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**UNDERSTANDING MARGINALIZATION THROUGH THE
MARGINALIZED: TOWARD A CRITICAL
INSTITUTIONALISM**

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RÉSUMÉ

Mon ancrage intellectuel est la théorie institutionnelle. Ce mémoire d'HDR retrace ce qui s'est produit lorsque cet ancrage a été confronté à un monde d'injustices – et ce qu'il a fallu, sur les plans théorique et personnel, pour y faire face. L'itinéraire intellectuel que je propose dans ce mémoire va d'un institutionnalisme “mainstream” vers un institutionnalisme critique, enraciné dans l'expérience vécue de la marginalisation et du déplacement forcé : la manière dont ces configurations sont endurées, dont elles blessent et épuisent, et dont les personnes et les organisations improvisent, en leur sein, des actes de survie, de soin et de résistance.

J'ai commencé ma carrière comme chercheuse inscrite dans le courant “mainstream” de la théorie institutionnelle. Mes premiers travaux ont contribué à établir la complexité institutionnelle comme problème théorique central, et à montrer comment l'identité et d'autres attributs organisationnels orientent les réponses des organisations à des logiques concurrentes. J'ai ensuite prolongé ce programme pour examiner comment des configurations élitistes et excluantes se perpétuent activement – à travers des routines et des récits méritocratiques – plutôt qu'elles ne se transmettent passivement. Plus récemment, j'ai interrogé la manière dont les institutions sont continuellement refaçonnées par des pratiques ancrées dans le quotidien, plutôt qu'imposées de l'extérieur. Ensemble, ces travaux invitent à concevoir les institutions non pas comme des systèmes de contrainte figés, mais comme des accomplissements dynamiques et disputés, continuellement construits et remis en question dans l'interaction.

Au fil du temps, mon engagement auprès de réfugiés syriens au Liban, d'organisations de la société civile résistant au recul démocratique en Hongrie, de travailleurs migrants naviguant dans des marchés du travail hostiles en Finlande, et de minorités racialisées confrontées à la stigmatisation quotidienne en France et au Royaume-Uni a fini par révéler les limites de cet appareil théorique. Dans ces contextes, le pouvoir n'était ni épisodique ni abstrait : il était constant, asymétrique, souvent violent, et ses effets sur les individus étaient bien réels. Les histoires ayant produit les inégalités contemporaines – colonialisme, racialisation, extraction économique – résistaient à des cadres qui reléguaient ces héritages à l'arrière-plan. Les dimensions émotionnelles et morales de la vie sous domination – la peur, la honte, l'épuisement – n'avaient que récemment commencé à entrer dans la théorisation institutionnelle. Cette tension entre mon ancrage théorique et ces réalités de terrain s'est révélée féconde, mais aussi inconfortable. Elle m'a conduite à percevoir la théorie non seulement comme un ensemble de ressources, mais comme un ensemble de silences – sur le pouvoir, l'histoire, les hiérarchies raciales, et l'expérience incarnée d'être gouvernée et catégorisée.

Au sein de la théorie institutionnelle, j'ai examiné deux grandes familles de réponses à la marginalisation. La première regroupe les stratégies de résistance par lesquelles des acteurs collectifs – ONG sous des régimes répressifs, innovateurs du secteur public ouvrant des espaces expérimentaux au sein des systèmes d'intégration, organisations de base travaillant de l'intérieur contre des normes excluantes – cherchent à contester les conditions structurelles qui produisent et perpétuent la marginalisation. La seconde comprend les pratiques de survie et de coping par lesquelles des organisations créent des espaces fragiles d'abri et de dignité, atténuant l'emprise de ces structures sans les démanteler – comme dans mon étude du ‘sheltering work’ auprès de femmes

réfugiées syriennes au Liban. À travers ces deux familles, mes travaux ont montré que les analyses institutionnelles de la résistance et de coping restent incomplètes tant qu'on ne prête pas attention à la manière dont ces structures sont réellement vécues : ce qu'elles ferment, ce qu'elles permettent, et le coût qu'elles imposent.

En m'appuyant sur une réflexion critique de mes propres fondements intellectuels et de mes travaux antérieurs, j'esquisse un programme d'institutionnalisme critique. Sur le plan théorique, il met la théorie institutionnelle en dialogue avec des perspectives critiques, décoloniales et intersectionnelles – non pour les domestiquer, mais pour les laisser réorienter les questions que nous posons sur le pouvoir, la racialisation et l'expérience incarnée dans le contexte de l'institutionnalisme organisationnel. Sur le plan empirique, il prend les institutions de proximité et les formes d'organisation ancrées dans les territoires comme terrains d'observation privilégiés : les abris, centres communautaires, ONG et espaces locaux où les normes institutionnelles abstraites s'incarnent, se contestent et s'endurent. Sur le plan méthodologique, il appelle à des pratiques de recherche participatives, décoloniales et réflexives, qui mènent l'enquête avec et pour les communautés marginalisées, plutôt que simplement à leur sujet. L'objectif est de rendre la théorie institutionnelle plus attentive aux mondes que j'étudie et plus fidèle aux personnes dont elle n'a longtemps analysé les vies qu'à distance.

Je conclus en décrivant mon approche de l'encadrement doctoral et de la construction d'espaces collectifs de recherche. Former la prochaine génération de chercheurs institutionnels critiques exige d'accorder une attention non seulement à la rigueur et au métier, mais aussi à la voix, à la réflexivité et à la volonté de poursuivre des questions qui ont du sens.

Mots-clés : théorie institutionnelle ; logiques institutionnelles ; marginalisation ; déplacement forcé ; expérience vécue ; institutionnalisme critique ; pouvoir ; inégalités ; dynamiques de champ ; réponses organisationnelles.

ABSTRACT

My intellectual home is institutional theory. This HDR thesis traces what happened when that home was confronted with a world of injustices – and what it took, theoretically and personally, to respond to that confrontation. The trajectory I lay out in this HDR thesis moves from mainstream institutionalism toward a critical institutionalism grounded in the lived experience of marginalization and forced displacement: how these arrangements are endured, how they wound and exhaust, and how people cope and improvise acts of care and resistance within them.

I began my career as a mainstream institutional scholar. My early research established institutional complexity as a central theoretical problem, showing how identity and other organizational attributes mediate organisational responses to competing institutional logics. I subsequently extended this programme to examine how elite and exclusionary arrangements are actively maintained through distributed routines and merit narratives rather than simply inherited. More recently, I have examined how institutions are continuously remade through situated everyday practice rather than imposed from above. Together, these studies contributed to treating institutions not as fixed systems of constraint but as dynamic, contested accomplishments – continuously made and unmade through interaction.

Over time, however, engaging with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, civil society organisations resisting democratic backsliding in Hungary, migrant workers navigating hostile labour markets in Finland, and racialised minorities managing everyday stigma in France and the United Kingdom made the theoretical apparatus feel incomplete. These settings featured constant, asymmetric, and often violent power with adverse effects on individuals. The histories that produced present-day inequalities – colonialism, racialisation, economic extraction – were not easily accommodated within frameworks that pushed these legacies to the background. The emotional and moral dimensions of living under domination – fear, shame, exhaustion – had only begun to enter institutional theorising. Standing with one foot in institutional theory and one foot in these worlds was generative, but also uncomfortable. It forced me to confront the theory not only as a set of resources but as a set of silences about power, history, race, and the embodied experience of being governed and categorised.

Within institutional theory, I examined two broad families of responses to marginalisation. The first comprises disruptive strategies through which collective actors – NGOs under repressive regimes, public sector innovators opening experimental spaces within integration systems, grassroots organisations working against exclusionary norms from within – seek to challenge the structural conditions that produce and sustain marginalisation. The second comprises coping practices through which organisations create fragile spaces of shelter and dignity that soften the grip of those structures without dismantling them, as in my study of sheltering work with Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. Across both approaches, my studies showed that existing institutional accounts of disruption and coping remain incomplete without attention to how these structures are actually lived – what they foreclose, what they allow, and what toll they take.

Building on a critical reflection of my own intellectual roots, and of my own prior work, I outline an emerging programme of critical institutionalism. Theoretically, it brings institutional theory into sustained conversation with critical, postcolonial, and intersectional perspectives – not to domesticate them, but to let them reorient the questions we ask about power, race, and embodied experience in the context of organizational institutionalism. Empirically, it takes proximate institutions and place-based organising as its primary entry points: the shelters, community centres, NGOs, and local spaces where abstract institutional arrangements become lived, contested, and endured. Methodologically, it calls for participatory, decolonial, and reflexive research practices that conduct inquiry with and for marginalised communities rather than merely about them. The aim is to make institutional theory more responsive to the worlds I study, and more faithful to the people whose lives it has long analysed only from a distance.

I conclude by describing my approach to doctoral supervision and the building of collective scholarly spaces, arguing that forming the next generation of critical institutional scholars requires attending not only to rigour and craft but also to voice, reflexivity, and the willingness to pursue questions that matter.

Key words: institutional theory; institutional logics; marginalization; forced displacement; lived experience; critical institutionalism; power; inequality; field dynamics; organisational responses.

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Farah Kodeih, Boulogne-Billancourt, April 2026

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1. Introduction: Anchored in Institutional Theory, Confronted with a World of Injustices

My intellectual home – and anchor – is institutional theory. I was initially drawn to it because it offered a powerful vocabulary to make sense of the taken-for-granted nature of organisational and field life. The theory addresses how actors make sense of what they do, how certain practices become legitimate while others are contested and marginalized, and how struggles over meaning and resources play out across institutional fields. My early research was firmly rooted in this tradition. I examined institutional logics and institutional complexity, and how organisations respond when they are pulled in different directions. My studies examined how identity and status mediate these responses, and how, over time, organisational responses shape field-level trajectories. This work gained traction by contributing to ongoing conversations about complexity, identity, and field dynamics within institutional theory.

At that stage, I understood myself primarily as a “mainstream” institutional scholar. I oriented my questions toward the concerns that dominated the literature and organised my projects around settings and puzzles that allowed me to engage those debates. My focus was on how organisations cope with multiple institutional logics, how they construct and maintain legitimacy, and how they collectively respond to pressures for change. These questions remain central to my work. Yet, over time, they came to feel insufficient on their own. As I became increasingly concerned with issues of injustice that mattered to me – the treatment of refugees, the racialization of migrants and immigrants, the gradual erosion of democracy and shrinking of civic space – the theoretical apparatus of institutional theory began to feel incomplete. Yet, I felt the theory remained useful and even crucial for explaining the structural conditions that create and reproduce patterns of inequality, oppression, and injustice: how categories, rules, and field-

level configurations channel resources and constrain possibilities for action. But institutional theory did not, on its own, help me grasp how these arrangements are lived and endured, how they wound and exhaust, or how people improvise acts of care and resistance within them. In other words, institutional theory helped me see patterns and mechanisms, but it did not fully capture the realities of the worlds that increasingly mattered to me – worlds marked by deep injustices, violence, forced displacement, and the erosion of protections for those already made vulnerable.

These interrogations were not just intellectual; they were also deeply personal. I was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to France at seventeen, carrying with me a sensitivity to how war, displacement, and colonial legacies shape everyday life. As the Syrian refugee crisis unfolded in Lebanon and later across Europe, it became increasingly difficult, for me as someone from the Middle East, to treat these developments as distant background conditions. Questions of displacement, borders, and belonging started to feel urgent, not only as abstract policy issues but as matters that affected people and places I knew. I began to follow more closely the work of NGOs, grassroots groups, and civil society organisations supporting refugees and other marginalized communities and gradually oriented my research toward these actors: civil society organisations operating in constraining environments, and migrant-support NGOs whose own survival is precarious. Taking these settings as my object of study made it impossible to see institutions as neutral or distant. My empirical data collection foregrounded the ways in which institutional arrangements organise vulnerability, constrain possibilities for care and resistance, and sometimes appear to be crumbling for those who depend on them most.

Gradually, my work began to re-anchor itself in the phenomena of marginalization and forced displacement: refugees navigating hostile bureaucracies; NGOs and grassroots

organisations creating fragile spaces of shelter and dignity; activists facing repression in authoritarian or hybrid regimes; racialized workers caught at the intersection of labour regulation, immigration law, and everyday surveillance. Starting from these worlds changed the questions I asked, shifting from questions of how organisations respond to multiple logics to questions such as: Who gets to define these logics, and on whose terms? Whose suffering is rendered visible or invisible by existing categories and routines? What forms of agency, resistance, or care become possible and which ones are systematically foreclosed? And how do institutional orders themselves become under strain and even dismantled?

Engaging with these phenomena reshaped how I related to institutional theory in two ways. First, it highlighted what institutional theory could help me see. The tools developed in the tradition I had been trained in were crucial for understanding how states, NGOs, firms, and international organisations collectively structure the governance of refugees and migrants, how field-level configurations make particular forms of organising more or less sustainable, and how taken-for-granted categories and evaluation devices shape the lives of those who are already marginalized. Working with concepts such as institutional logics, complexity, field structures, and legitimacy allowed me to connect disruptive and coping strategies I observed to broader institutional arrangements, even in settings marked by crisis and uncertainty.

Second, and just as importantly, this shift exposed the limits of institutional theory when confronted with these phenomena. In many of the contexts I was studying, power was not episodic or abstract but constant, asymmetric, and often violent. The histories that produced present-day inequalities – histories of colonialism, racialization, and economic extraction – were not easily accommodated within frameworks that push these legacies to the background or that foreground stability and adaptation over domination and harm. The emotional and moral

dimensions of living under these conditions – fear, shame, moral injury, exhaustion, small acts of care – have only recently begun to be part of institutional theorizing. What I encountered in the field often went beyond what my theoretical tools were designed to grasp. Standing with one foot in institutional theory and one foot in the worlds of marginalization and forced displacement has therefore been generative, but also uncomfortable. It has forced me to confront institutional theory not only as a set of resources, but also as a set of silences about power, about history, about race and coloniality, about the embodied experience of being governed and categorized, especially in a world where many institutional arrangements feel fragile or are being actively dismantled. It has also forced me to confront my own positioning as a researcher: the ways in which I initially aligned myself with “acceptable” mainstream questions, and the gradual process of finding a voice that is more faithful to the worlds and people I work with.

The trajectory I trace in this habilitation thesis is shaped by this double movement. I show how my early work on institutional logics, complexity, and field-level dynamics provided a foundation for my later research, and how it continues to inform how I think about institutions and organisations. I then show how my engagement with phenomena of marginalization and forced displacement has both relied on and unsettled these foundations, leading me to interrogate the blind spots of institutional theory when confronted with crumbling social and political orders. This interrogation has pushed me toward a research program that seeks to develop a more critical, historically grounded, and phenomenologically attentive institutionalism, one that takes seriously the lived experience of marginalization and the local practices of organising that emerge in its shadow.

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows. In the next section, I provide an overview of institutional theory in organisation studies and summarize my contributions to this literature

outside the context of marginalization, covering institutional complexity and organisational responses, the role of identity as mediator, and the more recent work on practice-based perspective and field-level dynamics. Then, I review the existing institutional research on marginalization, highlighting the work on institutional and organisational foundations of marginalization as well as institutional work related to them. This section concludes with a review of my own recent work on marginalization and forced displacement that draws on and expands this work. Third, I offer a critical reflection on the limitations of mainstream institutional theory in making sense of the phenomena that have become central to my work. Fourth, I build on this critique to outline my emerging research program of critical institutionalism and detail the methodological and ethical commitments that underpin it. Finally, I describe my approach to supervising doctoral students and to building a collective environment in which the next generation of (institutional) scholars can engage critically and creatively with the worlds they study. Taken together, the thesis traces a trajectory from contributing to canonical institutional debates to carving out an independent research program at the intersection of institutional theory, marginalization, and lived experience.

2. Personal and scholarly resonance of institutional theory

My initial attraction to institutional theory has been deeply personal. Growing up between two cultures, I was socialized into two different sets of social structures, which I reflect on briefly in Vignette 1. From an early age, I had to navigate their tensions and contradictions but also discover their complementarities. This experience made me acutely aware of the weight – and often the grip – of social structures on our lives, not only as individuals but also as members of collectives. It also sensitized me to the different ways one can navigate such

complexity: sometimes by keeping structures apart, other times by blending them, and often by shifting fluidly between them.

This personal sensitivity carried over into my academic journey. I became fascinated with how organisations, and individuals, respond to the tensions and contradictions created by different “rules of the game.” While every industry faces demands from multiple stakeholders, I was particularly drawn to settings where such pulls were reshaping entire practices, identities, and ways of functioning. Business schools, for example, find themselves caught between national logics and the increasingly powerful international logic of global rankings. The investment industry has long been anchored in a traditional financial logic yet faces the growing influence of a socially responsible logic that redefines its purpose. In observing these transformations, the institutional logics perspective provided a powerful lens to make sense of organisational change across multiple levels of analysis, from societal domains to individual strategies.

Since Friedland and Alford’s (1991) seminal call to “bring society back in” to organisational analysis, the institutional logics perspective has become a central strand of institutional theory. Initially framed around distinct societal sectors such as religion, family, or the state, the perspective soon shifted toward “field-level logics¹,” capturing domains such as the logic of academic science (Murray, 2010) or the judicial logic (Purdy & Gray, 2010). Its appeal lies in explaining organisational change and variation through the coexistence of competing, conflicting, and complementary logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Purdy & Gray, 2010; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010; Smets et al., 2015), as well as through the ways these logics interact (Pache &

¹ Societal logics derive from the central spheres of the society that nearly all actors are connected to, such as the bureaucratic state, religion, and family (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, 2004) while field-level logics, which typically draw on societal logics, entail practices and ideals connected to more bounded institutional fields that are often associated with specific kinds of organizations and practitioners (Smets et al., 2012).

Santos, 2013; Tracey et al., 2013) and blend (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005). Over time, the literature has moved from emphasizing competition between logics to exploring institutional complexity and contradictions that both constrain and enable agency (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). This has opened up rich streams of research on hybridization (Pache & Santos, 2013; Purdy & Gray, 2010), on the emergence of novel practices at the intersections of logics (Lounsbury, 2007; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012; Seo & Creed, 2002; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010), and more recently, on logics themselves as generative structures with internal dynamics that foster creativity and innovation (Quattrone, 2015).

These two threads – the personal and the scholarly – have been mutually reinforcing throughout my research. My lived experience of navigating competing social structures gave me an intuitive feel for the tensions that institutional theory seeks to explain, while the theory gave me the analytical vocabulary to understand what I had always sensed but could not yet articulate. The chapters that follow reflect this ongoing dialogue, asking how organisations manage competing logics and whose experiences are shaped by them.

Vignette 1. Navigating multiple normative orders

Growing up between two cultures meant learning early how to make myself legible in different worlds. In Lebanon, legibility was relational: it meant being anchored in family, community, and the affiliations – political, religious, sectarian – that locate you within a social map organised around loyalty and belonging. Sectarian belonging structured everyday interactions and perceptions, quietly informing how people were read, positioned, and judged. Status was read through multiple registers: family name, communal ties, position within identity politics, but also through a narrow set of respectable professions and the prestige of the institutions where one studied them. Language was another marker. Fluency in French and English signaled cultivation and social standing, often at the expense of Arabic. These

hierarchies were gendered and ran deep – internalized early, reproduced within families, entangled with colonial legacies that continue to shape Lebanese social life. I left Lebanon at seventeen, in 2001. The country I describe is the one I grew up in; successive crises have since reshaped and sometimes shattered its social fabric. The Lebanon I carry as a formative reference is not necessarily the Lebanon of today, and I hold that distinction with care.

In France, legibility operated through different rules: individual merit, republican universalism, institutional prestige. France places every citizen on ostensibly equal footing; racial and religious identities are meant to be irrelevant. Yet it was in France that I first experienced racialization – realizing I was read not simply as Lebanese or foreign, but as Arab, an identity shaped by political assumptions that republican colorblindness could not dissolve. The chauvinism I encountered was subtler than what I had known before, but it was there: a quiet confidence in the superiority of French secular institutions and intellectual traditions. Belonging required mastering these codes and knowing when to exercise restraint.

Navigating these worlds meant learning when to speak, when to stay silent, how to justify myself, and which parts of myself to mute. What counted as legitimate individualism in one setting came across as selfishness in the other. What felt like loyalty in one was dismissed as narrow-mindedness or even communitarianism in the other. This constant adjustment was not dramatic; it was ordinary. But it left me acutely aware of how the worlds we move through shape who we become, and of the quiet, everyday work required to live between competing expectations.

Over time, I came to sense that I had muted too much to remain legible within dominant norms. Recovering what had been silenced has taken sustained work – on voice, on confidence, on the questions I allow myself to pursue and the scholar I allow myself to become. It also meant

loosening the internal policing of tone, relevance, and legitimacy that had shaped how I presented myself and my research.

This thesis traces that arc: from contributing to mainstream debates to moving closer to the worlds and questions that matter to me. Finding my scholarly voice has been inseparable from recovering parts of myself I had learned to silence.

3. Intellectual anchoring: institutional theory and my early trajectory

Over the past decades, institutional theory has flourished into one of the most promising lenses for explaining organisational and field-level behaviour. Its centrality has sparked strong reactions: some scholars have positioned themselves as gatekeepers, narrowing interpretations of core concepts such as institutional logics, while others have grown exasperated with what they see as its simplistic applications and overuse in management studies – so much so that predictions of its decline have circulated for years. Yet, whatever one's stance, an objective reality remains: institutional theory continues to serve as an important frame for understanding organisations in contemporary society.

Institutional theory's enduring influence lies in its ability to illuminate how taken-for-granted norms, values, and cognitive frameworks enable and constrain organisational action. It explains how institutions create stability by providing shared meanings and expectations, while simultaneously enabling transformation through processes of interpretation, contestation, and recombination (Zilber, 2009; Greenwood et al., 2011). The field has evolved considerably from its early focus on isomorphism and legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to address fundamental questions of agency, complexity, and change (Battilana, Boxenbaum & Leca, 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002; Dacin et al., 2002). Contemporary scholarship explores how actors navigate competing institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury,

2012), how identities and practices mediate institutional pressures (Kraatz & Block, 2008), how field-level dynamics shape institutional change (Zietsma et al., 2017), and how institutions are enacted and reproduced in everyday work (Smets, Aristidou, & Whittington, 2017). The institutional work perspective has been particularly influential in revealing the purposeful efforts through which actors create, maintain, and disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). More recently, scholars have turned critical attention to how institutions shape and perpetuate inequality and marginalization (Amis, Munir, & Mair, 2020), opening new questions about power, exclusion, and justice within institutional orders.

My research engages directly with these debates, treating institutional theory not as a fixed framework but as an evolving lens for understanding how actors make sense of, maintain, and contest institutional orders. Across diverse empirical settings – from elite business schools and investment managers to civil society organisations confronting authoritarian regimes and responding to forced displacement – I examine how institutions shape collective action, how logics interact and evolve, and how organisational and professional actors navigate the tensions between multiple meaning systems and between stability and change. This body of work contributes to a broader intellectual movement within institutional theory – one that repositions institutions not as static systems of constraint but as dynamic, continuously negotiated accomplishments sustained through practice and interaction.

My early projects, during my PhD studies and the years that followed, were designed to contribute to the core debates in organizational institutionalism. In this section, I revisit and locate my contributions around four themes in the literature: (1) how organizations and individuals navigate institutional complexity; (2) identity as mediating the experience of

institutional complexity; (3) field-level dynamics of continuity and change; and a more recent turn (4) from structural to a practice-based perspective on institutional logics.

These projects helped clarify, I hope, the mechanisms through which institutional complexity is filtered and enacted inside organisations, and how these mechanisms in turn contribute to the evolution of fields. My research highlighted, in particular, the importance of identity as a mediating lens between institutional prescriptions and organisational practice, its role in shaping which responses are seen as viable or legitimate, and the distributed nature of institutional maintenance and contestation across multiple actors. These insights provide the conceptual and empirical foundation on which my later work on marginalization and forced displacement built – and which it subsequently came to question.

3.1 How organisations and individuals navigate institutional complexity

A central concern in institutional theory, and one that animated much of my early work, is how organisations and individuals respond when confronted with multiple, and often competing, institutional logics. This question has driven much of my initial research, in which I examined how actors interpret and navigate institutional complexity, and how these interpretations shape organisational and individual response.

A pivotal moment in this trajectory was the publication of “Institutional Complexity and Organisational Responses” (1) in the *Academy of Management Annals* (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). This paper synthesized and extended emerging insights on how organisations experience and respond to the presence of multiple, often conflicting, institutional logics. Its theoretical contribution was twofold: first, it unpacked how structural characteristics of the field and organisational attributes shape institutional complexity; second, it examined how organisations navigate conflicting institutional pressures through strategies and

structures. By articulating a multilevel framework linking field-level conditions to organisational responses, the paper laid the foundation for what has become a vibrant and enduring research program on institutional complexity. In 2021, the paper received the Academy of Management Annals Decade Award, recognizing its lasting contribution to the field.

Over the years, this framework has shaped how scholars conceptualize several core constructs in institutional theory, including: hybridity and hybrid organising (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Battilana, Besharov, & Mitzinnck, 2017), selective coupling as a response to competing demands (Pache & Santos, 2013), identity tensions in pluralistic organisations (Besharov & Smith, 2014), field-level dynamics and pathways of field change (Zietsma, Groenewegen, Logue, & Hinings, 2017), and the role of institutional infrastructure in shaping organisational possibilities (Hinings, Logue, & Zietsma, 2017). Its influence has informed research across diverse empirical domains such as healthcare, social enterprise, professional services, and public sector organisations.

More striking than the volume of engagement, however, is its breadth. A preliminary analysis of 1744 papers from Web of Science citing the Annals paper reveals that, while management and organisation studies account for the majority of citations (approximately 73%), the concept of institutional complexity has travelled far beyond its original disciplinary home. The framework has been taken up across a remarkably diverse range of fields – including computer science (nearly 11% of citations), education, public policy, government and law, psychology, geography, and domains as varied as biodiversity conservation, sport sciences, energy, and health care sciences. This interdisciplinary resonance suggests that the framework speaks to something fundamental about how organisations and actors navigate competing demands – a challenge that extends well beyond the settings traditionally studied by management

scholars. It also raises questions I find intellectually generative: How has the concept been translated as it travelled? And has it been enriched through engagement with new phenomena? These are questions I hope emerging scholars will take up.

3.2 Identity as mediating the experience of institutional complexity

In my subsequent work, this framework became the starting point for a deeper inquiry into how organisations and professionals experience and navigate institutional complexity. I became particularly interested in the role of identity as a mediating mechanism – how it shapes the way organisational actors interpret institutional demands, assess what is legitimate or appropriate, and decide which logics to prioritize. Identity, I came to see, operates as a cognitive and normative filter that guides sensemaking and action, influencing how members interpret strategic issues and environmental changes (Gioia et al., 2010). Within institutional theory, identity has often been portrayed as a stabilizing force – a “subliminal guide” aligning behaviour with a logic of appropriateness (March, 1981) – that helps organisations manage competing demands (Glynn, 2008; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011).

This focus informed my paper “Responding to Institutional Complexity: The Role of Identity” (2) in *Organization Studies* (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014), which examined how French business schools coped with pressures to internationalize while maintaining their traditional identity as *Grandes Écoles*. In this paper, we distinguish between institutional identity – an organisation’s membership in a recognized social category; and organisational identity, the distinctive attributes that define how it differs from others within that category. We also highlight the importance of identity aspirations, showing that organisational responses are shaped not only by who they are, but by who they wish to become. This framework helped explain variation in responses across status hierarchies: elite schools engaged in conservative “revision

by grafting” to extend existing prestige, while lower-status schools pursued more transformative change to redefine their position. As one of the earliest attempts to theorize how organisations cope with demands stemming from multiple logics and audiences, this paper helped lay the groundwork for subsequent research on identity, hybridity, and organisational pluralism.

In the paper “Doing Well by Doing Less: Institutional Logics and the Performance Consequences of New Practice Adoption” (Kodeih, Raynard & Arjaliès, 2015), I extended these questions to professional identity, exploring how it mediates responses to institutional demands. The study traced how two groups of asset managers, operating under distinct professional logics – one grounded in experiential judgment, the other in quantitative analysis – responded to growing pressures for socially responsible investment (SRI). We found that these identities shaped not only the form of practice adoption (substantive versus symbolic), but also its performance consequences. Paradoxically, the more substantive adoption of SRI practices generated weaker audience support than symbolic compliance, revealing how professional identity and institutional logics jointly shape the meanings and outcomes of organisational and professional change.

Although the paper was initially conceived within the institutional logics tradition, it was ultimately published with a framing closer to the literatures on expertise and professional practice (5). This reframing better captured the empirical richness of the data and opened up new connections with the sociology of work and expertise. Engaging with these literatures deepened my interest in how expertise is performed, negotiated, and legitimized in practice – how professionals make sense of and improvise within institutional constraints through the situated routines of their daily work. This interest emerged through multiple iterations of the paper and deeper engagement with the data, which directed us to research on expertise as not only

conferred and sanctioned by collective bodies, but also negotiated in practice through relational work and everyday interactions (Huising, 2015; DiBenigno, 2020), reinforcing my broader move toward studying the day-to-day and the situated as I explain later.

The papers discussed in this section have contributed to institutional theory by conceptualizing identity as a key mediating mechanism through which organisational and professional actors interpret and respond to institutional complexity. They helped advance the idea that deeply held understandings of “who we are” and “who we aspire to be” channel sensemaking and action, shaping both the possibilities and limits of organisational change. Yet this work still treated logics largely as structural lenses. The limits of that framing – and my growing interest in the messier, more situated dimensions of institutional life – would become clearer to me over time.

3.3 Understanding Field-level dynamics of continuity and change

Alongside my interest in how organisations navigate institutional complexity, I have been concerned with a more fundamental question: how are institutional orders maintained and changed over time? This question kept resurfacing, in my work on business schools, in conversations with colleagues studying social enterprises, and later in my research on civil society organisations under pressure.

Institutional theory has long treated organisational fields as a cornerstone of analysis and as key sites where institutions are created, maintained, and transformed. Since DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) foundational work, fields have been understood as structured spaces of interaction in which organisations compete, cooperate, and conform under shared norms and cognitive frameworks. They bring together regulators, professional bodies, ranking agencies, social movements, and organisations producing similar services, and are sustained by patterns of

interdependence, mutual observation, and evaluation. Fields thus provide the social and cognitive infrastructure that shapes action, coordination, and meaning, making them central to how institutional stability and change unfold (Scott, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011).

Fields can be understood as local social orders composed of interdependent actors whose relationships are organised around common meanings, interests, and practices (Zietsma et al., 2017). Building on Bourdieu's (1993) conception of fields as structured spaces of positions and position-takings, institutional scholars have emphasized their relational and contested nature, highlighting how fields are constituted through ongoing struggles over legitimacy, authority, and resources (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Fields come into being and evolve through processes of structuration marked by increasing interaction among actors, the emergence of structures of domination and coordination, and the development of mutual awareness among participants engaged in a common enterprise (DiMaggio, 1986; Scott, 2014). Recent work describes this as the development of an "institutional infrastructure" that enables and sustains field-level interaction (Raynard et al., 2021; Hinings et al., 2017). This view positions fields not as static containers but as dynamic arenas of meaning-making and power negotiation, where institutional logics interact and boundaries shift (Thornton et al., 2012; Zietsma et al., 2017).

This concern with field-level dynamics informed my work on the French business school field, developed in my paper "Proudly Elitist and Undemocratic? The Distributed Maintenance of Contested Practices," (4) published in *Organization Studies* (Raynard, Kodeih & Greenwood, 2021). There, I examine how a small group of elite schools, together with key field-level intermediaries, sustained and reinforced a stratified institutional order at a time when the sector was undergoing profound transformation. Rather than portraying institutional maintenance as

inertia, the study shows how it relies on active, distributed work across multiple actors: the design of accreditation standards, the crafting of ranking criteria, the circulation of narratives about “excellence” and “merit,” and the routine comparison and public display of performance indicators. I conceptualize these practices as meta-routines – recurrent field-level procedures that organise evaluation and categorization across organisations and, in doing so, stabilize a particular hierarchy as natural and deserved.

Tracing these dynamics highlights two aspects of institutional maintenance and change. First, it underscores the distributed nature of maintenance: no single organisation “holds” the field in place; rather, maintenance emerges from the interlocking, often uncoordinated yet mutually reinforcing actions of multiple, differently positioned actors who converge around shared criteria and narratives. Second, it shows how maintenance and change are intertwined. The very tools and practices mobilized to “modernize” the field – new rankings, accreditations, international benchmarks – are simultaneously used to entrench existing hierarchies and to legitimize “proudly” unequal outcomes.

This study matters beyond revealing the underpinnings of unequal systems. It shows that both maintenance and resistance can emerge from the interlocking, partly improvised actions of multiple actors who are not centrally coordinated but whose efforts nonetheless converge. This insight is important because many of the institutional challenges we face today – from democratic erosion and the defense of exclusionary structures to efforts to protect civic space – unfold precisely through such distributed patterns. Understanding how fields hold together or fall apart without anyone “in charge” is therefore essential for grasping how institutions operate in contexts of fragmentation, contestation, and crisis.

For me, this paper was important because it was the first time I traced concretely how inequality is made and defended rather than simply inherited. Working on it sensitized me to the everyday work involved in maintaining a “proudly” stratified hierarchy and to the role of rankings, accreditations, and merit narratives in turning unequal positions into something natural and legitimate. It also began to shift the kinds of questions I asked – from “how do organisations cope with complexity?” to “whose position is being protected?” – and left me with a lasting discomfort about how neutral language can be used to justify exclusion, an unease that continues to inform how I look at institutional orders.

3.4 From structural to a practice-based perspective on logics

Over time, my work on institutional logics has shifted from emphasizing structural filters and mechanisms to foregrounding situated, co-constructed practices as the primary mediators through which actors navigate institutional complexity. Drawing on the practice-driven institutionalism of Smets, Aristidou, and Whittington (2017), my recent work develops a practice-centric perspective on institutional logics (6) published in *Organization Theory* (Schildt & Kodeih, 2025). This perspective treats institutions less as hierarchical systems imposing coherence from above and more as emergent orders sustained through interconnected practices enacted in everyday work (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

This evolution marks a shift from a “tall” ontology – in which structure shapes action – to a flatter one, in which institutions are continuously made and remade through distributed practices and improvisations (Schatzki, 2006; Shove et al., 2012). A practice-centric lens thus moves beyond structural accounts of institutional response to foreground the embodied, situated, and improvisational work through which institutions are maintained, adapted, and sometimes reimaged. It also bridges the meso-level of organisational dynamics with the micro-level of

individual agency, showing how institutional contradictions are not merely abstract tensions between logics but lived dilemmas negotiated through everyday practice.

Although this practice-centric work does not yet centre marginalization as an explicit object of inquiry, it has been important in reorienting my thinking toward the everyday, situated practices through which institutional orders are accomplished – an orientation that has been crucial for my later work that engages more directly with the lived experience of marginalization and forced displacement.

Looking back, I see these last two streams – the distributed maintenance paper and the practice-centric perspective – as marking a quiet but important shift. Both are more critical than my earlier work: the first asked not just how fields work but whose interests they protect and how inequality is legitimized through ostensibly neutral routines; the second opened space for the messier, embodied dimensions that structural accounts tend to flatten. Together, they signaled my growing orientation toward a more critical institutionalism – one attentive to power, exclusion, and the lived experience of those navigating institutional orders not designed with them in mind. This orientation would define the next phase of my research.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the papers discussed in this section and summarizes their main theoretical contributions.

Table 1. Intellectual anchoring and (early) trajectory in institutional theory

Paper (year)	Empirical setting	Institutional problem addressed	Core theoretical move	Key contribution to institutional theory	Role in my intellectual trajectory
Greenwood et al. (2011)	Conceptual / theory-building	How organisations respond heterogeneously to institutional complexity	Typology of organisational responses to competing logics	Established institutional complexity as a central problem and legitimized heterogeneity in responses	Foundational anchor that motivated my early focus on <i>variation</i> in organisational responses to complexity
Kodeih & Greenwood (2014)	French business schools under internationalization pressures	Why organisations facing similar institutional complexity respond differently	Identity aspirations and status positions as mediators of responses to complexity	Connected institutional complexity with organisational identity and status dynamics	Marked my entry into institutional theory by shifting attention from structures to <i>organisational self-conceptions</i>
Kodeih et al. (2018)	French business schools competing over flagship programmes	How organisations compete through evolving categories	Product- vs. audience-centric categorization strategies and category-level status	Reframed categorization as a relational, strategic process shaped by intermediaries	Extended my work from organisational responses to field-level competitive dynamics
Raynard, Kodeih & Greenwood (2019)	Elite (French) business schools and recruitment practices	How elite, exclusionary practices persist despite contestation – thereby reproducing inequality	Distributed maintenance via meta-routines and justificatory work spread across multiple actors and sites	Positions maintenance as <i>active</i> and <i>distributed</i> work that sustains hierarchy and exclusion, not just stability	Conceptual bridge from responses/field dynamics to how institutions reproduce inequality through everyday maintenance work
Kodeih et al. (Working paper)	Asset management and socially responsible investing	How institutional logics shape substantive vs. symbolic adoption	Logics as filters shaping evaluation, adoption, and performance outcomes	Linked institutional logics to performance consequences	Opened my work toward evaluation, consequences, and limits of compliance
Schildt & Kodeih (2025)	Conceptual / theory-building	How institutional logics are reproduced and evolve over time	Practice-centric view of logics (practices, practitioners, referential linkages)	Re-theorized logics as dynamic constellations of practice	Provided the conceptual bridge toward my later work on the situated experience and the day-to-day practices

4. From mainstream topics to marginalization and forced displacement

Over time, my engagement with institutional theory has drawn me toward questions of marginalization, exclusion, and justice – issues that institutional scholarship has only recently begun to address more directly. This interest was not only theoretical but profoundly personal. It emerged as I witnessed the refugee crisis unfold in my home country, Lebanon, and across Europe, a moment that made the social and political stakes of institutional structures and the processes that maintain and change them impossible to ignore. The societal developments instilled in me a sense of urgency to study phenomena that matter: how people and organisations act, adapt, and resist in contexts where institutions fail to protect or actively undermine human dignity.

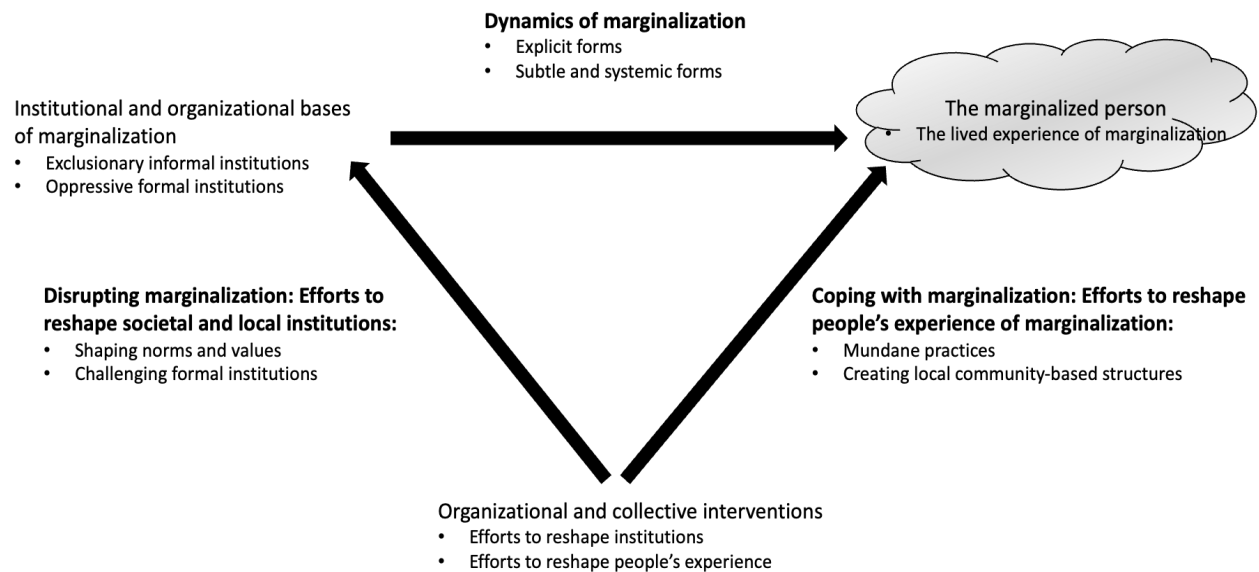
For a long period, the study of marginalization within organisation studies was largely confined to the domain of critical management scholarship, while institutional theory faced persistent criticism for its failure to fully account for systems of oppression, domination, and exploitation, as well as the strategies to resist and dismantle them (Munir, 2015; Willmott, 2015). Over time, however, institutional research has increasingly engaged with marginalized and stigmatized communities, examining how they navigate, resist, and adapt to their institutionalized conditions (Amis et al., 2018). This shift has been driven, in part, by a growing recognition of the subtle and systemic ways in which institutions reinforce power asymmetries and sustain marginalization. At the same time, institutional scholars have begun to incorporate more explicitly political and emancipatory perspectives, exploring how institutional work can serve not only to uphold existing structures but also to challenge and transform them.

Within this emerging stream, recent work has examined: (1) the dynamics of marginalization; (2) the strategies used by collective actors to disrupt these structures; and (3) the

coping practices through which marginalized people and organisations seek to alleviate its effects. My own research speaks to each of these strands, through studies of NGOs and civil society organisations supporting marginalized and displaced communities, and through analyses of how policy interventions and organisational programmes can unintentionally reproduce hierarchies of voice and legitimacy.

Yet across these developments, one dimension remains strikingly underdeveloped in institutional theory: the lived experience of marginalization, how these structures and strategies are felt, embodied, and made sense of in people's lifeworlds. Much of the literature – including my own work – gravitates toward organisational and field-level analyses and often adopts a neutral, ostensibly value-free stance. It tends to bracket the moral and affective dimensions of marginalization and the ways in which people experience structural violence in their bodies, relationships, and daily routines. Figure 1 below depicts these dynamics, with lived experience represented as a cloud that remains present yet under-theorized in institutional research.

Figure 1. Institutional theory's engagement with marginalization: structures, strategies, and the missing lived experience



4.1 Dynamics of Marginalization

In my own work, attention to the institutional and organisational bases of marginalization has permeated my projects, whether the focus was on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, migrant workers in Finland, or racialized minorities in France and the UK. Across these contexts, the grip of exclusionary structures – be they migration and asylum policies, bureaucratic procedures, or everyday discourses and classificatory practices – was visible both at the institutional level and within organisations that enacted, normalized, and sometimes amplified these dynamics. What struck me repeatedly was that marginalization did not stem from a single hostile actor or event, but from dense constellations of rules, narratives, and routines that quietly, and at times more overtly, organised who belonged, who was visible, and who remained disposable.

These observations resonate with how sociology has conceptualized marginalization as the social processes that push specific social groups to the fringes of society. Marginalizing

processes operate at both the societal and organisational levels, and are grounded in formal and informal institutional structures that disempower specific social groups by limiting the opportunities and agency of their members and impeding their ability to fully participate in the society (Lamont, 2018; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Dominant societal discourses often cast marginalized groups as inferior and “less worthy of protection” (Costas & Grey, 2019, p. 1575; Lamont, 2018), leading to widespread prejudice, disrespect and discrimination in social interactions. Consequently, members of marginalized groups lack the access to social and economic opportunities and resources available to the mainstream society, and their agency and voice are commonly curtailed. Although marginalization as a concept is seldom defined, it has become more commonly used in organisation studies (e.g., Bhatt et al., 2024).

Understanding marginalization therefore requires a close attention to the formal and informal structures that perpetuate distinctions between social groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), creating enduring “systems of domination” (Callero, 2003). These structures include diverse norms, regulations, shared beliefs, societal discourses, and reoccurring practices (Amis et al., 2017; Amis et al., 2020) and are often difficult to challenge because they tend to become “naturalized”, taken-for-granted (Amis et al., 2017; Douglas, 1986) and supported by those in positions of power (Claus & Tracey, 2020; Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). These “unchallenged” structures persist across generations through the transmission of legitimizing stories found in both formal texts and informal communication and interactions (Battilana & Casciaro, 2021), and often reproduced in organisational practices (Amis et al., 2020). For example, narratives perpetuating the supposed inferiority of women and the laziness of the poor are still with us today. Likewise, narratives about migrants who arrive in Europe to steal Westerners’ jobs and housing are deeply entrenched (e.g., Tracey & Phillips, 2016).

While marginalization is rooted in institutional structures, it is within organisations that these dynamics often become most tangible. Organisations play a crucial role in perpetuating, and at times exacerbating, patterns of marginalization (Amis et al., 2020; Bapuji et al., 2020). Organisational routines and practices often mirror or even amplify societal institutional structures within organisational hierarchies (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). Organisations may also develop and reproduce marginalizing practices that go beyond those of their broader institutional environment. Some perspectives even view organisations as “racialized” entities, reproducing through routine organisational processes, racial structures and schemas that lead to unequal distribution of organisational resources (Ray, 2019).

Organisations with entrenched power structures tend to develop cultures that normalize the preferential treatment of some socially advantaged groups, often to the detriment of other groups who are deprived of certain opportunities (Shore et al., 2018; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). Organisational routines, practices, and shared values serve as potent conduits through which power imbalances can fester at the workplace, ultimately becoming natural and sticky (Battilana & Casciaro, 2021; Clegg et al., 2006). Amis et al. (2020), for example, document how discriminatory hiring and compensation practices come to be perceived as ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’ due to the institutionalized myths of meritocracy, efficiency, and positive globalization that justify and reinforce existing power hierarchies. Similar dynamics can be observed in higher education admissions routines, where practices such as legacy admissions policies (giving preference to the children of alumni) (Hurwitz, 2011) or face-to-face interviews that tend to replicate social stratification by privileging “people like us” (Burmeister et al., 2013; Frank & Hackman, 1975).

Taken together, this body of work establishes the institutional and organisational foundations of marginalization as a necessary starting point. Yet, this is also the most studied aspect of marginalization where new contributions are rare. In my own research (e.g. Kodeih et al., 2023), I have written extensive sections about oppressive institutional structure, only to remove them during the review process to make space for more interesting and novel aspects of my data. Yet, oppressive structures foreground how marginalization is produced, normalized, and reproduced through rules, routines, and narratives and thereby sets the stage for examining how actors and organisations respond to these conditions – whether through disruptive or coping strategies.

4.2 Disrupting Marginalization: Addressing the Foundational Structures

As my attention turned to marginalization and the structures that reproduce it, I became increasingly interested in how collective actors and organisations organise to disrupt, dismantle, and resist these structures. In different projects, I have examined NGOs and civil society organisations that operate under hostile conditions: from initiatives seeking to protect migrants and refugees, to coalitions resisting repressive policies, to fragmented civil society organisations navigating democratic backsliding in Hungary, and more recently, to public sector actors experimenting with new ways of organising immigrant integration in Finland. In each of these settings, the question is not only how marginalization is reproduced, but how actors can mobilize – often with limited resources and in the shadow of powerful institutions – to unsettle exclusionary arrangements and open up alternative possibilities.

Within institutional theory, scholars have explored how such actors engage in institutional work to undermine the structural foundations of marginalization and domination. This research highlights a wide spectrum of strategies, ranging from overt acts of contestation to more covert,

everyday forms of resistance. Overt strategies involve large-scale mobilization of resistance and public attention, while covert strategies operate more gradually and through less visible actions. Both types of strategies aim to destabilize systems of domination by exploiting weaknesses in the processes that maintain them. Social movement studies highlight how direct confrontation can draw attention to social issues and mobilize support to ultimately eradicate specific oppressive structures (Cress & Snow, 1996; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; King & Soule, 2007; Rojas, 2006). In contrast to public confrontation, organisations can also work subtly and gradually to undermine exclusionary institutions without publicly challenging them (Claus & Tracey, 2020; Mair, Wolf & Seelos, 2016). These strategies are often employed in contexts where powerful elites “guard” formal institutions (Claus & Tracey, 2020) or where the population at large is likely to oppose attempts to disrupt prevailing norms and conventions (Martí & Mair, 2009).

The study by Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers and Mair (2016) documents the powerful efforts of a national NGO, PRADAN, to support poor women in rural India while coopting local norms and elites. Women in these communities are often subject to male domination, limiting their agency and opportunities to earn money. To combat these issues, the NGO formed self-help groups and market exchange activities to equip women with the skills and resources necessary to establish small businesses. Not only did these activities provide women with a sense of purpose and ability to plan ahead, but they also promoted a shift in the traditional subordinate role of women, empowering them within their families and communities. The study shows how NGOs can leverage existing community norms and values to foster institutional change, even when direct challenge to the prevailing institutional arrangements is impossible. By creating new social structures that gradually improved conditions for rural women, the NGO was able to empower them. In another illustrative example, Claus and Tracey (2020) show how a

coalition of NGOs challenged the coercively guarded institution of child marriage in Indonesia through a set of mobilization strategies that concealed controversial affiliations. Similarly, Mair et al. (2016) depict a process of scaffolding in a development program in rural India, whereby an organisation was able to transform entrenched local patterns of exclusionary behaviours and interaction while concealing this goal from powerful local elites.

My own work on civil society organisations under democratic backsliding in Hungary (7) adds to this line of research by examining how fragmented and resource-poor actors can nonetheless mount sustained resistance to an increasingly repressive state. Drawing on a longitudinal study of heterogeneous NGOs and informal groups, we show how they developed what we term *distributed resistance*: a pattern of action in which no single organisation openly confronts the regime, but where, through shifting coalitions, tactical specialization, and careful role differentiation, they collectively disrupt state attempts to close civic space. Rather than relying on heroic entrepreneurs or highly centralized movements, this form of resistance hinges on dispersed, partly improvised forms of coordination that allow actors to protect one another, keep issues on the public agenda, and preserve fragile spaces for dissent, even as formal channels of contestation are progressively dismantled.

This study offers one of the few empirical accounts of the predatory role that the state can play, and of civil society mobilization in response, a phenomenon that is spreading across Europe and beyond but remains understudied in organisation theory. For my own trajectory, this project was significant in different ways: it was the first time I studied organisations whose survival, not just their legitimacy or the legitimacy of their practices, was at stake. Working on this paper taught me that we could no longer treat the state just as arbiter or regulator when the organisations and people you study face harassment, funding cuts, and the real possibility of

being shut down. It pushed me to think more carefully about what institutional analysis can and cannot capture when institutions themselves are under attack.

A different, but related, strand of my work examines how public sector actors can pursue more “gentle” forms of disruption by creating experimental spaces within the immigration system itself. In a study of a national trial in Finland (8), we analyse how the government temporarily suspended some of the established rules of the immigrant integration system and invited municipalities to set up local “expertise centres” where new practices and services could be developed and tested. Rather than confronting the system from the outside, this initiative created what we conceptualize as *nested experimental spaces* that span national and local levels: a national space that loosened regulations and resourced experimentation, and local spaces that worked with front-line workers, NGOs, and employers to redesign integration pathways. By allowing actors to experiment with alternative arrangements while remaining embedded in the existing institutional order, these spaces offered a way to incrementally reconfigure a rigid integration system that had long produced exclusionary outcomes for immigrants, without requiring direct confrontation with its formal structures.

Stepping back from both this literature and my own research, three broad families of disruptive efforts can be distinguished. The first consists of NGO-led initiatives that gently unsettle exclusionary norms and practices from within communities, such as PRADAN’s work with rural women in India described in prior studies, or grassroots NGOs supporting women in refugee camps in Lebanon. The second involves fragmented yet sustained civil society resistance under repressive regimes, as in my study of Hungarian NGOs developing forms of distributed resistance. The third comprises state-led “nested” experimental spaces that temporarily loosen rigid rules within immigration systems, as illustrated by my work on the Finnish integration trial.

Across these different configurations, collective actors seek to create cracks in entrenched institutional arrangements and experiment with alternative futures for marginalized groups.

Studies of disruption are important, but they can render us myopic, as we tend to focus on the disruption itself rather than what it actually accomplishes over time. The mere presence of disruptive efforts does not mean that institutionalized patterns of marginalization are actually weakened. Strategies that aim to challenge exclusionary structures can fail, be co-opted, or even backfire, reinforcing the very systems they seek to transform. This is particularly likely when they fail to incorporate the voices of the marginalized communities they seek to support, a limitation that institutional research has seldom addressed. Khan, Munir, and Willmott (2007) provide a compelling illustration in their study of a coalition of NGOs and other actors that sought to eradicate child labor in Pakistan's soccer-ball manufacturing industry. Although these efforts were celebrated by Western audiences as heroic and morally commendable, they were met with resistance from local stitchers and community members, who viewed them as dismissive of their immediate priorities, most notably, fair wages and economic survival. By imposing their own normative framing and positioning themselves as saviours, the coalition effectively silenced local perspectives and reinforced existing power asymmetries. As the authors note, "power operated in a way so as to render this framing self-evidently true" (p. 1066).

More broadly, failing to attend to the complexity of organisational and policy interventions risks producing sanitized narratives – stories that privilege the neatness of theoretical argument over the lived realities of those we study. Such simplifications may seem acceptable when our empirical settings are business schools or investment managers. But they are far more troubling when the focus is on vulnerable or marginalized groups whose voices are already silenced within institutional systems. I return to these concerns in following chapters.

4.3 Coping with Marginalization: Reshaping People's Experience

In my own research, I have spoken with many informants living in exclusionary contexts: refugees in camps and precarious urban settings, migrant workers navigating hostile labour markets, and racialized minorities managing everyday stigma and surveillance. In some of these settings, prevailing norms, hierarchies, and institutional structures are virtually impossible to dismantle in the short term. What I have observed, however, is that collective actors and organisations sometimes organise to create safe and protected spaces *within* these structures – spaces that do not abolish marginalization, but that soften its grip and allow people to rework how it is experienced in their everyday lives. These practices do not change the institutional architecture directly; instead, they intervene in how people *live through* that architecture. It is this set of practices that are referred to as coping strategies.

This is a growing strand of research, sometimes explicitly aligned with institutional theory and sometimes drawing more loosely on that literature. One illustrative line of work examines stigmatized communities and how individuals often conceal their marginalized identities, passing as members of non-marginalized groups (e.g., Clair, Beatty & MacLean, 2005; DeJordy, 2008; Ragins, 2008), or engage in more proactive forms of identity work (e.g., Creed et al., 2010; Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022). For example, marginalized individuals may discursively reframe and contest their stigmatized status (e.g., Ali, Lyons & Ryan, 2017; Elraz, 2018; Lyons, Pek & Wessel, 2017; Slay & Smith, 2011), or deliberately seek out occupations and communities where they are less likely to face discrimination (e.g., Tilcsik, Antebi & Knight, 2015).

Coping can also take the form of building meaningful local activities that improve the lives of marginalized individuals in the shadow of oppressive structures, or of everyday, mundane practices that help them recover dignity and voice (Hultin, Introna, Göransson, &

Mähring, 2022; Fernández, Martí, & Farchi, 2017). Studies on resistance within an institutional tradition have shown how individuals can come together and build local “working” structures (Fernández et al., 2017; Martí et al., 2013) through which they express their shared frustration with prevailing systems of domination and reopen spaces of autonomy. Even under the most severe conditions, pockets of trivial but meaningful resistance may emerge (Martí & Fernández, 2013; Martin de Holan et al., 2019). Such local resistance does not allow individuals to achieve autonomy and “exit” existing structures, nor does it completely overthrow them. Instead, it enables marginalized individuals and communities to cope by envisioning “alternative futures within the interstices of the dominant structure” (Bhatt et al., 2024, p. 80).

However, such forms of collective coping are not always possible. Many vulnerable communities lack the energy and material resources to develop peer-support structures and practices on their own. In those cases, organisations can play a significant role in helping marginalized individuals cope with their adverse conditions. Often these efforts involve relief work that provides immediate resources to marginalized individuals, as well as the creation of local structures that help shield the affected social group from the negative effects of an oppressive social context (Kornberger et al., 2018; Lawrence & Dover, 2015).

One concrete way organisations can provide this support is by offering physical spaces and places that allow marginalized groups to evade or soften oppressive societal conditions. Researchers have highlighted the significance of such spatial provision. Lawrence and Dover (2015), for example, examine how a municipal program provided homeless people with temporary shelters in local churches. The program helped reshape people’s understanding of homelessness and facilitated institutional work by creating place-specific routines, resources, and identities. My own research likewise highlights the role of place and situated, proximal practices

in grounding communities whose agency has been eroded. In a study of an NGO supporting Syrian refugees in Lebanon (10) published in *Organization Studies* (Kodeih et al., 2023), we show how an entrepreneurial training program hosted in a local community centre “sheltered” participants from the oppressive temporariness imposed by the host country by intervening in their lived experience of time and reshaping their experience of the societal context. These “safe spaces” gave participants a temporary sense of stability and possibility and facilitated peer support by creating opportunities to share experiences and build relational ties. Such local structures can provide crucial support and relief in the short term and complement the longer-term processes needed to create institutional change.

Coping strategies can affect individuals and social groups in different ways. In the most adverse conditions, coping strategies simply help make life more bearable and to reclaim some dignity and humanity. For instance, Courpasson and Martí (2019, p. 865) discuss how Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto created a range of clandestine social and cultural activities to feel they “were still human beings” despite mortal threats. In less extreme conditions, NGOs often offer development programmes to support members of marginalized groups, such as refugees (Kodeih et al., 2023; Kornberger et al., 2018) and women in rural areas in India (Mair et al., 2016), to gain greater agency over their lives. While such efforts can provide affected communities with valuable skills and, sometimes more importantly, a sense of hope, self-worth, and relative control over their futures, they do so even when the institutional sources of marginalization cannot be disrupted.

As with disruptive efforts, treating coping efforts as the main outcome in our studies can also render us myopic to the exclusionary and harmful effects of certain norms, categories and practices. When we focus too much on how marginalized communities manage, endure and ‘get

by’, we risk shifting attention away from the persistent nature of exclusionary structures. In my own work, I have argued that in cases where challenging or dismantling societal structures is impossible or futile in the short run, coping strategies can “represent a ‘next best’ response” because they effectively shield marginalized groups from oppressive structures and help them “take control of their lives” (Kodeih et al., 2023, p. 194). But this is precisely the risk: that a focus on coping becomes a story of adaptation and resilience that leaves the structures intact, and in doing so, it can contribute, albeit unintentionally, to the normalization of the very structures that make coping necessary in the first place. I reflect on these questions and the romanticization of agency in Vignette 2.

In sum, research has documented diverse individual, organisational, and collective tactics to cope with and confront marginalization and oppression. Still, in practice, efforts to challenge and dismantle systems of domination remain relatively rare (Courpasson & Martí, 2019; Hamann & Bertels, 2016). Marginalized groups often lack access to the resources and connections that might help them redress marginalization, leading all too often to marginalized individuals accepting their own circumstances and acquiescing in the status quo (Courpasson & Martí, 2019). Here, researchers studying marginalization often have a stronger position: they are armed with the analytical tools necessary to uncover the structural barriers that hinder individuals and groups from enacting meaningful change and to identify strategies that might help overcome these barriers. The suffering and injustice commonly endured by marginalized communities creates a moral imperative for researchers to channel their expertise in ways that not only produce research but also contribute to addressing the effects and root causes of marginalization.

Vignette 2. Searching for agency among marginalized communities

This vignette is inspired by a public reflection by Vivek Soundararajan, Professor of Work and Equality at University of Bath, whose LinkedIn post² helped crystallize a discomfort I had been grappling with.

In research with marginalized communities, I have often found myself drawn to explaining how marginalized communities fight back and cope; I have been looking for moments that can be narrated as resistance and/or resilience. This comes from my firm belief that marginalized communities are not just victims; they negotiate, outsmart, endure and retain room to act. Treating marginalized actors as passive, voiceless, or merely acted upon can reproduce epistemic violence. Attending to agency pushes back against paternalism and deficit narratives; it restores dignity and complexity to lives too often flattened by structural accounts.

And yet, as Soundararajan noted, when agency becomes the primary analytic lens, it can slip into a comforting story: a kind of moral or scholarly reassurance that discounts structural injustices. We end up celebrating ingenuity in survival, while tacitly accepting the conditions that make survival necessary in the first place. The structures that constrain, exclude, and injure recede into the background, neutralized by narratives of coping, adaptation, and endurance. In some cases, emphasizing agency can even shift responsibility – subtly and unintentionally – from institutions to individuals. If marginalized actors are resilient, adaptive, and agentic, then why does change not happen? Why do conditions remain so unequal? The burden of transformation begins to shift toward those least able to effect it.

² https://www.linkedin.com/posts/vivek-soundararajan-397a5522_for-a-long-time-i-have-been-one-of-those-activity-7413912229101895680-YkCO?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAABd34oBrPb23peGikG224POiSceOyZOSu8

The question is not whether marginalized actors have agency; they do. The harder question is what impact that agency actually has, and what it leaves unchanged. A related question is why these structures remain so durable, so available to reproduce harm, even as people continuously navigate them and push against them? Finally, it is equally important to distinguish between disenfranchised communities' ability to mobilize agentic resources in different contexts (Global North vs Global South, democratic vs more authoritarian settings and other relevant conditions), with some prohibiting and denying access completely, while others offer more enabling, even if still constrained conditions (Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022; Marti & Fernandez, 2013).

Perhaps the task, then, is not to abandon agency-focused research, but to refrain from making it the end point of analysis, and to document not only how people cope and resist, but also how institutional arrangements remain remarkably stable – sometimes precisely because they can accommodate so much coping and resistance.

At times, insisting too much on agency risks offering an overly romanticized reading of marginalized people's conditions, and making domination look benign. After all, if people are able to resist it or cope with it, then why bother to critique it and work to dismantle it. This is where I want my own work to remain more careful: not by relinquishing agency, but focusing on the harder issue of what endures, what remains impaired, and how harm is continually reproduced.

Despite these important developments, it is difficult to say that institutional theory is widely perceived as a “natural home” for studying oppression and marginalization. In fact, institutional theory has long shown a reluctance to engage directly with issues of “domination,

oppression, and exploitation in modern work” (Willmott, 2015, p. 106; see also Munir, 2015, 2019). This moral timidity, combined with a longstanding commitment to value-neutral analysis, has limited institutional scholarship’s ability not only to grapple with deeper dynamics of marginalization and lived experience, but also to offer practitioners the conceptual grounding needed to design and implement inclusive, justice-oriented organisational practices. The next section takes up this critique more explicitly, asking what it would mean for institutional theory to take lived experience, power, and morality more seriously.

Table 2. Empirical papers examining disruption and coping in marginalized and constraining contexts

Paper	Empirical setting	Lens	Harmful institutional condition	What the paper shows (core mechanism)	Contribution to the disruption-coping framework
Chliova, Kodeih & Lounsbury (Working paper)	Hungary; fragmented civil society under repression	Disruption	Democratic backsliding; shrinking civic space	How CSOs coordinate, reconfigure, and sustain collective action under state predation	Disruption as contested, risky, and unevenly distributed.
Tarabichi, Schildt and Kodeih (2025)	Public sector innovation across levels (Finland; immigrant integration)	Disruption	Bureaucratic inertia; rigid rules; risk aversion	Nested experimental spaces: top-down authorization to deviate + bottom-up experimentation that generates viable alternatives	Treats disruption as governed and conditional; institutions can authorize novelty while still shaping its boundaries.
Polaki, Van Lent & Kodeih (Working paper)	Global health / HIV/AIDS care localization (Lesotho)	Disruption	Durable institutional infrastructures that undermine localization and reproduce inequality	How incentives, accountability systems, and infrastructures impair localization despite shared commitments to it	How disruption can be impaired by entrenched infrastructures that reproduce harm.
Kodeih, Schildt & Lawrence (2023)	Syrian refugees in camps; Lebanon	Coping	Indeterminate temporariness; exclusion; “stuckness”	Sheltering work that structures daily life and protects dignity amid chronic uncertainty	Coping as protective practice : it mitigates harm without resolving the underlying conditions producing it.
Van der Giessen et al. (2025)	Municipal reception/housing initiative for Ukrainian refugees (Netherlands)	Coping	Prolonged displacement; institutional gaps between emergency and long-term integration	Coping as organisational sheltering : collaboration, translation, and institutional design that supports endurance	Extends coping to public/collective infrastructures of support , showing how institutions can buffer harm even when they cannot remove it.

5. When Institutional Theory Looks Away

In this chapter, I turn to a critical reflection on institutional theory's blind spots, arguing that its conceptualization of power, history, and morality helps explain why lived experience has remained at the margins of mainstream work. I illustrate these arguments by revisiting my own research, showing both what the institutional lens enabled me to see and what it led me to overlook.

5.1 The missing critical lens on power and marginalization

Despite the important developments in recent years, institutional theory, particularly in its mainstream formulations, remains limited in its ability to adopt a genuinely critical stance and to capture the complex lived experience of marginalization. The literature I have reviewed documents the institutional and organisational structures that underpin exclusion, the strategies through which actors seek to disrupt them, and the tactics individuals and communities use to cope. Yet, the everyday realities of marginalization – fear, shame, stigma, exhaustion, small acts of care and defiance – often appear only at the margins of our analyses. They are treated as background context rather than as central to the processes we seek to understand.

This absence is not accidental. It is rooted in some of the core assumptions and sensibilities of institutional theory. Its intellectual foundations have long emphasized legitimacy, stability, and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014), often at the expense of interrogating how institutions reproduce domination and inequality. In doing so, it has tended to naturalize existing hierarchies, portraying institutions as neutral environments rather than as contested terrains structured by deep power asymmetries (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 2014; Munir, 2014). As critics have observed, much institutional scholarship abstracts away from the systemic,

historical, and geopolitical forces that shape whose interests institutions serve and whose voices they silence (Munir, 2019; Willmott, 2015).

A central limitation lies in how institutional theory conceptualizes power. Even as institutionalists often acknowledge that institutions are “all about power” (Zald & Lounsbury, 2010), mainstream work still tends to focus on an episodic, actor-centred view. Change is typically explained through the strategic deployment of resources, with early formulations revolving around the role of heroic institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum, 2009). Even though more recent work has moved away from this focus, an agentic undertone continues to run through much institutional theorizing, drawing attention away from the hegemonic and preconscious dimensions of power that shape actors’ preferences, identities, and horizons of possibility (Munir, 2015; Willmott, 2015). In parallel, organisations are too often treated as neutral entities rather than as arenas where domination and resistance unfold (Willmott, 2015; Munir, 2019). As Munir (2014) cautions, when scholars centre heroic institutional entrepreneurs, they risk overlooking how seemingly “positive” forms of actions may simultaneously reinforce deeper, colonial or extractive structures of domination. In this sense, institutional theory’s persistent agentic emphasis inadvertently reproduces a sanitized image of the world, one that highlights visible action while obscuring the structural and historical forces that condition it.

Moreover, critics have emphasized that institutional theory continues to struggle with history. Most empirical papers adopt rather short empirical timeframes, often obscuring complex historical processes and the long-term sedimentation of power dynamics and inequality (Willmott, 2015; Munir, 2019). This disregard for history undermines efforts to understand how

institutions evolve through colonial legacies, capitalist restructuring, racialized orders, or enduring patriarchal arrangements – all of which are central to understanding marginalization.

Finally, institutional theory is poorly equipped to explain organisational behaviour in environments where institutional trust is rapidly eroding – not only in the Global South, but increasingly within Western democracies themselves (Lounsbury, 2023; Meyer, 2025). This limitation is not incidental. Most foundational concepts in the field were developed during a period of relative stability and Western hegemony in the post-World War II decades, when American and Northern European institutions could be treated as the implicit baseline of what functioning institutions looked like. Seminal works were thus written from within a context of comparative stability and societal confidence – conditions that shaped, often invisibly, the assumptions baked into core theoretical constructs.

One telling example of this blindspot is the concept of “institutional voids”, often invoked to describe informal or low-income contexts. The concept rests on problematic assumptions about what counts as a “complete” institutional environment. As Nason and Bothello (2020) argue, such conceptualizations are implicitly derived from comparisons with Western, formalized economies, leading to a “deficit view” of other contexts. By framing the absence of formal market-supporting institutions as a void, this perspective assumes that order, coordination, and growth can only emerge through formalized, visible mechanisms. In doing so, it overlooks the alternative forms of organisation, reciprocity, and regulation that underpin economic activity in these settings. Rather than being devoid of institutions, informal economies often rely on dense, adaptive, and socially embedded arrangements that sustain commerce, trust, and livelihoods outside conventional market logics.

Taken together, these critiques show why institutional theory, on its own, cannot yet provide an adequate framework for analysing marginalization, oppression, or struggles for justice. They also help explain why lived experience has remained largely peripheral to institutional analyses, appearing as illustrative anecdote rather than as a primary site of theorizing. Yet they also highlight a generative opportunity. Institutional theory offers powerful tools for understanding meaning systems, logics, and field dynamics; critical scholarship offers robust frameworks for examining domination, hegemony, and emancipation. Bringing them into deeper conversation – rather than selectively borrowing across traditions – opens the possibility for a more reflexive, historically grounded, and politically attuned institutionalism. One that not only explains how institutions shape action, but also interrogates whose interests they serve, how they reproduce inequality, and how they might be transformed.

5.2 A reflection on my own work

A closer reflection on my own work illustrates both the strengths and the constraints of the institutional framework for analysing dynamics of marginalization. My paper on sheltering work (Kodeih, Schildt & Lawrence, 2023) offered valuable insight into how an NGO created a protective space for Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, enabling a degree of empowerment within an oppressive context. Using the concept of sheltering, we showed how the program intervened in the lived experience of time for these women by temporarily easing the oppressive temporariness imposed by the asylum regime and opening alternative temporal horizons through new routines, projects, and imagined futures. In this sense, the paper began to bring lived experience into institutional analysis, not just as background but as something that is actively shaped through organisational practices. Yet the institutional work framing that guided the study also constrained the questions I asked and addressed. By centering the NGO's efforts and

conceptualizing empowerment primarily as an outcome of “sheltering practices,” I reproduced a familiar institutional narrative: one that documents how institutional actors creatively respond to constraints, while leaving largely unexamined the deeper structures of domination shaping women’s lives.

This perspective led me to emphasize the NGO’s programmatic agency more than the women’s own forms of agency. In hindsight, there were subtle, situated, and sometimes resistant practices through which the women navigated life in the camp that were important part of their coping, but left out from the story I told. The analytical focus on institutional work left little room to foreground how gender, religion, and racialized refugee status intersected to shape these women’s experiences of bleakness, dignity, and relative empowerment. The data revealed shifting gender relations – women taking on economic responsibility while men grappled with dislocation, loss of role, and heightened surveillance in Lebanon – alongside the moral and emotional significance of faith and the ambivalent burdens of motherhood. It also revealed differences in how women related to their racialized refugee status, some embracing it as a source of shared identity and collective support, while others distanced themselves from it or rejected it altogether as a stigmatized label. This reversal of gender roles, faith as a moral anchor, motherhood as both empowering and constraining, and negotiated meanings of refugeehood were not isolated findings about the camp life, but reflections of deeper institutional conditions. By treating them as contextual background rather than as central mechanisms, I missed the opportunity to show how the women acted as politically situated subjects navigating multiple and overlapping systems of domination. Instead, the analysis remained focused on their participation in a bounded institutional intervention and on the temporal relief it provided.

This critique is not a rejection of the paper's insights, but an acknowledgement of what the institutional lens, as typically deployed, leaves unaddressed: the lived experience of structural violence beyond the specific dimension of time; the interplay of gendered, racialized, and geopolitical hierarchies; and the pockets of resistance and meaning-making that exist beyond organisational programmes. Recognizing these blind spots clarifies both what my work has contributed and where it falls short, and it motivates my effort to develop an institutionalism that engages more fully with lived experience, power, and morality.

More broadly, this reflection points to a tendency in institutional theory to treat institutions as the accomplishments of “powerful” actors – deliberately constructed, elite-sanctioned, and custodially maintained – while undertheorizing how institutions are also opposed, resisted, and subverted from below. Non-elites do not merely inhabit arrangements designed by others; they contest them, work around them, and build informal alternatives that can both challenge and complement official structures. These informal institutions – sustained through everyday acts of refusal, solidarity, and improvisation – are not simply gaps or absences relative to formalized systems, but generative arrangements in their own right, with their own logics of trust, reciprocity, and sanction. Developing an institutionalism that takes lived experience, power, and morality seriously thus requires not only expanding our empirical gaze but inverting our default theoretical vantage point: beginning not with the custodians of institutional order, but with those who live under it, navigate it, and, in small but consequential ways, remake it.

6. Future research plans: a program to put lived experience at the centre

“The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be either good or evil.”

Hannah Arendt – *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Building on the critique developed in the previous section, the research program I outline here is not a departure from institutional theory but an attempt to make it more responsive to the worlds of marginalization, racialized minorities, and forced displacement that have become my primary empirical home. Critics have shown that institutional theory's claims to value-neutrality leave little room for reflecting on its own political and intellectual effects and tend to obscure the fact that scholars are not neutral observers but participants in systems of power (Munir, 2015; Lok, 2017; Willmott, 2015). Much institutional work, including research on institutional logics, still treats competing logics as equivalent "demands" to be managed, without asking which ones are oppressive, exclusionary, or harmful to the involved social groups. A critical institutionalism that takes lived experience seriously requires making this moral stance explicit: foregrounding suffering, disrespect, and misrecognition; identifying the actors and practices that uphold systems of domination; and attending to the unintended harms that well-intentioned interventions can produce (Galleli & Amaral, 2026; Khan et al., 2007; Kaufmann & Derry, 2024). The aim is not to abandon institutional analysis, but to reorient it toward a more morally attuned engagement with the consequences of institutional arrangements for those whose lives are organised within them (Sayer, 2011).

The research program I outline below is grounded not only in theoretical and empirical concerns, but also in a particular understanding of the role of the scholar in times of institutional, ecological, and political crisis.

6.1 Taking the Lived Experience seriously: Bridging Institutional Theory and Critical Perspectives

Critical traditions and their domestication

Institutional theory has long borrowed from critical social theorists such as Bourdieu, Giddens, and Foucault, yet these borrowings have often been selective, domesticating rather than engaging the analytic and political force of these thinkers. As Hirsch and Lounsbury (2014) observe, such appropriations tend to strip away the radical insights into domination, symbolic power, and governmentality that made these theories transformative in the first place. This allows institutional theory to expand its conceptual reach without confronting its own epistemological and political limits, resulting in what Munir (2019) calls “academic imperialism” where critical ideas are absorbed into the mainstream, but their disruptive potential is blunted, crowding out alternative frameworks instead of fostering genuine dialogue.

A more generative path forward lies in bringing institutional theory into sustained and equal conversation with critical traditions. Integrating insights from phenomenological, intersectional, and decolonial approaches (to name a few) can better illuminate how domination operates through taken-for-granted norms and how systemic inequalities are reproduced or disrupted over time. Such a project does not abandon institutional theory but extends it, retaining its explanatory power for organisational and field-level dynamics while addressing its blind spots around power and marginalization.

Lived experience as moral commitment

One way to accomplish this, I argue, is for institutional scholars to move beyond structural abstraction and attend more closely to the subjective interpretations and lived experiences of social groups (Voronov & Weber, 2020; Galleli & Amaral, 2026). A better understanding of marginalization and how “barriers to entry, voice and opportunities” are created cannot be reached through “theoretical abstraction” alone, but requires centring the lived experiences of marginalized individuals and communities themselves (Kaufmann & Derry,

2024). The value of attending to lived experience is not merely methodological but moral. Sayer (2011) argues that human beings are sentient creatures whose relation to the world is one of concern – capable of flourishing and suffering in ways that carry objective moral weight, independent of whether social science chooses to recognize them. Unlike structural accounts of marginalization, which can be deferred or bracketed, the direct experience of suffering makes an immediate claim on us as moral beings. Centering lived experience is therefore not a methodological preference but an ethical commitment – one that takes seriously what it means to be a person harmed by the structures we study.

My recent research speaks directly to the disconnect between abstract principles and lived experience (Kodeih, Raynard & Bui, Forthcoming). In a paper on the unintended consequences of the UK's Modern Slavery Act (12), we show how well-intentioned policies designed to combat forced labour inadvertently produced heightened scrutiny of the Vietnamese nail salon community, casting it under suspicion and effectively racializing a group the policy sought to protect. This case illustrates how institutional interventions, even when morally motivated, can reproduce hierarchies of voice and legitimacy, and thereby privilege the perspectives of powerful actors while problematizing the very communities they claim to defend. Failing to attend to the complexity of organisational and policy interventions, and to how they are lived by those targeted, risks producing sanitized narratives. Such simplifications are troubling precisely when the subjects are those whose voices are already marginalized within the systems being studied.

Emotions, inhabitation, and the turn toward experience

Within institutional theory, important strands have already begun to move closer to lived experience. Work on the role of emotional experiences and displays in higher-order institutional dynamics (Lok et al., 2017; Voronov & Vince, 2012), as well as inhabited institutionalism

(Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), provides important foundations for such an orientation. Emotions offer a window into how people experience and cope with marginalization, shaping the sensemaking processes through which those disadvantaged by the institutionalized status quo interpret and respond to their position (Creed et al., 2010; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). Ritualized performances of joy, reverence, or awe (Farchi et al., 2022; Massa et al., 2017) can act as collective mechanisms of resilience, while compassion and empathy may motivate efforts to build sheltered “places of social inclusion” where marginalized individuals can temporarily experience dignity and equity (Wright et al., 2021). Inhabited institutional approaches similarly contend that institutions are not only external structures but are “lived in” and enacted through everyday interaction (e.g., Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Binder, 2007).

My own work has begun to move in this direction by examining the moral – emotional experience of interventions that seek to mobilize audiences around grand challenges. In a working paper on a political escape room art project addressing forced displacement (13), we trace how spatial design shapes the moral emotions of both players and refugees who work as “game masters” as the players move through a sequence of rooms, sounds and encounters. Although the organisers intended the installation to foster empathy for refugees, the juxtaposition of play and seriousness, the pacing of the rooms, and the configuration of the final interaction space often redirected participants’ emotions inward: feelings of shame, discomfort and doubt about the format itself led them to morally evaluate their own behaviour and the intervention, rather than the injustice of forced displacement. The study shows how well-intentioned awareness-raising efforts can generate moral dissonance and disengagement if they neglect the situated, embodied ways in which people encounter grand challenges, and it underscores the

need for institutional analyses that remain attentive to the lived experience of those who intervene and those on whose behalf they claim to act.

These developments mark a step away from views of actors as passive carriers of scripts and toward a more situated, experiential understanding of institutional life. Yet, as Voronov and Weber (2020) argue, people and their lived experience have still “not been a central part of neo-institutional theorizing,” and they have rarely been accorded special focus compared to symbolic entities such as organisations or material entities such as technologies. Greater attention to people’s lived experience, they suggest, is a precondition for an institutional analysis that is concerned not only with how institutions work, but that also sees itself as a reflexive, moral, and potentially emancipatory scholarly project.

Race, Embodiment, and Intersectionality: Toward a Decolonial Institutional Analysis

Taking lived experience seriously, however, also means recognizing that how individuals experience institutions is never generic. These experiences are patterned by intersecting axes of race, class, gender, legal status, and geography, and by long histories of colonialism and empire. Intersectional and decolonial perspectives make this point forcefully: they show how institutional arrangements are built upon and continually reproduce hierarchies of worth, visibility, and vulnerability, and how some groups are systematically exposed to harm while others are protected or even advantaged by the same rules and categories. Bringing institutional theory into dialogue with these perspectives is therefore not simply a matter of adding new variables; it is a way of reorienting institutional analysis toward those who are most affected by institutional orders.

Recent work connecting inhabited institutions and critical race theory illustrate what a move in this direction can look like. Two studies in particular (Ince et al., 2025; Ray, 2019) offer

a promising way to understand the lived experience of racialization in organisations – an aspect that mainstream institutional theory, with its emphasis on rationalized myths and formal structures, has historically overlooked. By highlighting how institutions are enacted in everyday interaction, inhabited institutionalism provides the analytic bridge needed to connect macro-level racial ideologies with the micro-level processes through which they are reproduced, contested, or occasionally disrupted. Ray (2019) argues that organisations are not race-neutral bureaucracies but “racial structures that reproduce (and challenge) racialization processes,” showing that institutional mythologies such as meritocracy or neutrality are not only rationalized but also racialized. Building on this view, Ince et al. (2025) integrate inhabited institutionalism with the theory of racialized organisations to argue that racialization cannot be reduced to either interpersonal encounters or abstract structural constraints. Rather, it is continuously accomplished through situated social interactions that sustain and sometimes subvert racial hierarchies.

Relatedly, institutional theory can benefit from phenomenological approaches that centre the embodied, affective, and habitual dimensions of oppression – dimensions that institutional scholarship has rarely examined. Helen Ngo’s *The Habits of Racism* shows how racism persists not only through explicit structures and policies but through the sedimentation of racialized habits that shape attention, bodily comportment, and everyday interactions. From this perspective, institutions are not merely external structures but repositories of embodied histories that live through people’s gestures, assumptions, and dispositions. Bringing Ngo’s insights into institutional analysis highlights how institutional logics, categories, and mythologies become ingrained as bodily habits that prefigure who is seen as competent, trustworthy, risky, or out of place. It also illuminates how racialized and colonially inherited ways of seeing and moving

through the world – what Ngo calls “racialized embodied orientations” – constantly reproduced in routine organisational encounters, often below the threshold of awareness. Phenomenological and decolonial perspectives can thus enrich institutional theory’s capacity to account for the lived experience of racialization and the micro-processes through which colonial and racial hierarchies persist in organisational life.

Intersectionality offers another vital bridge. It provides a powerful lens for analysing how multiple, intersecting institutional structures shape lived experience. Rather than viewing these structures as a rigid or value-neutral form of institutional complexity, this perspective highlights a shifting web of constraints and affordances that differently position individuals within systems of power. A compelling example comes from Nazzal, Stringfellow, and Maclean (2024), who examine the intersecting oppressions confronting Palestinian women activists navigating occupation and rising authoritarianism in the West Bank. Their study shows how the security apparatus of the quasi-state, alongside social structures such as patriarchy and family, simultaneously shape women’s day-to-day organising while producing differentiated subjectivities and experiences based on their relative privilege and access to resources. Women with higher levels of social capital, for instance, encountered less masculine dominance than those with fewer resources. The authors also illustrate how bodily shaming, policing, and stigma varied depending on whether a woman’s attire conformed to dominant social values, leaving some activists exposed to criticism while others were shielded. Family dynamics similarly diverged: for some women, familial obligations hindered activism, whereas others found in their families a source of support and motivation. This account demonstrates how intersecting institutional layers – state, community, family, and gendered norms – co-construct uneven

terrains of constraint and possibility, shaping both the risks and resources that define women's activist trajectories.

Finally, a decolonial perspective is much needed because it offers a way to confront the “epistemic blindness” that can shape our engagement with phenomena (Banerjee, 2022). As scholars socialized in Western universities, traditions, and knowledge, we often take these theories for granted and become “blind” to other ways of knowing. This is particularly problematic when we study phenomena embedded in different socio-cultural contexts or involving under-represented groups. For scholars conducting research in the Global South, for example, failing to engage with local specificities, realities, and knowledge traditions can amount to epistemic violence. The following vignette illustrates how I have begun to take up this decolonial, reflexive work in my own practice as a scholar (14).

Vignette 3. Decolonizing the self as a condition for a more critical institutionalism?

My growing unease with the silences of mainstream institutional theory has gone hand in hand with a more personal interrogation of my own position in the field. If institutions and knowledge systems are themselves marked by coloniality, then developing a critical institutionalism requires not only new concepts and empirical sites, but also a reflexive engagement with how we, as scholars, are shaped by and complicit in these structures. This concern is at the heart of a recent collaborative chapter I co-authored with Shaista Khilji, Juliana Mainard-Sardon, Chaïma Benzekri, and Bernardo de la Vega, in which we use narrative inquiry to explore how Global South scholars living and working in the Global North experience and navigate the coloniality of their being and their knowledge production.

Drawing on decolonial theory, the chapter highlights how Global South scholars in Western institutions inhabit a double bind: they are structurally positioned “within the academies

of dominant powers,” expected to perform according to Western epistemic norms, while simultaneously drawing their identities and attachments from knowledge traditions that are often devalued or treated as “data” rather than as legitimate sources of theorizing. We examine processes of self-orientalism, internalized coloniality, and the affective costs of inhabiting this in-between position – feelings of shame, doubt, and alienation that lead scholars to silence parts of themselves in order to be recognized as “proper” academics. At the same time, we show how becoming aware of these dynamics can open up possibilities for resisting epistemic violence, reclaiming Indigenous knowledge, and experimenting with more plural forms of theorizing.

For me, this project has been important because it made explicit something that had long been present but unnamed in my own trajectory: the discomfort of being, at once, a Lebanese scholar socialized into French and Anglo-American academic traditions, and someone whose attachments and injuries are rooted in places and histories that are rarely taken seriously as sites of theorizing. Engaging in narrative inquiry with other Global South scholars forced me to confront how I have internalized certain hierarchies of knowledge, how I have sometimes treated my own background as an object rather than a resource, and how these patterns risk reproducing the very injustices I seek to study.

This work does not engage institutional theory directly, but it helps explain why a more critical institutionalism is necessary. It foregrounds the coloniality of being that underpins the coloniality of knowledge in Management and Organization Studies, and shows that decolonizing our theories of institutions cannot be separated from decolonizing the selves who produce them. In that sense, it complements my efforts to develop an institutionalism that takes marginalization and lived experience seriously, by insisting that such an institutionalism must also attend to who is authorized to speak, from where, and on what terms.

This reflexive work on the academic self and its coloniality complements the more conceptual moves outlined above and forms part of the broader project of decolonizing institutional analysis that I pursue in this thesis.

Taken together, intersectional, phenomenological and decolonial perspectives offer a set of conceptual tools for bringing lived experience into the heart of institutional analysis. They invite us to ask how institutions are felt in bodies, biographies, and everyday interactions, and to treat categories such as race, gender, class, and coloniality as constitutive of institutional orders rather than as external “variables.” They also direct attention to the local, situated sites where abstract norms and higher-order institutions are instantiated, negotiated, and sometimes quietly resisted in practice.

The table below highlights how my recent work moves beyond structural accounts of institutions to engage more directly with lived experience, moral – emotional dynamics, and decolonial reflexivity, helping to bridge institutional theory with critical perspectives.

Table 3. Bridging institutional and critical, lived experience perspectives in three projects

Study	Empirical / narrative setting	Core focus and mechanisms	Contribution to bridging institutional & critical / lived-experience perspectives
Kodeih, Raynard & Bui (forthcoming)	Policy intervention targeting “modern slavery” in the UK, focusing on how the Act was translated into practice in relation to the Vietnamese nail salon community	Shows how a well-intentioned institutional intervention, designed to combat forced labour, produced heightened scrutiny and suspicion toward Vietnamese nail salons, effectively racializing a group it sought to protect. Traces how abstract legal categories, compliance routines, and media narratives interact to construct certain workers and entrepreneurs as risky and “exploitative” by default.	Bridges institutional analysis of policy and field-level governance with a critical, lived-experience lens by foregrounding how those governed by the Act experience its effects. Highlights how hierarchies of voice and legitimacy are reproduced through institutional interventions, and why theorizing institutional change requires attention to racialization, stigma, and the moral experience of targeted communities.
Kutscher, Kodeih, Raynard & Schildt (working paper)	Immersive “escape room” art project in Europe, designed to raise awareness about forced displacement; interpretive study of players and refugee “game masters” as they move through the installation	Analyses how spatial design, sequencing of rooms, and scripted interactions shape the moral emotions (empathy, shame, discomfort, doubt) of both visitors and refugee game masters. Shows how the juxtaposition of play and seriousness, and the configuration of the final space, often redirects emotions inward – toward self-judgement and critique of the format – rather than outward toward structural injustice and displacement.	Connects institutional concerns about grand challenges and audience engagement with phenomenological attention to moral – emotional experience. Demonstrates how awareness-raising interventions can generate moral dissonance and disengagement if they ignore the embodied, situated ways people encounter grand challenges, reinforcing the need for an institutionalism attentive to affect, space, and lived experience.
Khilji et al. (forthcoming)	Collaborative narrative inquiry with Global South scholars working in the Global North, examining their journeys of internalized coloniality, self-orientalism, and attempts to decolonize their being	Uses narrative inquiry to surface how colonial epistemologies live in scholars’ bodies, emotions, and academic practices. Identifies mechanisms such as dissonance/décalage, model-minority performances, silencing and later reclaiming marginalized identities, and the tension between conformity and resistance.	Extends the move toward lived experience by turning the analytical gaze onto scholars themselves. Shows how knowledge production is shaped by the coloniality of being and argues that decolonizing MOS requires decolonizing the self. Methodologically, it legitimizes deeply personal, narrative forms of knowledge as part of a critical, emancipatory institutionalism.

6.2 Local organising and place-based institutions as empirical entry points

This more critical institutionalism oriented to lived experience draws attention to the importance of attending more systematically to *proximate institutions* – the local configurations, organisations, and places through which higher-order norms and policies are made tangible in people’s lives. These include both local instantiations of abstract ideals or norms (such as integration centres, welfare offices, clinics, churches, shelters, or community organisations that enact national or transnational regimes), and the local institutions that actors themselves build to cope with, buffer, or temporarily escape the effects of those regimes. Because they sit closer to people’s everyday worlds, these sites offer particularly rich vantage points for examining how marginalization is experienced, negotiated, and sometimes contested in practice.

While institutional research has traditionally privileged societal and field-level analyses, and engagement with “relatively abstract concepts such as fields” (Lawrence & Dover, 2015: 4), recent work locates institutional research in specific places, locations and communities. I argue that understanding the workings of oppressive and harmful institutions requires attending to how these higher order structures are continuously (and sometimes habitually) enacted in specific local contexts and “local relational systems” (Marquis, Lounsbury & Greenwood, 2011), and how these local contexts can also become sites of protection and resistance. Extreme cases, such as the violent and dehumanizing practices inside concentration camps (Martí & Fernández, 2013), reveal how macro-level domination is reproduced through situated interactions and localized institutional arrangements. At the same time, other studies show that local places can buffer actors from hostile or marginalizing environments, mediating the effects of distal institutional pressures (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Kodeih et al., 2023).

Emerging research highlights the generative potential of local, place-based initiatives for developing responses finely attuned to the specific configurations of marginalization that communities face. Bhatt et al. (2024), for example, show how community-owned initiatives in rural India addressed entrenched inequalities by working directly with gendered, caste-based, and classed hierarchies, allowing both incremental movement toward an envisioned future and the in-situ emergence of new issues and solutions. Similarly, Vijay et al. (2023) illustrate how actors in Kerala transformed community palliative care by mobilizing proximate resources, local knowledge, and shared needs – relocating care from exclusionary hospital settings to community spaces that fostered solidarity and dignity. These studies reveal that place-based organising, though geographically bounded, leverages dense social ties, shared histories, and intimate knowledge of local realities to craft contextually grounded, culturally resonant practices (Fernández et al., 2017; Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2022; Pouthier & Sondak, 2021). Unlike standardized solutions imposed from afar – often by actors socially distant from the consequences of marginalization (Frey-Heger et al., 2022) – local organising allows for ongoing experimentation, meaning-making, and cultural adaptation (Bhatt et al., 2024).

Focusing on proximate institutions is not a call to give up on fields and higher-order regimes, but a way to trace how these are inhabited and reworked in the places where people actually live, work, and seek protection. As Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 151) famously argued, individuals are born into an “objective social world” that is mediated to them by significant others, who filter reality through both their structural positions and their own biographical trajectories. Proximate institutions are the sites where this mediation takes place, and where higher-order institutional arrangements become lived, contested, and endured. In sum, work that combines a focus on proximate institutions and the people who inhabit them offers a

promising research agenda for institutional theory. It gives scholars a way to see the effects of higher-order structures in situ, and to complement macro-accounts with a more grounded, context-sensitive view.

6.3 Methodological and ethical commitments for investigating the lived experience

Taken together, these conceptual and empirical shifts carry important methodological implications, particularly for the study of marginalized individuals and communities. Taking lived experience seriously requires cultivating the kind of cognitive empathy that Small and Calarco (2022) describe, an empathetic understanding of informants' subjective worlds, something that becomes especially challenging when studying groups whose lives and constraints differ profoundly from those of most academics. For institutional scholars, this means critically interrogating whether our methodological conventions – large samples, standardized interviews, neatly bounded datasets – can genuinely illuminate the hidden, taken-for-granted, or embodied dimensions of marginalization. In many cases, they cannot. Rich situated accounts, possibly even a small number of deeply textured narratives (Creed et al., 2010), may offer more powerful insight into how institutional structures are enacted, reproduced, and resisted on the ground.

Foregrounding lived experience also demands creating space for the voices, stories, and interpretations of marginalized individuals without romanticizing or essentializing them (Sobande & Wells, 2023). As Voronov and Weber (2020) suggest, “a person-centric starting point for institutional analysis would begin with the phenomenological study of people's entire lifeworlds, at the individual or collective level”. Doing so calls for methodological diversity and bricolage (Aguinis et al., 2019; Kistruck & Slade Shantz, 2022; Sharma et al., 2024): research designs attuned to the specificity of local contexts (Halme et al., 2024), and openness from our

journals to forms of inquiry that have historically been sidelined in institutional theory, such as autoethnography, autobiographical narratives, participatory and co-reflexive methods. Crucially, this bricolage should extend beyond data collection to encompass how knowledge is disseminated. Alternative formats – documentaries, semi-fictions, graphic narratives, or community co-created films – can reach audiences and communities that academic journals never do.

The imperative for such inclusive scholarship is not merely methodological but moral. Epistemic injustice has historically been reproduced, not corrected, by research that extracts knowledge from marginalized communities without returning meaningful value to them. When those communities bear the costs of research participation while its rewards accrue primarily to scholars and journals, the research enterprise risks replicating the very inequalities it purports to study. Inclusive scholarship, in this sense, is an ethical obligation: it asks us to conduct research *with* and *for*, rather than merely *about*, marginalized communities (Bothello & Bonfim, 2023).

It is worth clarifying what this distinction entails in practice. Conventional ethnography, even when it involves sustained immersion in a community, typically positions the researcher as the sole interpreter and author: community members are informants whose accounts are translated into scholarly frameworks they may never encounter or recognize. Participatory and co-reflexive methods go further by involving community members as co-researchers – shaping research questions, interpreting data, and sometimes co-authoring outputs. Such approaches can reconfigure the power relations of knowledge production and help institutional scholars uncover how macro institutions are inhabited, resisted, and transformed through local action, while actively guarding against extractive research practices.

These methodological commitments also require attending to the relational and ethical dynamics of fieldwork. Building respectful, trusting relationships and prioritizing depth over breadth (Halme et al., 2024) can help researchers avoid projecting assumptions or stereotypes onto participants – as when de la Chaux et al. (2017) expressed surprise that refugee communities did not engage in violent rioting, implicitly imposing outsider expectations. Institutional scholars must also reflect on their positionality (Creed et al., 2010) and on how interviews, observations, and researcher presence can unintentionally harm vulnerable participants (Reuber et al., 2022). Only a few studies (e.g., Pouthier & Sondak, 2021) explicitly report adopting a relational ethic of care in researcher – participant interactions; future institutional work would benefit from integrating such ethical reflexivity more fully.

Finally, institutional researchers must confront our own motivations for studying marginalization. As van der Giessen (2023) warns, there is a growing risk of “academic voluntourism” as scholars gravitate toward extreme contexts without fully considering the consequences for participants or themselves. The emotional demands of this work – exposure to trauma, grief, and violence – require institutional scholars, especially junior researchers, to develop practices of emotional reflexivity and support (Connolly & Reilly, 2007). Being explicit about why we study certain groups, how our work affects them, and how it affects us is not ancillary to institutional research; it is foundational to producing ethical, rigorous, and socially meaningful scholarship.

University ethics committees are only beginning to grapple with these challenges, and the gap shows. Systems designed around a biomedical model of individual risk and informed consent were not built for participatory, emotionally demanding research with marginalized communities – and they often struggle to evaluate it fairly (Flicker et al., 2007). What tends to

get missed are precisely the questions that matter most in this kind of work: communal consent, reciprocity, researcher wellbeing, the long-term relationship between a researcher and a community. A checklist cannot capture any of that, and neither can a board composed primarily of lawyers who approach ethics review as a compliance exercise. Enrolling experienced researchers who have actually done this kind of work, and who understand its relational and emotional demands, would go a long way toward making ethics review a genuinely useful process rather than a bureaucratic hurdle. What might actually help is a genuine conversation between ethics bodies and researchers – not as a gatekeeping exercise, but as a shared effort to think through what responsible research actually looks like in practice (Kara & Pickering, 2025).

Vignette 4. Co-constructing research with practitioners at Kodiko

The following vignette offers a glimpse into how I am currently trying to align my methodological choices with my commitments to lived experience and non-extractive collaboration.

Kodiko is a French NGO that supports the professional integration of refugees through mentoring and workplace-based programmes. When they first approached me to “evaluate” their impact, my initial instinct was to translate their request into a familiar institutional design: interviews, observations, a conceptual framing around integration policies and organisational routines. Instead, our early meetings quickly turned into a series of collective conversations about what they actually wanted and needed from research. Staff, volunteers, and former refugee participants raised questions that did not map neatly onto standard evaluation metrics: How do we create spaces where refugees feel seen as more than “beneficiaries”? How do our own practices sometimes reproduce the same hierarchies we criticize in the asylum system? What kinds of knowledge would be useful for us, and not only for academic publication?

The project that emerged from these exchanges is co-constructed in several respects. Research questions, sampling strategies, and modes of dissemination were defined together; the design combines interviews and focus groups with participants, mentors, and staff, with regular feedback sessions where preliminary insights are discussed, contested, and refined. We also agreed from the outset that the outputs would include not only academic articles, but also accessible summaries and workshops that Kodiko can use in its own internal reflection and external advocacy. This has slowed the research process and introduced new complexities – negotiating expectations, protecting confidentiality in small networks, and accepting that some of what I learn may not be “usable” in conventional theoretical terms. But it has also shifted my sense of what it means to study marginalization and displacement: not as an extraction of data from a field site, but as a shared effort to name and understand the institutional and organisational dynamics that shape people’s lives.

6.4 Rigor in engaged and critical scholarship

“The intellectual’s role is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory.”

Edward Said – *Representations of the Intellectual*

A common concern raised by editors and reviewers is whether critical, engaged scholarship can remain “scientific” in a meaningful sense. If we start from normative commitments – if we care about justice, dignity, or emancipation – do we risk producing advocacy rather than research? This is a question I take seriously, both for myself and for the students I supervise.

My view is that normative commitment and analytical rigor are not opposites. All research involves choices about what to study, which questions to ask, whose perspectives to centre. These choices are never value-free. The difference is whether we acknowledge our commitments or obscure them behind a language of neutrality. Critical scholarship makes its normative orientation explicit, which can actually enhance rigor by forcing researchers to be transparent about their assumptions and to subject their claims to scrutiny.

A study of racialization, for example, can be as rigorous as any other if it is methodologically careful and reflexive, empirically grounded, and open to findings that complicate or challenge the researcher's initial expectations. I now insist that it is the data, even when it leads somewhere uncomfortable, that should guide our analysis – and that our interpretations should represent participants' perspectives faithfully, even when they diverge from our own. Critical institutionalism, as I understand it, does not mean abandoning the standards of good social science; it means applying those standards to questions and populations that mainstream scholarship has too often ignored. And doing so through institutional theory can be particularly productive: it has long been strong at capturing the structures and logics that animate our fields, organisations and more recently, our thinking and emotions, yet it has often done so from a detached, ostensibly value-free stance that can make it harder to see when those structures harm and how. In Vignette 5, I reflect more broadly on the responsibilities of scholars and the limits of value neutrality in a world marked by injustice. The full text is published as a blog post by the HEC Research Centre for Grand Challenges as part of its *Science and Ideology* special issue³.

³ <https://hecgrandchallenges.ch/the-scholars-responsibility-in-a-collapsing-world/>

Vignette 5. On value neutrality and the scholar as a public intellectual

Our field has long been marked by depoliticization. We strip contexts of their political content and treat them as neutral backdrops for empirical inquiry rather than as sites of struggle, power and morality, and we do this in the name of value-neutrality and rigor. Over the past few years, I have heard countless times, “We are academics; we should not be doing politics”. Every now and then, there are calls to return to “conventional”, value-neutral scholarship and teaching⁴, as if those conventions were themselves apolitical or neutral.

But can we afford that in a world that seems to be crumbling, with fascism on the rise? How can we continue teaching and researching organisations as if extractivism, dispossession, and harm were marginal rather than systemic? How can we be asked to revert to “conventional” teaching when those conventions have so often normalized precisely the practices that have brought us to this point?

More recently, the genocide in Gaza marked a point of moral rupture for me and many other academics. It made it impossible for us to sustain the fiction of value-neutral scholarship in the face of mass civilian suffering, the systematic destruction of social and institutional infrastructures, and the active role of organisations in enabling it – particularly through the industrial-military complex. In that moment, our field’s long-standing comfort with depoliticization – and its tendency to bracket oppression, violence, and responsibility – felt morally wrong. This brought into sharp relief the limits of scholarly distance and reinforced my conviction that neutrality is itself a political stance.

⁴ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/hec-essec-em-lyon-quand-l-ecologie-radicale-infiltre-les-ecoles-de-commerce-20251223>

There are no easy answers. But I feel very deeply that we become obsolete if we refuse to engage in public debates, to understand, and at times even intervene in, the cultural and political struggles of our time. This is not a call to abandon academic rigor or to collapse scholarship into activism. It is, however, a refusal to stay enclosed within an academic bubble, detached from public debate and collective struggles. Stuart Hall (1992) insisted that intellectual work matters insofar as it enables intervention – not as the pursuit of truth for its own sake, but as a practice that seeks to make some difference in the world. I do believe it would be disastrous – for our profession and for society at large – if we refused to engage beyond publications and citations. What is needed is a reimagining of our role as scholars: an intellectual project aimed at understanding and intervening in the social and cultural struggles of our time, animated by what Ang (2016) calls “an ineluctable longing for a better world.”

6.5 Beyond institutional theory: Meaningfulness and social purpose in frontline engagement with marginalized communities

Studying non-profits and volunteers who work to help marginalized and displaced individuals has also led me to other theoretical lenses and concepts that vividly capture how people make sense of their work with marginalized communities. In a more recent stream of projects, I have become particularly interested in the concept of meaningfulness at work, understood as the perception that one’s work is worthwhile and makes a contribution – “having a positive impact on others through one’s work” (Mortimer, 2023: 811; Bailey et al., 2019).

This concept has emerged strongly in a study of local aid workers in Lebanon (16) who are themselves living through a “compound crisis” that simultaneously affects their beneficiaries and their own lives (Syrian refugee crisis, financial collapse, COVID-19, Beirut explosion).

Using an inductive, ethnographic design and long life-world interviews, we unpack how their sense of meaningfulness is gradually eroded as the multi-crisis takes hold. Impact becomes harder to see, and the identity of “helper” is destabilized when workers become as vulnerable as those they support. At the same time, the study shows how they reclaim “pockets” of meaningfulness through small, situated practices and continued engagement: reorienting attention toward concrete improvements in beneficiaries’ daily lives, building more horizontal relationships with those they support, and collectively redefining what “making a difference” can realistically mean in that context.

In another longitudinal case study of a Finnish NGO supporting migrants’ professional integration (15), we foreground nonprofit organisations as proximate institutional sites where social purpose is negotiated in everyday practice and closely tied to volunteers’ experience of meaningfulness. We develop a triadic view of social purpose as leaders’ narratives, members’ shared understandings, and enactment in practice, and show how purpose evolves through the relational work between founders, volunteers, and beneficiaries. Discrepancies between abstract, future-oriented narratives and concrete, impact-focused practices are not simply signs of failure; they can be generative moments in which volunteers and beneficiaries push purpose away from institutionalized expectations (such as entrepreneurial ideologies or donor demands) toward more resonant and achievable forms of social impact on the ground.

Together, these papers show how much is gained when we treat local organisations as sites where institutional ideals, donor expectations, and lived experiences are constantly negotiated in practice. They highlight how people experience and navigate tensions between externally defined goals and constraints and their own moral and emotional horizons, and how, in the shadow of powerful institutional orders, they strive to preserve or restore a sense of

significance in their work. They also mark an important shift in my own trajectory: my engagement with these terrains is no longer premised on staying in my “comfort zone” and applying an institutional perspective; instead, I let the field and the data guide which theories I need, a development that has been crucial in my research journey.

7. Fostering the Next Generation of (Institutional) Scholars

My trajectory as an institutional scholar has been shaped as much by relationships as by ideas. I have benefited from generous and demanding mentors who taught me how to do rigorous research, navigate academic institutions, and situate my work within broader theoretical conversations. I have also, over time, had to emancipate myself from some of the expectations and implicit boundaries of this mentoring, crafting a scholarly path that reflects my own concerns and sensibilities. In this section, I reflect on how these experiences inform my current practice as a supervisor and co-supervisor, and on how I aim to support the next generation of institutional scholars in cultivating both intellectual discipline and critical awareness – of blind spots, of power, and of the risks of rigidity.

7.1 Learning from mentors: discipline, generosity, and craft

My formation as an institutional scholar has been deeply shaped by two mentors in particular: Marie-Laure Salles and Royston Greenwood. Each of them taught me something different about what it means to do institutional research, and together they have left an enduring imprint on how I think, write, and mentor others.

During my doctoral years, Marie-Laure Salles played a crucial role in opening up the intellectual space in which I could imagine myself as an institutional scholar. She brought sociology and critique into a business school context at a time when this was far from

mainstream, and did so visibly and unapologetically. Through her courses – particularly in business history – seminars, and informal conversations, she exposed me to the sociological roots of institutional theory, to historically grounded analyses of capitalism and regulation, and to questions of power and legitimacy that extended well beyond narrow organisational concerns. In many ways, she was my first encounter with a critical scholar, and the imprint has been lasting: it is the sensibility I developed in those courses and in our conversations that continues to shape how I read the geopolitical challenges of the present – the erosion of democratic norms, the deepening of inequalities, the instrumentalisation of institutions. Though not my formal supervisor, she created an environment in which these perspectives were taken seriously, encouraging a generation of students – myself included – to pursue questions that did not fit comfortably within dominant managerialist frameworks. From her, I learned that mentoring can consist in holding open a space: making it thinkable to do critical and historically informed work in a business school, and signalling that such trajectories are not only acceptable but valuable.

Another crucial moment came during my visit to the University of Alberta in 2010, where I had the privilege of working closely with Royston Greenwood. This visit was nothing short of transformative for me. I arrived full of doubts, and with little confidence in my ability to say something interesting or to contribute to an ongoing scholarly conversation. What I found instead was a very supportive community of professors and PhD students. I am especially grateful to Royston Greenwood, who was one of the most prominent and brilliant scholars in institutional theory, and yet also humble, down to earth, generous, and extremely supportive. It was also the first time that I was invited to contribute to a paper (the Academy of Annals paper on institutional complexity). Royston felt that I had something to say about the role of identity and invited me to give a talk on this, which then turned into a contribution to the paper itself. I

was given space and voice in academia, an environment that too often treats PhD students like second class citizens.

Whereas Marie-Laure expanded my intellectual and critical horizons, Royston taught me the craft of writing research papers and the value of always digging deeper. I still remember the afternoons we spent going through my drafts line by line, guided by the detailed comments he had written in pen in the margins. Those sessions were patient, meticulous, and demanding: he pushed me to clarify my arguments, make my contributions explicit, and align theory, methods, and evidence in a coherent way. This experience fundamentally changed how I approached academic writing. It showed me that writing papers required sustained, careful work on structure, voice, and argumentation, supported by a generous mentor willing to invest time and attention in someone else's text.

These two mentoring relationships provide a template for how I now see my own role with doctoral students. From Marie-Laure, I retain the conviction that part of our responsibility is to create space for questions that critique and unsettle dominant assumptions and for biographies that do not fit the standard mold. From Royston, I retain a commitment to detailed, constructive feedback and to teaching students how to shape an idea into a publishable paper. Together, they have taught me that fostering the next generation of scholars involves both opening doors to new ways of seeing and providing the tools to navigate an academic world that does not always welcome those ways of seeing.

A decisive turning point in my trajectory was a three-year research term at Aalto University, which began in 2017. That visit quite literally changed my life. It allowed me to take distance from some of the more routine demands of my job and to focus on research at a moment when I was beginning to turn toward questions of marginalization and displacement. The

intellectual and collegial environment at Aalto was exceptionally conducive to high-quality work: seminar culture was demanding but generous, and there was a shared expectation that empirical richness and strong theorizing could go hand in hand. I benefited enormously from the feedback and support of colleagues such as Nina Granqvist and Henri Schildt; with Henri in particular, I began a stream of papers that pushed me to rethink institutional theory from a phenomenological and practice-based perspective. During this period, I also secured funding from the Academy of Finland (now the Research Council of Finland) for a project on *placing the displaced*, which gave me the temporal and material space to develop my research on forced displacement more systematically.

Equally important for my development have been a set of long-term co-authorships that are also, fundamentally, friendships. Since my visit to the University of Alberta, Mia Raynard has been both a close friend and a key intellectual companion. Working with Mia has shown me the importance of writing with people with whom one “clicks” emotionally as well as intellectually – people who are willing to hold doubt, to sit with messy data, and to push each other’s arguments without losing care. Another formative collaboration has been with Tom Lawrence. Tom is an exceptional co-author: patient, rigorous, and unafraid of the many iterations that good papers require. Through working with him, I learned that writing is often a long, sometimes painful process of redrafting, stepping back from the empirical material, and accepting the abstraction it demands. In 2022, I also had the opportunity to co-convene with Tom an EGOS sub-theme on institutions and marginalization in Vienna. That experience made visible the strong appetite within the OT community for studying the intersection between institutionalism and marginalization, and the growing interest in examining systems of oppression and domination through an institutional lens. These collaborations have taught me

that research is not only an individual craft but a relational practice, and that the kinds of institutionalism I seek to develop are inseparable from the communities and intellectual friendships within which they are forged.

These formative experiences have come to shape how I supervise doctoral students, how I engage with junior scholars, and how I seek to build research spaces that are at once intellectually demanding and personally supportive. Whether through supervision, collaborative writing, or the convening of scholarly communities, I try to enact the lessons I have drawn from my mentors and co-authors: holding open space for unconventional questions, investing in the slow and careful craft of writing, and creating the conditions for others to find their voice. In the following sections, I describe more concretely how these commitments have translated into my work with doctoral students and into the different academic spaces I have sought to foster.

7.2 Emancipation and finding my scholarly voice

At the same time, my trajectory has involved a gradual process of emancipation. The very environments that trained me also oriented me toward certain kinds of questions and away from others. Early on, I learned to formulate projects that spoke to established debates in institutional theory – around logics, complexity, and field dynamics – and to avoid issues that might be perceived as “too political,” “too emotional,” or “too normative.” My later engagement with marginalization, forced displacement, and the lived experience of institutional violence required me to push against some of these tacit expectations.

Finding my scholarly voice has meant, in part, accepting that the questions that move me – about injustice, suffering, and dignity – are legitimate objects of institutional inquiry, even if they sit uneasily with more conventional projects. It has also meant recognizing my own position and biography as relevant: that my background, my experiences in Lebanon and France, and my

encounters with refugees, racialized minorities, activists, and NGO workers shape not only the settings I study but the concepts I develop and the arguments I make. This emancipation is not a rejection of my mentors' influence, but a reworking of it, that is building on it but also departing from it and finding my own voice.

This process has led me to embrace a view of the scholar as a public intellectual, rather than as a neutral academic, as I argued earlier. I see part of our role as taking part in public, sometimes difficult and explicitly moral debates about the worlds we study: voicing concerns about exclusion and injustice, questioning taken-for-granted norms and categories, and engaging with practitioners, policymakers, and affected communities. In practice, this has meant translating my research into accessible formats and public spaces. For example, in an article published in *The Conversation France* (co-authored with Simone Moriconi and Juan Munoz), I drew on a UNHCR study to challenge divisive narratives about refugee integration, showing that while companies are willing to hire refugees, the systematic devaluation of their competences and loss of occupational status remain significant barriers — and arguing that better recognition of refugees' skills is essential not only for their integration but also for addressing broader labour market needs. Similarly, through a contribution to the HEC Research Centre blog, I sought to make accessible to a wider community the argument that neutrality is itself an ideological position. These are initial steps that I intend to build on: reaching beyond academic circles to engage more systematically with publics, practitioners, and communities who are directly affected by the institutional dynamics we study is, for me, an increasingly central part of what it means to do this work responsibly.

Doing so entails risks, including the risk of alienating those who prefer a more detached or “neutral” stance. Yet for me, accepting this risk has become part of what it means to inhabit

my role as a scholar in good faith. The challenge, and the aspiration, then, is to combine rigor and reflexivity with a willingness to be publicly accountable for the positions we take. It is this experience that I now seek to transmit to the students I mentor: respect for a tradition, coupled with the confidence to depart from it if/when ready; an appreciation for careful theorizing and methodological discipline, coupled with an understanding that our work is inevitably entangled with moral and political questions, whether we acknowledge them or not.

7.3 Current supervision practice: co-constructing trajectories and facing challenges

To date, I have supervised one doctoral student through to a successful defense, am currently supervising another who is approaching completion, and have been involved in the supervision of a third. All three have worked on issues of marginalization and oppression – in contexts ranging from forced displacement to colonial aid structures – and my supervisory practice has taken shape through these engagements.

The first doctoral student I co-supervised was Emma Sandström during my three-year visiting term at Aalto University. Emma was a curious and ambitious student who, like me at the time, was becoming deeply interested in questions of displacement in Lebanon. Her thesis focused on social mission organisations and how they navigate uncertainty and find their purpose. Together, we visited refugee camps in Lebanon and conducted fieldwork in difficult and at times extreme conditions. As my first doctoral student, Emma allowed me to transmit, I believe, my love for empirical work and for talking to people on the ground, but she also taught me a great deal about managing the boundaries between personal and professional engagement, and about how supervision needs to make space for the emotional and ethical challenges of such research.

My second student, Hani Tarabichi, a Syrian doctoral candidate at Aalto University, has been keen to study “from the inside” the immigration system in Finland: its shortcomings, the reforms it was undergoing, and the effects on migrants and refugees trying to rebuild their lives. With Hani, our debates have centred on how to theorize policy change and the role of experimental and liminal spaces within a rigid integration system: how temporary programmes, pilots, and in-between arrangements create openings for alternative practices, but also how fragile and reversible these openings can be. Supervision has involved working through how to connect these empirical sites to broader institutional discussions on public sector innovation, while at the same time recognizing his own position as someone subject to the very policies he analyses.

My most recent PhD student, Habofanoe (Habo) Polaki at IESEG, is from Lesotho and is working on the localization of HIV aid. His research attends to the colonial and structural conditions that constrain localization, and to the place-based practices through which indigenous NGOs seek to protect and shield vulnerable communities from oppressive patriarchal norms. With Habo, our discussions have revolved around how to hold together structural analysis and attention to local practices, and how to write about “localization” in a way that neither romanticizes local actors nor erases the deep inequalities that shape the aid system. In his fieldwork, Habo was also studying organisations providing sexual education to vulnerable women when some of the women beneficiaries spontaneously approached him to share their personal stories and even took photos with him – interactions that were entirely unplanned, as the research had been designed to collect data from NGO officers only. Rather than treating this impromptu material as straightforwardly usable data, we paused to reflect carefully on what it meant and whether it could ethically be incorporated. His positionality was central to these

discussions: although he is from Lesotho, he is also a man studying women's experiences in a deeply patriarchal context, and one affiliated with a Western institution – a combination that shaped the trust he was given and the obligations it carried. These conversations extended well beyond our supervisory meetings; we sought input from other researchers at conferences, precisely because the situation demanded a collective, reflexive engagement rather than a straightforward answer. The formal supervision arrangement has since changed, but my engagement with Habo's project shaped my thinking about place-based organising in deprived contexts to serve marginalized communities, and the challenges of studying aid localization from an institutional perspective.

Across these experiences, my supervisory practice has come to rest on three commitments. The first is conceptual and methodological grounding: I work with students to clarify their theoretical anchor points, situate their work in ongoing conversations, and develop a design that is feasible and ethically responsible – drawing on my own experience of conducting research in refugee camps, with asylum seekers in precarious conditions, and with civil society organisations under state repression, to guide them through the practical and ethical complexities of fieldwork in such contexts. The second is reflexivity about positionality: as the example of Habo illustrates, I encourage students to attend to how their biographies, social locations, and institutional affiliations shape access, trust, and interpretation in the field, treating reflexivity not as an add-on but as a continuous practice that informs research design, data collection, and the claims they feel entitled to make. The third is co-construction: I treat supervision as a space where students articulate what troubles or fascinates them in their field sites, even when it does not immediately fit within dominant frameworks, and where our conversations oscillate between sharpening a recognizable contribution and protecting the more fragile, emerging intuitions that

may eventually lead them to new ground. I try to model this in the supervisory relationship itself – being explicit about power asymmetries, acknowledging my own blind spots, and making space for students to voice discomfort, doubt, or disagreement.

In each case, my role has been to provide grounding, to insist on ethical vigilance, and to encourage intellectual ambition, while also allowing myself to be challenged and transformed by the questions, experiences, and commitments that my students bring to their work. In that sense, supervision has become one of the main sites where I try to enact, with others, the kind of critical, practice-oriented institutionalism that I argue for in this thesis.

Co-supervision also involves relational complexities that are rarely discussed in our field. Differences in status, institutional requirements (such as the formal designation of a supervisor holding the habilitation), and divergent expectations about roles can create tensions that affect the student and the supervisors alike. I have learned, sometimes painfully, that co-supervision requires ongoing negotiation and, when that fails, a willingness to step back in the student's best interest.

7.4 Encouraging critical awareness and resisting rigidity

A central aim in my supervision is to foster among students a critical awareness of the blind spots and normative underpinnings of the theories they use, including institutional theory. This does not mean asking them to abandon the tradition, but inviting them to interrogate its silences: whose experiences are centred or peripheral in canonical texts, which forms of power are foregrounded or minimized, how history and geopolitics are treated, and how value-laden language is disguised as neutrality.

Practically, this takes several forms. I encourage students to read institutional research alongside critical, feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives, and to consider what each

lens reveals and obscures. I invite them to ask how concepts such as legitimacy, logics, or fields look different when examined from the standpoint of marginalized actors rather than dominant organisations and affluent individuals. I ask them to be mindful of who they cite, and who they leave out without realizing it. And I push back on the temptation to treat concepts as rigid templates to be applied to empirical material, encouraging them instead to use concepts as starting points, open to revision when the evidence pushes back.

At the same time, I caution against replacing one rigidity with another. Critical perspectives can themselves become dogmatic if used unreflexively rather than as means for deeper engagement. My goal is not to steer students toward one “correct” stance, but to help them develop the intellectual and ethical resources to position themselves: to argue clearly, to take responsibility for their choices, and to remain attentive to the consequences of their work for the people and worlds they study.

Encouraging students to pursue critical, unconventional work also requires acknowledging the risks this entails. Academic gatekeeping is real: reviewers and editors sometimes dismiss research that challenges dominant frameworks, studies marginalized phenomena (although it seems to be less the case now with the proliferation of research on “extreme” and/or “unconventional” contexts), or adopts explicitly normative stances. Junior scholars are particularly vulnerable because they lack the track record and networks that can buffer against rejection. Advising students to “be bold” without equipping them to navigate these dynamics would be irresponsible.

In practice, I aim to help students manage these risks in several ways. First, I encourage them to build a portfolio that combines more conventional contributions with more ambitious or critical work, if this is something that they want to pursue. A paper that extends an established

debate in a recognizable way can create space for a subsequent paper that pushes boundaries. As a colleague once put it on a panel, “publications in recognized journals give you a seat at the table... then you can shape or even change the conversation”. Second, I aim to work with students on framing: how to present critical arguments in ways that engage rather than alienate skeptical reviewers, how to anchor unconventional claims in rigorous methods and careful evidence, and how to anticipate objections. This is not about diluting their arguments but about making them harder to dismiss. Third, I aim to help students identify journals, conferences, and scholarly communities where their work is more likely to find receptive audiences, for instance, special issues on marginalization and justice, or subfields where these conversations are already underway. These conversations are already gaining traction in a number of important journals. Finally, I aim to connect students with networks of like-minded scholars who can offer feedback, support, and solidarity.

None of this eliminates the tension between pursuing questions that matter and building a viable academic career. But I believe it is possible to do both, not by abandoning critical commitments, but by being strategic about how and where one advances them. Part of my role as a supervisor is to share what I have learned about navigating this terrain, while also being honest about the challenges.

7.5 Building collective spaces

Finally, I see fostering the next generation of institutional scholars as a collective endeavor. Individual supervision is one piece of this, but it needs to be complemented by shared spaces where doctoral students and early-career researchers can explore questions together: reading groups that bring institutional theory into conversation with critical work; workshops on ethics and emotional labor in fieldwork; and collaborative projects with practitioners and NGOs

that expose students to forms of knowledge and accountability beyond academia. These spaces matter not only for intellectual development, but also for cultivating solidarity and care in a profession that can otherwise be isolating and competitive.

In this spirit, I have increasingly tried to create and support such collective spaces. As Vice Chair of the EGOS, I have been involved in organising developmental workshops for PhD students and early-career researchers in regions where such opportunities are scarce but demand is high, such as Central and Eastern Europe (CESEE) and, soon, the Middle East. These workshops are designed not only to improve papers, but to create spaces where participants can discuss the ethical, emotional, and political dimensions of their research, and connect with a wider community of supportive peers and senior scholars. At IESEG, I have recently established a mentoring workshop with my colleague Benjamin Huybrechts in my department, where colleagues collectively discuss work-in-progress and share experiences of navigating academic life. More generally, I regularly participate in conferences and events where developmental feedback is central, particularly those that allow close interaction with doctoral students and early-career scholars. Through these activities, I try to contribute to building the kinds of supportive, reflexive communities that are necessary for a more critical, practice-oriented institutionalism to take root and endure.

These activities are time-consuming, and they exist in tension with the more directly productive rhythms of academic life – the pressure to publish, secure funding, and demonstrate measurable output. Building communities of this kind does not yield immediate returns, and the time invested in mentoring, organising workshops, and providing developmental feedback to others' work is time not spent on one's own papers. Yet I have come to see this investment as necessary rather than optional: the kind of critical, reflexive scholarship I advocate for cannot be

sustained by individuals working in isolation, but requires the collective infrastructure of supportive intellectual communities. Without such spaces, the risk is that scholars – particularly junior ones working on difficult or unconventional topics – are left to navigate alone the very tensions between rigor, relevance, and moral commitment that this thesis has sought to articulate.

In sum, my aim is to help students inhabit institutional theory as a living, evolving tradition rather than a closed canon: to engage it seriously, to see its power, to recognize its blind spots, and to feel entitled to contribute to its transformation. If my own path has been one of learning, unlearning, and gradual emancipation, my aspiration as a supervisor is to enable the next generation to undertake similar journeys with more support, more reflexivity, and perhaps a little more freedom.

8. Conclusion: Why do we hold on to a theory?

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

Wright Mills – *The Sociological Imagination*

Institutional theory has always appealed to me, in part, because of its elegance and explanatory power. At its core, it offers a simple but powerful intuition: that what organisations and people do cannot be understood apart from the wider systems of meaning, rules, and taken-for-granted assumptions in which they are embedded. For a long time, this elegance lay in its parsimony – institutions as shared beliefs and rules; organisations as seekers of legitimacy; fields as the main sites where these dynamics unfold.

The trajectory I have traced in this thesis pulls in a different direction. Bringing marginalization, racialization, displacement, and lived experience into the frame has required adding layers of complexity: not only institutions and fields, but also colonial histories,

bordering practices, safe places, proximate institutions, and the emotional and moral dimension of everyday life under domination. The more we attend to how social structures are differently experienced – across race, class, gender, legal status, geography – the more concepts and mechanisms we seem to need. At times, institutional theory can begin to look like a crowded suitcase into which we keep stuffing new ideas: logics, work, infrastructure, inhabitation, affect, decoloniality. When a theory expands in this way, one can legitimately ask whether it still counts as a theory, or whether it has become an ever-growing vocabulary we are reluctant to let go.

I do not have a definitive answer to that question, but I have a working hunch about why I continue to hold on to institutional theory, even as I push it in more critical directions. It remains one of the few perspectives in organisation studies that is genuinely cross-level: it connects societal structures, fields, organisations, and subjectivities in a single frame. It gives us tools to trace how national policies and global regimes show up in local offices, shelters, churches, NGOs, refugee camps and households – and how, in turn, the practices in those proximate spaces can stabilize, bend, or quietly subvert wider orders. In a field that often oscillates between macro abstractions and micro interactions, institutional theory can offer a bridge. For scholars interested in marginalization and displacement, this cross-level capacity is a necessity.

What I have tried to do in my work is not to replace institutional theory, but to make it more responsive to the worlds I study. This has meant bringing it into conversation with critical, intersectional and decolonial approaches; centreing proximate institutions and place-based organising; and taking seriously the lived experience of those whose lives are shaped by institutional arrangements. It has also meant subjecting my own work, and my own positioning, to critique. If the price of greater explanatory and ethical relevance is a loss of some of the

theory's original simplicity, then I am willing to pay that price – provided we remain attentive to what is gained and what is lost, and resist the temptation to treat every new concept as a solution rather than a question.

Whether institutional theory, in its expanded and contested form, will still be a vibrant research community in twenty or thirty years is uncertain. What seems clear to me is that it still has work to do. As long as it can help us connect structural conditions with lived experience, make visible the mechanisms that produce and sustain injustice, and support empirical and theoretical engagements that matter to the people whose worlds we study, it deserves a place at the table. My hope is that the program of critical institutionalism sketched in this thesis – one attentive to marginalization, grounded in place, and open to decolonial self-interrogation – can extend the life of the theoretical program a little further, while also making it more accountable to the people whose lives it has, for too long, analysed from a distance rather than engaged with in solidarity.

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