

“MAINTAIN THE CORE, REINTERPRET THE PERIPHERY” AS A MECHANISM OF INSTITUTIONAL  
MAINTENANCE. THE CASE OF THE ONION JOHNNIES

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes "Maintain the core, Reinterpret the periphery" as a mechanism of institutional maintenance. The concrete mechanisms that allow for institutional maintenance are understudied. Using a historical case of the *Onion Johnnies* – Frenchmen who have been selling onions from Roscoff in Southern England since 1830 -, the authors generate new insights into the process of institutional maintenance. Onion Johnnies have managed to keep their profession alive by conserving its central characteristics, while changing aspects on the periphery. Firstly, this article identifies a new mechanism for maintaining institutions. This enhances the concept of institutional plasticity by using it to think about how an institution is maintained through transformation and double boundary work. Finally, this article shows the advantage of studying weak institutions.

KEYWORDS

Institutional maintenance, Institutional work, Plasticity, Long term case study, Onion Johnnies.

## INTRODUCTION

How are institutions maintained? This question is addressed, directly or indirectly, by many researchers. After studying the processes of institutionalization (what was once a mere practice becomes one day an institution) (Scott, 2008; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009) and deinstitutionalization (what was once an institution becomes one day nothing more than a practice) (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), it now seems critical to better understand how institutions are maintained. Research has begun to identify the processes involved. For example, the study by Dacin et al. (2010) highlights the role of ritual in keeping up institutions in Cambridge. This is furthered by research by Currie et al. (2012), Lok and De Rond (2013), Micelotta and Washington (2013) who identify several mechanisms for maintaining institutions such as restoration, repair work and reinforcement. Nevertheless, these studies mainly show how, after being destabilised, an institution is maintained through attempting to return to its previous state. Few studies have analysed how an institution is maintained through transformation. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) provide some clues to this. Lok and De Rond (2013) propose the concept of “institutional plasticity” as a way of thinking about the phenomenon. The present study takes this perspective further.

Examining topics in fresh and insightful ways is critical to further develop the theoretical base in management (Lohrke *et al.*, 2012; Schriber, 2016). Case studies are effective for identifying key variables, for building theories and comparing different situations (Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2007). Historical cases, in particular, have proven a rich source for theory development in organizational topics (Oertel & Thommes, 2015; Godfrey *et al.*, 2016). They allow researchers to produce fresh insights by developing a rich understanding of organizational life and building theory inductively by asking “what is going on here?” (Yin, 2003). Accordingly, we employ an in-depth, historically

based case study to gain further insight into processes of institutional maintenance. Specifically, we analyse the case of *Onion Johnnies* – onion growers from Roscoff (Brittany, France) – who, since 1830, sell their produce door to door in the south of England. We have gathered data on this profession over a period of more than 200 years. These data show that the *Onion Johnnies* realized an institutional work that consist in maintaining the central characteristics of their activity (the specific nature and quality of the product linked with local agriculture and door to door distribution) and in reinterpreting a certain number of peripheral characteristics (the organisation and division of labour). This maintenance of the central characteristics and reinterpretation of peripheral characteristics appear as a concrete mechanisms that have enabled this institution to survive.

We begin this study by reviewing current maintenance of institutions' research. Then, employing an historical case study research design (Gaddis, 2004; Stake 1995), we examine the maintenance of the profession of the *Onion Johnnies*. This provides the basis for enriching the literature and making proposals to guide future research. In particular, our identification of this mechanism of institutional maintenance enables us to enrich the concept of institutional plasticity proposed by Lok and De Rond (2013) by showing that an institution may also be maintained through transformation. Our data also further the concept of boundary work mobilised by Zietsma and Lawrence (2010), since we propose the existence of “double boundary work”. This relates to an internal boundary that defines the skills required to exercise a profession, and to an external boundary focused on defending the place of the profession on the market. Finally, in terms of methodology, this article shows that weak institutions provide a particularly pertinent example for identifying the concrete mechanisms of institutional maintenance (Edward, Jones, 2008).

## CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF INSTITUTIONAL MAINTENANCE

Following Lok and De Rond (2013), our conception of institutions is grounded in practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011) that sees them as constituted by and maintained through institutionalized social practices (Scott, 2008; Börjeson & Löwstedt, 2017; Hossfeld, H., 2018). We define institutions as “patterns both *of* and for particular types of social practices” (Lok & De Rond, 2013, p.186). These practices are “distributed across time and space, routinized and taken-for-granted, “objectivized” as existing apart from and beyond the people who embody them and legitimized in terms of an overarching institutional logic” (Lok & De Rond, 2013, p.186). In this perspective, practices are defined as organized human activities regulated by rules and standards (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009).

The literature on the maintenance of institutions is a recent but rapidly growing development (Dacin *et al.* (2010), Méric & Jardat, 2010, Lok & De Rond (2013), Currie *et al.* (2013)). The hypothesis of institutional self-reproduction was long dominated by institutionalist research (Greenwood *et al.*, 2008). Continuity was thus often at the heart of the discussion (Sminia, 2011). This perspective was questioned in the seminal works of Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). They showed that all institutions require institutional maintenance, a specific institutional work that has to be carried out if an institution is to be maintained. This institutional maintenance is often not very visible, indeed it is often almost hidden (Jullien, 1997) and specific methodologies are needed in this area of research. To identify the mechanisms of institutional maintenance, it is necessary to unearth and analyse the micro processes that ensure this maintenance.

Dacin *et al.* (2010) are among the first authors to propose a detailed empirical analysis of the institutionalized social practices that enable an institution to be maintained. They analysed how the formal dining at Cambridge colleges contributes to maintaining the British class system. They

highlight the role of repeated performances of institutionalized social practices in the maintenance of this institution. With the same logic of attention to practices and micro processes, Méric and Jardat (2010) show that the consultancy firm they analyse is maintained through the repetition of the same practices during the induction process. Some practices used for recruiting people can be quite easily identified (they only recruit people educated in the best “Grandes Ecoles” in France, they follow the rule “if two associates say no for one candidate, we do not recruit him”, etc.); however, other practices are much difficult to identify (one candidate had to wait for his interview for at least 15 minutes, he had to wait in the hallway, and the interviews took place on the upper floor etc.). The authors conclude that this practice can be likened to companioning, anchored in traditions and values of Capetian French culture that go back millennia and characterised by concrete rites of passage; they thus return here to the notion, already developed by Dacin *et al.* (2010), of ritual as a mechanism for institutional maintenance. These studies are very interesting because they underline that an institution can be maintained through repeated performance of institutionalized social practices. Nevertheless, this mechanism cannot explain all kinds of institutional maintenance. Indeed, Lok and De Rond (2013) suggest that when such institutionalized social practices are analysed in detail, there is a surprising number of times when these behaviours deviate from and challenge institutionalized rules, norms and beliefs. In Cambridge University Boat Club, where everything is supposed to have been repeated continuously for 175 years, the ethnography of Lok and De Rond (2013) shows that crew may rebel against coaching staff, selecting a student even if he has not been “officially” selected etc. The maintenance of this institution thus cannot only be explained by the repeated performance of institutionalized social practices. On the contrary, the maintenance of an institution needs mechanisms that can deal with divergent practices (Dacin *et al.*, 2010).

Scholars propose different mechanisms to explain how institutions respond to these divergent practices. Lok and De Rond (2013) identify two main mechanisms: containment and restoration. Divergent practices produce minor breakdowns in institutional stability (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Breakdowns correspond to a discrepancy between expectations and the actual experience of institution members (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). When divergent practices produce minor breakdowns, they can be contained (Lok & De Rond, 2013, p.198). For example, institutional actors may tolerate them. Nevertheless, the accumulation of these minor breakdowns puts so much pressure on the institution that, maintaining it may require another mechanism: restoration. Restoration induces more implication of actors and more formal institutional work: “divergent practice performances are reconciled with the practice scripts in a way that protect the organizing principles” of this institution (Lok & De Rond, 2013, p.199). These two mechanisms help to understand how an institution can be maintained when faced with minor or major breakdowns. Currie *et al.* (2012) and Micelotta and Washington (2013) adopt the same perspective and propose a complementary mechanism to explain institutional maintenance. Currie *et al.* (2012) describe how specialist doctors threatened by substitution (other professionals being authorized to carry out some of their reserved tasks) respond to this major disruption in their profession by transforming this possible substitution into the delegation of routine tasks. They also respond by co-opting powerful professionals outside the professional elite who help them to maintain existing arrangements. Micelotta and Washington (2013) study the Italian Order of Medicine and show how members “repair” it to maintain the institution. This is done by reasserting the norms of institutional interaction, re-establishing the balance of institutional powers, regaining institutional leadership and reproducing institutionalized practices.

Nevertheless, all these maintenance mechanisms are characterized by the prefix “re”: “re”-peated performance (Dacin *et al.*, 2010; Méric & Jardat, 2008), “re”-storation (Lok & De Rond, 2013), “re”-pair”, “re”-asserting, “re”-establishing, “re”-gaining and “re”-producing (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). Although they are all very interesting and helpful in understanding institutional maintenance, they nevertheless all describe how a destabilized institution is maintained by seeking to return to a previous state. Our paper aims to explore institutional maintenance mechanisms that are characterized by transformation and not by an attempt to return to a previous stage, before breakdown and divergent practices.

#### BEYOND THE “RE” PREFIX: MAINTENANCE THROUGH TRANSFORMATION

At the end of their paper, Lok and De Rond develop the concept of “institutional plasticity” that “creates a temporary space in the practice script into which seemingly divergent practices can be temporarily co-opted” (2013, p.205). This concept makes it possible to think of the maintenance of an institution through transformation, but this transformation is intended to be only temporary. Compared to this concept, the study of Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) seems far more radical. Studying the British Columbia coastal forest industry, they show that this industry has been profoundly destabilized by environmentalists and First Nations demanding an end to “clearcutting” (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 201). “Clearcutting” had been used for decades by forest industry and is supported by Ministry of Forests. In the 1980s, Environmentalists and First Nations argued that “clearcutting” is detrimental to nature and that current practices in forest industry exclude the forests' rightful owners (the people of British Columbia and the First Nation) from forestry decisions. This conflict created major disruption in this institution. In fact, it threatened (high) wages for forest workers, employment for local communities, firms' profit, etc. The forest industry could not simply ignore the conflict, contain it or restore the previous institutional arrangements.

Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) documented the disruption in detail suggesting that these members of the industry created a new institutional arrangement that allowed them to maintain their institution. For example, they show how outsiders worked on boundaries to try to convince the Ministry that First Nations should be part of this institution (whereas previously, they were not members of the institution). They show how insiders worked on boundaries (creating experiments, considered as completely “outside” the work they do on other forests, etc.) but also on practices (trying to see if it would be possible to harvest selectively or engage inhabitants in the decision process, etc.).

Their paper shows that concepts of “boundary work” and “practice work” are particularly useful for analysing this mechanism of transformation. Borrowing from the sociology of professions, Zietsma and Lawrence define “boundary work” as “actors' efforts to establish, expand, reinforce, or undermine boundaries” (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 194) and “practice work” as “how actors affect the practices that are legitimate within a domain [...] how practices are created, maintained, or disrupted” (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 194). Boundaries and practices are interdependent but distinct. Boundaries establish distinctions between people, objects or activities (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Practices are organized human activities regulated by rules and standards (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). They are usually specific to each social group. Practices “belong” to each social group but they should not be reduced to boundary work which is an institutional practice specifically devoted to the creation, maintenance and transformation of boundaries.

Our article attempts to further the elements identified by Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) that we have just presented. In a certain way, by exploring institutional maintenance through transformation, we intend to respond fully to the call of Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). They defined institutional maintenance as the mechanism of “supporting, repairing and recreating of



institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 230). Major contributions have been made to the supporting and repairing sides of this maintenance. It is now time to look in detail into the transforming mechanisms of institutional maintenance.

## MAINTENANCE OF AN INSTITUTION - THE CASE OF THE ONION JOHNNIES

We use an historical case because we consider that it is a particularly pertinent methodology to understand how an institution is maintained. Following Maclean *et al.* (2016), we are in the "history as explicating" approach. We consider that "history might enrich organizational theory" (Maclean *et al.*, 2016, p.610). The "interplay of theoretical ideas and historical evidence" leads us to "theoretical refinements" (Maclean *et al.*, 2016, p.614).

### *The case of Onion Johnnies*

*Onion Johnnies* are seasonal, itinerant onion-sellers, from the area of Roscoff in France. They are organized into companies covering specified localities in the United Kingdom, walking and cycling from door to door to sell their strings of red onions. The first Onion Johnnies Company was supposedly founded by Henri Olivier, when he first set foot in Plymouth in 1828. Returning with tales of how quickly and well he had sold his onions, he established a new sales practice that became an institution that has been maintained for two centuries. From a British point of view, the Onion Johnnies are peddlers. Even though there has long been a suspicion of dishonest or petty criminal activity associated with peddlers, the *Onion Johnnies* are considered as respectable and deserving workers. The onion sellers spent their days on the road with a heavy brace of onions on their shoulders. Hard working conditions and a life balanced between France and the UK define the true Onion Johnny identity. The *Onion Johnnies* are well known and identified in the UK. They became the stereotypical image of the Frenchman. Well known peddlers in the UK, poor farmers in France, there were about 1500 *Onion Johnnies* in 1930. Today, the average Onion Johnny is 70

years old, but younger “new” *Onion Johnnies* have become interested in maintaining the profession. There are around 20 of them, still leaving Roscoff to sell their strings of red onions in the UK.

### *Data collection*

The data collection process includes the usual multiple approaches used in historical and longitudinal studies. In order to carry out methodological triangulation (Jick, 1979; Gill & Johnson, 2010), we detailed a documentary study of the *Onion Johnnies*, including primary archive material (e.g. Onion Johnnies’ belongings, client lists, maps etc.), historical narratives (Griffith, 2002; Guivarc’h, 1979), longer historical studies (Leboissetier, 2013; Menez, 1986 ; Moncus, 1973), biographies (Guillou-Beuzit, 2005; Macdougall, 2002), audio-visual archives (e.g. a Welsh journalist who carried out long interviews with 23 Onion Johnnies), paper archives ( *Ar Men* Review) and blogs (cf. appendix). We also interview all the different types of actor whom it is still possible to meet. We thus met former *Onion Johnnies* and new ones, as well as the many other actors involved in the development of the profession (onion producers, members of the French agricultural administration, members of the body that delivers the label « appellation d’origine contrôlée », the head of the Onion Johnnies museum in Roscoff, etc.). Our interviews were quite broad-based. We interviewed the individuals not only about their work but also about their private life, youth and their perspectives for the future. Using an interview guide, we carried out 10 semi-directive formal interviews of around 1 hour and a half each. In all, a total of 18 hours of interviews were recorded and 400 pages transcribed. In order to capture all the whys and wherefores of the practice, we also had a great number of informal exchanges with Onion Johnnies (during round table discussions, Onion festivals etc.). We also visited some of their homes and the locations where they lived and worked. Our data analysis was guided by three main questions: First of all,

we analysed the job itself. More specifically, we asked “Who are the Onion Johnnies”? What markers define the contours of their profession? Secondly, we analysed the evolution of the profession’s practices by asking: “How has the profession of Onion Johnnies evolved”? We identified three generations of Onion Johnnies so our analysis enabled us to show the attributes of the profession that remained and those that have changed over time. Third, we highlighted the mechanisms of institutional maintenance. We studied the representations associated to Onion Johnnies to explore the cognitive dimensions of the profession in order to answer the question: “What is it that makes the Onion Johnnies still a living institution”?

Step 1 : Define practice boundaries	Semi-directive interviews with <i>Onion Johnnies</i> (Old and new generation)
	Autobiographies – life stories
	Ethnographical narratives – Novels
	Scholarly works

Step 2 : Evolution of the practice	Transcription of interviews with Onion Johnnies (23 interviews old and new generation) by the journalist Gwyn Griffith
	Interviews with experts (Onion producers, representative of the chamber of agriculture and the INAO – National institute for Origin and Quality – Round table (President and treasurer of the Onion Johnnies’ association + 2 historians))
	Media archives

Step 3 : Maintenance of the institution	Reports from witnesses
	Netnography
	Iconography
	Artistic and literary representations

	Festivals and events: Roscoff onion festival (Fête de l'oignon, 23-24 August 2014) ; Visit to the house of Onion Johnnies and onions « Maison des Johnnies et de l'Oignon » in Roscoff
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*Note: an exhaustive list of data is provided in the appendix.*

Table 1: The case study data

The analysis of the different sources of historical data, the semi-directive interviews and the field notes were all treated in accordance with Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendations for qualitative studies: synthetic interview notes, data coding and matrices and tables to display summarized data.

### *Data analysis*

During our discussions with *Onion Johnnies*, in interviews and when reading data, we were more and more surprised by the duration of this profession (all *Onion Johnnies* talk about Henri Olliver, that is considered in 1828, as the first to travel to Great Britain to sell onions) and the fact that old as well as young *Onion Johnnies* share the same language and the same references. We also very quickly understood that the *Onion Johnnies* stand for far more than a mere sales practice. They are a true institution: a symbol of the “Frenchie” in the UK and of the local heritage of Roscoff, they carry not only onions, but also a specific savoir –faire and culture. We gradually realized that maintaining this institution has meant that these actors have defended some of its basic characteristics, but that they have also adopted deliberate transformations to ensure its survival. This mechanism gradually appeared to us as more and more relevant. In order to better analyse it, we therefore decided to call it “maintain the core, reinterpret the periphery” and we coded for any reference to this mechanism in our data, including interviews, blogs, books and documentation. We also extracted the dialogues related to this mechanism to construct a composite narrative for it

(Langley, 1999). This narrative provided the basis for analysing the emergence, evolution, and trajectory of the mechanism and the related interactions and roles of the different *Onion Johnnies* within it. We next sought to understand the content and dynamic of these interactions and to identify any patterns in the nature of the mechanism. Using a line-by-line coding approach, we generated first-order codes inductively from the narratives (Miles, Huberman, 1994). In addition to performing detailed coding of the ongoing interactions surrounding the mechanism, we coded many other related factors and interactions, including for example the nature of work related to the mechanism and the *Onion Johnnies* involved.

Drawing on these codes, we used analytic induction (Becker, 1998; Ragin, 1987) to build a conceptual framework of why this mechanism appeared efficient for maintenance and others did not. Analytic induction is a particularly effective method for theorizing social processes because it proceeds through constant comparison of cases in which a particular outcome of interest is observed (e.g., efficient maintenance of profession) and cases in which it is not (e.g., inefficient maintenance of profession) (Katz, 2001). The analysis proceeded narrative by narrative. Contradictory data – mechanisms that are inefficient – were crucial to this process because they challenged the emerging conceptual framework and resulted in its continuous refinement. This iterative process of comparing and contrasting narratives and of refining the conceptual framework continued until we were able to identify conceptual categories of codes. Although the framework was developed iteratively, we report only the final iteration that distinguishes the core and the periphery in the process of maintenance of an institution.

## First-Order Categories

## Second-Order Categories

## Aggregate theoretical dimensions

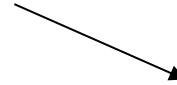
The soil and mild climate around Roscoff enable the production of pink onions that are sweet and long lasting.

Producers and sellers come from a very small and clearly identified geographical in the region of Roscoff.

The port of Roscoff makes it relatively easy to reach England.



Affirmation of a specific product rooted in a specific locality.



Plaiting the onions is a guarantee of their quality and their conservation.

Plaiting onions makes them a distinctive object

There are interpersonal relationships with clients (clients are often friends)



Perpetuation of a *savoir-faire* and a mode of market access.



Distinction between plaiters (those who plait the onions) and sellers – horizontal division of labour

Distinction between Masters and the other Johnnies (plaiters and sellers) – vertical division of labour

Creation of companies directed by a Master and employing several Johnnies.

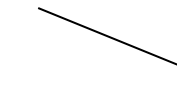
Johnnies carry out all the activities (plaiting, sales)

Masters disappear, companies are dissolved

Johnnies take part in the association (general assembly)



Transformation of the division and organisation of labour



Maintain the core characteristics.

Interpret the periphery characteristics

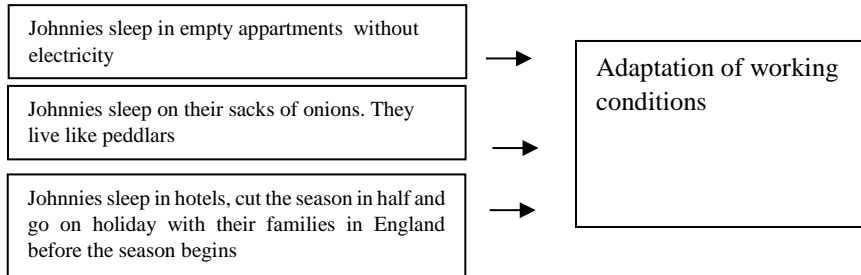


Table 2: Structuring the case study data (adapted from Corley and Gioia, 2004)

## THE *ONION JOHNNIES*, AN INSTITUTION THAT HAS BEEN MAINTAINED FOR 200 YEARS

### *Deep practice work - Institutionalisation of the profession of Onion Johnnies*

After the Pardon of Sainte Barbe, a religious festival that takes place at the end of July, *Onions Johnnies* take the boat at Roscoff and go to Great Britain to sell their onions door to door<sup>i</sup>. Initially, the Onion Johnnies were poor peasants who had no work because the winter moths prevented them from cultivating the land, so they were looking to supplement their income. Most of the time, *Onion Johnnies* had numerous children. In those poor families, children started working very young. Even though the law in England forbade child labour, the *Onion Johnnies* often started as sellers aged 10 or 12. Onion Johnnies usually hand down the job from father to son.

Selling onions door to door gradually became a profession. First we can observe a *segmentation* of tasks. The red onions were grown near Roscoff, shipped and transported by the Onion Johnnies, stored in a warehouse and then sold in British households. “Masters” supervised the sellers and stringers. This task division resulted in the development of true *organizations*. The Onion

Johnnies' companies were run by "the master" who hired and supervised the sellers and stringers for the season. Gradually, the Onion Johnnies' companies started buying the onions in advance, by hire-purchase, even though the crops had not yet been harvested, and they stocked them to obtain better prices.

*"After the 1914-1918 War, when I began as a boy selling onions in Glasgow, there were three or four big companies of Onion Johnnies there. In our company, as I've said, there were about 14 or 15: six patrons or bosses and about eight or nine "ouvriers" or ordinary Johnnies."* Jean Saout, p.28 in IanMacDougall (2002)

They were friendly salesmen, always cheerful and never out of arguments to settle a deal on their terms. They were so good at their job and so hard headed, that in some areas they were called the (door)bell brokers. They were quite crafty: they gave sugar lumps to dogs despite the "beware of the dog" notice and they exploited housewives pity for their children to sell.

The Onion Johnnies endured tough housing conditions. To reduce the expense of living abroad they lived in the storeroom itself. Very often these warehouses were condemned shops in crumbling buildings considered unfit for normal use.

*"There weren't any separate rooms in the place in Quality Street: it was a shop, a store place. You made rooms by building up the sacks of onions as walls. It wasn't exactly the Ritz .... There were no toilets, nothing... We slept on the floor to begin with and then later on there were iron beds"* Anna Gourlet, p.59 in Ian Macdougall (2002)

Their working conditions were difficult: they carried heavy strings of onions, they travelled all day long and had to return to the warehouse with no onions left to sell; they sold onions in all weathers.

*"Life was tough back then. I still feel the weight of the stick on my shoulder. Sometimes, the rubbing of the stick caused bleeding and when I came back, at night-time, my top was covered with blood"* Jean Marie Prigent, p.45 in Griffith (2005).

They were paid none of their wages until the end of the onion-selling season, giving the company time to build up cash that the master managed and spent with care.

After the First World War, the Onion Johnnies' companies coordinated and divided the market into geographical areas. There were agreements between companies to sell onions in particular



areas. A few Onion Johnnies have even kept maps of the UK with the names of companies in different sectors. This coordination decreased competition and suited the customers.

*“Well, I heard Claude saying when one day he showed me the map of Scotland on the table, and he said, look, and you know, there are fellows everywhere, even in the islands, you had to get away from the competition if you wanted to find clients and make sales.”* » Interview with an old Onion Johnny.

Each *Onion Johnny* also created a list of customers who they would visit frequently; they had a basis of loyal clients to ensure a minimum of sales.

*“We had about 500 customers. We went round them about once every month. But some people it was two weeks because they wanted more onions in two weeks.”* François Perron, p.71 in Ian MacDougall (2002)

*“Customers were loyal. You had your regular customers. When Onion Johnnies from other companies came to them... “Oh no, I’ll buy from the same man who always comes here. He’s been coming since a long time ago. Oh no, I don’t change””* Jean Saout, p.29 in Ian MacDougall (2002)

They also adapted their buying and selling techniques to increase revenue and margins. Companies joined forces to hire boats to ship their onions. Boats were faster, safer and had frequent connections between France and England. They could transport small bundles of onions that could be easily renewable. The companies shared costs, decreased the risks on their stocks and increased product quality. They gradually started to pay intermediaries to buy and dispatch the onions and to deal with customs.

These brokers purchased the onions when a lot of them were beginning to ripen, thus lowering the price. Restocking was also made easier by new ferry lines direct from Roscoff.

*“After the war I opened an office myself and I became a shipping agent. To do the customs’ formalities and charter the ship (for the Onion Johnnies). I started with small ships 20 to 50 tons near Paimpol. They used to go to Cardiff to load coal but they were empty going to Cardiff.”* Madeleine Le Guen, interviewed by Gwyn Griffiths, 1989, audio, 10<sup>th</sup> minute.

At the same time, the Onion Johnnies begin to diversify in types of customers and products. They sold to businesses such as restaurants, shop owners and covered markets. They sold garlic and pickles as well as onions. They also modernized by using bicycles. Bicycles could carry up to 75 kg of onions and extend the companies’ sectors.

*"I said to my boss "I'm fed up with the town; I would like to go to the countryside. If you give me a bicycle next year I will come back with you. If not I'll go with another boss" So he said all right, you'll have your bicycle. Before that I used to carry the onions with a stick on my shoulder. The first day I used the bicycle, I stole my boss' customers." Claude Tanguy, interviewed by Gwyn Griffiths, 1989, audio, 14<sup>th</sup> minute*

After over 200 years of activity, we see the profession become strongly institutionalised. Onion Johnnies are very well known, very well liked, respectable and legitimate in Great Britain. For example, they have an article in the English Wikipedia and are one of the entries in the index of "Library of Congress subject heading" published by Library of Congress. They also figure in English literature with the works of David Jones and Ambrose Bebb. They became and still are the stereotypical image of the Frenchman and their distinctive outfit is still used in Halloween costumes.

Even though Onion Johnnies are not sedentary and they have to register in police districts to get a "Pedlars Certificate" required by the Pedlars Act of 1871, they are considered respectable workers. First of all, their good behaviour could account for their good reputation. They are not involved in robbery, fights or murders where they travel. Furthermore, they take care to always be polite.

*« I first learnt to say « would you like some onions please? ». I didn't understand the answer but I knew that I had to say "Please" and "Thank You". » Olivier Olivier, p.35 in Griffiths (2005).*

The *Onion Johnnies* systematically have a warm welcome of the British population to the point that some customers became true friends. Every Onion Johnny interviewed told that they wrote, phoned and came to visit some British families, former clients but current friends.

*"I always found the English very warm, charitable and welcoming. I can tell you for example that when it was raining, people would give me a raincoat. When the rain stopped, I put in on my luggage rack because it got in the way on the bike, and they would give me another one. I sometimes came home with 20 or 25 raincoats! » A Johnny, Thalassa, « Les derniers des Johnnies », video, 15<sup>th</sup> minute.*

People look well on them because they are foreigners with Celtic roots; so though they are exotic, they also display cultural similarities. The Breton seller is indeed presented as a foreign figure in the United Kingdom. He wears a distinctive outfit: a beret, a velveteen jacket, sabots and corduroy

trousers. His beret was especially useful for holding a raffle, a fun sales technique used in pubs. The beret served as the “hat” from which the winning raffle ticket was drawn, and the winner would get the string of onions. The Onion Johnny usually had tanned skin and piercing eyes. His physique was appealing and the British housewife often considered him as a seductive Frenchman. He spoke with a thick French accent.

*“I saw them when I was a little boy- for me they were exotic, magical and mysterious, seemingly appearing out of nowhere.” Timinchina, comments on the article “Onion Johnnies return to England as French market dries up” The Telegraph, November 26<sup>th</sup> 2012.*

The institutionalisation of the Onion Johnny *metier* is centred on the following characteristics: mastering a specific know-how (plaiting onions), selling a recognised product that is differentiated from others (a high quality pink onion that keeps well) and a technique of direct sales based on a strong relationship with the customer. Henri Olivier is rightly the incarnation of the mythical figure of an institutional entrepreneur. Subsequently, the Onion Johnnies organised their activity. They rationalised production and sales processes by setting up companies within which there was a vertical division of labour. This quest for efficiency was the result of a real economic challenge but it was also a way of adapting to the post first world war context. We can already observe the Onion Johnnies’ capacity to seize opportunities to adapt to evolution in the field (organised into branches, sharing the market).

#### *Limited boundary work - An institutionalisation that remains fragile*

Nevertheless, the data shows that this profession has a hard time institutionalising. First, it is a part time profession. *Onion Johnnies* leave Roscoff at the end of July. They peddle along the British coasts and may venture into some cities (mainly London, Bristol, Birmingham, Nottingham, Newport, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol and Newport) but they come back home around the month

of February and take another job in France for the second period of the year. Most of the time, they work as small farmers or packers in vegetable stores around Roscoff.

However, the main cause of their fragile institutionalisation is the late closure of their job market. It was only in 1948 that an Onion Johnny, François Mazeas, created an association, “l’Association des marchands d’oignons de Roscoff et de sa region” (Association of onion sellers from Roscoff and its region), to protect the onion trade.

At that time, the *Onion Johnnies* collected money and financed Mazeas’ trips to different ministries in Paris to fight the import restrictions and taxes of the British government on French onions until his voice was finally heard by the ministry of Agriculture. He promised to argue their case with the English authorities. In 1947, the British government delivered the Onion Johnnies’ association an import license that benefitted members. In 1948, the association card became mandatory for *Onion Johnnies* wanting to sell onions in the UK.

*“There was an association of the Onion Johnnies at Roscoff and its purpose was to provide help. The association had a card and if somebody stopped you in Scotland you could show the card, a kind of license to sell the onions. I think it was the parliament in London which gave the Onion Johnnies the license to sell their onions in Britain. The Onion Johnnies’ job was special. It was authorized in that way. » François Perron, p.73 in Ian MacDougall (2002)*

The British authorities were satisfied because they wanted a single organization that would control the licenses, Onion Johnnies’ whereabouts, prices and fund transfers. The association kept stabilizing the profession by lobbying the French and English governments. Little by little, the association increased the tonnage of exports permitted and managed to impose rules on the Onion Johnnies. The association’s general assemblies decided the prices of Onion Johnnies’ onion purchase and sales, their dates of departure and arrival and took over the logistics and the administrative matters of its members.

*“There was a date you had to respect before leaving, because some people took advantage of having a ton of onions and leaving to get other people’s clients before they arrived, there was a lot of competition » Interview with former Onion Johnny.*

In 1949, the licenses were extended to garlic. In 1951, the association fought to benefit from the Block licenses that allowed selling during the prohibited period (from August to November). In 1954, the ministry of Food only kept some tariffs on trade but abandoned restrictions on the quantity and price of onions. In 1955, the association built a case for the profession not to pay Income Tax in England.

The Onion Johnnies evolved profoundly as a profession. The Onion Johnnies got together in a form of a legal organization and took collective decisions to maintain their institution. They created rules that were followed and changed in order to maintain the profession and fight against any setbacks.

*“There was a big meeting before we left, sometimes there were 7 or 800 of us in the room listening to the president – you had to listen a bit all the same ...it was mostly about onion prices, you had to know the price so that everyone would agree » Interview with a former Onion Johnny.*

But these changes did not appear to be sufficient. First, costs increased enormously. The big companies disappeared and smaller family companies took their place. This phenomenon increased the cost per seller but weakened the competition. The Onion Johnnies faced new housing difficulties as the English cities destroyed their old dilapidated buildings to put up new constructions whose rent was higher. Moreover, women (usually the Masters’ wives) began to follow their husbands to England with their children so housing had to be more comfortable. Living costs were further increased by the purchase of vans to transport their onions and paying for hotel accommodation.

*“At first, it wasn’t a family life you know. But after, my wife came with me and my younger daughter also. My wife strung the onions and made food and did the cleaning.” Jean Marie Roignat, interviewed by Gwyn Griffiths, 1989, audio, 17<sup>th</sup> minute.*

*“We rented a house yes. All year round. There were 5 men and me.” Thérèse Prigent, interviewed by Gwyn Griffiths, 1989, audio, 22<sup>nd</sup> minute.*

Second, social and economic changes in the UK weakened the profession. The decrease in value of the British pound, the greater availability of onions imported from elsewhere and supermarket competition impacted the Onion Johnnies. Custom from housewives also started drying up in GB as more women went out to work just like their husbands.

*“Of course as the years passed, social conditions were changing. More women were going out to work during the day, whereas in earlier years women had generally remained at home and worked in the house and not so many had jobs outside it. It made life more difficult for us Onion Johnnies if there wasn’t a woman at home to buy our onions”* Guy le Bihan, p.126 in Ian MacDougall (2002)

*“You want some onions missus, please?” ... Some other people would say, ‘oh, I go to the shop if I want onions? I go to the shop on the corner to get them”* Jean Milin, p.55 in Ian MacDougall (2002)

All these factors caused a great decrease in demand for Roscoff onions in England. The Onion Johnnies could not support an activity that was becoming financially nonviable and their number quickly declined.

Nevertheless, Onion Johnnies still exist today. Most of them are quite old but there are still around 20, still leaving Roscoff to sell their strings of red onions in the UK and there are even some "Young" Onion Johnnies among them.

*“It is not all gloom for the onion men, however. Johnny Onions does still exist, even if it is, in many cases, more as a novelty than as an essential provider of food. You can see him on street corners in places as diverse as Llantwit Major and Cardiff every autumn, a living reminder - even if a much reduced one - of a way of life and a culture that were once vibrant and alive in Wales”,* Phil Carradice, Johnny Onions, BBC Blogs Monday 26 March 2012. Better than well-established professions (as lawyers or doctors) that seem to maintain themselves with no institutional work, a profession as weak as that of the *Onion Johnnies* gives us detailed information on the concrete mechanism that enables institutional maintenance.

## NEW INSIGHTS

The above discussion is based on the framework of existing understanding of institutional maintenance. However, examining the case of the *Onion Johnnies* also produces new insights that enrich this literature. "Maintain the core, reinterpret the periphery" appears to be a mechanism

institutions use to maintain themselves. In fact, the maintenance of the *Onion Johnnies* as a profession is based on a subtle balance between loyalty to core characteristics (quality and specificity of the product and its specific local origins, and direct sales to a loyal client base ) and a major re-interpretation of certain peripheral characteristics (division and organisation of labour).

### *Maintain the Core*

For the past 200 years, Onion Johnnies have been selling the same type of onion, in a specific type of plaited string, door to door in Southern England. In the Roscoff region of Brittany, the fertile seaweed-fed soil and maritime climate with thermal stability gives high yielding onion crops. At the beginning, the onions also took advantage of an argument that they were good for health. Rich in vitamin C and keeping well, they became a staple food for sailors on board ship to fight diseases and malnutrition. Inspired from the old adage “An apple a day keeps the doctor away”, *Onion Johnnies* widely spread a new adage that extols medicinal virtue of onions: “*An onion a day, keeps the doctors away*” Moncus (1973), p. 171. But, more than that, the onions of the Roscoff region are special. They have a pink tinge and a sweet taste. Because they are sweet, the British often eat them raw in a sandwich or cooked to soften the taste of a meal.

*“The onion is unique. It is very mild. The British they like it. They eat it raw. My brother use to do it raw.”* Saik Mevel de Mogueriou, interviewed by Gwyn Griffiths, audio, 1989, 16<sup>th</sup> minute.

These onions were luxury goods in the UK where they were considered as rare and exotic because they came from France. Their appealing appearance, plaited in a string of raffia, reinforced this idea of high quality. Moreover, Roscoff onions last far longer than most other varieties. Indeed, the plaiting process ties up the onion neck, prevents air from entering and keeps the onions fresh for up to six months.

Onion Johnnies developed a real know-how. They plait onions by hand, one after the other, around a central rush stem keeping the Pen Capitaine, the biggest and best quality onion, to display at the top of the string.

*"The biggest onion in a string was called the captain. That was the big one, the captain. So the captain was at the top. Then after that you have the smaller onions, the sailors. So the smaller onions were at the bottom of the string... Customers would look at or touch the big one, the captain. It was nicer than the other smaller ones, the sailors. The captain looked nice and big. That was the tradition."* Jean Milin in Ian MacDougall (2002), p. 53

Plaiting and stringing the onions constitutes true know-how.

*"The plaited onion was the passport: with this you could go and sell everywhere, we could even go inside houses where was forbidden to go, but when we turned up with the plait, they would say nothing"* Interview with a former Onion Johnny.

This specific product and know-how have been recognized and strengthened by a quality label. At the end of the 1980's, M. Jezequel and Guillerm, famous local farmers, convinced local actors of the onion industry that they needed to protect their products and their agricultural expertise. They started to write a proposal that they put forward in 1995. The Roscoff Onion is the first vegetable to have obtained an *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC)* (French equivalent to the Protected Designation of Origin). The Roscoff red onion became the Roscoff Onion. The quality label on the string of red onions embodies the product's traditional know-how and local roots. The Onion Johnnies have found a new legitimacy and enjoy new recognition in their own country. Roscoff onions are a source of local pride and a high quality product that can be sold in France and in Great-Britain. 200 years after the first Onion Johnnies, the Onion Johnnies' reputation is still very positive. A young Onion Johnnie puts it like this:

*"You have to know something, that in England we are stars – we are as well-known as Johnny Hallyday, yes, it's true! And what's strange is that people are surprised by that, but it's incredible, we are part of the history of English life and we are part of history so it's quite surprising - we do door to door and sometimes we don't sell anything but people were happy to see us. We are part of the history of England! **!**"*, Interview New Onion Johnny.

*New working practices - Reinterpreting the periphery*



Even if the core characteristics stay the same, the changes are so visible that the actors all distinguish between “Old Onion Johnnies” and “new Onion Johnnies”. A young *Onion Johnny* declares:

*"As for us, it's clear, we are the « « new » Onion Johnnies. We are still part of the heritage of those that went before, we take advantage of everything they've built up, but there are loads of things they did and that we don't do now. In particular, their working conditions were sometimes really hard.... We don't really see ourselves like that, we are not really prepared to accept that..."*, Interview new *Onion Johnny*.

On the contrary an “old Onion Johnny” sees himself as:

*"I'm one of the “old” Onion Johnnies. It isn't a question of age. I think that us “old” Onion Johnnies, we knew the Masters, the companies that were a force to be reckoned with, and also working conditions that were much harder. Sometimes when I see the “young” ones, I think that they wouldn't have lasted a season if they had begun when I did.”*, Interview old *Onion Johnny*.

*Old Onion Johnnies* were from poor farmers' families that after a few generations, became Masters of companies. The *new Onion Johnnies* are Bretons who do not work in mainstream society and who like to promote the local high quality onions. The companies have disappeared; the father to son relationship, the initial capital to expand a company and the hierarchy involved have also lost their strength and their interest. The *new Onion Johnnies* value the freedom of the profession, the discovery of a new country and their direct contact with foreign customers. They have fun while in the UK and when at sea. They leave a few weeks per year with their bikes and their strings of onions. It seems to be more difficult to sell door to door nowadays but they walk with their bikes or go to their usual consumers. They still have no shops or market stalls and they still retain a specific status. Policemen are friendly towards the French Onion Man, with his strings of onions and his bike.

*“Today, the Onion Johnnie's appeal is probably more sentimental than gastronomic. For Londoners, Leroux represents the most attractive side of France — rural, ruddy, a memory of vacations and pleasures past. Most likely, his tressed onions are used as much to enhance kitchen decors as for the pot...”* Don't Cry for Me, Onion Johnnie, The New York Times, sept 6th 1997

The *new Onion Johnnies* are also attached to social rights such as social security and the pension funds; they do not wish to endure to hard working conditions or high risks and are unwilling to leave their family for half of the year.

*“And Onion Johnnies’ son you know didn’t bother about taking up the job, because well, it was a hard life... Young people have a higher level of education than we and the older Onion Johnnies ever had and there was more variety of employment for them than there was for us, their parents and grandparents.”* Guy le Bihan p.134 in Ian MacDougall (2002).

The dramatic changes between the old and new Onion Johnnies are sometimes problematic. For example, transmitting know-how is not always easy.

*"It’s just terrible, for example, the first time when I wanted to sell onions, I went to see one of the old Roscoff Onion Johnnies in his store, and I asked him a couple of questions but he didn’t even answer. » Interview New Onion Johnnie.*

*"- Oh yes, it was hard, and especially I thought at the beginning that we could have done it on a bike, but really, we gave up after the first day »*

*- H: Why?*

*- Well, the onions would get into the spokes*

*- H: Yes, you need the right kind of bike*

*- the right kind of bike, you need a whole lot of stuff for protection and anyway, we didn’t know how to plait the things, I only know a bit that I had learned with an old timer the first year, but he didn’t really show me, because I was a driver, he just showed me a tiny bit, so finally we didn’t know how to string the onions properly. Sso the first time we went over a hole in the road and the onions went everywhere, they rolled all over the place, so we just gave it up. On the other hand, we did do some door to door on foot; I stopped the car in the middle of the street and I went one side and he went the other. Interview New Onion Johnnie.*

*"We don’t know what you have to do now and then especially with Onion Johnnies, there’s a problem of passing things on through the generations. Interview New Onion Johnnie.*

In the same vein, although the *new Onion Johnnies* belong to the association of “marchands d’oignons de Roscoff et de sa region”, created in 1948 by François Mazeas, their allegiance is not without problems. They recognise that there are certain advantages to this association (including a form of protection) but at the same time, they no longer believe in it, they seek to escape from it or even create a new association.

*"All that’s the same, it’s worth nothing, it’s just a bit of paper with your name and a pretty photo, there’s no number there’s nothing. The Onion Johnnies association, in reality it no*

*longer exists, no declaration has been made for the last 10 or 12 years, they go on giving us the cards, but there's nothing really official."* Interview New Onion Johnnie.

The tensions between old and new Onion Johnnies are therefore significant. Nevertheless, by maintaining the core characteristics and reinterpreting peripheral ones, the Onion Johnnies have managed to maintain their practice.

Bases of the practice	Motivations	Defence strategies
A pinkish, sweet onion produced in Roscoff	Exploit the specific characteristics of a local product. Find another source of income	Enhancement: improve range; improve product quality through a quality label. Maintain this attribute through setting up a real sales network/channel
Specific know-how: plaiting onions (stringing)	Keeping the product. Creating a specific consumer product	Enhancement : transmitting the know-how that is a symbol of the profession
Direct sales	Creating a special relationship with clients: be a character to create an attachment. Specific system of sales that optimises an heritage	Enhancement: developing skills (improvising, being creative) ; standing out from other travelling salesmen (being close to clients, loyal, friendly)

Table 3: Maintenance of the core characteristics of the *Onion Johnnies*

	Outsider driven change	Defence strategies
Institutionalisation phase	The activity is increasingly attractive (increased competition among Onion Johnnies)	Constructing a market organisation: geographical sectors, organisation into companies ; horizontal and vertical division of tasks ; structured into a channel
	Difficult market access	Constructing an identity to stand out from other travelling salesmen: creating the Onion Johnnies Association to control access to the activity and ensure market access
	Low profits	Constructing a definition of prices and quantities through the Onion Johnnies Association. Accepting tough working conditions to reduce costs

Maintenance Phase	The activity is less attractive (because the economic climate in France improves)	Transformation: From tough working conditions to improved working conditions (renting houses, return trips to Roscoff etc.)
	Difficult market access (economic problems in GB, foreign competition )	Transformation: from a strong division of labour (Masters, companies) to « multitasking » fewer Onion Johnnies.
	Poor profits	Transformation: From a subsistence activity towards a « fun » activity, defending heritage, capitalising on regional identity

Table 4: Reinterpretation of the peripheral characteristics of the *Onion Johnnies*

## DISCUSSION AND FUTURE INSTITUTIONAL MAINTENANCE RESEARCH

Our objective in this study was to understand how an institutionalised social practice, illustrated by a profession, can be maintained over time despite being exposed to internal and outsider driven change. The originality of our research is based on our choosing to focus on a profession, the Onion Johnnies, as an institutionalised social practice. This perspective offers us a very interesting analytical framework for examining the dynamics of maintenance in a type of institution that is subject to instability. The case analysis supports and further clarifies many findings of extant institutional maintenance research. Although this method does have some limitations (e.g., the specific context may limit the generalizability of findings), case analyses can help to generate new theoretical insights that will help direct future research and inform practice. In particular, the present case study suggests several fruitful avenues for future institutional maintenance research on critical issues. The first and principal contribution of this study is to show that an institution can maintain itself while changing. At the micro level, we identify a new mechanism « maintain the core, reinterpret the periphery » that helps to understand how the key characteristics of an institution are maintained while the peripheral ones are transformed. At the macro level, this

transforming type of institutional maintenance examines and enriches the notion of institutional plasticity (Lok & De Rond, 2013). The second contribution of this study sheds light on the boundary institutional work. The distinction between the key and peripheral elements of an institution provide a clear illustration of its boundaries and enable us to suggest that there is institutional work on two kind of boundaries: this qualifies one of the boundaries as internal (at the heart of the institution) and the other as external (on the institution's periphery). Finally, in methodological terms focusing on the analysis of institutional maintenance, the case used encourages the study of these « weak institutions » rather than strong ones that are studied more frequently. We next discuss each of these points, in detail.

		Theoretical insights	Findings from the « Onion Johnnies » case
1st Avenue : highlighting the role of central and peripheral elements in maintaining the institution	1.a Micro-dynamics of maintenance	Core / peripheral characteristics of an institution	Onion Johnnies develop defence strategies that enhance the central characteristics of their practice and transform the peripheral characteristics.
	1.b Macro-dynamics of maintenance	Institutional plasticity as a continuous transformation of an institution	Onion Johnnies maintain their institution by regularly transforming the peripheral characteristics of their profession. They thus manage to adapt to environmental change.
2 <sup>nd</sup> avenue : institutional actors working on the central and peripheral boundaries		Proposition of the concept of « double boundary work »	Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) develop the concept of “boundary work”. Drawing on this concept, our findings enable us to propose the concept of “double boundary work”. Onion Johnnies work on two complementary boundaries of the institution. One is more internal and defines the Onion Johnnies' specific competences; the other is more external and tries to control access to the

		profession and aims to ensure their place in the market.
3rd Avenue : the pertinence of studying « weak institutions »	Weak institutions make institutional maintenance mechanisms more visible	Because they are only a semi-profession, the Onion Johnnies have to use levers and develop existing mechanisms; these mechanisms are less easy to identify in established professions such as medicine and law.

Table 5: Theoretical insights from the *Onion Johnnies* on the institutional maintenance

*“Maintain the core, Reinterpret the periphery”, a mechanism that enables institutional maintenance*

Our results illustrate the maintenance of this profession. For over 200 years, peasants from the region of Morlaix have been selling their pink onions door to door in Southern England. This profession has been violently shaken by numerous external events ( regulations) as well as internal ones (the crisis of the organisational model based on masters and companies, difficulties of shutting off access to the profession, the difficulties related to the job itself ). Despite all this, the profession has managed to maintain itself. This has been achieved not only through defending the profession’s central characteristics (selling the pink onions from Morlaix and its region to a loyal client base in the South of England) but also by making profound changes on other characteristics that appear as more peripheral (giving up the strict division of labour in favour of multitasking Onion Johnnies, improving working conditions).

This type of mechanism has been described in sociology to explain the evolution of social representations (Moscovici, 1988; Abric, 1993; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). The core elements are comprised of a limited number of inter-related cognitive and symbolic elements that allows maintenance of representation. The core elements are stable over time and shared by all the groups. This Roscoff onion is rather flat and pinkish, which means it can be plaited and looks nice. Clients easily recognise it by its colour, and they like the way it is distributed by attractive foreigners who

they can chat to and who come back regularly at the same time each year. In this way, the string of pinkish onions and the mutual good feeling between the English and their Onion Johnny are inseparable facets that define and maintain this institution.

The peripheral elements constitute a system of defence and a way of adapting to change (Moscovici, 1988; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). When the core is threatened or the environment requires change for survival, the periphery is modified (new interpretations, eliminating certain elements, integrating new elements). The profession of Onion Johnnies has witnessed a large number of important shocks. The English protectionist laws prohibited importing onions and imposed strict constraints on the Onion Johnnies' trade; then changes in the way of life and educational levels led the Onion Johnnies to organise themselves into an association to defend their specific sales methods and transform their working conditions and type of work.

The representation of the institution thus evolves while the core is enhanced. Onion Johnnies inspire a new generation; they are recognised for their know-how during various festivals that honour their heritage. Today in Morlaix, there is a museum devoted to their job. The English still recognise them in the city streets with their strings of Roscoff onions. A mechanism distinguishing the core and periphery of the profession can thus be identified in the process of institutional maintenance and this enables us to understand how institutions last while nevertheless adopting transformations. The results of our case study enable us to formulate the following proposition for future research on institutional maintenance.

*Proposition 1.a:* An institution may be maintained by defending its central characteristics and transforming its peripheral characteristics.

*“Institutional plasticity” as a way to think of institutional maintenance through transformation*

At a more macroscopic level, the fact that the institution's peripheral elements evolve whereas the central ones persist leads us to question studies on institutional maintenance that often insist on questions of continuity. As Sminia (2011, p. 1559) has underlined, the very definition of institution implies continuity, and the notion of repetition and self-reproduction of behaviours: "institutional continuity is a matter of a social mechanism which emerges as a consequence of the particular way in which practices are enacted, and which has the effect of repairing, and/or concealing contradiction so that change is not initiated" (2011, p.1559) Our research joins the view of studies highlighting that continuity does not necessarily mean returning to some previous status quo, conforming to or strengthening a pre-existing balance. In a certain way, our study aims to be completely faithful to the perspectives of Lawrence and Suddaby that clearly identify institutional maintenance as consisting of "supporting and repairing" but also of "recreating the social mechanisms that ensure compliance" (2006, p.230). Therefore, to fight against external and internal shocks on their profession, the Onion Johnnies set up long sustainable changes on the peripheral elements. For example, between 1914 and 1960, bicycles, vans and ferries modernized the logistics of the profession and enlarged the Onion Johnnies' sectors while improving their working conditions and the quality of the onion storage.

This perspective has been enriched by Lok and de Rond (2013) whose concept of "institutional plasticity" is based on definitions from biology and neuroscience. For example, for biologists, plasticity is "the capacity of organisms with the same genotype to vary in development pattern or behaviour according to varying environmental conditions" (Pigliucci, 2001). This definition enables scholars such as Lok and Rond (2013) to think of institutional maintenance through transformation. When divergent practices stretch institutional scripts, specific maintenance, that they call "institutional plasticity" may be able to create a temporary space that allows the institution



to temporarily co-opt these practices. The results of our case study enable us to further this concept proposing that such transformation can be continuous. In fact, here our results are more faithful to the definition of plasticity in biology or neuroscience: the transformations these sciences mention is generally permanent rather than temporary as Lok and De Rond (2013) suggest.

The transformations that we have identified in the Onion Johnnies seem to be permanent. Multi-tasking Onion Johnnies are not a temporary state of this profession. The Onion Johnnies are not destined finally to return to the same division of labour that their profession once knew. Even the Onion Johnnies interviewed made it clear that the « new Onion Johnnies » now occupy this professional area and they will never work in the same ways the « old Onion Johnnies » did. They do not think of leaving home for several months at a time to work in harsh conditions while respecting a socially established hierarchy of task division. Their main objective is not to sell onions and make money, but rather to live an adventure, meet people and keep the tradition alive. These results therefore enable us to insist on the pertinence of a radical definition of plasticity as the basis of a permanent, not a temporary, transformation of an institution. We thus make the following proposition:

*Proposition 1.b:* The concept of institutional plasticity enables us to think of the mechanisms of institutional maintenance through their transformations

#### *Actors' boundary work between core and periphery*

Identifying this maintenance mechanism that defends the institutional core while transforming the periphery also enriches the work of Zietsma and Lawrence (2009). Like Zietsma and Lawrence (2009), the literature on boundary work has mainly produced results on the way in which actors can work in order to transform the frontier between their institution and its field of activity

(Persson, 2010). The distinction we propose between central and peripheral characteristics of an institution deepen this analysis by highlighting that another boundary work can take place on the inside boundary that separates the central characteristics from the peripheral ones.

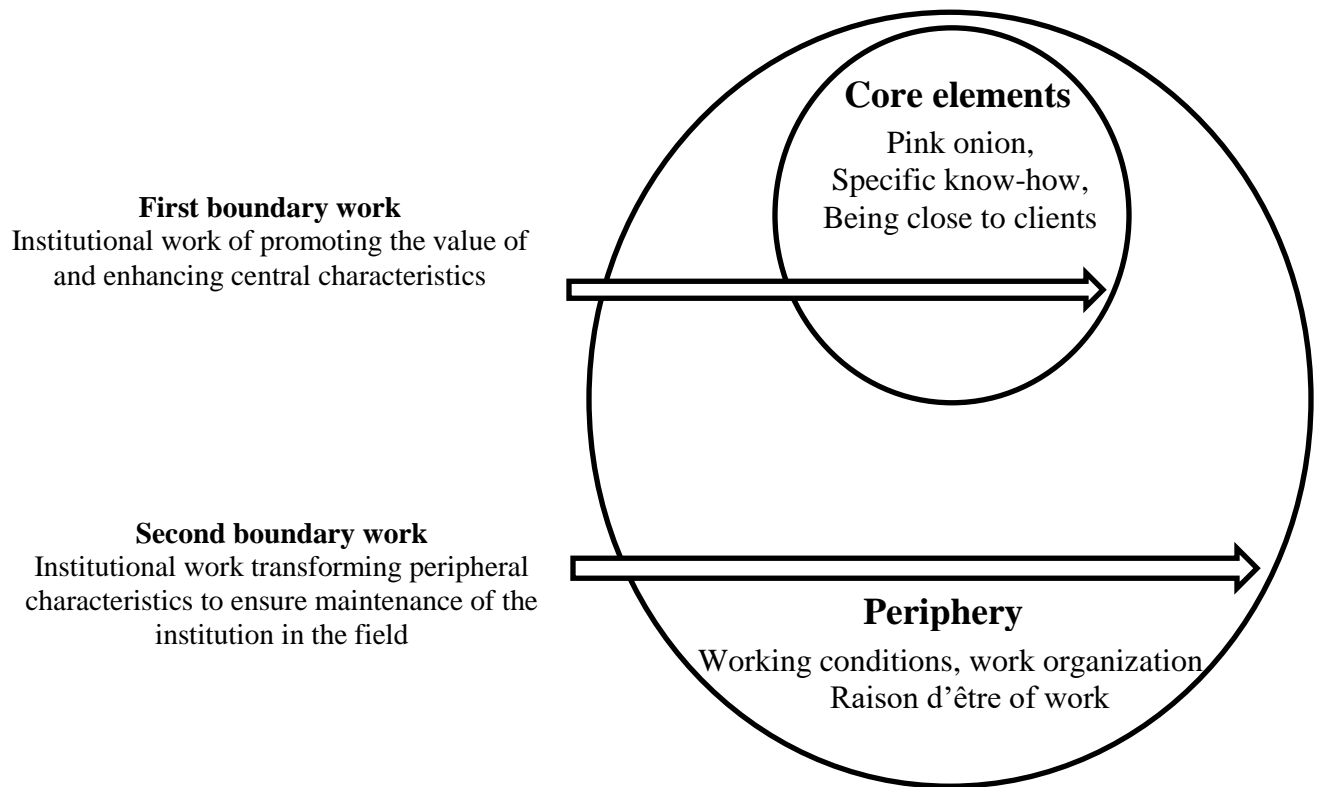


Figure 1: Representation of "double boundary work"

Our results show that this boundary work is dual. It works both on the central characteristics of the institution (internal boundary) and on their relationship with the field (external boundary). This approach through the central and peripheral attributes offers a new interpretation of institutionalised social practice. The case of the Onion Johnnies shows that their efforts have a bearing on the definition of the Onion Johnnies specific characteristics (their product, know-how

and sales method), but also on the definition of their place on a macro level (mobilising the French political authorities to fight against English legislation aimed at limiting their entry to the English market etc.) The concept of double closure proposed in the sociology of professions by Ackroyd (1996) helps us to think of an enriched version of boundary work. The concept of double closure designates the fact that the best established professions (such as accountancy, medicine etc.) construct double boundaries. The first is internal: it defines the competences of the professionals in question and prohibits other professionals from exercising these. For example, those who are not accountants cannot certify accounts, and those who are not doctors may not prescribe medicines. The second boundary is external: it defines the conditions of access to the profession. The best established professions have managed to make qualifications a prerequisite to exercising their profession and it is the professionals themselves who control the form and content of the exams required to obtain this qualification. The case of the Onion Johnnies thus shows that the concept of boundary work used by Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) could probably, like the concept of double closure (Ackroyd, 1996), be enriched and positioned as double boundary work, an institutional work that bears on the simultaneous definition of a boundary that is both internal and external. Our results thus lead to the following proposition:

*Proposition 2:* The maintenance of an institution depends on institutional work simultaneously on the internal and external boundaries and on the practices of this institution.

#### *“Weak institutions” as a promising field of research for institutional maintenance*

Academic research in management as well as in the sociology of professions has frequently studied “strong” institutions. For example, in the sociology of professions, some of the most recognised work focuses on the profession of doctors (e.g. Strauss, 1985; Abbott, 1988). In a similar way, in

management, doctors are also very often at the centre of reflexions on the maintenance of institutions (e.g. Currie *et al.* 2012). It is rarer to read works on weak institutions such as the profession of “emergency ambulance workers” who do not manage to establish their profession and try to build it up through practices (Mc Cann *et al.*, 2013).

In their seminal work, Suddaby and Lawrence (2006) were obliged to demonstrate that the maintenance of an institution is never automatic. Institutional work is always necessary if an institution is to last. The study of weak institutions shows this up clearly and thus makes it easier to identify the mechanisms of institutional maintenance (Edward, Jones, 2008). Weak institutions make it possible to see processes of maintenance and renegotiation that, are far more difficult to see for example in the case of the Order of Medecine, for the power of such an institution removes *de facto* all sorts of divergent behaviours that are frequently found in weak institutions.

The study of weak institutions produces interesting theoretical insights. On the other hand, such institutions imply a particular methodology. Analysing weak institutions means identifying external factors of institutional transformation (market, regulations etc.) (Greenwood *et al.*, 2008) but above all, it requires taking account of factors that are internal to the institution itself. These are even harder to identify because they are often discreet (Jullien, 1997). Méric and Jardat (2010) also showed that apparently insignificant details, such as making candidates wait a long time on the ground floor before going up to the first floor for the recruitment interview, should absolutely be taken into account because they contribute directly to the ritual and companionist dimension that is at the heart of this consultancy firm’s mode of functioning. In the same way, in the case of the Onion Johnnies, details seemingly as insignificant as technical alterations that have to be made to the bicycles to be able to display the onions effectively reveal strategies of institutional

maintenance. The transmission (or non-transmission) of these details are a direct example of how the institution manages (or not) to be maintained.

This major role played by internal discreet factors involves the type of long detailed historical study of practices that we carried out for the Onion Johnnies. It is through this longitudinal analysis of practices that we were able to identify the boundary work and thus realise how this profession has transformed itself. This attention given to discreet internal transformation factors makes it possible to account in detail, for how such local micro-practices (e.g. a discussion between old and new Onion Johnnies on the technical transformations of the bicycle or old Onion Johnnies plaiting demonstrations for producers so that they can obtain the quality label) manage to maintain and transform an institution overall (here the sprofession of *Onion Johnnies*). In fact, our results show that it is through the transmission of this type of micro-practice that the institution is maintained.

*Proposition 3:* The study of weak institutions makes it possible to identify the maintenance practices of institutions that are more difficult to see in strong institutions, particularly those maintenance practices that rely on discreet internal factors.

## CONCLUSION

For 200 years, the French peasants from the region of Roscoff have been selling their pink onions from door to door in the south of England. This situation constitutes a particularly interesting case of institutional maintenance. This profession has undergone a large number of external shocks (wars, regulations etc.) as well as internal ones (crisis of the organisational model, difficulties to self-organise etc.) The ways in which this profession has been maintained is therefore particularly interesting. From this rich historical case, our analysis suggests including four critical future research avenues: first, the distinction between core and peripheral characteristics, second,

institutional plasticity as way to analyse maintenance of institutions through change, third, double boundary work as a concept that allow to better understand maintenance of an institution and finally, the powerful insights of the analysis of weak institutions. These four research areas provide rich theoretical perspectives and valuable empirical findings. By exploring these, scholars may be able to further their understanding of institutional maintenance. In sum, institutional maintenance is a complex and multidimensional process. The maintenance of an institution should not be analysed as merely an attempt to return to a previous state, prior to internal or external shock. By analysing the maintenance of the profession of the Onion Johnnies, we have shown that institutional maintenance must also be thought of as a process that requires a deep transformation of the institution itself.

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## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> We can note that onion producers or sellers in the French or other European markets (except the UK) are not called *Onion Johnnies*.