Information is Power? Transparency and fetishism in International Relations

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ABSTRACT *International actors, state and non-state, have embraced transparency as a solution to all manner of political problems. Theoretical analyses of these processes present transparency in a fetishtic manner, in which the social relations that generate transparency are misrecognized as the product of information itself. This paper will outline the theoretical problems that arise when transparency promotion is fetishized in International Relations theory. Examining the fetishism of transparency, we will note problematic conception of politics, the public sphere, and rationality they articulate. Confusing the relationship between data, information and knowledge, fetishized treatments of transparency muddy the historical dynamics responsible for the emergence of transparency as a political practice. This alters our understanding of the relationship between global governance institutions, their constituents, and the nature of knowledge production itself. Realizing the normative promise of transparency requires a reorientation of theoretical practice towards sociologically and historically sensitive approaches to the politics of knowledge.*

Keywords: transparency; global governance; Critical Theory; sociology of knowledge; International Relations

The pursuit of transparency is a high-profile feature of global politics. Even a cursory survey of international policy practices finds countless initiatives designed to foster, promote, and increase transparency across a wide range of issue areas, from international development to arms-control and everything in-between. That this is a positive development is attested to in the mission statements and programmes of intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and throughout the organs of state institutions themselves. Transparency appears to offer a means of overcoming an underlying crisis of legitimacy in global governance, with access to information bridging the divide between global publics and the institutions of global governance.

International Relations (IR) has kept pace with these developments. A range of scholarship examines the operation of transparency, its measurement, its impact, and its potential drawbacks as a political project, across diverse issue areas. Prominent areas of study include global environmental governance (Dingwerth & Eichinger, 2010; Mol, 2010), international financial regulation (Best, 2005; Broz, 2002; Smythe & Smith, 2006), the relationship between democracy and transparency (Kono, 2006), alongside more general analyses of transparency in global governance (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006; Stasavage, 2004) and the methodology of measuring transparency (Andersson and Heywood, 2009; Hollyer, Rosendorff, & Vreeland, 2014). These studies represent valuable steps towards understanding how current structures of global politics operate. As in related disciplines (e.g. Bianchi, 2013; Birchall, 2011a; Fenster, 2015) IR theorists have noted serious political and ethical limitations of transparency promotion and have questioned the extent to which transparent political practices can solve the most pressing problems of contemporary governance.

The sociological aspect of this literature is primarily concerned with examining the accountability structures of global governance institutions; the normative aim is to increase public knowledge as a route to enhanced democratic deliberation (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006; Scholte, 2004). Unfortunately, weaknesses in how transparency is conceptualized and studied undermine both sets of objectives. In both positive and negative analyses of transparency promotion a conception of transparency as the exchange of information-objects between atomistic political actors is dominant. This is reflected in widely-used metaphors such as the claim that 'information is power' – suggesting control of information is akin to control of physical objects – and strong corporeal metaphors such as that of increasing 'information flows'. The causal effects of transparency promotion are attributed to these objects, rather than to historically- and socially-embedded practices through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Attributing power to information in this way resonates with the everyday experience of knowledge structures within global politics, even as it obstructs the sociological and normative analysis of transparency's emergence and operation. Understood in this way, transparency functions as a fetish: a form of productive power that aids in the reproduction of contemporary world order and furthers rather than reduces the alienation of citizens.

While our focus is on academic and elite conceptions, fetishized understandings of transparency and information are common in popular discourse – 'elite' appeals transparency would not likely be a response to the crises of legitimacy if they were not. That the concept of 'transparency' is widely assumed to be self-explanatory is reflected in its frequent use without explanation in the speeches and interviews of politicians and activists. Likewise, 'personal data' and information are now widely referred as objects that can be possessed or shared. The academic and institutional discourses we discuss here reflect this wider context. This paper charts the operation and implications of this fetishization. Our concern is not with whether transparency 'works' or with identifying new ways in which it might be pursued; discussing transparency in this register tends to remain within an instrumentalist framework which obstructs more careful reflection. Our goals are, rather, theoretical and programmatic, with empirical examples provided to illustrate our conceptual arguments. We draw on Critical Theory and related strands of Western Marxism to provide the basis for further and more detailed efforts to understand transparency as an analytical concept and political ideal. Through critique, we believe it is possible to keep the door open for alternative conceptions and practices which could compete with the dominant understandings of transparency described here.

We begin by outlining the concept of fetishism derived from Marx and developed by Western Marxists as the process whereby social relations between people 'take the form of and are expressed through things' (Rubin, 1924, p. 111). Having introduced the idea of fetishism, we turn to the various approaches to transparency in the literature on global governance and IR. Despite the distinctions that exist – between rational choice approaches and interpretive scholarship, or between causal accounts and normatively-oriented work – we note a shared, fetishistic tendency to treat transparency as the exchange of powerful information-objects between autonomous political actors. This tendency extends into the practices and discourse of international institutions and the civil society organizations created to monitor them.

This analysis clarifies the tendency of both 'monitory' and 'participatory' approaches to transparency to fetishize information. In the case of 'monitory' approaches to democracy and accountability in global governance, a focus on the formal disclosure and exchange of information obscures issues of substantive inequality. It also contributes to a political topography characterised by a sharp distinction between the public and governance institutions; fetishized transparency portrays the 'international' as a distant sphere of social and political activity. In participatory approaches to transparency and global governance, issues of access are carefully considered, but the historical and political character of knowledge production is

elided in favour of a transcendental conception of knowledge according to which it is discovered or unveiled, not produced, by social actors. This can be more or less effective, but what is discovered seems, problematically, to exist outside of history.

We conclude that the fetishization of transparency places limits on the emancipatory potential of democratizing knowledge. Fetishized transparency obscures the historical practice of knowledge production and the political struggles that necessarily underpin all epistemic settlements. The implication of this misrecognition is the restriction of political possibilities and reproduction of public passivity and alienation.

Fetishism, Reification, and the Recovery of Agency

In IR, Critical Theory has generally been associated with discourse ethics and scholarly 'reflexivity'. However, recent reconsiderations of this tradition in IR and elsewhere identify its core as lying in the materialist critique of a modern, capitalist society which is 'unthinkingly destroying itself' (Müller-Doohm, 2017, p. 254; Schmid, 2017). For many Critical Theorists, this critique partly concerns the epistemic dimensions of a social totality structured around the capitalist exchange principle, with the Marxist concept of fetishism representing a key influence. Locating Critical Theory in IR closer to the tradition of Marxist social theory reengages the project of ideology critique and its materialist interrogation of the ideational features of capitalist reproduction.

The critique of fetishism points to a specific set of problems in many accounts of transparency in International Relations. While its close cousins, alienation and reification, have at times featured as central explanatory devices (e.g., Der Derian, 1987; Levine, 2012; Rupert, 1993), fetishism has not enjoyed much prominence in IR (but see Roberts & Joseph, 2015). This is due, partly, to intellectual fashions, but also reflects discomfort with ideology critique and its epistemological baggage. Theorists wary of claims to objectivity, truth or essences have studied how discourses exercise power rather than examining the representation and misrepresentation of the social world.

As a concept in social theory, fetishism has a long and varied history. It is often negatively associated with Eurocentric anthropology, wherein it functioned as a pejorative description of the religious practices of non-Western people (Masuzawa, 2000; Pietz, 1985), tied to a teleological understanding of historical development. Recent scholarship has sought to move away from these uses, outlining how objects operate in social organization to bind groups together (eg. Graeber, 2003). While an interesting body of work, such studies often rely on a psychological understanding of misrecognition according to which the fetish is supposedly overcome by correcting the faulty understanding of the world.

By contrast, within the Marxist tradition fetishism is an objective property of capitalism. Marx's short passage on commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Capital* (Marx, 1976, pp. 163-177) formed the basis of much of Western Marxism, from the pioneering development of the concept in the 1920s by Georg Lukács, Evgeny Pashukanis, and Isaac Rubin to the Frankfurt School, Henri Lefebvre, and humanist Marxism in general (Lukács, 1922; Pashukanis, 1924; Rubin, 1924). A turn to anti-humanism initiated by Althusser, and the post-1968 politics of discourse – at least in its postmodernist guise – saw fetishism eclipsed as a workable concept to diagnose the ills of capitalist modernity. Its re-emergence as a tool of sociological analysis after two decades occurred after the rediscovery of fetishism by Critical Theorists seeking to recapture the political thrust of ideology critique (Dean, 2002; Honneth, 2008; Rehmann, 2013; Zizek, 1989).

For Marx, commodity fetishism occurs when value appears to be a property of non-human objects:

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists…simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's [sic, as throughout] own labour as objective characteristics of the product of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things (Marx, 1976, p.165).

In his more concise formula, fetishism is 'nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx, 1976, p.165). Fetishism thus denotes when specific social relations are misrecognized and human relations themselves are experienced as the product of powerful objects. Commodity exchange flattens the specific use-values of objects into abstract exchange-values which treat unlike objects as alike, valuing objects according to how valuable they are in exchange, rather than their particular purpose or utility. The fetish extends from how we view objects to how we view labour, itself exchanged in the market and evaluated in exchange-value terms. From this lived experience and its symbolic representation, capitalist societies begin to extend the distinction between form and substance, or the universal and the particular, from commodity exchange to social existence writ large. Commodity fetishism operates to 'flatten' the unevenness of human society (Roberts & Joseph, 2015).

Fetishism was not, for Marx, purely psychological; it was an objective feature of capitalist society in which individuals enact the fetish on a daily basis – a material social practice as well as an ideological representation (Eagleton, 1990, p. 40; Zizek, 1989, pp. 15-22). Ideology constitutes as much as it consolidates; we shall see how in the distinct social ontology suggested in fetishized treatments of transparency this process is in operation (Eagleton, 1990, p. 223). Nor are fetishes irrational or the product of errors of judgement, in contrast to the dominant understanding of misrecognition in IR (Jervis, 1976). Dispelling fetishism does not rest upon correcting an epistemological misunderstanding, but on theoretical critique and practical action to change the underlying social system.

Western Marxists extended Marx's theory to account for processes and experiences of disempowerment in modernity. This tradition points to several specific problems arising from fetishization: the misrecognition of knowledge; a sense of distance from social structures and products; and the obstruction of politically innovative thought and action. For Lukács and, following him, Frankfurt School Critical Theorists such as Adorno, the extension of Marx's theory rested upon the concept of reification (Lukács, 1922). As the 'thingification' of social relations, reification is 'a process of forgetting' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947, p. 191). The process by which the state, money, or knowledge is produced is misrecognized when fetishism becomes 'the universal category of society as a whole' and these processes are treated as things. The result, for Lukács, was that human consciousness becomes 'contemplative', rather than active (Lukács, 1922, pp. 97-98). Equal access to knowledge, rather than equal participation in the social activity through which it is produced, thereby becomes the focus of emancipatory political action. Reducing the opportunity of individuals and social groups to participate in producing holistic accounts of their social and political lives perpetuates disenfranchisement and circumscribes governance within clear technocratic limits.[1]

The extension of fetishism and reification generates political and social institutions which are experienced as a source of alienation (Lukács, 1922; Honneth, 2008). Any mundane encounter with modern bureaucratic governance, in which the human particular is subordinated to legal-rational rules, demonstrates this phenomenon. The overarching result is a sense of significant *distance* or *opacity* in our interactions with such institutions, an ongoing experience in which our everyday social practices do not seem to be related to the structures that govern them. For Adorno, the same experience was a feature of our relationship with the fetishized products of the 'culture industry' (Adorno, 1978). The productive moment of the fetish is

apparent in its ability to reproduce precisely the form of order that sustains it – the utilitarian, technocratic, and, at best, polyarchic institutions of contemporary world order.

Fetishization also obstructs the reflection required for political progress, with positivism's focus on appearance mirroring the flat ontology of capitalist exchange. Rather than obscuring reality with ideals, a positivistic ideology directs individuals to accept the surface appearances of society governed by the exchange principle – to be satisfied with access to the 'façade made up of classified data' (Cook, 2001; Adorno, 1974, p. 69). The more that social processes are understood as 'things', and the more that knowledge concerns the contemplation of these things, the harder it is to see how society could take a different form.

As an approach to the study of transparency, Marxist Critical Theory has clear affinities to existing treatments of transparency rooted in critical social theory. The work of uncovering the deeply problematic assumptions that underpin transparency policies has been productively undertaken by scholars influenced by Derrida, Lacan, Weber, Simmel, Focault and the field of Science and Technology Studies (Birchall 2011b, 2011c; Horn 2011; Fenster 2006, 2015; Hansen and Flyverbom 2014; Flyverbom 2015). As a corpus of work, these approaches have significantly advanced our understanding of the ambivalences and limits of transparency. Yet, at the same time, they tend to emphasize the exchange and circulation of information over the moment of knowledge production. Moreover, in their stress on communication as always already involving moments of secrecy and revelation they tend towards theoretical idealism (Birchall 2011c; Horn 2011; Fenster 2015, p. 154). The supposedly inherent properties of communication thereby appear to be generative of transparency's ambiguities. The result it is a relative neglect of the impact of specific institutional orders and of the historical specificity of transparency.

Marxist Critical Theory, by contrast, points to the importance of the institutional form of modern global capitalism in any account of transparency (see also Dean 2002a, 2002b). The separation of the political from the economic, with its related division between the public and the private, central to capitalist social order creates the public space within which transparency may occur. At the same time, it introduces an ostensible separation between states or governing institutions and civil society, in which the authority to govern is seemingly granted to neutral administrative bureaucracies. The tendency to view information qua information, absent any substantive consideration of its content – of what counts as knowledge, and why this specific form of knowledge has been created – is, in part, a function of the apparent autonomy of political authority. Marrying consideration of these objective structures to their expression in political culture is a task for which Critical Theory was designed.

The critique of commodity fetishism aims to recover the agency human beings exercise in making the world under conditions not of their choosing. A central part of this task is the careful analysis of the theoretical categories we use to understand the social world, as these categories form a central moment in defining 'realistic' present and future political possibilities. Turning to the literature on transparency in IR, we chart the theoretical implications that stem from treating transparency in the register of exchange value.

'The best disinfectant': approaches to transparency in world politics

The drive to increase the availability of information about social actors, economic processes, and the actions of governments is embraced by a range of international policy initiatives. A positive view of transparency is articulated by policy-makers throughout the varied webs of global governance. Transparency promotion policies articulate a relatively uniform understanding of politics, despite the diversity of actors practicing them in different issue areas. For example, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) – an initiative founded by

Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States in 2011 – promotes transparency as central to the broad goal of strengthening governance (OGP, 2014). The IMF describes transparency as important to 'achieving financial efficiency' and 'holding government to account' (IMF, 2012). The G8 Lough Erne declaration likewise identified transparency as a 'vital driver' of good governance, a position endorsed by nearly every governance institution in the world (G8, 2013; WTO, 2016). In 2009, Pascal Lamy, then Director General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), defined one of the core missions of the WTO during the financial crisis in these terms, stating

> The WTO has started monitoring measures taken by our members during the crisis, as a device to provide transparency and, through peer pressure, pre-empt this dangerous threat [of protectionism]. It operates on the principle that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Like the canary in the mine, it tells us if we are keeping isolationist pressures at bay.

Transparency is presented as a means to increase public sector integrity, improve the quality of democratic participation, hold governments and corporations accountable to citizens and consumers, reduce corruption, monitor adherence to international agreements, and ensure the efficient operation of the global economy.

The academic literature does not uniformly share this optimism. Transparency is understood to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of governance, but only with significant qualification (Dingwerth & Eichnger, 2010; Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Mol, 2010). Despite this ambivalence, the concept of transparency within the broad global governance literature is seldom subject to sustained critical reflection. Definitions are presented in clear terms, but there is often little accompanying discussion of the epistemological or political assumptions that inform global transparency promotion (but see Stasavage, 2004).

In contemporary treatments of transparency, fetishization occurs from two angles, occasionally simultaneously. One approach, developed upon the foundations of rational choice theory (RCT), focuses upon information as an objective factor in the causal explanation of political behaviour, defining transparency as the quantity of information present in a political system.[2] Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland (2014, p. 413), for instance, describe transparency as, at its broadest, the 'full flow of information within a polity' (also see Finel & Lord 1999, p. 317). Similarly, approaches derived from game theory portray transparency as complete information within bargaining games. Transparency or its absence is of signal importance in determining political outcomes because access to information is supposedly central to shaping an actor's beliefs, preferences, capacities and decisions. Within these approaches, transparency is the process whereby information transmission and exchange between actors takes place; information has the characteristics of a 'thing' that is possessed – an entity like a car or a laptop. These arguments tend to collapse knowledge into information and, as a result, significantly simplify the complex process of knowledge production (Burke, 2000, pp. 11-12; Sayer, 2000, pp. 12-22).

In the remainder of the paper, we focus on a second strand of literature on transparency, (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006; Higgot & Erman, 2010; Scholte, 2004; Smythe & Smith, 2006). Oriented to determining and, if needed, improving the legitimacy of global governance, this diffuse body of thought assumes that access to information is a source of political empowerment and/or effectiveness. For instance, Buchanan and Keohane argue that the legitimacy of international organizations is centrally determined by the flow of information between institutions, 'accountability holders', and civil society. In the absence of transparency, they argue, it can be assumed that an institution is not performing as it should and lacks legitimacy as a result (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006, pp. 428-429). Transparency thereby

functions as a proxy in place of other indicators of legitimacy. Where mechanisms for democratic accountability are weak or non-existent, as in the institutions of global governance, this is particularly important.

Sunburnt: Transparency as a fetish in global governance

Despite the problematic relationship between transparency, accountability, and the idea of the 'public' often implied in this second body of literature, the shift towards a deeper consideration of epistemic politics (outlined below) provides a useful aid to the development of a fuller understanding of transparency policies, their power dynamics, and their limits.

While the literature on global governance can be amorphous, constituting a very wide range of theoretical perspectives and areas of empirical analysis (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014), a central theme is the importance of transparency and accountability at international institutions such as the G20, the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF (Higgot & Erman, 2010; Scholte, 2012; Slaughter, 2013). This focus is part of the broader concern with a 'democratic deficit' in global governance since the end of the Cold War. For practitioners and institutions involved in global governance, these concerns derive partly from the emergence of democracy as the legitimate international norm *par excellence* (Dingwerth, 2014, p. 1126, *passim*) and partly from a reaction to the small (but significant) anti-globalization protests at international summits from Seattle to Genoa to Toronto (Barnett, 2016; Buchanan & Keohane, 2006; Slaughter, 2013). This diverse body of literature is difficult to summarize without glossing over the distinct positions of different authors. Nevertheless, there is sufficient similarity in the accounts of transparency offered to justify treating these works together, even as they disagree about the specific form of democratic governance appropriate to the global sphere or to whom institutions should be accountable.[3]

The core problem of transparency in global governance appears to be that those subjected to the authority of governance institutions 'are not aware what decisions are taken in global governance, by whom, from what options, on what grounds, with what expected results, and with what resources to support implementation' (Scholte, 2002, p. 294). Addressing this involves the disclosure of information across a number of registers, from the straightforward identification of individuals to the substantially trickier disclosure of criteria of judgement (an issue we will discuss in greater detail below). With information about decision-making processes, criteria, and conduct shielded from public view, the possibilities for holding organizations to account are limited. This gap between authority and accountability – a gap constituted by an absence of transparency – is understood to generate problems of inefficiency, distrust, and a general weakening of legitimacy.

Within the dominant approach in the literature, transparency is understood as the disclosure of information by, for example, the IMF, World Bank, or WTO to relevant 'stakeholders'. Grant and Keohane (2005, p. 41) summarize the core claims of this approach:

> The final component of accountability, information, may be the easiest to achieve. Crucial to the efficacy of an information system for controlling abuses of power is that control over it not be limited to power-wielders and the entities that originally authorized their actions. On the contrary, the system should be open to new groups, seeking to provide information relevant to the question of whether power-wielders are meeting appropriate standards of behaviour – and to make that information widely available.

This view of transparency as the disclosure of information to relevant actors is widely shared (Broz, 2002; Mavroidis & Wolfe, 2015). Drawing on liberal democratic political thought, often as reconstructed through principal-agent theory, this approach emphasizes the gains in legitimacy, accountability, and efficiency achieved through transparency. Realising

transparency in global economic governance is, in this reading, a question of designing the correct mechanisms and formal institutional frameworks of governing bodies.

The limits of transparency

The limits to transparency-driven accountability vary between issue area and the specific institutions under study. However, a number of difficulties arise from the fetishization at the heart of many accounts. While this literature is not idealistic about the achievement of transparency – it is widely noted that transparency promotion bumps up against power politics and power asymmetries – once disclosure policies are in place this framework suggests that information will generate positive political outcomes. Publics will be empowered and governance will become more efficient. One important question regards, of course, the capacity of different actors in international society to digest information disclosed (O'Neill, 2006). Structural inequalities limit the effectiveness of transparency promotion policies (Dingwerth, 2014; Scholte 2012). Even after straightforward power politics have been overcome and information disclosed, differences between the formal right to receive information and the substantive ability to make sense of it persist. This is distinct from, although related to, the capacity of publics to *access* to information. When the latter point is stressed (e.g. Grigorescu 2007) discussion remains within a distributive model of transparency. Equality of opportunity is the central concern, querying whether publics have the chance to access information, not whether they can *actually* take advantage of this chance. A sociologically richer account needs to grasp the production, exchange, and 'consumption' of information holistically. The gap between formal equality and substantive inequality highlights the limits of the distributive paradigm when divorced from issues of inequalities of epistemic power and the construction of epistemic legitimacy.

Another issue has received less attention. When transparency is understood as disclosure it sustains a quite specific political topography, one which reflects the 'distance' and contemplative attitude generated by fetishism. For instance, in Keohane and Buchanan's discussion of legitimacy, transparency is at the heart of a model according to which there is a stark distinction between the public or civil society, on the one hand, and structures of governance on the other. At one level, of course, the institutions governing the global political economy really are experienced by global publics as if they operate behind a veil. Issues of scale make this is particularly the case in international politics. Transparency promotion pursued through the wide dissemination of information, seems to represent a realistic solution; information will be transmitted through the barrier, reducing the 'distance' experienced by the recipients. At another level, however, the appeal to transparency reinforces the distinctions between governance institutions and publics, obscuring the social process through which the separation emerges and is perpetuated.

If transparency reinforces the distinction between governance or the market and civil society, it also takes the form of a quantifiable, fungible property which, in the absence of deeper interaction, promises to bridge the gap. Just as transparency itself is fetishized by institutions seeking to demonstrate their responsiveness (Scholte, 2012), in Keohane and Buchanan's account, it becomes a proxy for more demanding features of legitimacy (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006, pp. 428-429). In keeping with the connection between fetishization and contemplative knowledge, it helps to constitute and naturalise a view of the 'global' as a remote sphere of politics removed from the everyday concerns and practices of individuals, and access to which can only occur through engagement with the circulation of data modelled on exchange-value.

The view of knowledge implied in this approach is that it is a property of data as such, an object which might be stored, exchanged, or consumed. In transparency indexes and the vast

digital archives of global governance institutions we see the fetish of transparency materialized (Andersson & Heywood, 2009; Fenster, 2015). The effectivity of the fetish lies not simply in the misrecognition this fosters, but in the social practices and materialization of this ideological belief. Calls for transparency from civil society actors are grasped in distributive rather than participatory terms – it is supposedly through access to information objects that the democratic deficit can be addressed. Whether or not this vision of monitory democracy can generate accountability and legitimacy remains an open question. However, we can query whether the simple monitoring of political decision-making in the absence of attention to global social, economic and political inequalities constitutes accountability or empowerment in any firm sense.

Transparency, Participation, and Epistemic Democracy

A valuable shift in the literature on transparency and accountability in global governance is the increasing focus on the transparency of knowledge-making procedures themselves. This move promises to address some of the problems identified above by means of an account of transparency as the product of democratic participation. Drawing on deliberative and participatory strands of democratic theory, this approach to transparency and accountability is more demanding than its monitory cousins. It presents transparency as involving the participation of affected publics in the decision-making process of governance institutions across different facets of their operation. Steffek and Ferretti (2009), for example, stress the importance of two distinct goals of public participation: improved accountability and improved epistemic decision-making (Higgott & Erman, 2010, p. 465). Epistemic input, in which the public participates in the knowledge-making process through civil society organizations, is identified as a central aspect of making global governance more transparent. In highlighting the role of the public in constituting knowledge, Steffek and Ferretti begin to point toward an account of how knowledge is created through the complex interaction of multiple actors.

This emphasis on epistemic agency appears to represent a move beyond the socio-epistemic simplification arising from fetishization.[4] However, Steffek and Ferretti introduce a problematic element into their discussion, one indicative of the wider problems with many such approaches. In evaluating international governance practices, they rely on an understanding of knowledge derived from the epistemic democracy literature (List & Goodin, 2001) in which epistemic participation is valued either in procedural terms or in the improvement in 'truth-tracking' it realizes.[5] On this latter view – the standard of evaluation used by Steffek and Ferretti – the 'wisdom of crowds' will help decision-makers reach an optimal outcome in their deliberations. As List and Goodin note, underpinning epistemic democracy is the claim that 'there is a procedure independent fact of the matter as to what the best or right outcome is' (List & Goodin, 2001, p. 280). This assumption confines Steffek and Ferretti's assessment within the technocratic and undemocratic frameworks which constitute their object of concern. The normatively desirable outcome of increased democratic participation at the WTO or the World Bank is inappropriately extended to include an efficiency claim – the suggestion that greater participation is normatively desirable because it leads to better 'technical' knowledge (Steffek and Ferretti 2009: 43). At the same time, on this view, although civil society action to challenge exclusionary practices might be political, itis ultimately non-epistemic. As a result, the ideal of deliberation as a normative project of mutual recognition in which the force of better argument prevails is short-circuited as a standard to assess global governance. Epistemic participation is deprived of truly progressive force. It is not valued as an expression of autonomy, self-realization, or moral recognition.

Here, the fetishism of transparency relies on universalization at a deep level. It is not simply the assumption that all individuals will interpret information in the same manner that constitutes this fetish. An emphasis on democratic participation and the wealth redistribution required to achieve it moves beyond the distributive epistemology characteristic of rational choice approaches. Instead, it is the universalization of specific knowledge claims and procedures across both time and space that registers the degree to which information is represented as a form of exchange-value. Knowledge is still a quantity and is considered in quantitative terms. This ignores the important role of relations of power in constituting knowledge and its procedures, relying on a notion of facts 'out there' to which our ideas will conform, even as mediated through democratic procedures. Democratic governance is subsumed under the drive to achieve the correct technical decision, while the very constitution of what is 'technical' or the deeply contested grounds of expert knowledge are side-lined (Feenberg, 2002; Kennedy, 2016). Even Steffek and Ferretti's participatory appraisal of the WTO views the social production of knowledge as revealing the world rather than making it. Extensive studies in the sociology of knowledge suggest that, in empirical terms, this move is problematic. As Shelia Jasanoff notes, 'Knowledge and its material embodiments are at once products of social work and constitutive of forms of social life; society cannot function without knowledge any more than knowledge can exist without appropriate social supports' (Jasanoff, 2004, pp. 2-3).

This theoretical fetishization of transparency is matched in practice. In global economic governance, the IMF, World Bank, and WTO, are centrally involved in knowledge production – one of their main tasks in regulating and governing the global economy (Kennedy, 2016; Winickoff & Bushey, 2010; Broad, 2006). Their representations of knowledge production often reinforce the appearance of transparency as reified information, with the World Bank's desire to become the 'Knowledge Bank', the 'guardian and disseminator of the world's development knowledge' (Bretton Woods Project, 2004, p. 1, quoted in Broad, 2006, p. 407) indicative. However, detailed studies of these institutions illustrate precisely how knowledge-making involves multiple actors and institutions interacting over a long time-period. Consider, for example, how specific epistemic standards come into being through a knowledge economy involving institutions such as universities, corporations, think tanks, lobbying groups, and civil society organizations.[6]

As David Kennedy has noted, the background work of knowledge production in the global political economy is largely invisible to academics and publics alike. In his discussion of the role of the WTO in global wage regulation, Kennedy notes that 'non-tariff barriers' operated as background or accepted knowledge 'through expert identification and naming' (Kennedy, 2016, p. 117). Litigants, civil society, states and corporations contested whether or not a specific social practice was a non-tariff barrier, not the underlying value placed on non-tariff barriers themselves. This starting point of knowledge production – the initial power struggle that led to this settlement – was obscured. Kennedy notes that low-wage industrial strategies often produced by the 'non-tariff barrier' norm appear to be determining: 'they seem the inexorable result of economic forces that cannot be challenged in the foreground of political life' (Kennedy, 2016, p. 118). While the WTO may produce and release volumes of information about their conduct and policies, the circulation of this information fails to reveal the far more fundamental 'inner secret' of knowledge production: its status as a historically embedded social practice. Access to information may make the organizations more accountable in some respects, but it does not make their epistemic authority significantly more transparent. Information released to global publics is the tip of a very large iceberg in which the (necessary) institutional mediation of knowledge production often remains below the water.

Fetishized transparency generates a global political topography with two features. On the one hand, we find a distinct international sphere which confronts the public as a separate,

opaque realm. On the other hand, it is assumed that the gap between the two can be traversed by turning to an undifferentiated system of facts or data in which the technically correct course of action is waiting to be discovered. Deliberative and participatory accounts adopt a more sophisticated approach, but remain within a framework that underplays the political construction of epistemic categories. Their capacity to consider radical change is thereby considerably restricted.

Objective structures of knowledge production in global governance – the institutionally embedded, historically enduring way in which knowledge is produced – combine with intersubjective understandings of knowledge, including those promoted in theories of global governance, to reproduce contemporary forms of epistemic authority in global politics.. Common-sense or 'epistemic folkways' (Gramsci, 1971; Fluck, 2016) that understand the prevailing form of reified knowledge as a ready vehicle to social empowerment legitimize transparency politics as the obvious solution to democratic shortfalls. As one of us as noted in another context, 'Access to information appears to promise a route to the inner workings of political institutions, and thereby to power and influence' (……).Widespread appeals to transparency in statements directed at the public reflect the extent to which this assumption has been naturalised; in a very different form, the structures of widespread conspiracy theories reflects a similar fetishization of facticity (Dean, 2002, p.12; Fluck, 2016). Calls for transparency as a route to empowerment are embraced by publics at local, national, and global scales. Whether expressed in polling data (Europe for Citizens 2013, Roper Centre 2016) newspaper campaigns such as those surrounding the Panama Papers, or the continued proliferation of transparency NGOs (numbering in the hundreds[7]), the fetish of open government is pervasive. Access to information is important, but faith in its empowering potential misrepresents the nature of knowledge production and obscures social structures with fetishization at their heart. Realizing the normative and sociological promise of transparency requires an alternative which is historically sensitive to different forms of knowledge production.

Realizing transparency in theory and practice

In pressing for a richer sociology and ontology of knowledge production, Critical Theory pushes us to think about ways to realize epistemic practices that would facilitate genuinely democratic forms of global governance. As explained above, Critical Theorists point to several problematic results of fetishism: a sense of distance between individuals and society; misrecognition of the social character of knowledge; and obstruction of political innovation. Each of these problems is apparent in the case of transparency. The fetish of transparency contributes to a topography of global politics in which public and institutions seem to confront each across a void. Fetishized facts or information-objects, are presented as a bridge between governing and governed. Transparency's role in theoretical discourse helps to reproduce the objective dominance of exchange-value in the phenomenological experience of the global information society. Through the promotion of transparency, publics are granted access to little more than the 'façade of data' in a manner which undermines attempts to formulate, identify, and pursue alternative political structures and practices. Evaluating the conceptual shortcomings of contemporary approaches to transparency in global politics, we have highlighted how their ahistorical picture of knowledge analytically underplays the role of collective human agency in producing transparency within specific socio-historical contexts. Modes of knowledge production defined by specific technologies, political economies, and related ideological discourses, are subsequently misrecognized. The fetish obscures the power relations involved in determining how knowledge is produced and represented.

Clarifying our theoretical practice is a first step in identifying the historically delimited possibilities through which transparency politics may begin to fulfil their democratic potential. It is important to recognize, in keeping with the animating impetus behind classical liberal accounts of transparency, that transparency retains sediments of its history as a progressive normative ideal. Calls for transparency in politics express claims to moral recognition by the governed and the right to participate in their own governance – the essence of the democratic ideal that underpins the best aspects of the Enlightenment project. As stated in the introduction, our goal has not been to describe alternative forms of transparency. To do so would, we believe, represent an overextension of Critical Theory in the direction of the instrumental reasoning it seeks to avoid. However, , it is clear that the extension of democratic governance requires participation in forms of knowledge production that serve as the basis for public policy. This is not to enhance the 'truth tracking' or efficiency of knowledge production, but to enable self-governance at the broadest possible scale. To borrow from Stirling's work on participation in technological decision-making, unmaking fetishistic transparency requires a shift from informing to forming if transparency is to fulfil its promise (Sitrling 2008). What this would involve, exactly, is a matter best decided through political practice.

The normative project of Critical Theory – emancipation as self-realization, with all the attendant distributive and social preconditions this entails – extends transparency beyond the limits of the liberal project to consider issues of substantive inequality, while retaining its insights. Sociologically, critique undertaken via the concept of the fetish places recovery of our understanding of collective human agency in the constitution of the social world, along with recognition of the objective conditions under which this agency operates, front and centre. A critical theoretic approach to transparency must be oriented to the complex relationship by which different social forces and institutions interact to produce transparency.

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[1] For a classic treatment, see Wynne (1989), on the tension between technocratic knowledge and the unrecognized knowledge of UK sheep farmers in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster.

[2] For a detailed discussion of RCT approaches to transparency see (…..).

[3] Moravcsik (2004), Goodin (2010), and Barnett (2015) offer good summaries of the literature and present distinct approaches.

[4] Steffek and Ferretti refer to certain kinds of knowledge as technical, or to experts as technical, and thus tend to sidestep the politics of these boundaries-making knowledge claims (Jasanoff 2004).

[5] There is some slippage between these in Steffek and Ferretti's account. Higgot and Erman, by contrast, claim that WTO decisions reflect the dominance of 'abstracted rationality' but do not develop this point. Instead, they assert that liberal trade theory is correct; their argument is about how to legitimize WTO knowledge-claims (Higgott and Erman 2010: 468-470; cf. Winickoff and Bushey 2010: 373).

[6] On universities in global governance see Mittleman (2016).

[7] The Sunlight Foundation lists 543 local, national, and international transparency and open government NGOs.