Workshop Report

The Global Politics of Acceptance: Claiming Epistemic and Governance Authority in the Post-national Constellation

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Inhouse&Guests Workshop hosted by:
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The InHouse&Guests Workshop ‘Global Politics of Acceptance: Claiming Epistemic and Governance Authority in the Post-national constellation’ took place at the Centre of Global Cooperation Research in Duisburg on the 6th and 7th of September. An internationally assembled group of scholars discussed issues of global knowledge production, the interplay of distinct authorities, and problematized the role of expertise in the post-national constellation. Participants came from various disciplines such as sociology, human geography, political science, and philosophy. Topics covered varied from theoretical contributions on how to conceptionalize distinct claims for authorities to empirical contributions on the production of knowledge in private business organizations.

In his introductory remarks Holger Straßheim and Sigrid Quack, the convenors of the workshop, draw the attention towards the globally disputed role of expertise and knowledge production. Expertise and knowledge production was entangled in struggles for authority. This constellation demanded new ways of coordinating the governance of knowledge production. Further, he stressed the connection of the issues discussed at the workshop to the broader agenda of the Centre. As knowledge production is a focal point of establishing notions of ‘the global’, problematizing knowledge production and expertise regards core issues of global cooperation.

Session 1: Contesting Authority: The Politics of Expertise

In the first presentation, Stephen Turner discussed the stress-testing of expert consensus, with an emphasis on stress-testing conducted by the IMF after the global financial crisis. Thereby, he regarded expertise and expert consensus in the following manner: expertise and expert consensus was co-produced by networks of experts, politicians and administrators and was set up as practice and within specific organizational contexts. Thus, consensus needs to be regarded as something artificial. Based on this concept, the stress-testing of expert consensus at the IMF was conducted in response to ‘errors’ of the expert consensus during the global financial crisis. Expert consensus had been found to be influenced, first, by cultural features of the IMF, such as silo thinking. Second, an intellectual capture had taken place, thus experts in the IMF were insufficiently independent form outside experts. Third, political capture such as the influence of member states had led towards this specific expert consensus.
In the subsequent discussion, the concepts of epistemological errors and risks were scrutinized. Are distinct phenomena such as a failing expert consensus at the IMF or a spaceship crash comparable with reference to epistemological errors? Turner argued that both the analysis of a spaceship crash and of the financial system depend on expert consensus. Both are complex systems where expertise depends on consensus and this consensus can be shown to contain errors. Still, other participants argued that the definition of what counts as an error was in itself highly political and contested. During the financial crisis it was highly contested whether the crisis revealed ‘errors’ in the expert consensus on financial system or whether the crisis was a process of market adaption which expert consensus did grasp. In a similar vein, it was reasoned that the content of the case should be taken more into account – to consider the workings of the financial system to explain expert consensus on the financial system. Here, Turner answered that he defines errors through the definition of the actors; consequently this argument did not apply. In contrast, the argument assumed that it was possible to determine expertise independent of the specific area of expertise. He challenged this notion of distinguishing the content of expertise from its production. Closely connected, Turner said that the relation between the public and experts could be regarded as a competition for distinct knowledge regions. Thereby, he challenged consistently the notion of externalizing knowledge from its context.

Furthermore a broader conceptualization of politics was demanded. It could be argued that politics are never stable enough to influence expert consensus in a manner of ‘political capture’. For Turner at this point a distinct American academic tradition might become apparent, focusing rather on technological solutions for problems. Hence, the take on politics as ‘political capture’ implies the possibility of solving the problem of politicization.

Participants laid out two possible interpretations of Turner’s study: On the one hand, it could be read as analyzing the complex production of expertise. On the other hand, it could be read as an analysis of organizational feedback mechanisms. Turner made the case for both interpretations as parts of one story: he regards the problem of creating reality in an expert consensus. Afterwards, he is interested in how these realities play out in a stress-test. This meant analyzing institutional designs and feedback mechanisms. On this specific aspect, participants claimed that silo thinking could be portrayed as enabling creative thinking, too.
**Eleni Tsingou** presented on the politics of expertise on demographic change. Applying an organizational ecology approach, she considered policy issues as the binding characteristic of a specific ecology. Linking distinct ecologies enables the emergence of a specific field of expertise. Thereby, the issue of demographic change binds together experts from diverse disciplinary background. Building on extensive fieldwork, she elaborated on the creation of an expert epistemic culture regarding expertise on demographic change. This expertise was influenced by the interactions with national discourses and publics.

During the discussion, it was regarded as an advantage of the approach to acknowledge the linkages of expertise with broader discourses. It was seen as reflecting the need of experts to speak in different publics. Thereby, the homogeneity of the expert structure was stressed compared with Turner’s case.

Moreover, it was discussed how organizations affect this ecology. The impact of the private sector and economic arguments were scrutinized as well and a strong presence of private actors could be observed in the ecology of demographics.

It was also raised in how far the translation of demographic risks into policies is determined by politicians’ perception of second order risks, therefore, risking what might happen to politicians when demographic risks are not taken into account.

**Christina Bowell** presented on ‘Authority and Political Trust: Performance Targets in UK Immigration Policy’. She argued that authority is related to a notion of trust. Politics utilized performance measurements as a strategy to increase trust by binding itself towards specific targets. Still, these measurements offer only symbolic control and therefore ‘borrow’ authority from these targets. They might lack the effect they promise as the political system is not able to bind itself towards targets due to their inherent systemic dynamics. Therefore, binding politics to targets risks being uncovered as a cynical and inappropriate move.

The discussion took a closer look at the concept of trust. How does it relate towards authority and alter its understanding? It was asked whether trust should be regarded as a means of politics or as a conceptual starting point. Further, a distinction between trust and belief was requested and a notion of ‘institutional trust’. Bowell clarified that she regards trust as the precondition of the decoupling of the political system. Trust serves as a mechanism to reduce
complexity. As such it could be regarded as being closely connected with political authority.

In addition, it was debated whether the concept of trust leads towards analyzing society in a broader manner. Hence, it could be argued that the concept of media could demand clarification, as in her approach self-binding takes place with reference to the media. Bowell agreed that systemic processes within the media should be taken into account more. Further, it was requested whether the discussion of trust should include trust into scientific authority. Thus, the targets occur to demand scientific authority. To Bowell’s understanding this targets gain their authority mainly from transferring business logics into politics. They appeal towards politicians as they promise to transfer more efficient business techniques into politics.

On the issue of the historical singularity of performance measurements, Bowell regarded the combination of a communicative function and steering function of targets as exemplary. She considered it especially puzzling that targets were still communicated although such self-binding regularly failed. The discussion brought up in how far the persistence of the belief in targets marks an ongoing detachment of the production of governmental knowledge.

Session 2: Mapping Authority: Contextualizing Governance

Elisabetta Nadalutti explored what kind of epistemic authority emerges in cross-border regions by focusing on a cross-border governance ethical code. Is there an ethical code of values or an epistemic authority that underpins cross-border cooperation activities? Who has the authority to check that this ethical code is respected and implemented in such activities? Thereby, she intended to provide an alternative language of cross-border cooperation, which should influence its European framework. Currently, the people were not considered as dynamic subjects. Private and public actors involved in cross-border cooperation activities are not joined together by a feeling of solidarity which is necessary in cross-border cooperation. In contrast the border should be regarded as a common good; this should be more present in European regulations.

The discussion with the participants on the relation of the current state of cross-border cooperation towards notions of authorities argued how the apparent lack of trust could affect the authority of organizations involved in cross-border cooperation. On the kind of authority that checks the existing ethical codes,
Nadalutti argued for mutual checks of the EU but as well for more active engagement of affected citizens to ensure appropriate ethical codes. Moreover, it was discussed how the proposed ‘new language’ relates towards existing European regulations. Nadalutti clarified that the policies of the EU deepen social cleavages along the border instead of diminishing them. This was in sharp contrast towards the intention behind cross-border cooperation. Nadalutti stressed that academic and governance experts currently conceptualize the border as a place for completion. Her project was about setting an ethical code meant to influence EU legislation. Participants said that it might be reasonable to contrast such a project with existing bottom up projects.

Nirvia Ravena’s paper discussed the environmental assessments regarding the Belo Monte dam project. Thereby, she problematized the contested expertise in the impact analysis. Gold mining by private corporations had potentially huge negative effects on the environment, which was not considered in the official impact analysis. Although this expertise was contested and alternative accounts were produced, it was not possible to resist the dominating discourse. Deregulation, a lack of information and weak regulatory processes impeded contestation of the existing expertise.

The discussion focused on the transnational connections in the specific case. Why are transnational NGOs not invested in this case? Ravena stressed that some organizations actually were engaged. Besides, universities in the area respond to the lack of available expertise to some degree. Thereby, it was stressed that the importance of transnational NGOs showed that local knowledge occurred not to be considered important enough. Specific knowledge seems to be more important than other knowledge. Furthermore, the ambiguous role of transnational NGOs was discussed. Often they cannot be clearly tied to one side of the argument. Locally allegiances are possible which contradict a naïve notion of NGOs as advocates of the disempowered.

Debating the role of epistemic authority, Ravena stressed the possibility to buy expertise; consequently the application of epistemic authority is not power neutral. It was considered interesting that the official planning processes were actually followed – corruption made it possible to make expertise in itself unnecessary by avoiding planning processes.
Also, the complex institutional environment in the studied case was stressed. Unclear land rights made investments difficult to be planned, complicating the situation. Still, Ravena argued that actually the legal and institutional framework in Brazil was well established and solid – it is the implementation of existing regulation which is questionable.

Moreover, the discussion covered whether the challenging of expertise and the establishment of counter expertise was the best strategy against the Belo Monte project. It could be claimed that mobilization and influencing the discourse was a more promising route. Ravena argued that the social environment of the Amazonas region impeded such attempts as the geographical distance and the mixed populations made these attempts difficult.

### Session 3: Re-ordering Authority: Global Governance

The second workshop-day began with Kristen Hopewall’s examination of the construction of political authority in global trade. Thereby, she focused on the definition of agricultural subsidies by the WTO. These subsidies were at the core of the discussions during the Doha round and contributed to the failure of the talks. Main developing countries demanded a reduction of subsidies from developed countries. After the failing of the Doha round, the sides were reversed in response to the economic rise of developing countries. As a result the area of disagreement had shifted towards the definition of subsidies. Every part of the calculation was now disputed: the underlying formula, the classifications constituting the formula and the data collected from countries. In fact, the WTO definition of agricultural subsidies does not only affect the WTO. Based on the authority of the WTO, the definition is taken as granted more generally.

During the following the discussion the claims for legal authority involved were questioned. Participants reasoned that the definition of subsidies could also play a role in legal contestations. Furthermore, discussions in the WTO were typically codified in terms of trade law. Hopewell argued that the debate was mainly carried out in terms of economics. Authority within the discussions she observed was justified rather with reference to epistemic authority based on scientific economic arguments than based on legal authority.

Also a clearer distinction between distinct claims of authority was requested. Thus, the boundaries of political and epistemic authorities in the case were unclear.
Furthermore, it was requested in how far the challenges by developing countries were appropriate. In this line of argument, it was asked whether PPP were used in the calculation of subsidies, which was not the case. The discussion took this as a confirmation of the possibility to question calculations on a justifiable basis.

In the second talk, Timo Walter presented his paper on ‘The market and its problems: How the bounds of knowledge(s) write modes of authority into economy and society’ authored with Oliver Kessler. He focused empirically on attempts to reform the capital market union. He put forward the puzzle, why established economic expertise was continuously applied despite of its failures. Walter considered the public as ‘the third’ an important part of the story. Thus, the ‘triple contingency’ of expertise had to be considered in order to take into account how expertise as such is being established and continuously reproduced. Taking the argument towards the Capital Market Union (CMU), Walter argued the rewriting of established rules had to be taken into account in line with its ‘triple contingency’: By attempting to change the CMU, rules were rewritten due to the meddling-up of expertise with established practices on the field. His project intends to analyses how the public interacts with expert discussions. It regards the translation of expertise into the public and then the re-translation into the area of economic expertise as societal reproduction.

It was discussed whether there was a specific notion of the appropriate outcome implicit in the presentation. In line with this argument, it was questioned whether it is useful to focus on confronting classical economics. This confrontation could be regarded as not bringing the discussion forward. Walter agreed that their concept on what compounds economics could be clarified.

The discussants valued the performativity of the case study as high and asked whether the contextualization of reform attempts could be considered further. Walter stressed the importance of performativity in the empirical case, so that far reaching reform could be considered impossible as a working system had to be ensured at the same time. These demands hindered far reaching interventions into established expertise.

It was requested whether existing sociological analyses of the CMU should be considered more. It was established that in the area of legal regulation some incremental reforms took place. Walter argued that on a systemic level these regulatory changes were not such sufficient. Still, he clarified that a clear cut acknowledgement of what is understood as appropriate change is needed.
Further, participants saw a tension between analyzing performativity while at the same time stressing the reproduction of the system. Assuming an abstract notion of systemic interactions, it could be questioned whether experts possess contingency at all. In contrast, the actual translation of expertise into action had to be considered. Walter clarified that they use system theory rather a thinking tool than as a deterministic social theory.

**Jan-Peter Voss** presented his paper on ‘Working for authority. The interplay of political, epistemic, and aesthetic practices in global governance’. He conceptualized governance as a way of knowing about and doing governance. Thereby, authority practices could be regarded as performative representations of a common condition. He focused on distinct modalities of these authority practices: Epistemic, political and aesthetic. While the focus had been mainly on epistemic authority, political authority as representation of a common ‘We’ should be considered. Further, practices appeal to aesthetic authority when representations gain authority from its ability to overwhelm.

Questions were raised in how far such an approached assumed a transcendental unity and in how far did it take into account heterogeneity in politics and science. Voss answered that the notion of heterogeneity was key to an approach motivated by STS. Such an approach regarded the notion of authority as referring to distinct cosmologies.

It was also debated if such a model of authority reproduced a specific western notion of authority – especially, if the possibility for resistance was not appropriately taken into account. Voss stated that the focus on the making of authority took into account the co-production by various actors. This re-production could contain resistance. He intended to go beyond de-construction to analyze as well the assemblages of practices.

**Session 4: Co-producing Authority: Inter- and Transnational Advisory Arrangements**

**Maria Weimer** brought a lawyers perspective in to the workshop and presented on the EU ‘laws of knowledge’ from a constitutional perspective. She argued that the making of knowledge and of the political and legal order had always been deeply intertwined in the process of European integration. Yet, with growing EU regulatory powers, an unprecedented transformation of EU’s epistemic authority had been witnessed and expanding governance structures
for the generation of policy-relevant expertise. From a constitutional perspective the main challenge of EU democratic governance (and transnational governance more generally) was to ensure that the use (including the generation) of expert knowledge in policy making is able to safeguard the public interest.

Weimer was asked whether the described contestation could take place especially in international organizations. She responded that the international environment could be related, on the one hand, to a lack of party political contestation. This made higher contestation unlikely. On the other hand, nation states did attempt to influence the selection of experts.

Moreover, participants questioned whether the EU intends to balance interests in its dealing with expertise. Weimer clarified that from a legal perspective balance needed to be defined with reference to every group. Still, there were no clear cut criteria regarding the selection of expert groups. Thus, members of expert groups partly participated in interest groups, too.

On the question of how the implementation of norms regarding expertise was controlled, Weimer argued that legally regulated practices were finally monitored by the court of justice. Still, no ruling regarding expertise took place by now.

Furthermore, participants discussed the interconnection of epistemic, political, and legal authority in the presented case. Weimer acknowledged that such an interconnection appears important. It could be reasoned that the established relation of political and epistemic authority is endangered. The rise of identity politics threatened the political authority of the EU.

Glenn Morgan and Michal Frenkel presented their paper, authored with Andrew Sturdy, on the role of international management consultancies in global public policy. They analyzed McKinsey’s involvement in promoting the REDD+ campaign, which argued for financing towards developing countries when these countries commit to stop deforesting. They argued that expertise and legitimacy are embedded in the particular structures and strategies of these companies. Their high cost/high value business model provides a level of resource that enables the firms to spend on ‘thought leadership’. This model builds on recruits who can be set to work on projects at short notice and who will be integrated into a global network of alumni. This enabled international management consultancies to connect the distinct scales of global governance to their advantage. However, they claimed that these firms are not all powerful; the
trust they have established with their key clients is less pervasive amongst the sorts of NGOs and social movements which have emerged more strongly since the 2008 crisis.

In the discussion afterwards participants requested why political actors chose this management firms in the first place. This decision could be caused by similar social positioning of actors in governmental organization and international management consultancies. Furthermore, it was argued that these enterprises offered procedures to reduce complexity. Thus, the shift of tasks towards management consultancies displayed a lack of trust in established processes of outcome generation: Political procedures had less appeal than business procedures.

It was requested whether these firms build on existing epistemic infrastructure. Morgan and Frenkel argued that political and epistemic authority could not be distinguished in the analyzed case. The case made clear that challenging the existing standard can have powerful implications. It was rather a question of technologies which made consultancies successful.

At the end the organizational dimension of the study was discussed. The effects of McKinsey's internal structure such as organizational slack and the shared identity due to the large network enabled its operations. In contrast, NGOs possessed only limited capabilities; this made it difficult to control these consultancies.

Session 5: Transforming authority: Behavioral Public Policy

The final two presentations had both a focus on behavioural public policies. Reflecting on knowledge transfer in the field of behavioural public policies, Katrin Loer presented a heuristic framework to elaborate possibilities of knowledge transfer. This framework – the Political Process Inherent Dynamics Approach (PIDA) – focuses on the permeability of actors and institutions. Permeability depended on the specific political system, the legal system, the political culture and the relationship between actors and institutions. Furthermore, knowledge transfer was often transmitted by experts; these experts could be regarded as scientific entrepreneurs. Holger Straßheim presented the spread of behavioural public policies. He explored the network of experts connected with the rise of behavioural public polices: Starting with the behavioural insights team set up by the British government, a network of close collaboration spread globally. Straßheim forward the following possible explanations for this success: Behavioural public policy successfully combines
epistemic and political authority. Thus, it is both regarded as building on scientific insights and as adopting towards local political contexts. Furthermore, behavioural public policies successfully combined the relational attribution of social competence of experts (social dimension), the procedures and time horizons of policy advice (temporal dimension), and the role facts and objects play in establishing evidence (object dimension).

In the discussion the following arguments were raised: First, the PIDA heuristics was put under scrutiny. It was affirmed that the model allowed regarding policies as answers to a problem they constructed beforehand. On the other hand, it was argued that the established Kingdon model could provide a similar heuristic. Further, it was requested why social life was not regarded as self-sustaining but only in connection with policies. Here, the authors responded that in contrast to Kingdon’s model, PIDA did not simply assume the coupling of streams but merely allowed for it.

Furthermore, the unique feature of the case was stressed. It binds together distinct authorities besides epistemic authority and distinct disciplines. Still, behavioural public policy could be considered as based on the academic discipline of psychology, too. Maybe it would be advantageous to regard a specific notion of individuality as the basis of behavioural public policy. These arguments were generally supported by the presenting scholars.

Then, it was discussed in how far the rise of behavioural public policies could be integrated in the established analysis of larger political developments. It was requested whether behavioural public policies could be regarded as a case of governmentality. Straßheim stated that such an approach was possible and was actually already applied by some scholars. Still, they aim for a different explanation in order to get beyond a description of ever-extending neoliberalism. Further, it was argued that the contestations of behavioural public policies could be regarded more. If they were not contested, this fact had to be scrutinized.

Other possible core defining characteristics of behavioural public policies were discussed: It was argued that the appeal of business logics could explain the rise of these policies. In a similar line, it was argued that behavioural public policies could be regarded as a machine, which promises huge impact with small interventions. The mobilized epistemic and political authority could be regarded as stabilizing the weakness of this machine. Additionally, it was argued that a specific notion of instrumental policies could be at the heart of behavioural public policies. These policies could be seen simply as a design choice without
too much new content. In contrast, the authors argued that the side-lining of alternatives still made behavioural public policies influential.

Wrap-up

Wrapping up the workshop, Holger Straßheim said that the intense discussions revealed the importance of academic thinking about acceptance and authority.

Important conceptual issues were raised during the workshop. Some participants argued that contested authority was no longer authority. Others regarded authority as always embedded in claims for authority which can be contested, too. The tension of both positions should be explored further. It was interesting that epistemic authority was still mainly connected with scientific authority. Other sources of epistemic authority – such as everyday knowledge or religious knowledge – were not regarded.

Further steps were considered: Intersections of distinct authorities (such as epistemic, governance, political, legal, aesthetic authorities) could be explored. These connections were still undertheorized: Do distinct authorities strengthen or undermine each other? Are some claims for authority more fundamental than others? Thereby, thinking along an adopted model of the policy cycle might be useful to theorize authority further.

Regarding epistemic authority, it remained ambiguous under which circumstances claims for epistemic authority become effective for policy making. Is the kind of knowledge, the connectivity, the templates, the networks, the promotion, the permeability decisive? During the workshop it was clearly established that some claims for authority lead towards politicization of issues while others lead towards de-politicization.

It was considered what had been missing in the workshop: Future discussions should cover how different concepts such as authority, beliefs, implicit knowledge, control or cosmologies relate to each other. Further, challenges to authority or processes of bargaining about authority such as resistance, protests or negotiations could be considered further.

Participants added to this wrap-up:

- The increasing plurality of constituencies was of huge importance. Therefore, trust and relationality had to be considered more.
- The procedural dimension of authority should be considered further. Trust could be an important part of such a procedural perspective.

- Spaces of authority should be considered and the relation of these spaces.

- The term authority could be regarded in contrast to the term legitimacy, which was favoured by some participants. Still, a way out of this confrontation could be found in referring towards claims of authority. Maybe the confrontation could be eased by distinguishing different forms of authority and their historical use.

- The differences between the front stage and back stage of exercising authority could be considered more.

- The interaction of global and national spheres of authority, thus the spatial dimension, should be analyzed in order to explore the “post-national constellation” further.

- The organization and stabilization of authorities could add to the analyses.

Report written by Luis Aue