International Knowledge Institutions and the Generation of an Epistemic Function in Global Governance

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Understanding the processes by which global knowledge institutions generate epistemic functions and impact governance requires inquiring into the construction of global problems, the legitimation of new institutions, and the complex dynamics of disseminating cooperative solutions. International knowledge institutions trigger an empirical re-ordering of authority in global governance, but the consequences of this reordering for representation, distribution, and accountability are less clear.

Generating Epistemic Functions by Creating Needs and Filling Them

The epistemic function of an international knowledge institution can be divided into many smaller capabilities and services, each with its own unique generative process and demand dynamic. It is only possible to generalize about the generation of epistemic functions because certain steps are always required in order to make information into 'legitimate knowledge' and the basis for an authority claim based on expertise. Thus, the generative process can be broken down into three interrelated steps: problematising an issue, legitimating an institution, and disseminating solutions.

The first and most commonly overlooked epistemic function of international knowledge institutions is their capability to make issues into problems. Before any institution can respond to a problem, people, meaning policymakers and the public alike, must be persuaded that something is a serious threat. Persuasion to comply with new rule-setting by institutions requires prior problematisation (Hulsse 2007). The need for an expert institutional authority must be internalized by large numbers of people before an institution can be considered an authority. An issue like climate change or money laundering must be perceived as a serious problem in order for people and policymakers to create and support institutions designed around the issue. Also, the problem needs to be constructed in such a way that nation-states do not appear capable of solving the problem independently. New scientific knowledge must be publicized or newly-framed knowledge must be supported by dissemination of new 'types' and classifications. The productive power of 'problem creation' lies in drawing attention to a new set of facts and then setting the boundaries for debate about this new, 'global public' problem. International knowledge institutions can set the global agenda, encourage funding, and prioritize certain issues while downplaying other issues using this problem-creating capacity. In some senses, framing the issue as a 'global public' concern is also an attempt to convince policymakers that 'global publics' desire to replace state competition with global deliberation (Miller 2007). However, this is a by-product of the first core epistemic function of international knowledge institutions, which is to persuade people that there is a problem.

The second step in generating an epistemic function is a collection of tasks and services designed to build the authority of the institution. If the first step of creating a problem has been successful, there is a perceived gap in global authority, and the institution only needs to prove itself worthy of filling this gap. The straightforward way to generate institutional legitimacy is to cultivate respect for 'expert authority' by disseminating scientific facts in thorough, transparent presentations of global data. Yet international institutions must be carefully designed and monitored, since in reality there is no one straightforward way to produce, validate, and disseminate global data.

Therefore, the productive power of knowledge-creation is usually legitimated by creating at least the perception of international knowledge institutions being open to all 'stakeholders' and designing inclusive 'deliberative' processes. Ideally, these institutions forge a consensus through shared understandings of the problem, and use these shared understandings to create possible solutions. When one view of a problem has dominated globally and is uncontested, it is relatively easy to agree on a solution; however in reality the dominant view is rarely uncontested and institutions usually forge legitimate solutions by developing procedures perceived as 'legitimate' and 'fair'. The facade of procedural legitimacy is crucial in the legitimation of international knowledge institutions; conflict-avoiding provisions are institutionalized and working relationships with powerful actors, including states, are carefully cultivated. These institutionalized rules and practices for knowledge production and validation enable the institution to command the necessary authority to resolve disputed knowledge claims. However, deliberative processes do not guarantee that the knowledge disseminated by the institution reflects the variety of viewpoints expressed within the institution; often international knowledge institutions tolerate diverse views but only one approach is supported by the institution's productive power and material resources. For example, the World Health Organization tolerates different cultural approaches to health, but ultimately produces and supports one global policy per issue. The legitimacy of the WHO and other international knowledge institutions rests of their ability to produce and disseminate information in responsible and useful ways.

The third step in generating an institutional epistemic function is to apply institutional knowledge by providing standards, mediating disputes, and suggesting solutions. This step contains the capabilities and services that these institutions consider it their purpose to really deliver. Many international knowledge institutions are standard-setting organizations, and their key purpose is to develop standards in technical areas and ensure they are widely accepted. The epistemic function of these organizations is embodied in the International Organization of Standards (ISO) website, which encourages viewers to, 'benefit from the wealth of knowledge of some 50'000 experts who help develop ISO standards'. The standard-setting capability of most international knowledge institutions is accompanied by an authoritative, if evolutionary, interpretation of the rules and institutionalized monitoring. When the WTO reports that a new agreement on liberalization has been reached, it is expected that the new agreement will be enforced and monitored by the member states and WTO organs like the Dispute Settlement Body. International knowledge institutions also interact and attempt to influence each other, usually by setting the agenda at international conferences and continually prioritizing certain global problems. The influence of other international institutions is sometimes more symbolic, as in the WTO Doha 'Development' Round, or can be more meaningful, as in the Rio Earth Summit of 1992. Finally, if the first two steps in the generation of an epistemic function have one well, then international knowledge institutions have the capability to counter epistemic chaos with consistently respected 'expert authority'. For example, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) consistently testified against U.S. assertions of Iraqi WMD, ultimately winning the battle for truth and legitimacy, even if the institution appeared powerless in the immediate power struggle. The ability of the IAEA to present its knowledge as 'more legitimate' than that of the US military and to eventually be vindicated illustrates the increasingly powerful role that knowledge institutions can play in global affairs; the IAEA was merely carrying out its epistemic function when it made the US foreign policy look less than fully legitimate (Miller 2007). This examples shows how the consequences of international knowledge institutions fulfilling their epistemic functions are becoming increasingly controversial, even as three steps of this model show how the generation of epistemic functions is becoming more commonplace and less controversial.

The Consequences of Epistemic Functions for Global Governance

Despite their central position in networks of governance, there have been relatively few analyses of the consequences of international knowledge institutions that go beyond the changing configurations of authority. The empirical re-ordering of authority in global governance triggers important consequences for representation, distribution, and accountability (Adler and Bernstein 2005). The empirical consequences of international knowledge institutions can be demonstrated, but the normative consequences are still very much contested; I argue that international knowledge institutions provide opportunities for better global governance, but the power that accompanies their epistemic functions needs to be wielded with extreme caution.

The demonstrable consequence of international knowledge institutions generating epistemic functions is that there

are changing configurations of authority in international affairs. The overriding change is that international knowledge institutions are experiencing enormous growth and recognition of their productive, institutional, and increasingly even compulsory power. Adler and Bernstein (2005) even argue, contra Weber, that authority is now the decoupling of coercive force and legitimate rule and that legitimacy is now the key feature in determining who governs. Given the enormous yearly military expenditure of nation-states, this assertion appears a bit too hopeful, but there are certainly indications of movement in that direction. Expert authority, be it technical, judicial or scientific, is increasingly relied upon to mediate disputes between states. Pauly (2005) argues that sovereignty is transforming and states are seeking cooperative solutions through new governance structures. He further argues that states recognize the tension between the prerogatives of sovereign power and the necessity of shared authority, and are becoming cooperative states and shifting authority towards broadly based multilateral organizations capable of promoting both efficiency and equity. Clearly this is true for some states, but it is equally untrue for other states, whose (typically irresponsible) leaders remain steadfast in their assertion of unconditional sovereignty and denouncement of multilateral authority. However, that these states can be pointed to as noncompliant or uncooperative illustrates the substantial movement towards the world of cooperative states envisioned by Pauly. In sum, the generation of epistemic functions is creating visible changes in the networks of global authority, which trickles down into many smaller empirical consequences.

The normative consequences of changing authority for 'good' governance are not certain from any point of view, and arguably the continuing contestation of 'globalization' and articulations of very different paths forward from different global actors illustrates how 'legitimate' knowledge could dramatically shape future world order. Adler and Bernstein (2005) argue there are possibilities and limits to moving global governance in a more sustainable and just direction, and knowledge institutions will be leading any movement in global governance. Adler and Bernstein also argue the commonly asserted requirements of moral governance include the people being represented and treated fairly, a fair distribution of burdens and benefits, and that those who make decisions are held to account. Obviously many more consequences exist and I think it is overly hopeful to assume these three represent a global consensus, but these three are important and together provide a nice framework for analysing the normative consequences of epistemic functions.

The idea that good governance means people are represented and treated fairly is accepted and promoted by most international knowledge institutions. However, this idea has not been widely translated into practice at international institutions. Expert bodies usually have a very undemocratic constitution, and the most powerful decision-making bodies within international knowledge institutions in particular tend to designed without concern for their representativeness. The most high-profile example of this is the UN Security Council, but many smaller 'executive councils' or other concentrations of power are equally poorly governed if representation is a criterion for 'good' governance. However, there is debate in about what a truly representative institution would look like, and if such an institution is even desirable, since 'good' representation is often equated with 'inefficient' institutions. Some theorists, like Miller, argue representation is crucial for 'good' governance and are willing to accept inefficiency in order to lay the groundwork for global democracy: ''international Knowledge Institutions represent a desire to replace the logic of states pursuing arbitrary and ad hoc national interests with a logic of deliberative legitimacy in international relations'' (Miller 2007: 328). Even if global democracy is accepted as a normative end, it is not an inherent consequence stemming from the development of epistemic functions in the current system of international knowledge institutions. International knowledge institution like the World Economic Forum make a farce out of the idea of representation, yet are increasingly legitimate in the eyes of powerful actors. Even processes or institutions that are seen as sensitive to representation like The Monterrey Consensus deal with NGOs or other well-organized groups with a strong unifying interest. By most normative standards, NGO participation is sub-optimal representation, particularly given the complicated reality that money and self-interest play in the NGO field. Even when the World Bank involves indigenous groups on a project as 'stakeholder participation' the difficult normative questions remain, because it is rarely clear exactly who these groups are representing, how the representatives were selected, and with what mandate. Although international knowledge institutions accept representation as an important normative good, their growth has not led to a massive increase in representation at the global level. For the most part, when international knowledge institutions attempt to cultivate meaningful representation, it signals an improvement in governance; however many members in powerful bodies are loathe to give up power in order to increase representation.

Distribution is a polarizing criterion for 'good' governance, since there are such different and deeply-held conceptions of what constitutes a 'fair' distribution of global public goods. Adler and Bernstein (2007) argue that notions of 'fairness' are always historically and institutionally bound by epistemes, or collective understandings and intersubjective knowledge. Even within a broadly 'liberal' episteme, different standards of fairness can be incongruous, like the Rawlsian and Habermasian standards, and therefore lead proponents to define and judge 'good' governance very differently. On issues of distribution, the position and empirical record of international knowledge institutions varies widely, even among institutions with similar mandates. For instance, the World Bank and the UNDP both produce regular statistics-based publications on global development prepared for a ministerial readership, yet they are perceived to be very different from one another on issues of distribution. If one were to attempt, like Chwieroth (2007) to measure the impact of ideas, this perceived difference between the World Bank and the UNDP would derive from the difference in their organization cultures, or the ideas shared among staff. Since international knowledge institutions have 'kind-making power' or the expert authority to classify knowledge and frame conceptions of what is a 'fair' distribution, the ideas floating around these institutions have the potential to change global distribution. The way these institutions present and disseminate their information has enormous productive power and the setting and regulating of standards can either reproduce or change a given distribution. Compared with the expectations of positive change that has accompanied the establishment and growth of international knowledge institutions, the actual change towards a more 'fair' global distribution has been disappointing, at best. However, given the increasing authority and importance of their epistemic functions, international Institutions could develop the capability to restrain state and or corporate power, or at least compel actors to publicly justify their actions, and create the conditions for a more just distribution of global public goods.

While the international community is still searching for shared normative ends regarding questions of distribution and representation, consensus seems closer regarding the issue of accountability. There is not serious debate about making institutions less accountable to the public, instead the debate about accountability centers on the question of how institutions, governments, and private actors can be made more accountable. The nature of the debate on accountability would seem to signal that progress towards 'good', accountable, governance, is being made. This may be true in many parts of the world, however the current debate (outside academia) on accountability does not really consider how much of global authority-public and private-is not accountable, since it is no one's job to survey the world and point out all the instances where governments or private actors are entirely unaccountable. The global debate on accountability is largely shaped by and for the informed, mobilized public, and the cases where accountability does not exist tend to 'fly under the radar' unless abuses occur and are not advertised in media outlets or by NGOs as a serious problem. The globalization of production, crime, and almost every other facet of life and dispersion of authority that followed destroyed old systems of accountability and the checks that previously existed were rendered impotent by transborder operations. International knowledge institutions have already had positive consequences in filling the void of accountability at the global level, for instance developing and disseminating of ideas such as 'conditional sovereignty' and 'corporate responsibility'. These institutions could do more to create concrete change, as Miller (2007) and others argue international institutions are a special case of monitoring and verification programs, with the productive and institutional power to change practices. Additionally, empowering more transparent and democratic institutions that rely on fact-finding and discursive power instead of non-transparent coercion can only bring better, more 'moral' global governance. The consensus that seems to exist regarding the desirability of greater accountability is exciting, but international institution need to begin actually defining and measuring progress towards greater accountability instead of merely celebrating the rhetoric of accountability at the international level. It is within the epistemic function and capability of international knowledge institutions to produce and enforce more accountability; accountability is a shared norm and it seems most of these institutions recognize it and are progressing towards more accountable and thus 'good' governance.

The generation of epistemic functions requires constructing problems, legitimating certain experts and institutions, and applying knowledge to alleviate or solve the targeted problems. International knowledge institutions have successfully developed epistemic functions and are seen as creating the conditions and space necessary to articulate a vision of 'good' or moral governance. International knowledge institutions have become very powerful and opened up avenues for serious positive change worldwide, however, whether these institutions live up to the possibilities has yet to be seen definitively. The generation of epistemic functions brings very serious productive and institutional power to largely like-minded groups of individuals; this power can be beneficial and create better

conditions or it could be misunderstood or abused to create worse normative outcomes in global governance.

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