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Parasites, Functionaries, and Their Relations: Responding to Commentaries on Institutional Parasites

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PARASITES, FUNCTIONARIES, AND THEIR RELATIONS: RESPONDING TO COMMENTARIES ON INSTITUTIONAL PARASITES

Institutional parasites are illegitimate actors that undermine the institution on which they depend in the long-term but maintain and even enhance that institution in the short term. Examples of institutional parasites include essay mills offering bespoke assignments for university students, firms offering bogus supply-chain certification schemes, or so-called ‘McDojos’ which offer all external signals of a Karate training dojo without the appropriately qualified Karate instructor. Although an institutional parasite is a deviant actor, it is also well aware of the rules, norms and practices of an institution. Some institutional parasites can also be far less intrusive than the examples above. For instance, counterfeiters of luxury products are unlikely to cause the demise of well-known luxury fashion brands. Similarly predatory journals and publishers are unlikely to fatally harm leading scientific journals. Indeed, there can be examples where these types of parasites might be used by their host institution. For instance, luxury fashion brands like Gucci harnessed the creativity of knock-off artists like the Harlem-based fashion designer Dapper Dan to build their brand in new markets.

Conceptualizing certain actors as institutional parasites poses theoretical and ethical questions about which actors might be considered as parasites and who might make such judgements, something we discuss in the original paper. However, there was also a temporal element built into our model whereby an institutional parasite could maintain an institution in the short term but undermine its’ legitimacy in the long term. Institutional changes over time can create more favorable conditions for the parasite but also softer evaluations from core actors and a broader audience. A closer look at the interactions between parasite and actors was beyond the scope of the original paper. However, we did note the ethical and functional grey areas in which a parasite operates, but we did not explore the perceptions of parasites by

institutional actors. We are therefore happy to develop these ideas by introducing a typology and suggesting a new actor: the dysfunctional functionary.

SKETCHING A TYPOLOGY OF PARASITES AND FUNCTIONARIES

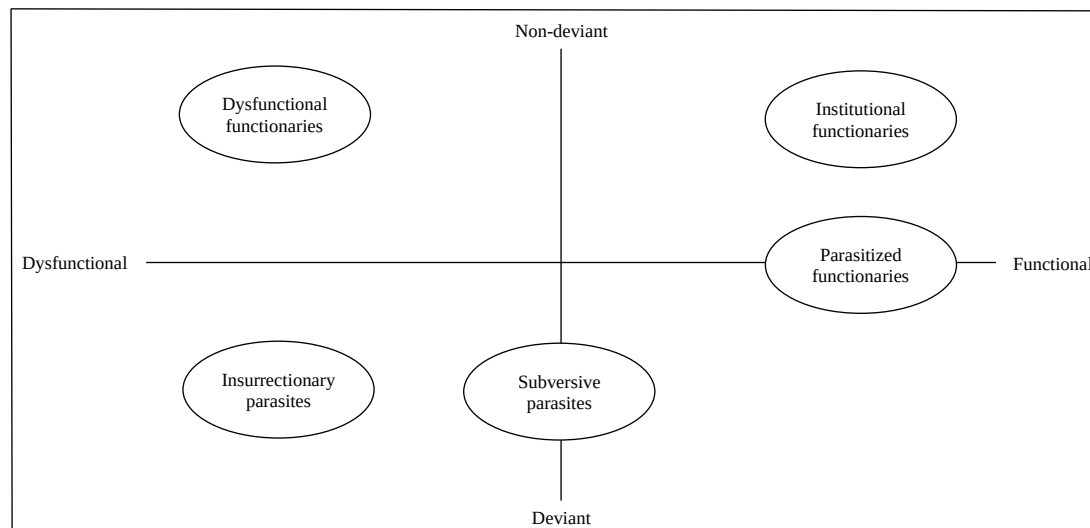


Figure 1. Typology of parasites and functionaries.

The three commentaries on our original paper prompted us to develop ways to better distinguish between different kinds of parasites and functionaries. We are, broadly speaking, in agreement with all of them, but the excellent points our colleagues raised certainly made us think. Ritwick (2024), for example, encourages us to think about who determines who or what is a parasite and how the meanings, practices and naming of certain actors can change over time. Relatedly, Zhou, Wang and Zhang (2024), point to the possibilities of movement and flux, highlighting the idea of a “parasitical functionary”, a “good” egg gone bad. Helms, Piazza and Bergemann (2024) point to the possibility of flux and change in opportunity structures for deviance over time, highlighting how power relations and strategic interactions can shape parasitic deviance, functionary co-optation and failures to do either.

As a result of these commentaries, we came up with a typology based on two dimensions (Figure 1). One dimension is the functionality of an actor, or the degree to which the actors help or hinder the functioning of institutional processes. The other dimension is the deviance of an actor, or the degree to which the actor deviates from or complies with institutional rules. We use the typology to as a tool for understanding different kinds of parasites and functionaries, such as the “parasitical functionary” proposed by Zhou et al (2024) and our own new actor the “dysfunctional functionary” alongside actors previously discussed in the original article (Rintamaki et al, 2024). Taking on board the commentaries of others we also demonstrate how such actors may change over time, due to strategic interactions (Helms et al, 2024) and changes in perceptions/audiences (Ritwick, 2024). The typology is intended to be understood as a tool that can be used iteratively in a given institutional context, taking into account the eye of the beholder (Ritwick, 2024) and the various facets of the opportunity structures for deviance (Helms et al., 2024).

One actor that can be discerned through the typology is the insurrectionary parasite. It is an actor that is low on functionality but high on deviance; in other words, an actor that seeks to disrupt the functioning of institutional processes and deviates from institutional rules. An example of an insurrectionary parasite we used in the original article was the fake-news organization. The fake-news organization Breitbart, for instance, along with its co-founder Steve Bannon, has been explicitly anti-establishment and anti-media (Lewis, 2018) and described as an insurgent (Farhi, 2017). As a different example, in their dialogue commentary on our original article, Ritwick (2024) pointed out the spy, which is also parasitic by nature, coupled with insurgent tendencies. The insurrectionary parasite is a deviant actor that imitates legitimate actors while purposely undermining the institution it is dependent on. This kind of parasite thus seeks to drive institutional change, unlike most of the examples we cited in the original article.

The kinds of institutional parasites which featured most heavily in our original article combine medium functionality with high deviance. We call them subversive parasites: they seek to stay hidden or blend in among legitimate actors. The preservation of the present institutional arrangement is in their interests (for a deeper discussion between insurrectionary and subversive actors, see Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Some subversive parasites may, as we have stated, even support the contemporary institutional arrangement, along with legitimate actors, in the short term. Of course, there are a variety of subversive parasites, with varying degrees of functionality and deviance. Indeed, some subversive parasites may display extreme deviance accidentally or gradually becoming more deviant over time; however, these are more likely to be expelled very quickly.

Institutional functionaries, as per our original article, would tend to be low on deviance but high on functionality. These actors aim to maintain an institution and ensure institutional processes function as intended. In their response to the original article, Zhou, Wang and Zhang (2024) point out that functionaries may be or become parasitic, too – the roles of different actors in parasitic processes are not set in stone. They suggest a fourth potential institutional change pathway: partially functional maintenance. Here, “parasitized functionaries” oversee parallel institutional processes, where resource-sapping deviance is permitted for designated actors, but not for the average actor. What this suggests is that functionaries may, over time, become more deviant as they deliberately enable a few deviant parasites and demonstrate more adopt parasitic behaviors. Their functionality may still remain comparatively high; many (somewhat) corrupt governmental institutions still get things done, after all. As Helms and associates (2024) highlight, just how fluidly these kinds of role fluctuations take place is contingent on the opportunity structures in that institutional context. We surmise the nature and strength of ties between actors within a given institutional

field will tend to condition the kinds of cooptation processes described by Zhou and colleagues (2024).

Functionaries may become parasitized and become more deviant, similarly, the institutional parasite is not fixed in place either. Over time, parasites might become less deviant as their practices become normalized or even softened in collusion with functionaries. This speaks to two things. Firstly, there is a temporal element to the institutional parasite and related actors; although things may work in the short term, this will likely change in the long term, due to power-relations, strategic interactions and opportunities for deviance that may change and stretch across institutional fields, as pointed out by Helms and colleagues (2024). Secondly, as Ritwick (2024) notes, our theorization would benefit from taking a more explicitly relational, constructivist perspective with regard to who determines what is considered a parasite (or functionary, we might add). A parasite might be legitimate and even beneficial for some, and illegitimate and harmful for others, depending on one's geographical location, hierarchical position, reference point and temporality. This puts the ambivalence of moral dimensions of parasites into the spotlight. As Ritwick (2024) notes, it is useful to ask who the parasite is, and whether the institutions in question are worth defending. One of our examples in the original paper, the consultancy firm helping garment factories cheat in human rights audits, may look very different to those working in the factory than it does for functionaries in global human rights governance. Perhaps locals at the factory might think that the deals the multinational companies were offering in the first place were so bad they feel exploited (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021) – so who is the parasite here? Or consider the essay mill, another prominent example in our original paper. To most academics marking student essays, the essay mill is a clear parasite. An academic ghostwriter in Nairobi, Kenya (which is considered a major hub for essay mills) might, however, consider the entire Western

education system a scam where the exorbitant degree fees are out of reach, and might provide little in terms of return on investment anyway.

The final actor our typology made us think about is the dysfunctional functionary - an actor who tries to do the right thing but by doing so creates problems for institutional processes and actors. One way these actors do their work is by layering more and more policy, rules and procedures in a way which is not only unsuccessful but actively jeopardize the functionality and legitimacy of an institution. For example, a compliance function might respond to a widespread problem in a process by overly bureaucratizing elements of that process, making it much harder to do the original activity in an orderly or efficient manner. Research ethics processes in some Western universities provide a good example of this. Research ethics is a very important part of the research process, but in some settings, they can overwhelm the original research idea and dissuade a researcher from undertaking a project. When this happens the ethical clearance process can become isolated from the practice of research and more focused on avoiding litigation. Eventually, ethical clearance for research becomes overly bureaucratized, increasingly meaningless, and actively hinders research (Alvesson & Stephens, 2024).

Another example of the dysfunctional functionary is Eddard “Ned” Stark, a well-known character in the HBO series Game of Thrones. As the newly appointed “Hand of the King” (the regents’s chief advisor), Stark was arguably the most formally powerful functionary in the realm. A notably just and noble character, Stark’s reliance on a code of honor and a rigid understanding of the formal political rules led to a bloody civil war – and his own demise. When the king that Stark served died, Stark steadfastly held onto the ascension of the technically rightful but unpopular heir to the throne, whilst passing up the opportunity to (somewhat dishonorably) slay conspirators for the throne. These conspirators then proceeded to have Stark killed, and eventually sent the kingdom into a war that killed

thousands of people. Stark was a functionary that clung to an ethical code but became detached from the political realities of an institution he himself was a part of. In a case of institutional drift (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Voronov, Glynn & Weber, 2022), the formal rules remained unchanged while the “rules on the ground” were considerably different from what Stark thought he understood.

CONCLUSION

In our original article, we focus on how the interaction between parasites and functionaries leads to institutional change and maintenance. The commentaries from our colleagues have their focus more strongly on the parasites, functionaries, and parasite-functionary relations themselves. Thanks to these commentaries, we have now made a few more steps to developing a deeper, more fluid understanding of parasites as actors, and how they relate to functionaries. The typology we have sketched out is by no means intended to be the final word on the topic. We see it as another step to understanding these kinds of actors and their relationships and relationalities and look forward to reading and learning more about institutional parasites in different settings.

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