institutions about collegiality. Many of these take the form of the cultivation of distinct kinds of guile, but several of Macmillan's ministers sacked in July 1962 regarded their dismissals as violations of such norms too. Other cases are violations of more formal rules established in policy. Most of these violations have already been mentioned, including Macmillan's deals with Beeching kept secret from his colleagues, or his willingness to tip the wink to the rail unions that accepting a modest settlement in one pay round would be rewarded with an inflationary one in the next round, or in hanging a colleague out to dry. One more might be cited, which was the decision to institute a review of security following one of the spy scandals, when in fact there was no serious intention to make substantive changes, but the priority was simply to distract the press from criticism of the government for the handling of the particular scandal.

Mars's emphasis on rule violations can be understood as a development of Douglas's (1966) method, which was to identify the anomalies generated in thought style as key indicators of social organisation, and then to explain those anomalies by reference to the dynamics in social organisation which generate those anomalies and the ways in which people are biased to deal with them. A distinction is drawn in 6 (2013) between the generation of anomalies in styles of thought, and the style of their management in response to their generation: in positive feedback, the styles in which "monsters" (Bloor, 1982) are managed often only serve to reinforce the generation of more anomalies.

Table III summarises the principal types of violation found in the Macmillan government's isolation dynamic. The table shows that the growing trend towards violations in each of these registers provides an index of the depth of the isolation dynamic. More important for the present purpose, though, is the chronological movement from right to left in the table, which provides evidence for the role of rule violation in the

**Table III.**  
Key types of rule violation cultivated in the Macmillan government's isolation dynamic

Rule violations	Internal Not policy oriented	Policy oriented	External Policy oriented
Anomaly generating	Lies to colleagues about sexual indiscretions	Guile in relaxing agreed policy	Violations of incomes policy norms for conciliation or in pursuit of macro-economic expansion
Anomaly managing	Guile in asking colleagues to watch other colleagues' decisions	Instituting inquiries to distract press	Side-deals with trades unions and nationalised industry directors



“second phase” of the neo-Durkheimian feedback loop. For the right hand side external policy anomalies were already clear by 1960-1961, and beginning to lead to the left-hand side behaviours internally. In effect, rule violation of the right hand side external policy-oriented kinds pushed the second phase of the feedback loop within isolate ordering towards rule violations of the left hand side, or internal kinds, which provide an index of the degree to which disorganisation might eventually have been threatened, had the government lasted sufficiently long.

### Quiet unintended transition between forms

The transition in Macmillan’s government provides a good case study to study the puzzle, because Macmillan’s intention to deepen both social regulation and integration was generally shared by his ministers. There was little enclaving within the cabinet; no zone of individualism opened up to allow rivals to become patrons; and isolate ordering was not deepened as a result of very strong articulation prior to 1961 (as would be the case under Heath, for isolate ordering was very significant in the Conservative leadership led by Heath even in opposition: 6, 2015a). The government slipped into isolate ordering while intending to seek what can only be coded as hierarchical institutions, and without great resistance to the ideal of hierarchy being provoked.

Only when the change in institutional ordering was largely complete, by the time of the July 1962 reshuffle, was there a great deal of “noise” in the sense that the term is used here. For much of the period, any discontent in the government itself was expressed in terms of demands for greater integration and greater regulation of policy making. Although some backbenchers outside the zone of governmental institutional ordering could be found calling for different kinds of organising principle within the government, none of them wanted the isolate form which emerged. After the transition in informal ordering to a mix in which isolate ordering was much more significant, discontent was obvious among many, especially after the reshuffle and most obviously among the losers. The complaint from dismayed Conservatives was that the reshuffled government was a hierarchy with the prime minister more clearly at its apex but on too narrow a base of expertise and opinion within the party to command wider authority for the prime minister personally as an individual patron in what they imagined was still in part an individualistic patron-client ordering in the parliamentary party, not that the government’s hierarchical institutions had been eroded. Indeed, the fact that the new Chancellor, Maudling, held views on economic management much more strongly integrated with the prime minister’s, was taken at face value as indicating social integration within the narrower government.

The “noise”, then, was of the kind expected in positive not in negative feedback, yet the result was a transition between forms: in the negative feedback register the transition was a “quiet” one. Figure 4’s description of the case appears correct, that deepening social regulation caused the weakening of social integration, but this provides no explanation that is consistent with the neo-Durkheimian framework. The fundamental neo-Durkheimian argument is supported, that the informal institutions of social organisation in the government explain its thought style, both in its most hierarchical and in its isolate phases, but the machinery has not yet been shown to explain the transition.

### Explaining the puzzle

Can any of Mars’s three mechanisms provide an explanation consistent with the neo-Durkheimian framework?

Consider first the possibility of blinkering. Consideration of the description of the mechanism against the data in case study reveals a central theoretical weakness in the argument for such a mechanism which may not be obvious when it is presented in the abstract. The core neo-Durkheimian argument is that currently operative institutions do the blinkering. Departed institutions should not have the lingering after-effects that this mechanism appears to suppose. In the case study, it is true that Conservative ministers and backbenchers did not appreciate the scale of the shift from hierarchy until quite late in 1963 after Profumo's lie had been exposed; they presumed that what remained was simply a weakened and narrowed hierarchy. But this mistake was the effect of the limited information available to them, rather than a ghostly causal after-effect of institutions that had already decayed.

Second, consider disorganisation and replacement. Here, the mechanism fails for empirical reasons. The chronology of the transition exhibits no clear caesura. Nor indeed, if the case is a genuine example of quiet unintended transition of the kind that is puzzling to explain should we expect a clear hiatus of the kind predicted.

This leaves the remaining possibility of capture, stolen rather than continued rhetoric, reliance upon power and less upon trust, and other actors fail to recognise the change until it is complete because of the guile used by the actors who engage in capture. The analysis offered of the transition shows that this does provide an explanation, but not at all in the way that Mars envisaged in his study on the East End warehouse, and with one key qualification of a kind that is consistent with Douglas's and Mars's arguments in their work on, of all things, enclaves. In the present case study, the project of capture was undertaken, not by the formally weaker party (the warehouse workers, in Mars's study) but by the actor who was, on the measure of the formal institutions, the superior in the hierarchical ordering – namely, the prime minister himself. From 1960 onward Macmillan himself “captured” the collective process of deepening hierarchical ordering. What began with policy reviews, delegation and new committee structures was seized by the premier trying to secure greater personal control over the Treasury and trying to involve himself directly in industrial disputes, and finally undermining delegated authority to ministers. This “capture” undermined the hierarchical institutions and moved them into an isolation dynamic again. The rushed “night of the long knives” reshuffle left his authority weakened, and he was unable to maintain a structurally despotic position.

But, crucially, this qualifies our understanding of “capture”. Douglas and Mars's (2003) study showed that the position of the charismatic leader in an enclave is not the strong one that its rhetoric represents her or him to be, but a strategy for dealing with the limitations on individual power created by enclaving: Weber was wrong to take the form of charisma at its face value. In the same vein, 6 (2011, 2015a) emphasises the brittleness and fragility of the structurally despotic position in isolate ordering: despotic strategies are ways of using imposition to cover improvisation and coping; when they fail, in isolate ordering there is only the position of the structural serf upon which to fall back. So too with the concept of “capture”. When Mars introduced it as a term of art specifically for the neo-Durkheimian institutional theory, he did so with a case in which real veto power was seized by a party formally weaker in the central relationship examined. In the case of the Macmillan government's transition from hierarchical into isolate ordering, the capture attempted by the prime minister himself proved brittle. Far from resolving anomalies, his guile and the drastic reshuffle weakened Macmillan and left him closer to the structural serf than to the despotic position after July 1962. The hope of strength from capture turned into weakness.

Arrow “A” in Figure 3 was a proxy for “capture”, but not as Mars’s East End enclaved warehouse workers knew it. Like charisma, capture is much less powerful than it first seems.

But this mechanism restates the original puzzle at a new level. For if Macmillan’s intended capture of political resources and control was a key part of the transition, how can this be reconciled with the unintended character of the transition, unless there remained some process of blinkering after all, at least affecting Macmillan’s own intentions? The answer to this recast version of the puzzle arises precisely from the fact that the second mechanism was not operating. There was no hiatus, but a process running over two or even three years of informal institutional change, in which informal hierarchy decayed gradually. Hierarchy was sustained, but in reduced degree during 1962 and 1963 by the formal hierarchical institutions of the constitution and the powers and role of the prime minister, which remained essential to the legitimation and presentation of Macmillan’s strategy even when the government had substantially slipped informally into isolate ordering. There was still just enough hierarchy, sustained by formal institutions of the constitution, to provide rhetoric to be stolen.

### Conclusion

Neo-Durkheimian institutional theory explains transitions between elementary forms of informal institutions by concentrating on feedback effects within and among those forms. The two fundamental dimensions of institutional variation in institutions are not supposed to be causally efficacious in their own right. They provide only descriptive measures of the change to be explained. Descriptions which use the two dimensions can be enlightening. It is an important first step to discover that, descriptively, deepening social integration in pursuit of hierarchy can unintentionally bring about weakening integration, yielding isolate ordering but without apparent and obvious leaching away by people in structural isolate serf positions who seek to evade the burdens of hierarchical ordering. But the neo-Durkheimian argument is that this cannot constitute a convincing explanation. Faced with the appearance of transition between forms brought about by a ratchet effect, it proposes that the ratchet cannot be on one dimension of variation causing movement on the other, for a dimension of variation is neither a uni- nor a bi-directional dimension of causal change. The apparent anomaly between the description of the case and the theory is to be resolved by showing that there was in fact negative feedback all along, but that fact was obscured by the work of informal institutions cultivating bias for as long as they operate.

This paper argues that Mars’s proposed mechanism of “capture” can indeed provide a way of sustaining a powerful and convincing explanation of such cases of quiet, contrary-to-intended transitions between forms. But the concept must be nuanced in ways that are entirely consistent with Douglas’s and Mars’s wider appreciation of the fragility of power strategies, when they are correctly explained by reference to the informal institutions under which they are adopted and to which they are a responses.

For the understanding of cabinets as organisations, the significance of the argument is that it becomes possible to show remarkable velocity of change in informal institutions. This can explain major changes in thought styles that inform political judgement and decision making.

The significance of the argument for the neo-Durkheimian institutional approach is fourfold. Methodologically, it brings out the importance of two of Mars’s key contributions to the development of the theory – the central importance of understanding how the institutional cultivation of rule violation not only provides a descriptive index of

institutional form but also helps to understand the causal mechanisms by which change in institutional form is brought about, and how the cross-sectional feedback loop set out in Figure 1 actually works. In short, the seamier side of organisational life is, as Mars has argued throughout his career, causally fundamental to institutional change. Theoretically, the argument shows that a category of apparently recalcitrant cases can indeed be explained by the neo-Durkheimian machinery. Third, the integrity of the theory's causal machinery can be preserved by the ways in which these apparently difficult cases are resolved. Transitions between forms really are the product of negative feedback. Positive feedback is a phenomenon of elementary forms, not of dimensions of variation. Fourth and finally, although Mars initially borrowed the concept of "capture" from rationalist conceptions in the study of legal regulation and economic studies of rent-seeking behaviour, he redefined it so that it could be located firmly in neo-Durkheimian institutional dynamics. The result is, as he proposed, a key part of a causal mechanism by which these apparently anomalous cases can be explained.

#### Note

1. NB: all references in this format are to dated documents in files in the National Archives at Kew.

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