

RESEARCH NOTE OPEN ACCESS

# Reconstructing the Social Construction of Reality

Norman M. Fraser<sup>1,2</sup> | Romeo V. Turcan<sup>1,3,4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>AAU Business School, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark | <sup>2</sup>Clare Hall College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK | <sup>3</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK | <sup>4</sup>Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

**Correspondence:** Romeo V. Turcan ([rvt@business.aau.dk](mailto:rvt@business.aau.dk))

**Received:** 14 June 2024 | **Revised:** 8 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 15 January 2025

**Funding:** The funding received from the Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 3187-00002B) for his stay at the University of Cambridge Department of Sociology during which this paper was co-developed with his co-author, Norman M. Fraser.

**Keywords:** Berger and Luckmann | institutionalization | legitimation | social construction of reality | theory building

## ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between legitimation and institutionalization? We take a fresh look at a more complex and nuanced landscape than has previously been documented. Our approach is to view legitimation and institutionalization as separate, though related, processes. We engage in theory building to develop a typology suggesting four different ways in which the social construction of reality can be achieved: instantiating (mutual causal emergence, coming into being), realizing (legitimizing toward institutionalization), aspiring (legitimizing from institutionalization) and missing (mutual causal suppression, unrealized potential). Our typology contributes a new foundational framework for the sociology of knowledge for better explicating socially constructed reality, not only in periods of stability but also in the uncertainty of liquid times and states.

## 1 | Introduction

Legitimation and institutionalization are key concepts in the sociology of knowledge. Legitimation is the process by which the status of social artifacts<sup>1</sup> increases within a community such that their standing moves from the periphery of the shared social space toward widespread acceptance within the community. Institutionalization is the process by which social artifacts become normative within a community. In this paper, we take a fresh look at the relationship between legitimation and institutionalization, revealing a more complex and nuanced landscape than has previously been documented. In the process, we engage in theory building to develop a typology suggesting four different ways in which the social construction of reality can be achieved.

## 2 | Scope

### 2.1 | Berger and Luckmann's Approach

What is the relationship between legitimation and institutionalization? In their seminal treatise on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) lay out a framework for understanding and analysing how 'subjective meanings become objective facticities' (p.30) or, putting it another way, how social reality is constructed in intersubjective space. In their scheme, the process begins with typification, which is the categorization of concrete experiences of people, behaviours, and ideas into abstract types, such that each concrete experience can inherit meaning from meanings previously associated with its type, whilst also enriching type meanings for future use. As

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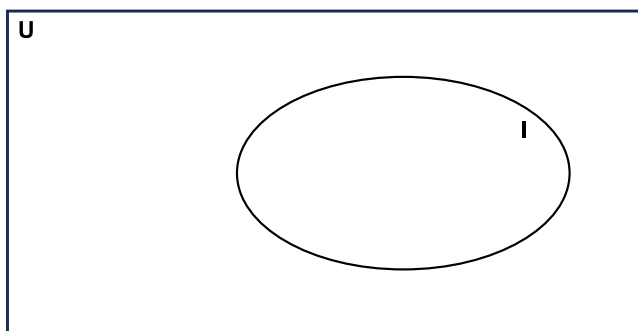
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individuals interact, they trade typifications, in the process refining them further and tending towards intersubjective convergence. *'Institutionalization* occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of *habitualized* actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution' (p.72, our emphasis).

Berger and Luckmann (1966, 110) envisage a clear hierarchical relationship between institutionalization and legitimation: 'Legitimation as a process is best described as a 'second-order' objectivation of meaning. Legitimation produces new meanings that serve to integrate the meanings already attached to disparate institutional processes. The function of legitimation is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible the 'first-order' objectivations that have been institutionalized'. In their view, legitimation is the process by which established institutions are reinforced to maintain their continuing institutional status. Its function is to strengthen and shore up institutionalized social artifacts (in Berger and Luckmann's terms 'objectifications of meaning'). If Figure 1 shows the set of social artifacts that have been institutionalized (I) within the universe of all possible social artifacts (U), then the scope of legitimation is confined to I, where it concerns itself with the creation of new meanings that better integrate the social artifacts within I.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Berger and Luckmann's work in the development of the sociology of knowledge. Nonetheless, we contend that there are significant lacunae in their approach, which are enumerated below, along with the associated challenges we have identified (in italics):

- Berger and Luckmann's work was conceived and illustrated in the context of stable traditional societies. New meanings emerge and become institutionalized organically and slowly. *To account for phenomena in innovation-rich, highly fluid societies, we argue that an enhanced analytical framework is required.*
- For Berger and Luckmann, 'the most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation, which is the prototypical case of social interaction. All other cases are derivatives of it' (p.43). *The emergence of pervasive social media, including as a primary context of social interaction for some individuals, forces us to re-evaluate this assumption with its analytic consequences.*



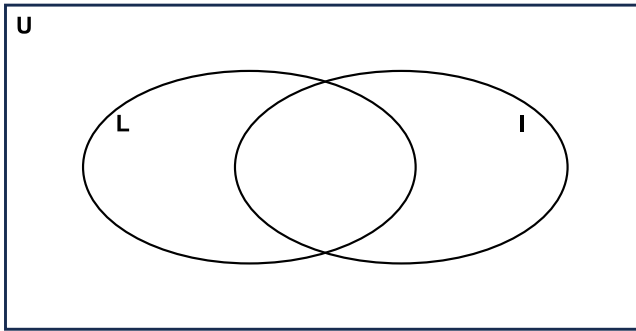
**FIGURE 1** | The set of institutionalized social artifacts (I) within the universe of all social artifacts (U).

- In Berger and Luckmann's scheme, the process of constructing social reality begins with typification, but they express this as a fairly simple categorisation task, where comprehensible experiences get assigned to known, albeit malleable, types. The challenge of what to do with profound newness is not addressed. *In real life, typification is likely to be considerably more complex than Berger and Luckmann envisage. Consider what to do when a completely innovative and thus unique kind of object gets introduced into the intersubjective space. It is hard to understand, let alone typify when no known type exists for it and there is insufficient data to construct one by conventional means. And yet, it is not hard to envisage the possibility of emergence of understanding and typification for the new social object given no further instances through focused social interaction, such as explanations or justifications by the introducer of the new object or other actors for whom it has already been typified. A plurality of instances may often underpin typification, but this is not necessarily the case. A single instance, backed up by comprehensible and convincing explanation, may be sufficient. There must be at least two types of typification: type-creating typification and type-assigning typification.*
- For Berger and Luckmann, the path from reciprocal typification to institutionalization is troublingly short. For them, once a typification becomes habitualized it is deemed to be institutionalized. Use and status are thus conflated. *Although Berger and Luckmann regarded their definition of institutionalization as broader than the prevailing view of their time, many today, including ourselves, favour a definition of institutionalization that is considerably broader, for example, as a 'process by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behaviour [and] how these elements are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time; and how they fall into decline and disuse' (Scott 2005, 460).*
- Just as typification may sometimes occur in the absence of multiple instances so, *contra* Berger and Luckmann, institutionalization may take place without habitualization. *Habitualization may be one of the mechanisms by which institutions emerge, but it is not by any means the only one. The exercise of power is an obvious example. An institutionalized and legitimated power structure, such as a government, may create new institutions by decree, not only brick-and-mortar institutions but also laws, practices, and roles. In such cases, habitualization follows institutionalization and cannot be said to cause or contribute to it.*

## 2.2 | Our Approach

Our approach is to view legitimation and institutionalization as separate, though related, processes. In Figure 2, U is the set of all social artifacts, L is the set of legitimated artifacts, and I is the set of institutionalized artifacts. In this view, a social artifact may integrate features of legitimation or institutionalization or both or neither.

Conceptually, legitimation and institutionalization are separate processes that may, and often do, interact, though sometimes they do not. Legitimation may indeed serve to strengthen



**FIGURE 2** | The set of legitimated social artifacts (L) and the set of institutionalized social artifacts (I) within the universe of all social artifacts (U).

existing institutions by ‘explaining and justifying’ them (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 111). However, legitimation may also serve as the engine that creates the conditions of plausibility and social standing in which institutionalization may arise to ‘recognize the reality on the ground’ (see e.g., Turcan and Fraser 2016). Typification of new types of object in intersubjective space may be enabled and/or accelerated by legitimation, in which additional meanings are supplied by actors to aid typification. Once initial typification has occurred, habitualization may sometimes play a role in institutionalization, but habitualization is best seen as evidence that legitimation has already occurred, since repetition sufficient to produce habitualization of a given social artifact is unlikely unless it has already been legitimated.

Aldrich and Fiol (1994) break legitimation down into two parts: cognitive legitimation and sociopolitical legitimation. For a social artifact to be legitimated, it must be possible to integrate the new meanings associated with it plausibly with an actor’s existing subjective meanings and with the objective meanings and institutions of the actor’s social context. Intuitively, in the early stages of innovations such as generative AI, new social artifacts get legitimated one person at a time, as actors engage with complex new ideas that are not widely accepted in wider society. As the community of actors for whom the innovation has been legitimated grows, a community of support begins to form. Within this community, the social status of these actors is significant; higher status, such as that associated with institutionalized expertise, tends to accelerate legitimation. As legitimation of the artifact grows, its scale and/or nature may create the impetus for institutionalization: in this example, the emergence of normalized generative AI product categories, the creation of legislative frameworks to regulate the use of the technology, its incorporation into established and new educational curricula, and the establishment and funding of structures of research and development by government and industry. The final result is an artifact that is both legitimated and institutionalized. As the technology and the social context develop, further elements of cognitive and sociopolitical legitimation may emerge to strengthen the existing institutions, and new forms of institutionalization may also arise.

Not every legitimated social artifact will be institutionalized. Some rise and fall, never meeting a threshold of institutionalization. Others may persist in society because they have a certain

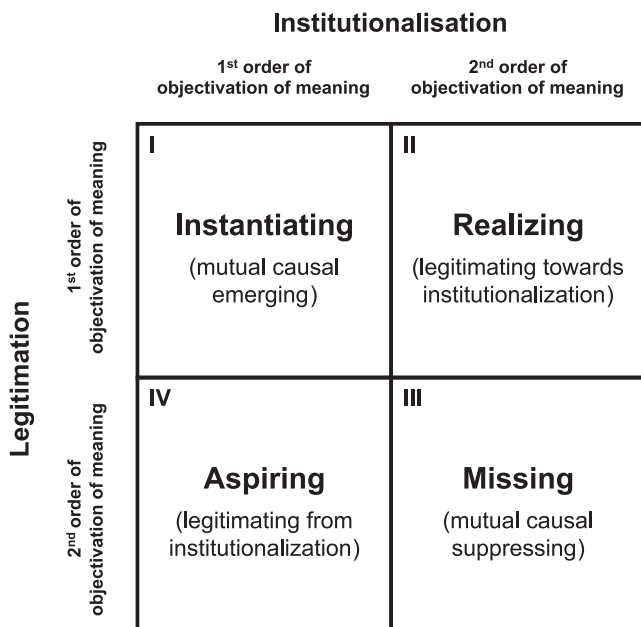
utility without ever becoming normative. In the familiar example of the emergence of video cassette tapes as a medium for storing and replaying media, one of the formats, Betamax, was clearly legitimated, initially achieving 100% of the emerging market; indeed, many enthusiasts maintain to this day that it was technically the best solution. Nonetheless, its competitor VHS ultimately became dominant and won the prize of institutionalization, leading to the decline and ultimate disappearance of Betamax (Cusumano, Mylonadis, and Rosenbloom 1992; Murphy 2015). Or consider cryptocurrencies, which have emerged as an alternative to institutionalized forms of payment, incorporating features such as lack of control by any central bank that could be viewed as anti-institutional. While cryptocurrencies are widely regarded as legitimate means of payment and used as such, they still exist at the margins of the global financial system, are subject to patchy or nonexistent regulation around the world and are missing or banned from a wide range of contexts that accept more mainstream currencies. It is difficult to argue against the proposition that legitimated cryptocurrencies existed for approximately a decade before even the first signs of institutionalization began to emerge, and there is still some way to go before the process reaches maturity (Malherbe et al. 2019; Rosati, Lynn, and Fox 2021).

The reverse is also possible. Existing institutions may be delegitimated and/or deinstitutionalized, as new and problematic cognitive and sociopolitical meanings emerge or as previously supporting meanings are disavowed. By recognizing that both institutionalization and legitimation may serve as 1st-order objectifications of meaning (1st-OOM) or as 2nd-order objectifications of meaning (2nd-OOM), we are able to construct more productive and nuanced accounts than have previously been available.

### 3 | Social Construction of Reality Reconstructed

#### 3.1 | Method

We employed the method of typology building by reduction and substruction (Glaser 1978; Lazarsfeld 1937) by cross-tabulating the first and second orders of objectivation of meaning of legitimation and institutionalization (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> This allowed us to reduce the typology to the two types of social constructions of reality: *aspiring* (quadrant IV) and *realizing* (quadrant II). The former is Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) conjecture of institutionalization as the 1st OOM and legitimation as the 2nd OOM, the epistemology of which is about legitimation from a starting point of existing institutionalization. The latter is Turcan’s (2018) conjecture of legitimation as a 1st OOM and institutionalization as a 2nd OOM, the epistemology of which is about legitimation toward institutionalization. Further theorizing led us to substruct the other two types of social constructions of reality: *instantiating* (quadrant I) and *missing* (quadrant III). Instantiating is based on the conjecture of mutual causal emergence of legitimation and institutionalization as first-orders of objectivation of meaning, the epistemology of which is about coming into being. Missing is based on the conjecture of mutual causal suppression of legitimation and institutionalization as second-order objectivation of meaning, the epistemology of which is about a realm of unrealized potential.



**FIGURE 3** | Typology of the social construction of reality. *Note:* (I) Mutual causal emergence, coming into being. (II) Legitimizing toward institutionalization. (III) Mutual causal suppression, unrealized potential. (IV) Legitimizing from institutionalization.

### 3.2 | Aspiring: Legitimizing From Institutionalization

We conceptualize this intersection as *aspiring* legitimation, where legitimation and the social construction of knowledge or structure emerge from institutionalization. Once knowledge or structure have been institutionalized, the next main concern is how to legitimate these so as to maintain, enrich, strengthen or reinforce the institutionalization. The context herein is defined by certainty and risk (certain times) in which knowledge and structure are known realms or at least one of them is. Institutionalization as 1st-OOM and legitimation as 2nd-OOM (Berger and Luckmann 1966) drive research at this intersection, which is plentiful. The legalization of marijuana in the U.S. is a recent example of the institutionalization of a new structure (sector or industry) first, with aspiring legitimation of new knowledge (e.g., new ways and forms of producing, processing, storing, selling and consuming). The Marshall Plan, formally the European Recovery Program, is another example of a new, institutionalized, post-World War II structure (e.g., new institutions, industrial and agricultural sectors and industries, national or supranational) that had to be legitimated immediately after. In uncertain, liquid times defined frequently by a high degree of newness, institutionalization as a 1st OOM and legitimation as a 2nd OOM conjecture (1) have limited power in explaining the abovementioned liquid states or unprecedented departures from what is normal or expected. A reverse order of objectivation of meaning (Turcan 2018) is needed, to which we now turn.

### 3.3 | Realizing: Legitimizing Toward Institutionalization

We conceptualize this intersection as *realizing* legitimation, where legitimation and social construction of knowledge or

structure emerge toward institutionalization. The main concern herein is how to legitimate knowledge or structure first. Once legitimated, the next main concern is how to institutionalize these from the moment of respective legitimation. The context herein is defined by uncertain (liquid) times in which knowledge or structure have a high degree of newness with unknown expected impact. Empirical research at this intersection is scarce. Counter to Berger and Luckmann (1966), we conjecture that under a high degree of newness and associated uncertainty, legitimation constitutes the 1st OOM, whereas institutionalization constitutes the 2nd OOM (Turcan 2018). Recent examples include the legitimation of Brexit and Covid-19 vaccination. Although provided for in the EU Constitution, the EU had never experienced a member leaving the Union; hence, the uncertainty of/around Brexit was a new phenomenon with unknown potential impact. Interestingly, two different types of realizing legitimation could have been observed. One was the ‘leave’ campaign, which aimed to legitimate Brexit to lead via a vote to a new structure with unknown outcomes. The other was by the ‘remain’ campaign, which aimed to delegitimize the Brexit phenomenon and, via a vote, to maintain the structural status quo. In the case of Covid-19 vaccination, realizing the legitimation of vaccination toward its institutionalization was counterfought by vaccination deniers who were aiming to delegitimize its safety, need and impact, opting instead for status quo maintenance.

### 3.4 | Instantiating: Mutual Causal Emergence

In this intersection, legitimation and institutionalization, both as 1st-OOM, coemerge, coming into being instantly. The main concern here is how to legitimate and institutionalize knowledge or structure at once, be these new or existing, formal-informal, empirical-ideal, thinkable-unthinkable, useful-useless, in certain or uncertain contexts. An example of such instant legitimation and institutionalization of knowledge and structure is the creation and launch of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton by Abraham Flexner in 1939 (Flexner 2017). Flexner had a vision of a physical space where ‘useless knowledge’ would be generated that in turn might stimulate further ‘useful’ debates and enquiries that would eventually become ‘useful’. What Flexner did was to legitimate and institutionalize instantly the idea of ‘useless knowledge’, which allowed the Institute to attract its first high-profile ‘students’, such as Einstein and Gödel. Another example of instant legitimation and institutionalization of knowledge or structure is ‘swearing in’, for example, in the context of inauguration of heads of state, wedding vows, swearing in governmental agents or medical doctors (Hippocratic Oath). The instant coemergence of new knowledge and structure out of chaos is another example of instant legitimation and institutionalization as a 1st OOM.

### 3.5 | Missing: Mutual Causal Suppression

This is where legitimation and institutionalization as 2nd-OOM of knowledge and structures never materialized or 1st-OOM of legitimation and/or institutionalization ceases to exist. In the former, the respective legitimation and institutionalization as

2nd-OOM of knowledge and structure were not a major concern initially to be realized. Examples of instances where legitimation and institutionalization suppress each other include tried and dismissed ideas, regrets, risks untaken, opportunities avoided or unprovided, needs unmet, desires sacrificed, possibilities refused, and unthought ideas (Baert, Morgan, and Ushiyama 2023; Fisher 1975; Flexner 2017; Phillips 2013). In the latter, knowledge and/or structures that were legitimated and institutionalized instantly (QI) or legitimated from (QIV) or toward (QII) institutionalization were delegitimated and/or deinstitutionalized. Examples of such instances include social, economic, financial, political or technical bubbles. They can be born instantly and achieve maturity by mutual causal emergence of related knowledge and structure and respective legitimation and institutionalization. Instant, apparently legitimating and institutionalizing behaviour, which is nonetheless irrational or incoherent, could cause the bubble to burst instantly, delegitimizing and deinstitutionalizing it (QIII). When less rational institutionalization, as a 1st OOM of knowledge and structures, drives the quest for legitimation from it (as was the case for Iceland during the 2008 financial bubble) (QIV), the bubble could burst, deinstitutionalize and delegitimize cognitive and sociological legitimacies (QIII). When less rational legitimation, as indicated by the 1st OOM of knowledge and structures, drives the quest for legitimation toward institutionalization (as was the case for the dot.com bubble) (QII), the bubble could burst, deinstitutionalize and delegitimize cognitive and sociological legitimacies (QIII).

## 4 | Discussion and Conclusion

Our typology adapts and extends Berger and Luckmann (1966) to contribute a new foundational framework for the sociology of knowledge. As an emergent theory, it is evaluated based on its fit, workability, modifiability and relevance (Glaser 1978). The typology fits, corresponds to and reflects the data/facts in the social reality it purports to explain. It is able to conjecture and explain the emergence, legitimation and institutionalization of new and existing knowledge and structures within certain and uncertain contexts. Its transcendence and ability to predict behaviours across diverse contexts and times is ensured by its modifiability, which allows for new conceptual and empirical data to produce and define new concerns, epistemologies, categories, properties or dimensions. Its relevance is underlined especially by today's liquid times in which individual choices, institutions, routines, fears, power, politics, collective action, long-term thinking, free will, conformity, and legitimation, to name a few, are in a liquid state (Bauman 2007).

Toffler predicted that the *'massive injection of speed and novelty into the fabric of society will force us not merely to cope more rapidly with familiar situations, events and moral dilemmas, but to cope at a progressively faster rate with situations that are, for us, decidedly unfamiliar, "first-time" situations, strange, irregular, unpredictable'* (Toffler 1970, 193). As he predicted, we witness many interrelated, mutually reinforcing 'liquid states' in politics (e.g., Brexit); science and technology (e.g., climate change); health (e.g., pandemics); social (e.g., terrorism); and ethics (e.g.,

fake news) that tend to be uncertain and have a high degree of newness, innovative power, and negative social impact.<sup>3</sup>

In such liquid states, new knowledge and structures—formal-informal, empirical-ideal, thinkable-unthinkable, useful-useless—bring uncertainty; socially constructed ignorance (Smithson 1985) that manifests in the absence of true knowledge and/or when the latter is distorted (Moore and Tumin 1949); and fear, *'...a sense of impotence that we are no longer in control, whether singly, severally or collectively'* (Bauman 2007, 26) reinforced by ignorance, a sense that we have limited freedom to choose. Our typology offers a new foundational framework for better capturing reality, not only in periods of stability but also in the uncertainty of liquid times and states.

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### Acknowledgements

Romeo V. Turcan acknowledges the funding received from the Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 3187-00002B) for his stay at the University of Cambridge Department of Sociology during which this paper was co-developed with his co-author, Norman M. Fraser.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> By 'social artifacts', we mean any construct whose creation and continued existence within the social space depends upon agreement within a community to ascribe social significance to it. For example, practices, theories, social structures, and institutions are all examples of social artifacts.

<sup>2</sup> The typology presented here is the culmination of more than a decade of theory building around legitimation. In 2011, the authors' paths crossed, and we discovered our mutual interest in and frustration with existing accounts of legitimation—from both academic and practice perspectives. In 2012 we launched a research program, Theory Building Research Programme (<https://www.tbrp.aau.dk/>), bringing together international scholars passionate about legitimation, training and supervising over a dozen doctoral candidates who studied legitimation in diverse contexts and further contributed to our developing understanding of legitimation. Initially, our research sought to understand the fundamentals of legitimation, that is, cognitive and sociopolitical legitimacies (Aldrich and Fiol 1994) and how they manifest over time. Along the way, several theoretical frameworks emerged (e.g., Turcan 2018; Turcan and Fraser 2016; Turcan, Marinova, and Rana 2012) that were validated, corroborated by various organizations (e.g., national and international development organizations), in diverse contexts, technologies, sectors and disciplines (e.g., ethics, software, AI, IoT, 6G, FinTech, digital twins, metaverse, BioTech, Life Sciences, social enterprise, vertical farming, Society 5.0, circular economy). In light of this, our theorizing journey shifted to a higher level of abstraction. Constant iteration and comparison between various dimensions of these led us to the general typology introduced here (Figure 3).

<sup>3</sup> Most of the examples we have used here relate to contexts of innovation. This is deliberate as our contention is that this is an area of weakness for Berger and Luckmann (1966). It is not, however,

intended to convey that our theory is limited to contexts of innovation. Following Weber (1947), legitimation is perhaps most often referenced in contexts of power and political institutions (Beetham 2013; Habermas 1976). We posit that the underlying mechanisms of legitimation and institutionalization are universal across all domains and applications, and thus power falls within the scope of our typology. Therefore, election campaigning in a democracy is an instance of legitimation toward institutionalization (Q2), wherein a candidate is presented through a series of actions and accounts as a legitimate holder of power as the people's representative. In contrast, incumbent governments deploy actions and accounts to legitimate from institutionalization, to retain power (QIV). Powerless members of society can claim neither legitimated nor institutionalized power (QIII). In a successful coup d'état, power is simultaneously legitimated ('might is right') and institutionalized (the instruments and symbols of power are appropriated by force and demonstrated to have changed hands) (QI). Perhaps it is not quite enough to assert—as we have done above—that power falls within the scope of our typology. Power is precisely the currency in which our typology trades. The journey from illegitimacy to legitimacy follows a trajectory from less power to greater power, whether the subject matter is social acceptance of a new technology or fashion, or the ascendency of a new President. Almost by definition, institutionalized entities embody power which is not structurally available to those which have never been or which have ceased to be institutionalized, whether they be cultural practices like the celebration of Christmas, which can shape grassroots behaviours for whole societies, or structures of government, which can top-down compel behaviours in whole societies, in ways that uninstitutionalized entities cannot.

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