Politics as Institutional Subversion

-a neglected mechanism in explaining institutional change and continuity

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Abstract

In understanding institutional change and continuity we need better theoretical insights on the micro mechanisms of political action, which is increasingly acknowledged in the literature on new institutionalism. This article contributes in this direction by theorizing on institutional subversion, which is a secret reaction/action against existing rules and norms either by ignoring, violating or seeking to change them, or trying to preserve stability by secretly resisting new political or management initiatives, which are perceived as a threat to certain values, norms and interests. The article theorizes on how this mechanism can contribute to a more nuanced and varied understanding of institutional change and continuity. In contrast to rational choice institutionalism and normative institutionalism, an institutional framework is formulated that is context-sensitive and open to different micro mechanisms of political agency. In the main section, it is argued that subversive action is a distinct and highly relevant mechanism that can complement other types of mechanisms like appropriate behavior. More precisely, the article addresses: (i) the nature and meaning of institutional subversion and how it is conceptualized and discussed in the literature; (ii) what contexts that tend to give rise to subversive action; and (iii) how it can work as an important mechanism behind institutional change and continuity.

Continuity, change and political agency

It is an ironic paradox that the family of institutional theories has dominated in a dynamic era of globalization, individualization and Internet revolution, while at the same time not being perceived as useful in explaining change (Peters, 2011; Peters & Pierre, 2005). However, the opposite challenge is equally important: to understand institutional stability in times of changing environments. Continuity and change are two sides of the same coin and both need to be addressed in intelligent ways by institutional theory and policy change theories (March & Olsen, 2006; Olsen, 2010; Peters, 2008 and 2011; Sabatier et. al. 2014; Boin & Kuipers, 2008; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Change is often seen as the difficult challenge here, but as will be argued in this article it is equally challenging to elaborate on the mechanisms behind continuity

In understanding institutional dynamics, normative institutionalism, which has been influential in political science, ascribes explanatory power to organizational factors and institutional legacies rather than to individual characteristics or to forces in the broader social context. In normative institutionalism change is perceived as an ordinary part of politics and administration by stressing the endogenous nature of change, conceptualized as institutional development, institutionalization and deinstitutionalization. Institutions have dynamics of their own and change is understood as rule-bound, following standard processes of interpretation, learning and adaption. The logic of action is thus adaptive behavior or, in the words of James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, appropriate action (March & Olsen, 1984; 1989; 1995; 2006; Olsen, 2010).

In contrast to normative institutionalism, it is commonplace to argue that major change in rules, norms and values occur occasionally and can be seen as an exception to institutional stability. In explaining why and how change takes place after long periods of stability and path-dependent action there have been a strong focus on exogenous forces conceptualized as external shocks, punctuated-equilibrium, critical junctures, and windows of opportunities (Kingdon, 1984; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Peters, 2011; Thoenig, 2012) or as change in exogenously determined preferences or attitudes among (rational) individual political agents (Shepsle, 1989; Peters, 2011, ch. 3).

It is further argued that institutionalism is too structuralist and does not properly theorize on political agency and conflict (Peters, 2011; Peter & Pierre, 2005; Mohoney & Thelen, 2010; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). In normative institutionalism, single action logics have mostly been in focus. Leading researchers have elaborated on the logic of appropriateness

(March & Olsen, 1989 and 1995), but theorized less on the importance of and the interactivity between different action logics or micro mechanisms (March & Olsen, 2006; Christensen & Røvik, 1999; Brunsson, 2006). Furthermore, in theorizing on the importance of agency in relation to change and continuity there have been an overly strong focus on collective actors like organizations, advocacy coalitions and networks (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Torfing, et.al. 2012), while the role of individual key-actors have got scant attention (Olsson & Hysing, 2012; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Forester, 1989; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013).

However, Vivien Lowndes and Mark Roberts argue that new institutionalism now has entered a third phase in which institutional change not only is theorized as a result from either incremental endogenous change or from exogenous shocks (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Institutional change and stability is today increasingly theorized as being stimulated by both endogenous and exogenous forces; that transformative effects can follow from gradual change; and that both change and stability are the product of political agency, also in terms of bottom-up activities, resistance and subversive action (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

This article will modestly contribute in this direction by theorizing on a specific micro mechanism called institutional subversion – which is a secret reaction/action against existing rules and norms either by ignoring, violating or seeking to change them, or trying to preserve stability by secretly resisting new political or management initiatives, which are perceived as a threat to certain values, norms and interests. The article theorizes on how this mechanism can contribute to a more nuanced and varied understanding of institutional change and continuity. In contrast to rational choice institutionalism and normative institutionalism, an institutional framework is formulated that is context-sensitive and open to different micro mechanisms of political agency. In the main section, it is argued that subversive action is a distinct and highly relevant mechanism that can complement other types of mechanisms like appropriate behavior. More precisely, the article addresses: (i) the nature and meaning of institutional subversion and how it is conceptualized and discussed in the literature; (ii) what contexts that tend to give rise to subversive action; and (iii) how it can work as an important mechanism behind institutional change and continuity. The article ends with a discussion on research needs and prospects for future theorizing.

Political agency in new institutionalism

Different versions of new institutionalism have a common understanding that processes and structures produce some level of "stable, valued, recurring pattern of behavior" (Goodin, 1996, p. 21). This gives some amount of stability and predictability to human behavior, even though it is often argued that institutional theory lacks a more nuanced understanding of political agency and how it relates to institutions. In the words of Guy Peters:

"there must be a mechanism through which the institutions shapes the behavior of individuals, and there must be mechanisms through which individuals are able to form and reform institutions. Unless that linkage can be made clear, institutions will remain only abstract entities and will have little relationship with political behavior" (Peters, 2011, p. 38).

In understanding how institutions and individuals interact and how this contributes to institutional change and continuity, new institutionalism have for some time treated political agency rudimentarily, which is partly due to hard driven specialization within different versions of new institutionalism, implying fragmentation and limited possibilities for cross-boundary elaboration.

Most fundamentally, new institutionalism lacks elaboration on the micro mechanisms of human action (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Rational choice institutionalism has strict assumptions on human agency, implying that individuals and other actors basically act according to the same type of action logic, labeled in various ways in the literature: 'the classical model of rationality' (Searle, 2001); 'decisionism' (Majone, 1992); 'logic of calculation' (Schmidt, 2010); and 'logics of consequentialism' (March & Olsen, 1989). This logic, in its pure form, is about self-interested actors with fixed preferences who seek to maximize expected returns by choosing the best course of action among a number of systematically investigated alternatives. Thus, this perspective does not include theoretical assumptions on variations among individuals even though our common sense experience tells us that people vary in many respects to a considerable extent. In the words of Kenneth A. Shepsle, this is self-conscious and self-imposed limits that are an inherent part of the program so that the conclusions can be stated in confidence. For others this is a weakness (Green & Shapiro, 1994), because "limits are after all limiting" (Shepsle, 2006, p. 33).

In normative institutionalism (sometimes labeled sociological), the logic of appropriate action is a key concept, which can be interpreted as a micro mechanism of action among individuals and groups. However, appropriate action seems to be the only micro-level building block in understanding institutional change and stability. Furthermore, this building

block is mostly used as a heuristic device rather than as a theoretical concept for systematic empirical inquiry on the individual level. Even in theorizing on fragmentation and unresolved conflicts, there is a tendency to discuss it in terms of different "pockets" of appropriate action or "multiple cultures" within organizations rather than to elaborate on political agency and micro mechanisms in institutional contexts (Olsen, 2010; Peters, 2011, ch. 2). It seems in fact that human action can be subsumed under social forces of institutional adaptation; that political agency in institutional contexts is not that varied and complex to make a more varied toolbox of micro mechanisms necessary.

Since the 1980s we have seen the emergence and development of different versions of new institutionalism with limited cross-fertilization (Peters, 2011). March and Olsen made their vital theoretical distinction between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness in the 1980 debate between rational choice and institutionalism scholars (March & Olsen, 1984, 1989). These two theoretical strands have dominated political science in decades and have developed mostly in parallel, which also holds for rational choice institutionalism even though its name signal something else (Eriksson, 2011; Peters, 2011; Shepsle, 2006). More recently, March and Olsen have argued that the logics of consequentialism and appropriateness are complementary (March & Olsen, 2006, p. 9), but at the same time they continue to distance themselves from "micro-rational individuals" (March & Olsen, 2006, p. 16). These two logics as conceptualized by March and Olsen are not commensurable concepts in an ontological and epistemological sense. The logic of consequentialism or anticipation is an economic-rationalistic concept with strict assumptions on agency but with limited elaborations on the importance of contexts, while appropriate action is sociological and context-sensitive to its nature (see table 1). It is therefore difficult to theorize on them in combination, which is also done rather infrequently (March & Olsen, 2006; Christensen & Røvik, 1999).

It has also been argued that rational choice institutionalism is now less imperialistic and increasingly responsive. According to Kenneth A. Shepsle, "the distinctions between it and its institutionalist cousins are beginning to weaken" (Shepsle, 2006, p. 35). However, there is hard to see any cross-fertilization between rational choice and normative institutionalism. Guy Peters, for instance, argues that normative institutionalism is to a very great extent the antithesis to rationalism (Peters, 2011).

The argument of Vivien Lowndes and Mark Roberts that new institutionalism now is entering a third phase of consolidation (after exploration and fragmentation) is in particular

about a more explicit and open conceptualization of human agency and its importance for institutional change (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Their 5C-model of institutional agency has a more political nature and they argue that agency is *collective* because actors need to mobilize other actors to work together (networks, coalitions etc.); *combative* in the sense of direct action by a group of actors with the intent of opposing and undermining other groups and their institutional defences; *cumulative* through the impact of agency on institutions over time, including actors that may not know each other; *combinative* in the sense of actors using the "institutional materials" to hand; and *constrained* through dependency on their institutional context, which means there is no pure free will or absolute power (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013, p. 104-110).

This third phase is, according to Lowndes and Roberts, characterized by cross-fertilization and consolidation between different versions of new institutionalism, but when considering the arguments and connections actually made it seems in particular to be an affair between historical institutionalism (Streek & Thelen, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004) and constructive or discursive institutionalism (Hay, 2010; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Of course, some discursively oriented researchers, like Vivienne Schmidt, want to develop their own institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010), even though one could argue that the discursive dimension should be acknowledged within new institutionalism in general and the more political version in particular. Rational choice and normative institutionalism have some problems to fit well with this "new" political project. This has very much to do with its more elaborated and less strict view on agency and a more political understanding of institutions and institutional change. Instead of strictly rational or socially adaptive actors, agency is conceptualized in terms of conflict, power and combat in institutional contexts characterized by fragmentation and ambiguities, which make interpretations and discursive power necessary as well as strategic and tactical action like intended neglect, resistance, exploitation of ambiguities and subversive action (Streek & Thelen, 2005, p 13-16; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013, ch. 4).

This overview of political agency in new institutionalism is summarized in table 1 in terms of three types of action logics. The logic of consequentialism and the logic of appropriateness are well-known from the literature. The logic of combat is a suggestion on how to conceptualize the *political* nature of the recent third phase challenge to traditional versions of new institutionalism. These three approaches have their theoretical roots and sources of inspiration in different social science disciplines: economy, sociology/social

psychology and political science, a few key-references are noted. A common characteristic is that all three logics are about intentional action but in quite different ways. To avoid confusion we need to talk about this in terms of intentionality or intelligence instead of rationality, because this is the particular type of action of the consequentialism logic. The relatively narrow focus of these action logics tends to give them a heuristic character, which means that each of them may fall short when it comes to a more realistic theoretical development based on systematic empirical inquiry.

Table 1. Three types of action logics within new institutionalism.

The Logic of Consequentialism	The Logic of Appropriateness	The Logic of Combat
What are my goals and preferences? What are my alternatives? Chose the alternative that has the best expected returns for me	What kind of situation is this? What kind of person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?	These rules and norms are unacceptable! What combative acts are possible in this situation? What alternative rules and norms should I/we fight for?
Theoretical roots: economic theory; self-interested rational actors and anticipation by calculation	Theoretical roots: sociology and social psychology; norms, identities, roles, social adaption and learning	Theoretical roots: political science; power, conflicts, domination, combative and subversive action
Downs (1957) Shepsle (2006)	March & Olsen (1989) March & Olsen (2006)	Mahoney & Thelen (2010) Lowndes & Roberts (2013)

To avoid the limitation of heuristic modelling and to enable cross-fertilization, we need an institutional perspective open to different types of micro mechanisms such as to act on previous experience; to rely on appropriate rules and norms; to imitate "good examples"; to try to anticipate consequences of alternative courses of action; to act from narrow self-interest and to act subversively in order undermine institutions etc. Thus, in trying to be "rational" or intelligent, people are "muddling through" in many ways in dynamic processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization (Lindblom, 1959). In practice, these micro mechanisms are all driven by human sense-making, embedded in emotions and experiences, and operating under conditions of limited information, resources and time-frames. In two words: uncertainty prevails (Weick, 1995; Brunsson, 2006). Political agency in practice

constitutes of a mix of different types of micro mechanisms and even irrational and hypocritical behaviors are relevant parts in the overall picture of human action (Brunsson, 1985; 1989; 2006).

This article contributes to the debate on political agency and institutional dynamics by elaborating on a specific micro mechanism called institutional subversion. Politics as *institutional* subversion is institutional in two senses: in terms of embedded, complex and dynamic human action as a contrast to ideas of context-independent rationality; and it is institutional because subversive action takes place in organizational contexts where rules and norms constitute the framework of action and where some of those rules and norms are at stake. Thus, there is a dual interaction between institutions (structure) and individual action (agents) (Giddens, 1979 and 1984), even though every institutional perspective to be labeled institutional have to acknowledge that institutions are relatively stable and enduring with a capacity to structure individual behavior to a considerable extent (Peters, 2011). However, in understanding how change is possible at all and how it occurs we need better insights on the complex operation of different micro mechanisms behind processes of change and continuity. We will now focus in particular on one such mechanism: subversive action.

Institutional subversion – the nature and meaning of the concept

Subversion comes from Latin (*subvertere*: to overthrow) and bear reference to processes by which the values, principles and/or rules of an existing government system or political regime are undermined. Subversive action is most commonly used as a concept in the context of international politics and refers then to actions between countries in conflict with one another (Blackstock, 1964; Beilenson, 1972; Spjut, 1979; Hosmer et. al 1986; Rosenau, 2007). In the dictionary of the US Department of Defense, subversion is defined as: "Actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority" (Department of Defense, 2014, p. 243).

This article suggests that the concept of subversion can be fruitfully transferred and adapted to the national context of general relevance to organisational life, but the main focus here will be on democratic governments and public organizations. Institutional subversion is understood in a relatively broad sense and is usually not about subverting an entire government or political regime. Institutional subversion is defined as *secret political reactions/actions against rules and norms within a public organization either by ignoring, violating or seeking to change them, or trying to preserve stability by secretly resisting new*

political or management initiatives, which are perceived as a threat to certain values, norms and interests. Institutional subversion is political to its nature in the meaning of questioning some rules or norms, not in relation to narrow personal interests, but for trying to address important social and political problems and to fight for specific values and norms. This means that activities for pure personal profit fall outside the definition.

In practice, subversive action can be of quite different kinds and their importance and effectiveness largely depends on the specific context. To begin with, a few tentative examples of subversive acts can be mentioned: whistle-blowing by a committed public official to make the media aware of dubious government activities like environmental destruction; secretly coordinated exit by disappointed professionals in order to leave 'their organization' in a troublesome situation; a tacit agreement to slowdown in professional activities by a staff who dislike a new management initiative; a top-manager attempting to saw dissent between political parties to be able to divide and rule on important issues; and a government trying to secretly violate legal rules in order to increase arms export.

These examples illustrate the variety of subversive action and its political character: it is about conflicts on specific rules, norms and values as well as actions and non-actions to handle those, either by working for change or trying to preserve status-quo. However, it is political – not in the traditional sense of open protest, political negotiations, formal decision-making power or dominant political discourses – but in a secret, tactical and power-driven way (Forester, 1989; Alexander, 2001; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Olsson & Hysing, 2012). Furthermore, the examples indicate that subversive actions are of different magnitudes and importance; are driven by various actors and in different stages of the policy process; and have fairly general relevance on different levels of organizations. Last but not least, it is obvious that subversive action can be fundamentally problematized from morale, political and democratic points of views.

The basic motive behind institutional subversion is a subjective ambition to make things better in public life in some respect or in some way. This benevolent ambition can be assumed to vary a lot between different actors and can thus be controversial and perceived as malign by some actors and benign by others. Furthermore, actors can be motivated to act subversively thanks to its tacit nature, which allows them to operate behind the scenes and partly playing outside the rules. For some actors with limited resources subversive action can be the last resort, but for more powerful actors, it may be just one of many options in order to try to impose their will. Subversive action driven by immoral and/or illegal methods is a high

risk activity, which is problematic for all involved actors and we can therefore expect it in situations where really important values are at stake.

Subversive action is a logical antipode appropriate action (March & Olsen, 1989; 1995). Instead of actions based on what seem to be the most appropriate thing to do in a given situation, subversive action and non-action secretly undermine what is deemed as appropriate behavior. In the words of Vivien Lowndes and Mark Roberts, "in politics, as elsewhere, rules exist to be broken as well as to be obeyed!" (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013, p. 47-48). Subversive ideas are like shadows of institutionalized rules and norms; they are always there and people within organizations may be aware of them, but those surreptitious ideas and values are hardly ever openly expressed or acknowledged. Thus, they do not make any fuss, but can never be counted out.

In other words, subversive action is not about open protest or argumentation, but can follow as a consequence if subversive acts are revealed. One can in fact argue, in relation to the classical study of Albert Hirschman on responses to decline in firms, organizations and states, that subversive action is a fourth type of response beside exit, voice and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970)[1]. A subversive act is never an open protest or a direct form of communication like voice in Hirschman's study. As stressed by Laurence Beilenson, to "criticize a government in an effort to reform it or to change its policies is not subversion, even though such criticism may contribute to overthrow" (Beilenson, 1972, page v). Secrecy is the vital difference between voice and subversion. For instance, individuals and subgroups in organizations may prefer subversive chit-chat, tacit agreements and secret actions, because to raise the voice may have a too high price if superiors perceive it as an unfair and disloyal act. This could lead to negative reactions and punishments. Subversion is neither about exit in terms of individuals leaving an organization, unless it is secretly organized in order to undermine existing rules and norms or new management practices. In sharp contrast to loyalty, subversive action is not about adapting to what is generally deemed as appropriate within an organization. It is an action against what is expected and demanded; subversive acts either secretly supports "outdated" rules and norms or undermine what is now perceived as appropriate.

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[1] A similar argument was made by Dan Farrell (1983) who added "neglect" as a fourth element into Hirschman's conceptual framework, which means to passively allow conditions to deteriorate through reduced interest or effort. (See also Rusbult, C. E.; Farrell, D. et. al. 1988).

In the literature, ideas have been launched that are relatively close to how institutional subversion is understood in this article (Rajão et.al. 2012; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Falleti, 2010; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008; O'Leary, 2014). In a study on stopping deforestation through a system of environmental licensing of rural properties the researchers propose the "notion of institutional subversion as a way of describing how the strategies adopted by local actors may change or even go against the initial aim of institutional development initiatives" (Rajão et.al. 2012, p. 229). They use institutional subversion as a descriptive notion and do not conceptualize it further.

Rosemary O'Leary uses the concept of guerrilla in the bureaucracy or government (O'Leary, 2014), first introduced by Martin and Carolyn Needleman (Needleman & Needleman, 1974). Unfortunately, the concept is not clearly defined, but the authors actually use it to denote subversive action in line with how it is conceptualized in this article but extends it also protests, disobeying etc. This research contributes mainly in an empirical sense through interesting case-studies, and concludes that the guerilla phenomenon is far from a limited activity.

James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen eloquently theorize on gradual institutional change and elaborate on four types of actor categories: insurrectionaries, symbionts, subversives and opportunists (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Subversives are conceptualized by Mahoney and Thelen as:

"actors who seek to displace an institution, but in pursuing this goal they do not themselves break the rules of the institution. They instead, effectively disguise the extent of their preference for institutional change by following institutional expectations and working within the system. From outside, they may even appear to be supporters of the institutions. But they bide their time, waiting for the moment when they can actively move toward a stance of opposition" (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 25-26).

The secret character and the "double dealing" of Mahoney and Thelen's subversives are quite in line with how subversive action is conceptualized in this article, but an important difference is the perceived degree of freedom for subversive political action. For Mahoney and Thelen, the subversives are biding their time and seem in the meantime to have only limited possibilities to act (by exploiting eventual institutional ambiguities and by neglecting aspects that may lead to institutional drift). The subversives rather wait for the moment of active opposition. As a contrast, this article perceives subversion as a more fundamental mechanism, which occurs spontaneously or is strategically exploited in the daily life of public organizations; an argument that will be further developed in the next section.

Subversive action in context

We have discussed motives and incentives behind institutional subversive action, but we have not addressed what contexts that tends to give rise to this type of political action. It is time now to focus on how subversive acts take place in different contexts.

The general argument

Taking departure in the context of international politics, subversive action can be seen as a necessary ingredient due to deep conflicts and fear between countries. In the national political context as a contrast, we can expect institutional subversion to be a relatively common activity because open conflicts and protests are not always perceived as appropriate, especially not within public administrations. To try to handle problematic and sensitive issues open deliberation may be more or less acknowledged as an appropriate method, but this is not the case for subversive action although we can assume it to be an alluring mechanism for handling conflicts in public organizations thanks to its tacit nature.

Subversive thinking and acting can be expected within all organizations because it is a natural part of human nature, just like appropriate behavior is. We can assume that organization members have an official personality fairly well in line with the identity and norms of their organization, but we can also assume them to have a non-official personality which is more or less disguised to the public sphere of the organization. This non-official personality has both a private side of limited relevance to the organizational life and a publicly relevant side that can be more or less subversive to specific norms of the organization or to its entire identity. We can therefore expect that very few individuals have values and interests that are completely in line with the official rules and norms of their organization, which is quite natural considering that most organizations are complex entities with different goals and values, of which some are in disharmony or even contradictory. This is why politics and power are essential elements within organizations (Pfeffer, 1994).

From the point of view of job-seekers many are not in the position of choosing their employer. A lot of people therefore get positions they find less attractive and have to accept some values and goals that contradict their own personal beliefs and attitudes. This is a daily experience for many employees and most of the time it is nothing more than a boring experience. From the point of view of employers, in times of change with severe competition for attractive specialists they tend to face a dilemma: they badly need certain types of specialists who may not easily fit into the culture of the organization due to weak loyalty to its

values. This will probably have consequences for the likelihood of getting employees with a predisposition for subversive action in the future. Two examples can illustrate this argument.

In the 1990s, when environmental issues were increasingly addressed by governments on different decision-making levels but also among larger enterprises, the demand for educated and experienced staff increased and people like biology teachers and environmental activists got new employment opportunities. Those were not only educated and experienced but often had a strong green commitment as well, which their new employers also got as a (sometimes unknown) part of the deal. This is part of the background to the phenomenon of green inside activism; that is activists within the environmental movement, who hold formal positions in the public sector and act strategically by using public resources as well as civic network resources in order to influence public-decision making (Olsson & Hysing, 2012).

The second example is about the IT-revolution and the increasing need for educated and experienced people when it comes to computers, soft-ware and the Internet. Those were mainly to be found among young people born in the 1970s and 80s. One of those thousands was a young man with the name of Edward Snowden. When the US surveillance expanded during the War on Terror Epoch, more and more people were needed with IT-specialist competencies. The target group was of course IT-experienced youth, who happened to be raised in institutionalized democracies where the ideals of individual freedom had become increasingly important. This meant that the likelihood for critical eyes from below within the NSA increased and it was probably just a question of time when some sort of leak would be a fact (Greenwald, 2013).

Guy Peters has also theorized on "nonconformity" as a source of change and he exemplifies with military organizations that had to react to changes in the values of their young recruits in the 1970s (Peters 2011, p. 41-42), but he is also open to the opposite argument when he says that "although individuals may import some values when they join an institution they are willing, by virtue of joining, to allow institutional values to dominate at least this aspect of their lives" (Peters, 2011, p. 180). One way out of this apparent contradiction is to argue, in line with normative institutionalism, that the forces of socialization will take over in due time. A further aspect on this, and an alternative hypothesis, is that committed individuals may even seek employment opportunities in organizations where they hope to make a difference on important social problems and issues. In this scenario, we can expect institutional subversion to be highly relevant. This discussion

indicates that we should not only stick with the logic of appropriate action in trying to understand the interconnection between individuals and institutions and how it may lead to change or preserved stability. We need to be open to the relevance of different types of actors and micro mechanisms.

How common then is subversive action? It is of course a really difficult question that needs much more empirical research to be properly dealt with. However, beside a large number of case-studies on subversive action (Olsson, 2009; Rajão et.al. 2012; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Falleti, 2010; O'Leary, 2014), we can get a rough estimate by looking at whistleblowing statistics. Jane Olsen has made a recent overview of empirical studies on the incidence of whistleblowing in and about organizations and it shows that there are broad similarities between large-scale studies in comparable contexts and that whistleblowing is a significant phenomenon (Olsen, 2014). The large-scale studies usually have random samples of employees and they are asked if they have observed wrongdoing and if they have reported it. Wrongdoing is usually understood as illegal, illegitimate, or immoral conduct and includes a long range of activities (mismanagement, corruption, sexual harassment). An empirical study by the US Merit Systems Protection Board indicates that half or more of federal public servants have observed organizational wrongdoing and about 30 per cent reported it (Miceli et al. 2008; MSPB 2011). About 30 studies of this type have been implemented in different parts of the world, and focusing on different types of organizations. The reporting rates varies from 8 per cent to 74 per cent. The propensity to report wrongdoing is positively related to the perceived seriousness and frequency of the wrongdoing as well as the quality of evidence about the wrongdoing. Reporting rates also seems to differ between the private, public and non-profit sectors. Government employees are most likely to both observe and report wrongdoing; employees in the non-profit sector was least likely to observe wrongdoing; and business sector employees were least likely to report wrongdoing that they had observed (Olsen, 2014).

Thus, whistleblowing research indicates that subversive action in terms of whistleblowing is a quite common activity, but there are limited research results when it comes to importance, effects and consequences of whistleblowing. We also need to keep in mind that subversive action not only is about whistleblowing to report wrongdoings, but can of course also be organizational wrongdoings. However, the definition of institutional subversion in this article is more limited than the concept of wrongdoing in whistleblowing research. We can still expect subversive thoughts and actions to be of considerable magnitude in organizational life.

Subversive acts on different levels of organization

As already illustrated, institutional subversion is relevant in all stages of the policy process and on different levels of organizations: both among ordinary staff and elites. Ordinary employees in public organizations often think and feel that decisions and actions made or sanctioned by managements are not up-to-the point, have weaknesses, or are even quite bad and detrimental to some of the goals of the organization or to the culture and traditions of it (Tammers, 2013; O'Leary, 2014). This type of reaction from below can be based on more or less articulated values and interests. It is sometimes nothing more than a gut-feeling that 'this is not ok' or 'this is really bad' without a clear conception of how and why this is so and what consequences that will likely follow. Sometimes, the subversive reaction is based on more well-articulated values and positions, which may have developed over years. In those situations, a new management initiative may be the straw that breaks the camel's back and more though-out subversive actions will likely follow like for instance so called guerrilla activities within governments and public administrations (Needleman & Needleman, 1974; O'Leary, 2014). Over the years, important research insights of this kind or close to it has been developed in research fields such as implementation studies, governance as well as public administration and management. This type of research shows for instance that public organizations often have to face difficult trade-offs between different values leading to intractable dilemmas for decision-makers, with consequences such a implementation gaps, unintended effects and paradoxes (Margetts and Hood, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckart, 2011; Tammers, 2013; O'Leary, 2014). In this broader picture of management and implementation problems, subversive action is one important element which deserves more attention.

Beside this type of bottom-up subversion, there are also subversive action among elite-actors like leading politicians and top-managers. A recent example is the case of Swedish plans on arms cooperation with Saudi-Arabia, which received a huge attention thanks to lauded digging journalism (Bodin & Öhman, 2014). In short, this study shows how the Swedish government and central agencies were secretly planning far-reaching cooperation with Saudi-Arabia on weapons export, including the construction of an arms factory, in conflict with Swedish rules and norms. This case consists of a number of subversive acts by leading politicians and public officials like open lies, cover up operations and illegal establishment of a company by an employed official at the central agency FOI. The vital subversive illegal act, which initiated the dramatic process, was made by an anonymous whistleblower who handed over classified confidential documents to the two journalists. This

was the beginning of the end of this top-level secret affair. After an extended, painful process for those involved the scandal was a public fact, with severe consequences for some of the key-actors and the most important one was the Swedish Minister of Defense who had to resign (Bodin & Öhman, 2014).

This case illustrates that subversive actions tend to occur in series. Once a subversive act has been made more subversive acts will likely follow. This may end up in whistleblowing, which may trigger new subversive acts to try to veil over past actions and activities. Series of subversive actions follow an internal logic; once you start compromising with the truth and cover up decisions you will likely have to move on in the same direction. It comes as no surprise that series of subversive actions typically occur in big public scandals, like the Watergate scandal, the NSA mass surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden and the so called Saudi-Weapon case in Sweden (Sussman, 2010; Greenwald, 2014; Bodin & Öhman, 2014).

Subversive action and value conflicts

The argument so far is about the general relevance of subversive action, but some examples offered suggest that subversive action most likely occur in situations of value dilemmas and conflict. Of course, this is more or less present within all governments and public administrations. However, we know that the degree of conflict tend to vary between different contexts and situations and we can therefore assume that subversive action is most likely to occur when really important values are at stake, such as war on terror and security versus human rights and personal integrity, and industrial development and arms export versus peace and disarmament.

Another context where we can expect value dilemmas and conflicts, and thus subversive action, is within organizations facing rapid decline or expansion. In the previous section, we discussed Hirschman's contribution on mechanisms in processes of organizational decline and argued that subversive action can be seen as a fourth mechanism. To try to save the reputation of a declining organization, parts of the staff may see it as absolutely necessary to undermine existing, malign practices like for instance a weak budget regime, loss of important competencies or declining satisfaction from service users. Problems like these are difficult for the management and may lead to subversive action among individuals and subgroups within the organization. The leadership can be undermined by new subversive ideas, for instance on how to better satisfy service users, even though it is not sanctioned by the management or is even contradictory to the service policy of the organization. This type of argument are also

relevant for expanding organizations if important rules, norms or practices are re-interpreted and undermined. We can in those instances expect subversive action in terms of resistance and neglect.

To conclude, we can assume subversive thoughts and actions to be a fairly general phenomenon in the daily life of public organizations, and we can in particular expect subversive actions to be important in institutional contexts where value-dilemmas and conflicts are sharp and difficult to handle. This may take place over and over again when it comes to difficult dilemmas in specific policy areas, and can in others occur more temporarily for instance due to a period of organizational decline.

Change and continuity through subversive action

Previous sections have suggested that politics as institutional subversion is a highly relevant phenomenon, but the most difficult and important question remains: Is subversive action making any difference in changing or preserving institutional rules, norms and practices? In line with the argument of Vivien Lowndes and Mark Roberts we will theorize on institutional change and continuity in relation to three aspects: (i) institutional change is seen as stimulated by both endogenous and exogenous forces; (ii) transformative effects can follow from gradual change; and (iii) change and stability are products of human agency (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013).

Endogenous and exogenous forces

As argued, subversive ideas are present all over organizations and we can perceive them as seeds of change and continuity in the soil of public organizations. When subversive ideas are already in place minor changes in the environment can lead to new or better opportunities to transform them into subversive action that may trigger change processes. Thus, we can assume that subversive ideas are not dependent on external shocks to become activated. Furthermore, during change processes, subversive actions can spur interactivity between endogenous and exogenous forces to increase the dynamic power of the process, for instance through subversive networking which will be addressed in the next section. The neglect of subversive action in institutional theory probably means that it has not only underestimated the interactivity between endogenous and exogenous forces, but also that gradual processes may subsequently lead to fundamental change.

Another implication of institutional subversion is that institutional theory has a relatively limited understanding of the mechanisms behind stability as well. Appropriate action can be seen as the most important micro-force in explaining continuity and adaptive change in rules, norms and practices. However, subversive action can also work as a mechanism to preserve stability by undermining change initiatives and reforms. Institutional subversion can take place in terms of secret resistance from inside, also with support from external actors, which may save existing institutions. From the management perspective, this may look like "ordinary" implementation problems or unintelligible institutional inertia.

Furthermore, it is increasingly difficult to talk about endogenous and exogenous forces as though they are separate from each other. Important trends of today tend to increase both the degrees of freedom for individual action and for interactivity across organizational boundaries. These trends are complex governance and multi-level governance (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Stoker, 1998; Bache & Flinders, 2004; Olsson, 2003; Torfing, et. al. 2012); increased civic engagement and alternative venues for social movement activism (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Tarrow, 1998; Olsson & Hysing, 2012); increasing influence and legitimacy of individual actors through knowledge and expertise in the policy process (Fischer, 2009; Svara, 2006); and related to this, the increasing use of framework laws with multiple goals which tend to decentralize value-priorities to public officials and professionals and their networks (Pollitt & Bouchaert, 2011).

Of particular importance are actors within those inter-organizational networks that "belong to" more than one organization (employee, member, participant etc.). A good example here is the already introduced concept of inside activism. The inside activist is a public official active within social movements that uses different forms of strategies to influence policy- and decision-making. The activist behaviour of inside activists is dualistic, like Janus, the twofaced Roman god. It is open, deliberative and consensus-seeking ("the Habermasian face"), but also subversive, tactical, and power-driven ("the Foucaultian face"). Inside activists act both on the light and dark side of planning (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Alexander, 2001), underscoring that appropriateness and subversion can work in concert. Subversion here is to go beyond and to overstretch formal responsibilities and jurisdictions to promote their "higher goal" (e.g. environmental protection, gender equality, or social justice), while appropriate action is about taking part in dialogues and broad discussions to legitimate decisions and actions. The phenomenon of inside activism – and similar governance and network relations – tends to dissolve the distinction between endogenous and exogenous

forces. Thus, we should expect processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization to increasingly occur through the interactivity of endogenous and exogenous forces rather than through exogenous shocks or endogenous processes of adaption.

Gradual processes and transformational change.

In line with the arguments above, we can theoretically assume that transformative institutional change can follow from gradual processes of subversive actions. This can take place in two quite different ways, illustrated by two metaphors: subversive change as a "tipping point" and as a "ticking bomb".

Subversive change in terms of a tipping point can occur through small activities from within organizations during a long time which can, in a slowly and hardly noticeable way, undermine some institutional rules, norms or practices until a point of no return, where fundamental disruptions take place. This is possible thanks to secrecy, which gives degrees of freedom for political agency over a long time. Thus, fundamental change to take place does not need external shocks.

Subversive change in terms of a ticking bomb occur when an actor with really sensitive information go through a process of personal considerations (and maybe small group chit-chat) and come to a point where subversive ideas are turned into dramatic action in the hope of getting the greatest possible attention. Whistleblowing of some type is the obvious method here and a recent example is of course the "explosive revealing" of Edward Snowden. Thus, dramatic change can follow from inside actions. The wide-spread phenomenon of subversive thoughts means that the potential for dramatic change is continuously present within organizations. Thus, endogenous change in new institutionalism does not have to follow from adaptive processes.

Political agency behind change and continuity

To elaborate on the importance of agency we will focus on the operation of different micro mechanisms, in particular appropriate and subversive action, and how individual subversive actions through networking can transform to a collective force that is hard to detect and to handle. Secrecy through subversive action gives, generally speaking, more time and larger degrees of freedom for political agency to influence institutional rules, norms and practices in the policy process.

Individuals alone have a difficulty to make a difference even in situations where they have an advantageous position. According to whistleblowing research, it is not as easy as one can

imagine to actually change or preserve institutional rules and norms, even when an employee has gained access to sensitive information. The solitary whistleblower in particular will likely have a hard time to be influential and to make a difference. At best, we can expect him/her to criticize and to direct public attention to organizational wrongdoings, but this is not very likely to lead to fundamental change unless the organization and/or the people involved are well-known to the broader public. In those situations, whistleblowing will likely trigger a lot of other activities like opinion-making and public deliberation (see figure 1).

A central strategic dilemma for subversive actors to remain influential is for how long time they shall operate in secrecy. How and when is it wise and productive to turn to an open strategy (public argument, opinion-making etc.)? To begin with, there are strong arguments for both continuous and temporary use of subversive action, which can be illustrated by whistleblowing. For instance, Edward Snowden leaked information and did chose to come out and motivate his behavior, while other whistleblowers remain anonymous. This choice of coming out or not is to a large extent context-dependent. Snowden knew it was a risky activity. It would have been difficult for him to continue as an anonymous whistleblower and to go on leaking information without being caught sooner or later. He further perceived the nature of the information to be of extraordinary importance to the public interest, which was a strong motive for choosing the opinion-making strategy in close cooperation with carefully selected journalists. Thus, in this case, the subject matter can prosper from openness and it may also be helpful for Snowden in combating accusations of espionage (Greenwald, 2013). However, he has now fewer cards to play and the whole issue could slowly disappear from the media agenda with declining public awareness as a likely consequence. Even though change takes place in terms of rewritten surveillance laws in the US, we can still question what will really change (Naughton, 2015). Intelligence has its own strong secrecy culture and subversive activities, which will likely hinder or limit reforms to have profound and lasting effects.

In the Swedish Saudi-weapon case the whistleblowers have remained anonymous and have thus been able to leak more relevant information of the same kind. Of course, we cannot say if this has been done or not but we do know that the so called "China-affair" was revealed by Swedish media in the autumn of 2014, with similar ingredients as the Saudi-weapon case (export of aircraft technique to China through a front company and the FOI-manager denying involvement). Thus, if whistleblowing trigger extensive media coverage it can be wise to remain anonymous, if possible, because the option of more whistleblowing is still available

and thus a continuous cooperation between the whistleblower and journalists. Thus, the question of remaining anonymous or coming out is of central importance, but is essentially context-depending in many respects.

Figure 1. Four types of strategies to influence the policy process
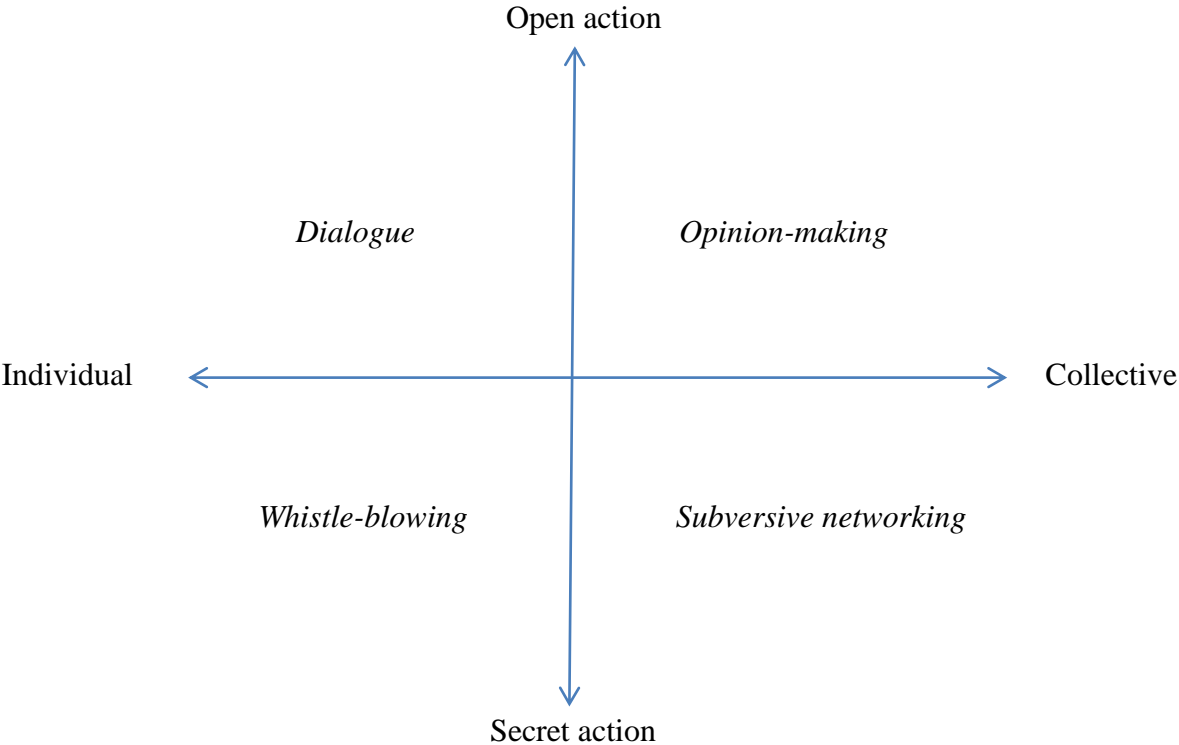
A particularly important source of influence is subversive networking, that is; actors from different organizations that cooperate in secrecy to try to change or preserve specific rules and norms. A key-point to get the most out of subversive networking is when it takes place in the shadow of appropriate behaviour. This double dealing can influence decisions and policy output as well as building legitimacy, even though there is a risky business to combine appropriate and subversive action. For subversive actors, the vital point here is to keep these types of actions separate from each other, at least in the eyes and minds of potential opponents. Leading actors in subversive networking, like inside activists, can coordinate activities in secrecy from the backstage, which includes activities like mobilizing their "troops" for political action; initiating specific political activities such as letting others do the "dirty" work like open protest in order to weaken the legitimacy of an

organizational regime (Olsson & Hysing, 2012). Through subversive networking quite different measures of political activism can be launched in parallel (see figure 1). For instance, one public official can do whistleblowing by leaking to "friends" in the media problematic information about the "enemy". The same public official can committee double-dealing by taking initiative to trustworthy dialogue with relevant superiors. One of the activists in the subversive network can go public and activate an offensive opinion-strategy. In launching and coordinating all these activities, subversive networking is the key-mechanism, which means it is difficult to trace back radical action to individual public officials and professionals. Thus, they cannot be blamed for acting in a way that contradicts bureaucratic rules and norms, but they can still use inside information and have access to powerful actors.

Conclusions and future research needs

In understanding institutional change and continuity we need better theoretical insights on the micro mechanisms of political action. This article has contributed in this direction by theorizing on institutional subversion, which is a secret reaction/action against existing rules and norms either by ignoring, violating or seeking to change them, or trying to preserve stability by secretly resisting new political or management initiatives, which are perceived as a threat to certain values, norms and interests. Subversive action is discussed in the literature, but it is still neglected to a large extent. The article argues that institutional subversion is a fairly general phenomenon in the daily life of public organizations, and we can in particular expect subversive actions to be important in institutional contexts where value-dilemmas and conflicts are sharp and difficult to handle. Subversive action can both contribute to undermine and change institutions and to secure existent rules and norms from change initiatives. To understand this it is important to perceive of political agency in a relatively broad sense, which includes different micro mechanisms, in particular appropriate and subversive action, but also how individual actions through networking can transform to a collective force that is hard to detect and to handle (subversive networking). Secrecy through subversive action gives, generally speaking, more time and larger degrees of freedom for political agency to influence institutional rules, norms and practices in the policy process.

Important trends have increased the likelihood for subversive action to arise and we thus need more systematic empirical research on subversion and other micro mechanisms behind institutional change and continuity. It is a difficult challenge to study something that is not

meant to be known, but we are not on uncharted waters. For instance, there are already extensive empirical research on whistleblowing and also intensive studies; critical cases and backward-mapping of observed institutional change, but much work remains.

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