

# **Ideas, Containment, and Proportional Causality**

(Why Some Ideas Change Systems—and Others Don't)

*A Structural Philosophy of Generative Influence (January 2026)*

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*PREFACE: This piece explores a question I keep returning to: why do some ideas reshape systems while others dissipate, even when widely shared?*

*The argument that follows proposes “containment” as a missing condition between diffusion and durable influence. It is an early attempt to make that intuition more precise—by identifying the structures through which meaning becomes stable enough to guide action and generate sustained effects.*

*This paper presents an early-stage articulation of a broader line of inquiry into ideas, integration, and systemic influence.*

*It is not intended as a finished academic contribution, but as a structured attempt to formalize a set of emerging intuitions and distinctions. The framework will evolve as I engage more deeply with relevant fields, including systems theory and sociology.*

*The aim of sharing it in this form is to make the underlying thinking visible: the core questions, conceptual moves, and explanatory direction.*

*Methodology note: The conceptual framework and arguments are my own. AI tools were used to assist in structuring and refining the presentation.*

## Abstract

How do ideas exert durable causal influence within social systems? Prevailing accounts emphasize diffusion, replication, institutionalization, or structural determination. Yet such frameworks struggle to explain why some widely circulated ideas fail to produce coherent transformation, while others generate proportionate and sustained systemic change.

This paper advances a structural philosophy of generative influence centered on the concept of containment. It argues that durable and proportionate systemic causality requires the stabilization of meaning within integrating agents. While symbolic systems, institutions, and material structures constrain and mediate action, generative coherence depends upon instantiated integration within embodied nodes.

Drawing on phenomenology, pragmatism, and complex systems theory, the paper distinguishes diffusion from propagation, reproductive stability from generative coherence, and structural constraint from causal primacy. It develops an ontological mediation argument to defend the claim that effective social causality is always mediated through lived integration — whether reflective or pre-reflective.

The framework generates testable predictions and specifies falsification conditions, offering a cross-domain account of how ideas transition from internal insight to durable structural influence.

## Introduction: The Problem of Generative Influence

Ideas are often treated as if they possess a kind of autonomous agency. They are said to “spread,” “take hold,” “reshape institutions,” or “change history.” Across major theoretical perspectives, ideas appear as structured entities whose circulation or institutionalization explains their impact.

Yet a persistent puzzle remains. Many ideas circulate widely without producing durable systemic transformation. They diffuse, trend, polarize, and dissipate. Others, by contrast, propagate more slowly yet generate sustained structural reconfiguration—reshaping scientific practice, cultural norms, institutional design, or collective behavior. Diffusion alone does not explain this divergence.

What distinguishes ideas that merely spread from those that exert proportionate and durable causal influence?

This paper argues that the missing explanatory variable is **containment**.

Containment refers to the stabilization of meaning within integrating agents. It names a structural condition under which emergent insights, tensions, or symbolic configurations become coherently integrated within lived experience, thereby acquiring the capacity to guide action proportionately across contexts. Without such stabilization, ideas may circulate symbolically, but their causal influence tends toward volatility, fragmentation, or ephemeral effect.

The central thesis is:

**Durable and proportionate systemic causality in social systems requires the stabilization of meaning within integrating agents.**

This is a mediation claim. Social systems operate through meaning; meaning becomes causally efficacious only when instantiated; instantiation requires embodied integration. Therefore, effective systemic causality is always mediated through integrating agents.

## **1. Diffusion Without Durability**

Diffusion models explain how ideas circulate—through exposure, repetition, and network dynamics. However, they primarily explain distribution, not transformation.

An idea may spread widely without producing durable alignment in behavior or institutions. Viral dissemination can coexist with instability or rapid reversal. In digital environments especially, symbolic content often achieves broad visibility without sustained structural change.

This suggests that replication is not sufficient for generative influence.

Diffusion describes movement across nodes.  
It does not explain stabilization within them.

## **2. Structural Autonomy and Its Limits**

Structural and institutional accounts explain how systems constrain and reproduce meaning. They show how individuals are shaped by symbolic and institutional configurations.

However, they risk obscuring a key mediation fact: structures exert influence only insofar as they are instantiated within lived practice.

Norms, rules, and discourses do not act directly—they operate through embodied agents who enact or transform them.

Structures constrain what can be integrated.  
They do not eliminate the integrating function.

Thus, an explanatory gap emerges:

Diffusion explains spread but not durability  
Structuralism explains constraint but not generative stabilization

### 3. The Explanatory Gap: From Circulation to Propagation

Consider:

An idea that spreads rapidly but produces fragmentation  
An idea that spreads slowly but yields coherent transformation

What explains the difference?

The answer proposed here is **containment**.

**Spread** = transmission across nodes  
**Propagation** = stable extension of coherent influence

Containment is the condition under which meaning becomes stabilized enough to guide action across contexts.

Without containment, ideas:

Are repeated without action alignment  
Escalate affectively  
Fragment into slogans  
Collapse under contradiction

With containment, ideas:

Maintain coherence  
Resist destabilization  
Generate consistent behavior  
Scale without losing structure

### 4. Initial Formulation of the Containment Thesis

The thesis does not deny structure. It asserts mediation:

Social systems operate through meaning  
Meaning requires instantiation  
Instantiation requires integration

Therefore:

**Durable systemic causality is mediated through integrating agents.**

Structures reproduce and amplify stabilized meaning—but they do not independently generate generative coherence.

**Part I: Containment, Integration, and Generative Coherence****5. Defining Containment**

Containment is a **threshold condition of integration**.

An idea is contained when it is stabilized enough to guide action across contexts.

Three criteria define this:

**5.1 Coherence Across Contexts**

The idea remains intelligible across situations.

**5.2 Resilience Under Stress**

It withstands contradiction without collapse or escalation.

**5.3 Proportional Behavioral Alignment**

It produces consistent, proportionate action.

**6. Pre-Reflective and Reflective Integration**

Containment does not require conscious articulation.

It includes:

**Pre-reflective integration** (habit, affect, embodied orientation)

**Reflective integration** (explicit conceptual understanding)

What matters is not awareness, but **stable action-guidance**.

**7. Insufficient Containment**

Indicators include:

Rapid abandonment under pressure

Persistent dissonance

Affective escalation

Fragmentation into slogans

Behavioral inconsistency

Containment is not intensity of belief—it is **stability of integration**.

## **8. Generative vs. Reproductive Coherence**

### **Generative coherence**

Produces new stable meaning

### **Reproductive stability**

Maintains existing meaning

Structures reproduce coherence.

They do not originate it.

## **9. Ontological Mediation Argument**

Social systems operate through meaning

Meaning must be instantiated

Instantiation requires integration

### **Conclusion:**

Systemic causality is mediated through integrating agents.

## **10–12. Clarifications**

Structures condition integration but do not replace it

Material conditions constrain but do not generate coherence

The model avoids both individualism and structural determinism

## **13. Transition**

Containment operates across multiple levels, leading to a hierarchical model.

## **Part II: The Hierarchy of Containment**

### **14. The Four Levels**

Individual integration

Collective fields  
Institutional structures  
Material conditions

Generative coherence originates at the level of integration.

## **15. Individual Level**

The primary site of stabilization:

Conceptual  
Affective  
Practical

## **16. Collective Level**

Collective containment = **distributed integration**

It emerges from coordinated stabilization across agents— not independently.

## **17. Institutional Level**

Institutions:

Codify  
Amplify  
Stabilize

But they are **reproductive**, not generative.

## **18. Material Conditions**

They constrain possibility but do not determine meaning.

## **19. Feedback Dynamics**

Causation is recursive— but always mediated through integration.

## **20–22. Objections Addressed**

Structuralism: conditioning  $\neq$  replacement of integration

Materialism: constraint  $\neq$  coherence

Institutionalism: autonomy is derivative

## **23. Systems Theory**

Containment functions like the formation of stable attractors in complex systems.

## **24. Scope**

The thesis applies specifically to **meaning-mediated social causality**.

# **Part III: Empirical Implications and Conclusion**

## **25. Empirical Implications**

Containment predicts:

### **Individual level**

Stable behavior

Coherent action

### **Collective level**

Coordinated practice

Distributed alignment

### **System level**

Durable propagation

Resistance to disruption

## **26. Falsifiability**

The theory is challenged if:

Transformation occurs without integration

Structures generate novelty independently

Coherence emerges without mediation

## **27. Limitations**

Viral but unstable ideas  
External shocks  
Context dependence  
Measurement challenges

## 28. Research Program

Longitudinal studies  
Network analysis  
Simulations  
Comparative history

## Conclusion

Containment is the missing link between ideas and durable systemic influence.

Diffusion explains spread  
Structure explains constraint

**Containment explains transformation**

Social causality is neither purely structural nor purely individual—it is **mediated**.

Where ideas are contained, they propagate.

Where they are not, they dissipate.