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# Different but equally plausible narratives of policy transformation: A plea for theoretical pluralism

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## Abstract

Theories of institutional change help us to understand policy transformation, and provide us with a framework for presenting transformation narratives retrospectively. By telling the transformation narrative of a single case through the lenses of three different institutional change theories, this article highlights the potential shortcomings of a single lens, and the value of using complementary lenses. It argues for a pluralist approach to provide a richer understanding of policy transformation.

## Keywords

historical institutionalism, incremental change, policy change, punctuated equilibrium, punctuated evolution

## Prologue

New Year's Eve 2000. A typical party in a typical pub in a typical Dutch town: teenagers, Christmas decorations, step-gabled houses. Suddenly, there is panic. Fire! People struggle to escape the overcrowded pub. Most make it out alive but 14 do not. Many of those who survive are maimed for life. The incident provokes vast media attention. Within a few days the guilty party is found: the municipality is to blame, claim the newspapers. It has not fulfilled its duty to provide sufficient enforcement of construction regulation. It is found that a stack of boxes blocked the emergency door, the Christmas decorations were not fireproof and the pub held more people than was authorized. Consequently, the responsible minister (Minister for Housing, Urban Planning and the Environment) faces severe criticism in the House of Representatives, and, as is so often the case with such incidents, there is a promise of swift action to prevent future tragedies.

A little over two years later the Dutch Housing Act (regulating the construction and use of buildings) is amended to make construction regulations easier to understand and easier to enforce:

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Dutch construction regulation is fully restructured, rewritten in less legalistic language and ‘unnecessary’ regulations are scrapped.

## Introduction

This anecdote provides a typical example of policy transformation. Questions that arise are: to what extent is the policy change related to the pub fire? How significant is the policy transformation or, for that matter, the pub fire? Or, alternatively, to what extent is the pub fire used as an argument to support the need for policy transformation? The answers to such questions may be decisive in steering the course of (future) policy transformation, as they can provide post facto legitimization of, as well as justify the need for, future transformation. It matters, for example, whether or not a policy narrative causally associates the fire with the policy transformation. If a causal narrative is plausible, the responsible Dutch minister may legitimize the financial burden of the transformation as a way to prevent future human suffering; or a US politician may use the pub fire and the swift promise of action in the Netherlands as an argument for strengthening fire codes in his or her own jurisdiction – note that the fire attracted vast international media attention (see news archives on <http://news.bbc.co.uk> and <http://articles.cnn.com>). If a non-causal narrative is persuasive, however, a member of the Dutch opposition may criticize the responsible Dutch minister for wasting public funds and seek to revoke the policy change (or have the minister replaced) or promote yet another policy change. In other words, policy narratives about the policy transformation process could be relevant drivers of the direction of the ongoing policy process (e.g. McBeth et al., 2007; Schmidt, 2011). This burdens scholars with a substantial responsibility in terms of presenting narratives of transformation – and provides policymakers with a substantial opportunity to select a narrative that suits their needs.

The questions related to policy transformation can be addressed through the lenses of institutional change theories. Various institutional change theories and heuristic frameworks have developed over time (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2006; Streeck and Thelen, 2005b). This article aims to show something obvious: by using diverse theoretical lenses, different, yet equally plausible, policy transformation narratives can be told of a single example of policy change. Yet the value of demonstrating the obvious should not be dismissed. This article asks scholars to be aware of the pitfalls of using single lenses. It does so by applying three well-established lenses (punctuated equilibrium, historical institutionalism and punctuated evolution)<sup>1</sup> to a relatively simple and bounded case (the pub fire). Studying a relatively small and self-contained case may resolve some of the problems encountered in studies of transformation in large policy programmes: the focus on macro-level variables and the difficulty of containing and analysing them (cf. Zehavi, forthcoming).

In the following section, the different lenses are introduced. This section aims to show how each lens informs the contours of the narratives that may be told through them. Next, the lenses are applied to the pub fire, and three different, but complementary, narratives are told. Finally, the article concludes with some of the major lessons learned and a plea for a more pluralistic use of theories in explaining policy transformation.

## Different theories of institutional change

Rhodes et al. (2006), and a special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* edited by Capano and Howlett (2009), present excellent overviews of various theories of institutional change that can be used to study policy transformation. In reviewing the use of these theories, two

conclusions can be drawn. First, the theories are descriptive only. They provide explanations after the fact and cannot, by definition, explain when transformation may happen, and what form or direction it might take in the future (e.g. Jensen, 2009; Kickert and van der Meer, 2011; Kingston and Caballero, 2009). Second, although the theories appear complementary, there is little plurality in their application: that is, scholars stick to using a single lens in explaining policy transformation (cf. Rhodes et al., 2006).

This article does not aim to provide another review of the various theories (for discussions of these theories in the *International Political Science Review*, see, among others, Fabbrini, 2000; Ma, 2007; Mackay et al., 2010). This section briefly introduces the theories applied throughout this article. Table 1 provides a brief summary.

**Punctuated equilibrium**

Punctuated equilibrium (PEq) provides a framework for a narrative that holds that policies are normally stable for long periods of time. Yet, periodically, they encounter shocks caused by exogenous factors (e.g. war, financial crisis, natural hazard), which may cause rapid and substantial policy transformation (e.g. Givel, 2010; Jensen, 2009). Note that Baumgartner and Jones (1993), regarded as among the most influential early PEq theoreticians, consider policy transformation as resulting from inadequacies in earlier institutional arrangements that make these arrangements unable to deal with such shocks. In short, not all shocks result in a ‘punctuation’, and not all periods of stability are equilibriums (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009).

**Table 1.** A brief summary of the three theories applied in this article

	Punctuated equilibrium (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones, 2009; Givel, 2010; Jensen, 2009)	Historical institutionalism (e.g. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010b; Pierson, 2000; Streeck and Thelen, 2005a)	Punctuated evolution (e.g. Hay, 1996, 2006; Kerr, 2002)
<i>Thesis</i>	Significant policy transformation is a result of a substantial shock in the policy’s environment	Significant policy transformation is a result of an accumulation of incremental change over time	Significant policy transformation results from the use of crisis narratives in the policy process
<i>Central question(s)</i>	(1) What is to be considered long-term stability? (2) What is to be considered a substantial shock? (3) What is to be considered as significant transformation?	(1) What is a sufficient time frame for studying incremental change? (2) How small/large should change be to be considered incremental? (3) What role do endogenous factors play?	(1) What is a sufficient time frame for studying policy transformation? (2) What is considered to be a crisis? (3) How are crisis narratives used in the transformation process?
<i>Dependent variable</i>	Policy (significant transformation)	Policy (gradual change)	Policy (transformation)
<i>Explanatory variable</i>	Exogenous factors (shocks – e.g. wars, financial crises, natural hazards)	Endogenous factors (e.g. actors, path-dependent elements, existing structures)	Crisis narratives

In applying this lens, we face three questions: (1) ‘How long should a period be “relatively stable” to be considered “long-term”?’; (2) ‘How extensive should a transformation be to be considered substantial?’; and (3) ‘How severe should exogenous factors be to be considered a shock?’.

A review of empirical applications of PEQ provides no comprehensive answer to these questions. Regarding the first question, scholars applying PEQ theory often do not provide a full-fledged rationale for the time periods they study. We can at best infer a time period from their works that may be considered as acceptable for testing the PEQ thesis – roughly 30 to 50 years (e.g. Breunig, 2006; Jensen, 2009; John and Margretts, 2003; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005).

Addressing the second question, in testing the PEQ thesis, scholars have used various data sets, both quantitative and qualitative. Jones and Baumgartner (2005), for instance, find evidence to support their thesis by analysing a data set of annual increases or decreases in public spending. Scholars using less straightforward statistics, however (e.g. measuring transformation in policy outputs such as laws, regulations or administrative procedures), face the difficult task of *interpreting* what should be considered a significant transformation and what should not (cf. Givel, 2010).

For similar reasons, scholars applying the PEQ lens to a more interpretative or qualitative data set may face difficulty in distinguishing a ‘shock’ from a ‘moderate’ or ‘minor’ influence, which makes it difficult to answer the third question. Incidents such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (e.g. Kerr et al., 2010) or the global financial crisis (e.g. Crotty, 2009) may convincingly be presented as shocks, but what about the explosion of BP’s Texas City Refinery in 2005 (killing 15, injuring more than 170 others; see Cutchin et al., 2008) or the rapid devaluation of the South African rand, losing over half of its value between 1999 and 2001 (Macdonald and Ricci, 2004)? As Dempster and Wildavsky (1979) stated over 30 years ago, there is no magic size for an increment.

### *Historical institutionalism<sup>2</sup>*

Historical institutionalism (HI) is a broad term addressing a group of concepts that hold that although institutions appear to show stability, they change incrementally over time. Existing policy settings and the choices made within them are considered to have a strong impact on the possibilities of policy transformation (Pierson, 2004). A closer look at these concepts and ideas shows that two strands of HI can be distinguished (Bell, 2011): a strand with a strong focus on path-dependency and exogenous factors to explain transformation; and a strand with a focus on the ability of actors within policy settings to change or maintain the status quo.

The former strand is sometimes typified as structuralist (Olson, 2009) or even deterministic (Hay and Wincott, 1998). The notion of *path-dependency* implies that existing structures are difficult to change because of the exit costs involved: it is often cheaper or easier to maintain or join an existing policy setting than to change it completely or develop a new one, as elements of a policy setting become ‘locked in’ and generate ‘increasing returns’ as the setting matures (Pierson, 2000) – for example, it becomes routine (such as incarcerating criminals instead of dealing with them in some other way; see Foucault, 1995 [1975]). Another example is that when more and more people and organizations adopt an institution it gains a monopoly (e.g. the use of the QWERTY keyboard; see David, 1985). This strand of HI has been criticized for only being able to explain stability and not transformation as well as for mimicking PEQ, as the transformations studied often do not result from endogenous but from exogenous factors (Kay, 2005; Peters et al., 2005).

The latter strand of HI is considered ‘a more flexible, agent-centred version’ (Bell, 2011: 906). It holds that agency plays a strong role in continuity and transformation: although limited by

existing policy settings, actors may aim at policy transformation or try to prevent it (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010a). Policy settings are therefore seen as a set of rules that provide structure to social life. As long as actors follow these rules, the setting should be stable. Yet rules are often open to different interpretations: certain actors may violate the rules, and some actors may seek to change the rules. These endogenous factors may ultimately produce transformation from within. Such transformation is thought to occur slowly but with significant results: over time the minor changes will add up to substantial transformation.

A leading scholar in terms of this agent-centred strand of HI, Kathleen Thelen, introduced a wide range of concepts to analyse incremental but significant policy transformation in greater depth (e.g. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010b; Streeck and Thelen, 2005a; Thelen, 1999, 2003, 2004):

- layering: the introduction of new rules on top of or alongside existing ones;
- conversion: the changed enactment of existing rules owing to their strategic deployment;
- drift: the changed impact of existing rules owing to a shift in their environment;
- displacement: the removal of existing rules and the introduction of new ones; and
- exhaustion: the gradual breakdown of existing rules owing to behaviour invoked by or allowed under these rules.

Applying this agent-centred lens, and especially Thelen's approach,<sup>3</sup> we again face three questions: (1) 'What is a sufficient time frame for studying transformation?'; (2) 'How gradual should change be to be considered incremental?'; and (3) 'what role do endogenous factors play?'. A review of the literature fails to present any crisp and clear answers. Scholars use time frames ranging from decades to centuries to study incremental change (e.g. Putnam et al., 1993; Thelen, 1991); and, just as the notions of 'large change' and 'shock' are open for definition by the PEq-oriented analyst, so the notion of 'gradual change' is left open for definition by the HI-oriented analyst. In addition, Thelen's work, albeit widely followed (e.g. Ackrill and Kay, 2006; Béland, 2007; Boas, 2007; Bruszt, 2008; Engelen, 2006; Hacker, 2005; Parker and Parenta, 2008; Thatcher and Coen, 2008), can be criticized for being somewhat technocratic (Van der Heijden, 2010) and as subject to similar issues of interpretation as the PEq framework: the boundaries between the different modes of change are vague and it is up to the researcher to provide a convincing argument why a certain instance of institutional change is typified as one mode and not the other (Van der Heijden, 2010).

### *Punctuated evolution*

The punctuated evolution (PEv) lens fits within the school of constructivist institutionalism (Fuller, 2010). Constructivist institutionalism has some overlap with HI, but also critiques this heuristic frame:

constructivist institutionalists emphasize not only on institutional path-dependency, but also on ideational path-dependency. In other words, it is not just the institutions, but the very ideas on which they are predicated and which inform their design and development, that exert constraints on political autonomy. (Hay, 2006: 65)

Constructivist institutionalism considers ideas and discourses of institutional actors such as political agents and the media as critical to policy transformation, and understands such transformation as 'punctuated moments within broader evolving systems of social learning' (Fuller, 2010: 1123; for a discussion of 'discursive institutionalism', see Schmidt, 2011).

The PEv lens itself can be traced back to the work of Colin Hay (Hay, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2006; also Kerr, 2002; but see Roe, 1996). Hay considers crises to be instigators of transformation. He does not see them as objective properties, however, but as properties that are interpreted and given meaning by institutional actors. It is in their interpretation and presentation of the crisis, the *crisis narrative*, that these actors determine the direction of policy transformation. Further, actors are thought to:

revise their perceptions of what is feasible, possible and indeed desirable in the light of their assessments of their own ability to realize prior goals (and that of others), as they assimilate new 'information' (from whatever external source), and as they reorient future strategies in the light of such 'empirical' and mediated knowledge of the [policy] context as a structured terrain of opportunity and constraint. (Hay and Wincott, 1998: 956)

PEv theory therefore 'seeks to explain both the success of a particular path of development and its dislocation' (Davies, 2004: 573) and implies the acceleration of the pace and extent of ongoing gradual change (Hay, 2001). A crisis may provide an opportunity for institutional actors successfully to present their envisaged policy transformation or to change the direction of change within the constraints of the existing policy setting (an idea that can be traced back to the notion of policy windows opening up under particular circumstances; see Kingdon, 1984). That being so, PEv may be considered as sitting somewhere between the PEv and HI lenses on the sliding scale of theories and heuristic frameworks that address transformation and stability but differing from both as it brings an ideological perspective to bear on the existing paradigms (cf. Davies, 2004).

As with the PEq and HI lenses, the researcher applying the PEv lens faces a number of questions: (1) 'What is a sufficient time frame for studying policy transformation?'; (2) 'What is considered to be a crisis?'; and (3) 'How are crisis narratives used in the transformation process?'. When reviewing the literature, one finds limited 'pure' applications of the concept. One exception is the work of Hay on the rise of neo-liberalism in the UK (Hay, 2001). In this work, Hay uses an approximate 20-year time frame, the 1970s and 1980s, to discuss an example of institutional change within the PEv framework.

The PEv lens appears to be less concerned with the 'size' of transformation or the 'size' of a 'shock' and so partly solves the other questions related to the PEq and HI lenses. Nevertheless, it is specific with regard to which 'exogenous' situation typifies a 'crisis' and which does not. A crisis is considered a contradictory situation that motivates a structural response, based on an awareness and understanding of political and economic circumstances, that 'not only *must* be dealt with but that *can* be dealt with' (Hay, 2001: 203).

## One incident, three policy narratives

Looking at the pub fire incident through these three different lenses results in three considerably different policy transformation narratives. In short, the PEq lens provides a narrative that claims that the pub fire was a significant shock that has resulted in significant policy transformation. The HI lens provides a narrative that claims that with or without the pub fire, policy transformation would have occurred. The PEv lens provides a narrative that claims that transformation was in the air, but the pub fire provided a crisis narrative, which was needed for change-actors actually to make the transformation happen.

In what follows the different lenses are applied to the pub fire. The risk of this approach is that the analysis will result in a caricature of the lenses used. This holds particularly for the PEq lens:

in the light of the HI and PEv narratives, the PEq narrative appears very simplistic because it links the pub fire to the policy transformation without considering other causes and processes that may have led to the transformation. Also, in the light of the PEq and PEv lenses, the HI narrative may appear overly detailed; whereas in the light of the PEq and HI lenses, the PEv narrative may appear a twister as it gives credit to and builds on the explanatory factors of both the PEq and HI frameworks. However, it is not the aim of this article to present caricatures. Table 2 provides a summary of the narratives produced by the different lenses.

**Applying punctuated equilibrium theory**

Following the cited PEq works, a 40-year time frame, 1972–2012, is studied to ascertain whether the pub fire supports the PEq thesis. The analytical approach chosen asks: (1) whether the pub fire can be considered a significant ‘shock’; (2) if so, whether it is associated with policy transformation; and (3) if so, whether this is a ‘puncture’ of the status quo in the period 1972–2012 – that is, whether there is a significant change in this period.

First, a narrative of the fire as a *significant shock*: the pub fire on 31 December 2000 can indeed be considered a shock. Until then, the Netherlands had never witnessed a construction-related incident of this magnitude (Van der Heijden et al., 2007). Such magnitude is ‘measured’ in terms of human suffering (cf. Eckenwiler, 2004) – that is, the imminence and scale in terms of casualties and injuries. The pub fire resulted in 14 fatalities and over 180 people severely injured; most were maimed for life. Earlier construction-related incidents in the period 1972–2000 had resulted in, at most, one or two casualties and a small number of people severely injured (e.g. Commissie Alders, 2001; Commissie Oosting, 2001; OVV, 2006; VROM, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). That said, the period 2000–2012 faced another serious construction-related incident in terms of human suffering. On 27 October 2005, a fire destroyed an asylum seekers’ centre, resulting in 11 fatalities and 15 people severely injured. Other construction-related incidents in this period followed the earlier discussed pattern – that is, at most, one or two fatalities and a small number of people severely injured. In

**Table 2.** The narrative of a single policy transformation through different lenses

	Punctuated equilibrium (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones, 2009; Givel, 2010; Jensen, 2009)	Historical institutionalism (e.g. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010b; Pierson, 2000; Streeck and Thelen, 2005a)	Punctuated evolution (e.g. Hay, 1996, 2006; Kerr, 2002)
<i>One-line narrative</i>	The pub fire caused significant transformation in Dutch construction policy	Since 1901, the Dutch government has followed a path to reduce municipal autonomy in construction policy	The crisis narrative of the pub fire sped up the process of transforming Dutch construction policy
<i>Dependent variable</i>	Dutch construction policy	Dutch construction policy	Dutch construction policy
<i>Type of transformation</i>	Significant	Incremental	Incremental, but with increased speed
<i>Explanatory variable</i>	The pub fire	The various actors involved (e.g. Dutch government, municipalities, associations)	Crisis narratives as presented by politicians and the media



short, the pub fire and its consequences can be considered a significant deviation from the normal pattern of construction-related incidents in the Netherlands.

Second, a narrative of *causal association* between policy transformation and shock: a number of inquiries into the incident followed (Cachet et al., 2001; Commissie Alders, 2001). The inquiries came to a number of conclusions: (1) at the time of the incident, the pub held more people than was legally allowed; (2) the emergency exit was in breach of Dutch construction regulations; and (3) the Christmas decorations were not fireproof, as required by regulations. Further, these inquiries concluded that the local construction inspectorate had fallen short in enforcing Dutch construction regulations in this particular pub. The latter conclusion may particularly be considered as relating the pub fire to construction policy – that is, better enforcement by local construction inspectorates might have prevented the incident. Facing severe criticism in Parliament, the responsible minister promised swift and major transformation of the Dutch Housing Act and the Dutch Building Decree (two pieces of legislation that regulate the construction and use of buildings), aiming to improve policy enforcement and hence policy outcomes. In 2003, an amended Housing Act and a fully revised Building Decree were introduced, which aimed: (1) to make construction regulations easier for builders and building owners to understand through the use of less legalistic terminology; (2) to make construction regulation easier to enforce by local construction inspectorates; and (3) to provide more clarity regarding the tasks and responsibilities of different actors in the construction and enforcement process (Van der Heijden, 2009).

Third, a narrative of the policy transformation as a *significant transformation* in the period 1972–2012: apart from major policy changes in 1992 and 2010, this period had only witnessed amendments that aimed to clarify individual regulations and requirements (Van Overveld, 2003; Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, 2010). The 2003 transformation may be considered significant as it resulted in a fully revised Housing Act and a fully restructured Building Decree, demonstrating, among others, the enforceability of Dutch construction policy.

To conclude, the pub fire in 2000 may be considered a significant shock in the period 1972–2012, and policy reports provide evidence that it is associated with a transformation of Dutch construction policy in 2003. The change may be considered a significant policy transformation in this period. Therefore, it may be concluded that the case of the pub fire supports the PEq thesis of a shock causing significant policy transformation.

### *Applying historical institutionalism theory*

Following the cited HI works, a long time frame is studied to assess whether the policy transformation traced fits the HI thesis of being a result of incremental change along a more or less fixed path – path-dependency. To do so, the analysis starts with the introduction of the Housing Act in 1901 and follows its development to its incorporation in the Environmental Act of 2010. The analytical approach chosen asks: (1) ‘Does the development of Dutch construction policy in this period provide evidence of path-dependency?’; (2) ‘What role do actors in this period play in transforming this policy or preventing transformation?’; and (3) ‘What modes of incremental change can be distinguished?’. These three questions, and the HI approach in general, do not allow for a similarly thematically structured discussion of the data as under the PEq lens. Rather, a discussion of more or less distinct time periods seems more appropriate (see, for instance, the different contributions in Mahoney and Thelen (2010b) and Streeck and Thelen (2005a)). This does result in a somewhat lengthy discussion, however.

*1901–1940: A first step in limiting local governments’ autonomy in construction regulation.* Prior to 1901, local governments were free to regulate construction in their jurisdictions. Steadily expanding

industrialization in the second half of the 19th century necessitated more state intervention: workers' housing conditions were poor, which resulted in severe social health risks. The Housing Act of 1901 incorporated regulations that demarcated the powers of local governments and the responsibility of the national government in terms of public housing (De Vreeze, 1993). Municipalities were required to introduce a construction ordinance that regulated land use and set local construction by-laws. Municipalities were not given a standard text or guidelines for form or content. Nor were there any legal obligations with respect to the enforcement of construction regulation (De Vreeze, 1993). This resulted in a patchwork of different building regulations among the various Dutch municipalities. Enforcement of these regulations received scant attention (Wijnja and Priemus, 1990).

Through a change in the Act in 1921, enforcement became obligatory at municipal level: from this point on, municipalities had a duty to provide for enforcement. In the same amendment, the provinces (regional governments) were given the power to intervene in those municipalities where, in their view, enforcement was carried out inadequately (Wijnja and Priemus, 1990).

This period can, in Thelen's terms, be framed as a period of layering: new rules and regulations were added to the newly implemented Housing Act of 1901. In addition, new actors and powers were introduced, and the national government started a process of limiting local government autonomy in construction regulation and enforcement.

*1940–1981: Towards uniform construction regulation.* After the Second World War, the Netherlands dealt with a shortage of and a growing demand for housing. More and better-quality housing was needed. Aiming to solve these problems, the national government introduced a scheme for housing subsidies. These subsidies played a strong role in further limiting local governments' autonomy in construction policy: under the Housing Act, the national government introduced quality-based nationwide conditions for subsidies (Thijssen, 1991). The first set of conditions was issued in 1944 and was then regularly revised. These conditions are generally considered key in the development of national uniform construction regulation (De Vreeze, 1993) – and, in Thelen's terms, can be considered as another example of layering.

During the entire period, the national government faced great opposition to its amendment of construction regulations from local governments who were not willing to give up their powers (Van der Woude, 1997). Yet the existing patchwork of local construction regulation severely hindered the construction industry in meeting housing demands. Aiming to solve this problem, the national government amended the Housing Act again in 1962 and required municipalities to issue a construction ordinance based on specified criteria. Understanding the direction taken by national government and the implications it could have for local governments, the Association of Dutch Municipalities produced a model construction ordinance. This ordinance was introduced in 1965 with the aim of establishing nationally acceptable minimum standards for housing and other buildings, and to improve legal protection for parties in the construction sector through uniformity of local by-laws. The model was not mandatory but it was generally adopted by municipalities as a municipal construction by-law (Niemeijer, 1989; Thijssen, 1991). Using Thelen's terminology, we witness a situation of conversion: whereas the Housing Act was originally implemented to improve the quality of housing, it now became an instrument to protect the different parties in the industry from the 'random' behaviour of municipalities.

*1982–2000: Nationwide uniformity of construction regulation.* After the 1982 elections, the new coalition's philosophy was in line with international trends towards privatization and new public management that became *en vogue* in the 1980s (Hood, 1995). With regard to construction regulation, the 1982 Coalition Agreement stated that superfluous rules and regulations should be scrapped,

and that the construction regulations themselves had to become more uniform. After 10 years of debate, this resulted in two relevant policy outputs. The first was the introduction of the Building Decree in 1992, a set of uniform construction regulations that applied throughout the Netherlands, aiming to ensure unity and transparency in building regulations (Van Buuren et al., 2009). The second was the formal end of the national government's interest in housing quantity: from now on, it would only address the quality of construction in the Netherlands (De Vreeze, 1993).

On paper, things now looked good: a uniform set of construction regulations was in force and local governments were significantly limited in terms of their ability to alter construction policy. General practice, however, proved to be more obstinate. An evaluation of the amended Housing Act carried out in the mid-1990s (VROM, 1996) revealed that the construction sector favoured the 1992 Building Decree, but had difficulty with its structure and highly legal terminology; and a later government inquiry concluded that local construction authorities fell short in adequately enforcing construction regulations (VROM, 2000). The outcomes of these evaluations may be seen as the impetus for the amendments to the Housing Act in 2003.

Again, this period was characterized by layering. The Housing Act was once more amended to formalize and structure many of the earlier requirements for construction. As a result, the national government strengthened the protections provided by the Housing Act to different parties in the construction sector. Furthermore, it followed the earlier path: limiting municipal autonomy in construction policy. We also see a move away from government involvement in social housing: the Housing Act remained in place, but was increasingly used for regulating construction quality, reverting towards the intentions of 1901. This may be framed as conversion.

*2001–2010: Towards uniform enforcement practices.* In this period, the Netherlands were plagued by a series of construction-related incidents. This series started with the aforementioned pub fire, and was quickly followed by the collapse of the roof of a conference centre in 2002 (no casualties), the collapse of a balcony on a recently occupied apartment building in 2003 (two casualties), the evacuation of a recently occupied multi-use building owing to danger of collapse (no casualties), and a series of roofs collapsing under heavy snow in the winters of 2001/2002 and 2006/2007 (no casualties). Inquiries into these incidents underline the earlier finding that local construction authorities fell short in adequately enforcing construction regulation (Commissie Alders, 2001; Commissie Oosting, 2001; OVV, 2006; VROM, 2003b).

In 2003, the Housing Act was once again amended. The amendments aimed to solve the issues highlighted in the earlier inquiries (VROM, 1996, 2000): the Building Decree was revised to make it easier for builders and building owners to understand and easier for local construction inspectorates to enforce. In the same year, the national government announced another amendment of the Housing Act. Three major changes were proposed: construction regulations should (again) become easier to understand; the Housing Act should be aligned with Dutch administrative law; and more instruments should be introduced for streamlining and standardizing regulatory enforcement (Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2004). Ultimately, this final amendment was not executed but, in 2010, the Housing Act was incorporated in a new Environmental Act (Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, 2010).

To conclude, since the introduction of the Housing Act in 1901, the national government has aimed to reduce local governments' autonomy and powers in terms of construction policy. First, it added layer on layer of amendments to the Housing Act, paving the way for uniform construction regulation in the Netherlands (path-dependency). Then, it began a process to take away local governments' final bastion of autonomy in the construction regulatory framework: the enforcement of construction regulations. Throughout the period, different agents used their powers either to

transform construction policy (the national government mostly) or to prevent it or bend it for their own ends (the Association of Dutch Municipalities). The pub fire may have had limited or no impact on the path towards reducing local governments' autonomy and powers: that is, the case study supports the HI thesis that the ultimate transformation was a result of incremental policy changes along a more or less fixed path (path-dependency).

### *Applying punctuated evolution theory*

Following Hay's work, the decades around the pub fire, the 1990s and 2000s, are studied to question whether the transformation traced fits the PEv thesis of the pub fire having increased the pace of policy transformation along a more or less fixed path. The analytical approach chosen asks: (1) whether the development of Dutch construction policy in this period provides evidence of path-dependency; (2) what role crisis narratives play in this period; and (3) whether the crisis narratives can be associated with increased speed of policy transformation.

First, a narrative of *path-dependency*: following on from the above HI analysis, we may conclude that the development of the Housing Act indeed supports the path-dependency thesis. Looking at the particular 20-year period, we can see that the national government started a move towards diminishing local governments' autonomy in construction inspections: it aimed to improve the quality of these inspections. The pre-1990 amendments of the Housing Act provided the national government with sufficient influence to start a process of reducing this local government autonomy in construction policy; in the 1992 and 2003 amendments, it advanced towards this goal.

Second, *crisis narratives*: as we have seen in the earlier narratives, the pub fire attracted significant political and media attention. Strikingly, the balcony incident in 2003 resulted in even more media attention (Van der Heijden, 2009). The deaths of an elderly couple who were on their first-floor balcony when the fourth-floor balcony broke off and buried them under tons of steel and concrete resonated with both the public and the media. This story was somewhat more 'juicy' than the pub fire as the media could report 'neighbours in shock', 'fraudulent builders', 'sloppy public officials' and 'again a fatal construction-related incident' (Cobouw, 2003a, 2003b; De Telegraaf, 2003; De Volkskrant, 2003; NRC, 2003, 2007). As a result of this incident, local construction inspectorates throughout the Netherlands announced that the inspection of balconies would be high on their list of priorities; and local governments throughout the Netherlands faced questions about the safety of balconies in their jurisdictions (e.g. Municipality of Amsterdam, 2003).

Third, a narrative of *policy transformation causally associated with the crisis narratives*: both media attention to the different incidents and the reports on the various inquiries introduced a very strong policy frame: the crisis was not the series of incidents or their related fatalities, but a crisis in Dutch local construction inspectorates (Commissie Alders, 2001; Commissie Oosting, 2001; OVV, 2006; VROM, 2003b). In response to this frame, the Association of Dutch Inspectorates claimed that it was impossible to fully monitor compliance with construction regulation: '100% supervision is beyond our capability!' they exclaimed (VBWTN, 2003, my translation). Yet the responsible minister's response to this crisis was that it must and could be dealt with (e.g. VROM, 2007), and amendments to the Housing Act were announced that would significantly affect how local construction inspectorates policed compliance with construction regulations.

To conclude, the pub fire in 2000 may be seen as an incident that allowed for the introduction of the policy frame of a 'crisis in Dutch local construction inspectorates'. This sped up the (path-dependent) process towards diminishing local governments' autonomy in construction inspections. It also provided a strong counter-argument to the view of the Dutch Association of Construction Inspectorates that the crisis was not their fault because they were unable to carry out 100%

supervision. That being so, it may be concluded that the case of the pub fire (and related incidents in this period) supports the PEv thesis: a shock speeds up policy transformation on a more or less fixed path owing to how the shock is presented in crisis narratives.

## Epilogue

One incident, but three different narratives of policy transformation. What does this tell us about the different theoretical lenses used? An obvious conclusion is that they all provide enough ambiguity to make it possible for a single case to support each theory. Or, to put it another way, the narrative presented depends on the careful but subjective selection and interpretation of relevant facts by the narrator: a Rashomon effect by means of which different but equally plausible accounts can be given of a single event.

This warns us once more against the dogmatic application of theoretical frameworks; that is, picking a theory, applying it and defending it to the death. In the woolly world of policy analysis (or perhaps *especially* in the world of policy analysis), there are too many variables and there is too much interaction among them for one study to be able to tell the one and only true story. If the relatively simple and relatively contained case of the pub fire can be told in at least three different ways, what about cases that involve (even more) interdependent variables, variables that are (even more) difficult to measure, and variables that are most likely to come from different settings or different research projects? Using a single lens in such cases all too easily gives a flawed and bleak version of the transformation narrative. That said, a number of lessons can be learnt from the exercise undertaken in this article, and some questions result from it.

### *To what extent are the narratives presented equally plausible, as the title of this article suggests?*

As authors such as Hall (1993) and Cashore and Howlett (2007) have discussed, policy transformation occurs on different levels (i.e. policy outputs, policy philosophy, policy settings), addresses policy means and policy ends, has different speeds (fast, slow), and may have different directions (i.e. cumulative, non-cumulative). The pub fire case shows that the different lenses are distinctive in that they address dissimilar levels, and focus on different aspects of policy transformation. It is through the availability of (valid) data that a more or less plausible narrative can be told, regardless of the lens applied.

For instance, applying the PEq lens to this particular case resulted almost in a caricature of what the theory can provide. This was largely because of the lack of quantitative data on the relative size of the transformation and the punctuation – note that the question of size is often raised in the literature (Cashore and Howlett, 2007; Dempster and Wildavsky, 1979). This particular lens may, however, provide a strong framework for discussing the *speed* of transformation, that is, if quantitative data are available. The lens appears of lesser value when addressing interacting policy transformations.

The use of the HI lens resulted in a lengthy narrative, and proved a good fit for the relatively small and contained case studied. It helped to explain different aspects and forms of policy transformation in terms of non-cumulative changes in policy instruments and policy implementation while the policy philosophy remained stable. The particular lens appears highly suitable for discussing *interacting* policy transformations and their *direction*, but only if the researcher has access to rich and detailed data. Scholars are likely to find this lens of limited use in terms of questioning the significance or size of transformation or factors that affect it.

Lastly, addressing the case through the PEv lens resulted in a nuanced and detailed narrative in which both the speed and direction of policy transformation received particular attention. In addition, the role of crisis narratives provided an additional variable for explaining the particular transformation witnessed. This lens is particularly relevant if the researcher wishes to understand the impact of *discourses* on policy transformation, but, again, only if rich and detailed data are available. Also, the use of this lens may be hampered as its focus on punctuation calls for quantitative data to discuss relative changes in the speed of policy change. The lens holds much promise, but researchers may face difficulties in obtaining the data necessary for its use. For telling the pub fire narrative, this latter lens appears most suitable but its use is flawed due to a lack of quantitative data.

### *To what extent are the narratives presented complementary?*

The narratives are complementary precisely because they address different aspects of policy transformation. Through the PEq lens, we were presented with a narrative of transforming *policy outputs and instruments*, a significant change in Dutch construction regulations and their administration through enforcement. Through the HI lens, we were presented with a narrative of a stable policy philosophy, but *changing roles of actors*: the diminution of Dutch municipalities' autonomy in construction policy. Through the PEv lens, finally, we were presented with a narrative of transforming *policy setting and implementation preferences*, whereby the crisis narratives resulted in a situation where transformation was needed to address political and social unrest.

The collective utility of the lenses is that they can help us to overcome the limited focus of the individual lenses, and allow us to study and tell the larger and more complex narrative: fast and slow transformation, transformation on different levels and of different policy aspects, and cumulative and non-cumulative transformation are likely to exist side by side.

### *Should future research build on the use of multiple lenses to tell narratives of policy change?*

The bigger issue addressed in this article is that the theories of institutional change do not just provide a lens but a *structure* for the policy transformation narrative told. The theories inform the contours of the transformation narrative and how it compels its audience (Lindblom, 1990). In the case of the pub fire, a narrative of great tragedy can be told and, depending on the lens used, a narrative of a preventable tragedy. It is in structuring policy narratives that theories of institutional change wield power: policymakers and the media may use our narratives of policy transformation to legitimate or question past policy choices, and to influence and steer the policy transformation process. Future research may wish to apply different theories to single cases but may also question whether or not policymakers actually apply any of these lenses in practice, or seek to explain whether and how a certain lens becomes dominant in transformation processes. This is where we are responsible for highlighting the various sides of the transformation narrative, for using different viewpoints. This challenge calls for a more plural use of the different theories of institutional change and policy transformation than what we currently find in scholarly research.

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## Notes

1. Space does not allow me to deal with questions as to whether or not the punctuated equilibrium and punctuated evolution lenses fit within the historical institutionalism lens, or whether the former clearly differ from the latter. The reader interested in a particular lens (and its relation to the other lenses) might wish to follow up on the many references provided throughout the article. I wish to note, however, that I particularly use Kathleen Thelen's approach to historical institutionalism as she is one of the current leading theorists in this field. Further, the choice of the three lenses is partly pragmatic. Space unfortunately limits discussion of more, or more varied, lenses. A good reference for various lenses is the special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* edited by Capano and Howlett (2009).
2. See note 1.
3. As a reviewer rightly pointed out, I apply a specific approach to incrementalism (see also note 1). Charles Lindblom (1990), for instance, provides a theory of incrementalism that differs from the work of Thelen discussed in this article.

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