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# Beyond the Metaphor: Institutional Anthropomorphism and the Expression of Social Power

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**Abstract**

This paper advances the theory of institutional anthropomorphism, arguing that social institutions, from religion and the state to the family, are not merely regulatory structures but entities that metabolise core human attributes, such as morality, hubris, and anger. Through an interdisciplinary lens blending social theory (Durkheim, Foucault, Bourdieu) with contemporary research, the paper analyses how institutions, once sedimented into collective consciousness, express these traits with a self-preserving ferocity. The workings of this logic are demonstrated through case studies from a North Indian context, which include the elite "awe" preserved by means of cultural capital; political "anger" that asserts sovereignty through violent retribution; and religious "hurt" that imposes doctrinal absoluteness through social exclusion. The study concludes that if the underlying institutions are unjust, then traditional measures of progress, such as technological spectacle, are regressive. Institutional power is not a key marker of true human development; rather, the ability of an institution to practice restorative justice and its commitment to human dignity are more crucial markers of human development.

**Keywords:** Political Power, Social Control, Cultural Capital, Symbolic Violence, Institutional Anthropomorphism, and Social Institutions.

## 1. Introduction

Like humans, the institutions they construct are imbued with a sense of their own morality, power, and hubris. This "institutional morality" is not merely an aggregate of individual virtues but a purpose-driven logic, functionally determined to sustain the organisation itself, often with a consequentialist disregard for the personal (Hardin, 2012). When such an institution blocks your path, its action is not celestial but the product of centuries of human design and cultural sediment. It grows voluminous, monstrous in its inertia. Its display of power, its "anger," reflects the basic social

structures; it might represent the ability of the powerful to demonstrate dominance or the frustration of the marginalised struggling with structural constraints (Jiyoung et al., 2013).

This power can be corrupted, twisted through "state capture" where institutions serve elite interests, or weaponised as "strategic corruption" to fuel insecurity and consolidate control (BIG, 2021). And when its core precepts are violated, the institution does not only feel bad as humans do; it reacts with a functional, self-preserving brutality. It goes berserk, enforcing its derived morality with a force that feels impersonal and absolute, for it is an entity designed to perpetuate its own logic, not to accommodate ours. To comprehend the monstrous, we must first observe the mundane. Institutional power is most insidiously exercised not through grand spectacles of force, but through a daily, diffuse economy of moral sanction and what Foucault termed "the capillary circuits of power"; power that reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and permeates their gestures and daily routines (Foucault, 1977).

## 2. Literature Review

The review combines various theories to show that institutions are not fixed constructions, but living, breathing things that illustrate and embody human characteristics. The framework is based on three related ideas: how institutions are established, how they utilise their authority, and how they may express their intentions.

**2.1. The Social Construction of Institutional Reality:** The premise that institutions possess a "life of their own" finds its roots in social constructivism. Berger and Luckmann (1966) established that institutions are human creations that, through processes of habitualization and objectivation, become experienced as an objective reality "out there," independent of their creators. This externalised reality develops a "collective consciousness" (Durkheim, 1912), a shared system of beliefs and morals that functions as a powerful social fact, compelling individuals to conform. Once established, this reality is internalised, shaping individual identity and perception, making the institutional worldview feel natural and sacred.

**2.2. Power, Discipline, and the Institutional "Body":** How does this constructed reality enforce itself? Foucault's (1977) concept of "capillary" power shows how institutional control permeates the social body and reaches into everyday life through disciplinary processes. This power enables individuals to self-regulate. Weber's (1919) definition of the state's monopoly on justified violence can be applied to other organisations that claim the power to discipline those who transgress, an important aspect of their "anger." Bourdieu (1991) called this "symbolic violence", the imposition of misrecognized meanings and culture that masks power relations.

**2.3. Institutional Anthropomorphism or Human Affect Absorption:** Institutional structure and power are addressed by the earlier theories, but affect is not. This paper suggests "institutional anthropomorphism" as an acronym for how social institutions capture and translate human emotions. Several perspectives explain this:

- Moral Psychology: Haidt's (2013) Moral Foundations Theory implies that morality is intuitive and emotional. Institutions encode intuitive morals into doctrinal standards, and infractions affect constituents as personal offences.
- According to Müller (2016), populism can lead to a "moral monopoly," where a leader or organisation asserts it represents the people and views disagreement as a moral infraction.
- Bourdieu's (1984) theory of "cultural capital" describes how elite tastes and styles are adored, reinforcing social hierarchy through "awe". New research on "tight" and "loose" cultures (Gelfand,

2018) helps explain why institutional reprisal varies among social structures.

## 2. Methodology

This study uses phenomenological and critical discourse analysis. It seeks a profound, contextual understanding of institutional power and its affective manifestations, not statistical generalisability. This research uses a case study design to examine North India, notably Kashmir. This context gives detailed examples of religious, political, and social interactions. Two main sources provide data:

**1. Auto-ethnographic Narratives:** The analysis incorporates the author's first-hand, observed experiences within religious gatherings and social interactions. These narratives provide an "insider" perspective on the subtle and overt mechanisms of institutional control.

**2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Public discourses, such as sermons, political speeches, and social interactions, are examined as arenas where institutional power is exercised, challenged, and upheld. CDA enables the analysis of language employed to demonise disagreement, exalt authority, and communicate institutional "emotion." This methodological framework is therefore a philosophical inquiry into the essence of institutional affect. It prioritises depth over breadth, using contextually embedded cases to build a theoretical argument about the general behaviour of institutions as feeling entities.

## 3. Limitations

This study offers a context-specific analysis grounded in the socio-cultural milieu of North India and does not claim universality. Nonetheless, it interacts with the overarching theoretical assertion that institutions co-opt and suppress various types of resistance, a phenomenon identified in the "hubris hypothesis," which examines how institutions can be influenced by their leaders' excessive confidence (Picone et al., 2014). The tactics institutions use to suppress disagreement are not uniform; they are profoundly influenced by cultural contexts, as evidenced by the cross-cultural examination of linguistic indicators of hubris (Akstinaite et al., 2020). For example, the methods of control can be viewed through the concept of "technological intentionality" (Liberati & Mykhailov, 2023), wherein institutional structures cultivate their own logic and agency. Consequently, although the extent and implementation of these institutional techniques may differ, their intrinsic ability to exert influence, as vividly illustrated in case studies of corporate leadership (Brennan & Conroy, 2013), cannot be entirely dismissed.

## 4. Findings

The analysis reveals a consistent pattern across different institutional domains. When an institution's core logic or authority is challenged, it responds not as a dispassionate system but with a personalised, affective force. This section presents three case studies that exemplify this dynamic.

**4.1. Religion: The Hurt of the Sacred**: The case of the individual in Kashmir who questioned the doctrine of hellfire demonstrates institutional "hurt." People didn't see his criticism as a theological argument; instead, they saw it as a "thoughtcrime," which is a violation of the sacred. The institution's response, which included defamation and then sending the person to "counselling," was a complicated way to make sure that its beliefs were still pure. This fits with the idea of "spiritual coercion," which is when the power of religion is used to regulate and correct errors.

The punishment was not merely argumentative but social and psychological, culminating in the individual's effective exile, demonstrating how religion hurts and manifests as a brutal, self-preserving defence of its sanctified narrative.

**4.2. Politics: The Anger of the Sovereign**: The encounter with the police jeep illustrates raw institutional "anger." In spite of the fact that the

driver's action of passing another vehicle was a small violation of traffic rules, it constituted a significant symbolic threat to the institution's unquestionable authority. The police response, which involved the activation of sirens, the pulling out of him, and the beating of him, constituted a "performative reassertion of sovereignty" (Schulenberg, 2020). This was a public and spectacular demonstration of authority, intended to teach a crucial lesson: the institution cannot be resisted. The state's punitive machinery is triggered to suppress any observed insubordination and to promote a pervasive fear that enforces submission. This anger is the functional expression of the apparatus.

**4.3. The Awe of the Social Elite:** Awe, which is a more nuanced but equally powerful institutional effect, is the mechanism by which political actors and the upper classes are revered. According to Bourdieu (1984), elites retain their power not only through income but also through "cultural capital," which includes styles, tastes, and preferences that are mistakenly recognised as crucial indicators of superiority but are actually not. By doing so, a system is created in which the majority of people are constantly held in a condition of adoration and anxiety, continually striving to achieve an unattainable elite "perfection." Because the subjects themselves participate in their own subordination through internalised reverence, the institution of social class can assure conformity and perpetuate hierarchy without the necessity for blatant violence. This is accomplished through the use of fabricated awe.

**5. Discussion and Analysis**

Consider religion, a formidable institution whose architecture of belief, ritual, and taboo powerfully governs thought and behaviour. In its South Asian heartland, this control manifests in micro-practices: the social ostracisation (boycott) of a family that dares to cross caste-boundary dining, or the subtle yet devastating coldness a woman may face for neglecting a norm, her piety instantly questioned. These are not legal decrees but social enforcements, a quiet, collective "anger" that morally reprimands to maintain the sacred order.

This institutional disapproval is quite culturally coded. Religion, law, and government express bitterness differently across regions. In a theologically "tight" culture (Gelfand, 2018), violating a religious norm may result in public shame. In contrast, in a more theologically "loose" one, it may be ignored or lead to private counsel. Similarly, the law, as an institution, expresses its "anger" not through personal fury but through what Durkheim (1893) saw as its core function: repressive law that punishes violations of the collective conscience. A parking ticket, a delayed visa, a zoning violation, these are the law's mundane, bureaucratic "punishments," its way of reasserting its normative boundaries with impersonal force. The strangeness lies precisely in this variation: the institution's "feelings" are not universal human emotions, but culturally and structurally specific scripts of power, played out in a thousand small, ordinary, and often debilitating ways.

Religion here transcends institutional form to become a collective consciousness in the Durkheimian sense, a moral unity constitutive of society itself, representing a largely idealistic vision of the perfect living (Durkheim, 1912). This consciousness is not merely taught but inculcated, a process whereby, as Bourdieu would argue, the objective structures of the religious field become embodied as "habitus", a system of durable, unconscious dispositions that generate practice (Bourdieu, 1977). For centuries, this has been accommodated layer by layer in the collective psyche, sedimenting into what we might call a "sanctified doxa": a realm of belief so fundamental that it is beyond question or refutation, perceived not as one possible truth but as the natural order. Its foundations are laid through what cognitive

scientists of religion call "early developmental entrainment," implanting its axioms in the young mind when its critical faculties are most malleable (Bloom, 2007). Thereafter, its sway is held with tenacious resoluteness, not merely through doctrine but through the very architecture of thought it has constructed. Through its long evolution, this elaborate sedimentary process captures and fossilises within its dogma and ritual the full spectrum of human elemental characteristics. The institutional hubris, the righteous anger, the capacity for collective hurt or empathy, the potential for sanctified violence; these are not bugs in the system but features etched into its deep structure. The institution, thereby, does not merely regulate human emotion; it becomes a "fossil record" of it, reifying our most primal neural and moral impulses into eternal, unchanging truths.

Once it begins to act, the institution operates as a social fact, in the Durkheimian sense, a force external to, and coercive upon, the individual. It functions as a single body, a "moral cocoon" that envelops its members, demanding integration and punishing deviance with a weight that feels both collective and profoundly personal. Religion, as one such institution, is not merely a sacred structure but the very embodiment of a "collective conscience"; its tenets, rituals, and prohibitions are treated as sacred, beyond the realm of mundane challenge. Therefore, those who practice it, and even those who don't, often find they cannot confront it. This is not only because they are violating a sacred taboo but because, unconsciously, they know the sacred entity will be hurt and will punish in turn. This is not merely the abstract punishment of an afterlife, but the very real, systemic punishment meted out by the human constituents of this body, the devout who have internalised its norms so deeply that their own identities feel attacked by any dissent.

This dynamic was starkly illustrated in a gathering of so-called learned men in Kashmir, to which I was a part. An individual dared to criticise the theological enormity and interminability of hellfire, questioning its proportionality to the sins of an ordinary mortal. His critique, a spark of reason, spread. In response, the institution, as if possessing a neural network, registered this not as a theological query but as a violation of its "collective consciousness". It could not tolerate the words, for they struck at a foundational myth. The individual was vilified, his act framed not as dissent but as a "thoughtcrime," to use the powerful Orwellian term, a transgression against the institution's core identity. The institution's retaliation was not a blind rage but a calculated, multi-faceted deployment of its social power. A team of young, madrasa-trained men, gifted with great oratory skills, was dispatched to him for "counselling." This act can be theorised as a form of "spiritual coercion," a mechanism defined by researchers as "the manipulative use of religious elements to control, dominate, or exploit" (Renato & Zuniga, 2025). Their mission was not dialogue but enforced realignment, a performative display of the institution's power to pathologise and correct deviation. Ultimately, the person left the place for a town where he was unknown. Yet, he still could not find peace, for the angry shadow of the hurt institution followed him everywhere. This shadow is the pervasive reality of social and spiritual ostracism, a powerful tool of authoritarian systems that isolates the dissenter, marking them as 'other' and ensuring the institution's moral authority and its threat transcends any single geographical location.

When religion speaks through an authorised agent, it ceases to be mere human speech and becomes divine discourse, a channelling of sacralised authority that demands a posture of receptive silence. To listen is to participate in a ritual of affirmation; to interrupt is to commit a form of symbolic violence against the entire cosmological order. Within this space, even the nascent desire to

question, sparked by a rational inconsistency, is internally experienced as a "sacrilege," a moral transgression that triggers deep-seated anxiety. This dynamic is supported by a widespread *hermeneutic passivity* among the laity, wherein many believers neither read nor analyse fundamental texts and, unexpectedly, do not question this dependence. Conversely, those who do read often operate within a closed "hermeneutic circle," a self-validating interpretive loop where their reading is presumed to be eternally and infallibly true, immune to external critique.

This power structure was starkly illustrated when a renowned preacher, positioned as the mouthpiece of religious perfection, whom I observed and listened to very closely, used his pulpit in a major mosque to anathematise bank loans and a specific social sector, condemning them to hellfire and questioning the very credibility of their education. The audience, ensnared in what Bourdieu would call "misrecognition", the acceptance of symbolic power as legitimate, could not muster a rebuttal, their silence reinforcing the preacher's authority. The true test of this institutional logic, however, came not from a direct theological challenge but from a mundane request for civic consideration. A month later, a member of the very section targeted humbly requested the same preacher to lower the volume of the mosque's loudspeakers to ease his ill and terrified infants at home. By announcing this request to the congregation on the following Friday, the preacher did not merely share a grievance; he *framed* it as an act of insubordination, transforming a personal appeal into a public provocation.

The institutional retaliation with a visceral, "carnal sociology" to express its disapproval in the most degrading ways (Wacquant, 2004). Anonymous excrement on the man's gate was a premeditated act of *pollution symbolism*, a global symbol of contamination and social marginalisation. This was not random vandalism but a symbolic performance, a *dramaturgical* punishment intended to destabilise his life by marking him and his home as unclean and ostracised from the sacred community. As Mary Douglas argues, where there is dirt, there is a system, and this act was the system's brutal, non-discursive way of reasserting its boundaries and enforcing its will upon a dissenting body.

Similarly, the institution of politics has become increasingly bellicose, behaving like a spoiled scion of a wealthy dynasty. Nourished on a diet of power, it exemplifies what modern political scientists identify as "affective polarisation," where political conflict is not based on policy differences but on group identity and moral disdain for the out-party (Iyengar et al., 2019). This institutional form cannot metabolise dissent, as it operates within a "populist performativity" that claims a monopoly on legitimate representation (Moffitt, 2016). An ordinary person, a cog in this apparatus, cannot voice disagreement, fearing not just a wounded ego but a "networked retribution", a disproportionate punishment enacted through formal and informal channels to enforce conformity. The process is methodical. Criticism triggers a process of "digital othering" and "identity siloing," where the dissenter is algorithmically and rhetorically categorised and cast out from the legitimate political community (Bennett & Livingston, 2021). This institutional anger then cascades through a structure of power. It originates with the political leader and radiates outward through state machinery, which, as recent criminological studies note, can operate with a sense of "institutional spite" when its authority is publicly challenged (Butler, 2020).

A clear demonstration of this reasoning transpired recently while I was driving. A driver, capitalising on an opportunity, surpassed a police jeep that was intentionally driving at a reduced speed. The institutional ego, represented by the jeep, was wounded by this act of disobedience, this reluctance to acquiesce to its enforced tempo. Furious, the

jeep used its sirens, a loud emblem of undeniable authority, halted the vehicle, and its officers forcibly removed the driver. He was beaten not as a human being, but as if he were an inanimate object. The response was not about traffic safety but a "performative reassertion of sovereignty" (Schulenberg, 2020). The pervasive fear this generates is the antithesis of safety; it is the hallmark of what scholars call "authoritarian policing," which aims to produce docile subjects rather than protected citizens (Jefferson, 2020). The institution was hurt, and in its rage, it demonstrated that its power is the only truth that matters.

This logic of institutional retribution is not confined to the grand stages of state and religion; it operates with equal force at the micro-level, within the very bedrock of society: the family. A son's or daughter's disagreement with the father is rarely a simple interpersonal altercation. A "micro-political act" with major social consequences. The parents' hurt is often that of an "institutional agent" whose socially imposed status is being questioned. The patriarchal institution of the family, as argued by contemporary feminist scholars, confers a "status shield" that legitimises the father's authority; to question him is to question the institution itself (Connell, 2020). This pattern of institutional defence replicates across nearly all socially curated roles. A teacher's irritation at a student's objection, a doctor's displeasure with a patient's contrasting assessment, or the rich elite's outrage at redistribution demands are not personal grievances. As social psychology research on "system justification theory" implies, they are defensive behaviours against the challenges to a system that gives them power and prestige (Jost, 2020). The role player perceives a "role-status violation," where a slight against them is seen as a threat to the institutional hierarchy that authenticates their identity and commands respect (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2017). The resulting anger is the institution's immune response, activated at the most intimate and dispersed levels of social life to maintain an established order of power.

Another quintessentially human characteristic that spills into institutions is the sense of veneration, awe, and deification directed towards the figures, power, and immaterial essence that constitute them. This process is a cornerstone of institutional endurance, functioning as a form of "mnemonic socialisation" where communities learn to remember the past in a specific, identity-forming way (Assmann, 2011). Religion makes the historical narrative incontrovertible and sacred, creating "collective effervescence" when groups unite in ritual, causing people to transcend their routine existence and feel part of a greater force (Durkheim, 1912). This goes beyond intellectual assent to a psychological absorption. During evocative narrations, both speaker and listener can enter a state of "narrative transportation," where they become so immersed in the story that they mentally leave the present, their physical bodies, and their individual egos behind (Green & Brock, 2000). Within this sacred ecology, religious founders and saints are systematically deified, stripped through hagiography of the very crudity that makes us human. Max Weber called this process "charismatic routinisation," in which the outstanding traits of a leader are turned into a stable, impersonal institution (Weber, 1978). Conversely, historical figures who refuted these saints are often subjected to what Pierre Bourdieu called "symbolic violence", a soft, cultural power that legitimises their mockery and erases their credibility (Bourdieu, 1991). The institution, much like a human ego, cannot abide what fundamentally rejects it; it systematically silences direct challenges while allowing, and even encouraging, the subtle denigration of its historical opponents, thereby reinforcing its own doctrinal and moral supremacy.

Political systems thrive on adoration and awe, as authority coalesces around a dominant individual in "sacralization." Political figures

become symbols of institutions (Gorski, 2020). Max Weber theorised this phenomenon as "charismatic authority," wherein the leader is endowed by followers with exceptional, almost supernatural qualities (Weber, 1978). This institution, once crystallised in a figurehead, cannot tolerate questions regarding its nature. As Jan-Werner Müller argues in his analysis of populism, such regimes claim a "moral monopoly" that frames dissent not as legitimate opposition but as a betrayal of the people itself (Müller, 2016). It is a self-reinforcing system: because the institution perceives itself as the only legitimate order, "it can't be otherwise," and thus it systematically pathologies and excludes what goes against it.

This dynamic of awe is not confined to the political stage but is replicated by elites across social categories. As Pierre Bourdieu observed in *Distinction*, the upper class stays on top not only because of its economic power but also because of its "cultural capital," which is the institutionalised, privileged cultural knowledge, styles, tastes, and preferences that people wrongly think are inevitable superiority (Bourdieu, 1984). The elite "enjoy it," perpetuating a system that keeps the majority in a state of awe, constantly measuring their own perceived inadequacies against a curated image of elite "perfection." This is not a passive process but an active one of "social judging," where elite tastes are established as the universal standard, forcing the rest to constantly think about and aspire to an unattainable ideal, thereby ensuring their own subordination through a cycle of symbolic consumption and social anxiety (Barker, 2020).

**6. Conclusion**

While it is a foundational observation in critical theory that institutions serve a fundamentally disciplinary and hegemonic function, the analysis often stops short of recognising their profound *anthropomorphic assimilation*, their capacity to absorb core human emotional traits, moral frameworks, and even fundamental whimsicalities, which they then express without human restraint when their logics are violated. They become, as philosopher Byung-Chul Han argues, a "digital unconscious" that operates with our own pathologies but on a scale and with an inertia we cannot control (Han, 2017). Therefore, the study contends that the conventional triumvirate of science, technology, and material progress, which Guy Debord termed "the integrated spectacle", is not the total, or even the most meaningful, indicator of human development (Debord, 1988). Indeed, as post-development researchers such as Arturo Escobar have long contended, this model can be regressive, promoting epistemic violence by excluding alternative, often more humane, modes of knowledge and existence (Escobar, 2018). The true metric of a civilisation's advancement is not the spectacle of its infrastructure but the "capability approach" to justice embedded within its institutions, their just approach towards the humanity they are meant to serve (Sen, 1999). It is the ultimate pity that our global standing is determined by the terrifying features of a newly minted missile, the ultimate expression of institutional hubris and destructive power, and not by the dignity, security, and flourishing of the human lives at whom this power is ultimately directed. We have perfected the institution of war while allowing the institutions of care to languish, a tragic misallocation of our collective moral and imaginative resources.

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