Constructed Ignorance and Global Governance:

An Ecumenical approach to Epistemologies of Global Power

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Abstract

How can we account for the role of ignorance and knowledge in global governance? For thirty years, scholarship in international relations has focused on the role of knowledge producers, knowledge diffusion and learning processes in the governance of international affairs and transnational management. In this paper, we question the claim that globalization and the mobilization of expert knowledge in international policymaking inevitably furthers ‘enlightened’ policymaking. Turning to the study of ignorance and its instrumentalization in international politics, we build on scholars of agnotology, socio-legal researchers, science and technology scholars, and critical race theorists who have charted the emergence of ‘post-truth’ or ‘alt-truth’ societies, to derive a typology of epistemologies of power in which truth and ignorance are defined and combined in a plurality of ways. In doing so, we open a dialogue between sociologists of ignorance and global governance scholars that has yet to take place. Describing differing epistemologies of power in the transnational realm in a general or ‘ecumenical’ manner, we identify weaknesses in earlier, dominant approaches to the study of knowledge and ignorance in global affairs, and call for greater recognition of the constitutive role that ignorance plays in the operations of power on a global scale.
1. Ignorance: towards an ecumenical epistemology

Recent political events appear to offer a stark contrast between two opposite views of globalization and the role of knowledge in governmental affairs. Think about the election of Donald Trump. Much of the written press condemns a populist leader who uses and abuses the social media to relay rumors as facts, creates alternative truths about the adequacy of the election processes, and castigates the authority of science and cosmopolitan communities of scientists to express the common good, especially in fact-based policy domains like environmental regulation (Bobic 2017). In media commentary, ignorance and opacity are seen as working at multiple levels: ‘passive ignorance’ when voters in the United States can hardly situate Middle Eastern nations on a map even as they salute decisions to restrict those from the Middle East from entering their country; ‘willful ignorance’ when voters write slogans such as ‘climate change is a hoax’ on billboards or placards; ‘active concealment’ of facts when Donald Trump insists on keeping information on his global financial ties secret despite the public’s demand for transparency. Media commentators have thus posited an opposition between nationalism, populism and the creation of alternative untruths on one side, and internationalist, expert-led decision-making and transparency on the other (Viner 2016): ignorance is presented as a sort of virus that afflicts the uneducated and the weak more acutely than the powerful, while experts and bureaucrats stand on the side of reason, elevated as they are by the sheer authority of the organization they represent or the stock of knowledge which they are seen as commanding. This is a view that we dispute.

In this article, we seek to unpack diverse meanings and operations of ignorance in the governance of international affairs, the management of international organizations and the multiple ways by which nations of varying levels of strength and status relate to one another. We start from the assumption that ignorance in the
realm of international politics is widespread, multifaceted and relational: each type of truth-telling involves a different type of ignorance. Just as truth is often culturally bounded and tied to subjective perceptions of the self and the other, so is ignorance. Distinguishing between various types of ignorance is crucial to avoid conflating the kind of epistemological regime that Trump’s political rhetoric deploys and the type of selective ignorance that what we call ‘factual determinism’ creates. Even international organizations promoting fact-based policy recommendations and a heavy reliance on facts and expert knowledge, such as the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), advance hard knowledge as well as unwillingly (and sometimes willingly) produce new forms of unknowability.

When it comes to environmental science and governance, for instance, researchers have spent over three decades developing General Circulation Models (GCMs) which aim to predict interactions between different polities and geographical regions: atmospheric scientists wanted to understand how emissions in one place might influence other geographical areas (Dahan Dalmedico and Guillelmo et al. 2008; Pestre 2016). And yet, the computation models they cultivated under the leadership of the IPCC were dependent on available data sources as well as the necessity of conceptualizing relationships on certain scales—this was a crucial part of why climate change became a ‘global’ problem (Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin, 2015). The well-intentioned goal of charting globally interconnected climate dynamics led to an unintended effect, “which is the fact that contemporary GCM models are not capable of fully capturing the pace and scale of change in small or regional areas” (Balachandran et al. 2016) – a case of what Robert Proctor (2008:5) calls ‘selective ignorance.’ This has led to the exclusion of other paradigms which might have been developed using a more varied approach to combating ecological damages at the local or regional levels (Pestre 2016).

Another central assumption of our approach is that ignorance can and does win battles—and not just battles for political office, but battles for the re-ordering of the rules of international exchange, whether in the fields of trade and finance, or human rights and rule of law advocacy. This reality calls to mind Orwell’s famous maxim from the novel 1984, ‘ignorance is strength’. When interpreted as a simple empirical assertion, the veracity of Orwell’s phrase is impossible to deny: ignorance is strength—but not equally so for all nations and all citizens of each nation. For
instance, the boundaries that Trump draws between truth-tellers and liars might enrage foreign observers who can clearly prove that he routinely deceives the US public. But regardless of the anger he elicits, his boundary-making has empirically observable, world-changing political implications. A focus on the new US President’s ‘lies’ should always be paired with a focus on the ‘truths’ that his lies generate, including the most unavoidable empirical reality: that his lies – his illegitimate assertions – helped to put him in office, yielding him legitimate power. The power that his office confers on him then fosters in turn Trump’s ability to consecrate whole swaths of humanity as ‘lesser’ or ‘greater’ allies or threats to US security, creating global effects that are rooted in Trump’s ignorance, both feigned and real— also an effect of self-deception fostered by ability to postpone the test of reality, as documented by Hannah Arendt (1971) in the context of high-level foreign policymaking during the Vietnam War.

By highlighting the existence of plural epistemologies, and an associated plurality in the forms that ignorance may take in international politics, these papers thus build on new developments in ‘ignorance studies’ (Gross and McGoey 2015; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008; Smithson 2015) to complement and go beyond the classical literature in political science and transnational governance which focuses on the role of “epistemic communities” of experts seen as diffusers of norms, rules and policy diagnosis (Haas 1992). The main theoretical ambition of the contributors is to critically examine and build upon new concepts, frames and perspectives coming from ignorance studies for the field of transnational governance and the study of cultural, social and political dynamics between nations. To do so means to ask: What kinds of knowledge and ignorance are being produced in the global governance arenas? Do the concepts proposed by scholars who focus on various notions of ignorance, such as “misrecognition” (Bourdieu 2002); “strategic ignorance” (Bailey 2007; McGoey 2007, 2012; Pénet and Mallard 2014); “negative knowledge” (Gross 2010); “deception” and “self-deception” (Mallard 2014) and even ‘bullshit’ (Spicer 2012) capture the range of mechanisms at work in the making of ignorance and global governance? How is transparency imposed upon states and international organizations? What kinds of social and political resources are needed to produce transparency and/or opacity and secrecy? How can transparency or opacity be sustained over time? Which conceptions of ignorance adequately capture some of the ways by which international organizations, clubs of states and transnational
communities of experts restrict access to information that could be relevant to public policies?

Whatever its form, ignorance and truth are thus always the object of invention, negotiation, and institutionalization within context-specific vocabularies of power, which deserve careful analysis and systematic comparison. We term the methodological approach that we are calling for ‘ecumenical epistemology,’ defined as an epistemological position which asserts as a general, universal starting-point that ignorance can be an equally powerful political resource as knowledge.

In so doing, we counsel social scientists to follow theorists from science and technology studies (STS), as well as critical race and gender studies, who adopt a principle of symmetry, especially when they analyze public controversies (Latour 1987). By calling for an ecumenical approach, we hope to complicate the association between power and empowerment; truth and ignorance; governmentality and emancipation. To date, such a ‘symmetry’ approach to the study of ignorance has been lacking, particularly among scholars of agnotology who have tended to view the construction of ignorance as an inherently pernicious act, deployed by powerful industry or political groups to realize self-serving aims (see Gross and McGoey 2015; Frickel and Edwards 2014 for analyses of the limits of agnotology literature), or by ‘epistemic community’ scholars (Haas 1992, Adler 1992) or international liberal scholars (Keohane, Macedo, and Moravcsik 2009) who see in ignorance the sheer absence of knowledge, or the outcome of state lies. Opening the study of ignorance to social scientific questioning should lead to a disavowal of the belief that all national actors and international institutions articulate the difference between truth and untruth in similar ways. Describing these differing epistemologies in a general or ‘ecumenical’ manner which refuses to presume a priori that a ‘reality-based’ approach to the truth is the sole or even the most influential epistemological position held by powerful actors is a key ambition for the authors gathered in this volume.

In this paper, we seek to prepare the groundwork for future symmetrical research on various epistemologies of power and emancipation, by engaging in an effort of classification and typology construction. To do so, this paper is divided into five sections which explore the limits of traditional understandings of ‘ignorance’ broadly construed in international politics, and present various forms of ignorance operating in the field of international politics. We do not claim to provide an exhaustive review of the dominant approaches in international relations (IR) or
‘global governance’ studies, and list their understanding of power in relationship to ignorance and truth. Such a task would be difficult, if not impossible, due to the fact that these scholars rarely focused explicitly on the problem of ignorance, which means that their views on the matter remains mostly implicit. Instead, we seek to identify various epistemologies of power, which we will relate, when relevant, to a select (and very limited) list of writings in these other scholarly fields, especially when the latter have attended to questions of deception and truth in international affairs.

In the following second section, we focus on a longstanding epistemology of power which sees in the international scene the display of ‘hard lies’ –a view that IR realists have implicitly and sometimes explicitly endorsed– and show the continuities and discontinuities between what we call ‘cynical realism’ and ‘hopeful constructivism’, which relies on the blurring of the boundary between truths and untruths. In the third section, we discuss some other alternative conceptions of truth and ignorance. Here we distinguish between two epistemologies of power: one which we call ‘factual determinism’, and the other ‘agnostic proceduralism’, which articulates quite differently the relation between truth and untruth. The fourth section identifies lacunas within the field of ignorance studies, reflecting in particular on the failure to date to understand the importance of ignorance in emancipatory processes of colonial and contemporary nation-building: it shows that ignorance is not always an evil that should be fought against, but sometimes, a quality that can be cultivated by international organizations to impose the legitimacy of their own epistemology against those of others. The fifth section relates our effort of classification with the examples analyzed by the various papers collected in the special issue.

2. From Hopefuls’ Willful Ignorance to Realists’ Cynical ‘Hard Lies’

The construction of ignorance distinguishes specific vocabularies of power and governmentality. Depending on their political imaginaries and the discursive context in which they situate their claims to articulate a truth, policymakers, states actors, and international organizations construct various epistemologies of power and emancipation upon which they base their calls for action – and disqualify those of their opponents. An illustrative example can be taken from George W. Bush’s presidency, and the rhetorical strategies that he and his advisors used to justify the
The example stems from an encounter reported by US journalist Ron Suskind, after meeting an unnamed Bush aide who was later reported to be Karl Rove, Bush’s most senior advisor. Suskind met with the aide during the summer of 2002, a time of growing skepticism over whether or not US intelligence agencies had firm evidence about the existence and threat posed by ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in Iraq. When asked about the weapons, the unnamed aide told Suskind the following:

The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off.
‘That's not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality— judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do (Suskind 2004)

Bush’s aide did not dispute that journalists were animated by a legitimate search for ‘truth’ as truth tends to be conventionally defined, as the articulation of observable, demonstrable facts. But he insisted that journalists were incapable of grasping a higher truth, which was beyond the power of the media to grasp in the present, since the hidden gem only existed as a potential reality – the realization of which required the global clout of an empire. For Bush’s aide, positivist empiricists underestimated the superior, morally laudable ability of an imperial force to create history rather than simply adhere to available evidence. With the pious confidence of someone who believes himself to be morally superior, the aide allowed that those in the ‘reality-based community’ were often capable and well-versed in “studying that [past and present] reality— judiciously, as you will.” But he insisted that those at the helm of an empire had the ability to ‘act again, creating other new realities, which [journalists and fact-based commentators] can study too” (Suskind 2004). In other words, Rove juxtaposed imperial ambition, extraordinary foresight and the unwavering optimism of ‘history actors’ against the ‘reality-based community’s’
passive resignation to known facts. In Rove’s epistemology, empowered hopefuls can turn empirically dubious promises into actualized futures while ‘losers’ have only pitiable reverence for the status quo.

Ignorance always matters, but not always in the way policymakers, states or international organizations say it matters. Rove’s encounter with Suskind illustrates the political importance of two opposing epistemologies that are held by powerful actors which do not distribute truth and ignorance in similar ways: ‘factual determinism,’ according to which facts and knowledge have the highest ontological value and as such should be the legitimate determinants of individual and institutional action in the international realm; and ‘hopeful constructivism’ which posits that dominant actors such as the US President have a moral right to re-configure the past and the present and displace accepted notions of truth and error, and to blur the distinction between the two—see table 1. This example also underscores the value of a more systematic classification of epistemologies of power which we introduce in table 1. We suggest that this table can help social scientists to avoid ‘symmetry’ failures, which are sometimes common in IR approaches. Indeed, the latter, whether inspired by realism or by “epistemic communities” approaches (Cross 2013), tend to lend primacy to their own foundational epistemological assumptions in a way that hinders understanding of alternative forms of knowledge production and ignorance management.

This tendency is visible within the realist paradigm in IR, which, on the hand, has introduced important insights about the centrality of deception and ‘untruths’ to international affairs, but on the hand tends to overestimate the importance of ‘hard lies’ in comparison to more subtle forms of unknowing. The realist approach is not only a theoretical school represented by powerful figures in the field of IR, from Hans Morgenthau to Henri Kissinger to Kenneth Waltz, to cite just a few, but also a common conception found among diplomats, IO practitioners, and even the broader public, which in its simplest manifestation, assumes that national leaders routinely lie to defend the collective interest of their own country, as well as openly or quietly disregard the legal constraints imposed on their sovereign will by their country’s past treaty commitments, and maintain a strong police over the boundary between public
and private negotiations – see table 1. Deception in this case often resembles what John Mearsheimer (2011:63) calls a “strategic cover-up”, e.g. a situation in which ‘a leader bent on covering up a controversial or failed policy… seeks to deceive his public.’ This widespread use of decision is so common that it has even shaped our contemporary understanding of diplomacy ever since the envoy of King James I of England to the Venetian Republic defined the diplomat as “a man of virtue sent abroad to lie for his country” (Jay 2010:141).

There are many examples of such retrospective lies and cover-ups such as the lies expressed by the colonial powers (France and the United Kingdom) when they staged the invasion of the Suez Canal by Israeli forces in 1956; when former French President Maurice Mitterrand denied knowledge of a covert operation to destroy the Rainbow Warrior – a boat used by Greenpeace activists to protest against French nuclear testing in the Pacific island; when the Reagan administration lied about its involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal; the lies of the Greek government after it adjusted the numbers of its budgetary deficit (Little 2012). The list could go on. Of course, not all lies are produced by government policy-makers or professional diplomats; independent experts often have an important role to play in giving credibility to a blatant lie: for instance, the medical experts and think tankers hired by tobacco companies to deny that scientific tests demonstrate with high degrees of confidence a relationship between lung cancer and smoking (Oreskes and Conway 2010). But lying in international politics (and international negotiations in particular) is facilitated by the lack of access to the sites of negotiation, cooperation and conflict within international affairs facilitates the production of such retrospective lies. It is still true today that diplomatic interactions often occur in both a public space where polite half-lies are expressed, and in a secret space where the actual meaning of mutual pledges is negotiated outside of the public’s eye (Mallard 2014:3).

However, this realist view may overemphasize the problem of blatant lies or cover-ups at the expense of appreciating more blunt or more subtle ways that state actors exploit and often seek to compound policy uncertainty in order to further national or disciplinary goals. In other words, ‘hard lies’ tend to receive more analytical censure and exploration than what might be called ‘soft lies.’ Equally, its prevalence makes it harder to think the singularities of alternative forms of lying that tend to do by blurring the boundary between truths and untruths rather than by strictly policing the boundary between public and private lies. For instance, when Secretary
of State Colin Powell attempted – and failed – to convince the U.N. Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that the U.S. possessed credible evidence that Saddam Hussein was buying uranium from Niger, that he also imported aluminum tubes to build uranium centrifuges, and that these violations of Resolution 1441 of the U.N. Security Council authorized the U.S. to take military action against the violator (Mallard 2014:2), he barely hid the secret agreement that the U.S. and its allies had already reached regarding military action against Iraq (Alterman 2004).

Such duplicity seems to display what we call ‘cynical realism’ in action, but it also illuminates the ease with which US actors moved between ‘factual determinism’, to ‘cynical realism’ to what we call ‘hopeful constructivism’ (as illustrated in Rove’s justification for US imperial ambitions) in order to ensure their goals were not constrained by a reliance on any singular epistemology of power.

3. ‘Agnostic Proceduralism’ and the Self-Deceptive Willingness Not to Know

The cynicism expressed by realists when they justify the routine experience of lying in international politics does not exhaust the attitudes toward truth and untruth found in the common life of diplomacy and foreign policymaking. Although lies clearly form an important component of state diplomacy, there are also more subtle versions of falsehood than outright mischaracterization of past action. As Jay (2010:8) has argued, the ambiguity of international negotiations ‘allows perhaps greater latitude for deception [and self-deception] than straightforward descriptive [lies],’ because the production of such documents usually ‘involves a set of unarticulated assumptions about the future context in which the condition is or is not realized.’ In his words: ‘lying is inherently future oriented.’ Policymakers, experts, and other opinion leaders can claim that they will not, in the future, violate legal or political commitments imposed by international organizations, when in fact, they continue to secretly advance toward the fulfillment of that prohibited goal, maintaining its ‘potentiality’ as a rationale for quietly pursuing covert policy goals.

The history of nuclear nonproliferation is a case at point (Mallard 2014): states can advance on the road toward greater “nuclearity” (Hecht 2012), while remaining within the ambiguous bounds of a treaty regime such as that defined and policed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and whose compliance is monitored by
the IAEA, the Agency of inspectors located in Vienna. Typically, uncertainty and legal ambiguity are also made visible within the textual body of the binding multilateral treaties, by inserting articles that draw legal boundaries within the range of future end-states: for instance, whereas the NPT characterize most situations as falling under the scope of the treaty, its article 10 still leaves enough freedom for its member-states to plan any contingency if the latter decide that some extraordinary action requires them to leave the framework of the treaty—and recover their entire freedom of action. Such future-oriented manipulation of truth thus begs social scientists to pay more analytical attention to the diversity between forms of ignorance found in the international realm.

A recent, burgeoning scholarship has explored this intuition by documenting the cognitive effects and associated forms of ‘soft’ ignorance and self-deception that are produced in domestic policymaking processes. In some respects, what we are calling the ‘agnostic proceduralism’ that we expect to find in international organizations (IOs) and transnational fora should not be surprising to social scientists: that ‘agnostic proceduralism’ expresses itself when bureaucrats stop questioning the assumptions underlying the policies they have to implement (Rist 2002), or where they formulate ambiguous propositions about future member-states’ commitments which they know are hardly tenable—see table 1. By emphasizing conformity to prescribed rules and scripts over reflection on effective ways to achieve policy goals, bureaucrats often evade the question of whether they believe or not that the regulations that their institutions promote have a real and positive effect on either the economy, international security, and rule of law promotion. In recent years, psychologists have carried out pioneering studies that confirm the widespread existence of such forms of individual strategic ignorance in decision-making. These studies have yielded considerable empirical evidence to suggest that oftentimes individuals don’t want to know more about themselves, or about the lives of other people, or the possible future repercussions of different actions. The future is uniquely consoling and empowering because of its unknowability and/or ambiguity (Hertwig and Engel 2016; Gigerenzer and Garcia-Retamero 2017).

And yet the willful denial of the social and political value of ignorance remains entrenched, particularly when it comes to IR theory (Levy 1994) and global governance studies (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000). Despite the growing number of behavioural studies from psychology and economics that confirm the ubiquity of
strategic ignorance in individual decision-making, as well as the plentiful disturbing examples of the ways that social groups invoke ignorance in order to rationalize their involvement with heinous crimes – what Stanley Cohen calls ‘states of denial’ with reference to practices of torture and genocide (Cohen 2001; Thiel 2015) – social scientists continue to perpetuate the erroneous belief that knowledge procurement based on empirical fact-gathering is an inevitable goal of international institutions and the individuals working within them.

One of the rare terrains in which research has questioned whether experts and bureaucrats in international affairs express a willingness to question their own assumptions and principled beliefs is, first, in the STS literature that has focused on the mobilization of anticipatory knowledge within present-day transnational security communities of experts and international organizations (Lakoff, 2007; Mallard and Lakoff, 2011; Aradau and Van Munster, 2011). As Aradau and van Munster point out (2011:14, 31), domestic and international organizations in charge of counter-terrorism policy now routinely deploy forecasts and scenarios about the future, but they rarely do so to test hidden policy assumptions. Rather than analyzing the rise of probabilistic and fact-based reasoning that has been particularly prevalent within insurance business (Beck 1992; Porter 1992), these scholars have focused on new practices since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which turn the future into a site where unlikely but catastrophic events could be observed, although fictionally, through a series of scenario-making exercises (Aradau and Van Munster 2011:14, 31).

In the course of such scenario exercises, participants are not asked to question the plausibility of the improbable futures that they have been fictionalized for their benefit: rather, they are called on to enact the possibility that the apocalypse may happen in the future, despite (and because of) its very low probability. Typically, in these scenario-making exercises, the national anxious Self is confronted to its own catastrophic disintegration, assailed by an unknown foreign or domestic Other, whose motivations, power, and relationship with the Self are hardly known (or even, actively concealed to the game participants), but whose assaults are described in detail to the point of creating a sense of urgency bolstered by the realization of one’s lack of preparedness (Mallard and Lakoff, 2011). Thus, the unpredictability of a situation said to be uncertain is constructed through knowledge techniques which enable the unknowability of the situation to be actively nurtured rather than resolved, to the point that the distinction between truth and likelihood on the one hand, and untruth and
plausibility on the other, is blurred. Actively construing certain envisioned scenarios as belonging to the realm of the unplanned, the unwanted, or the uncontainable (McGoey 2009; Pénet, this volume; Taussig et al 2013), may also tend in practice to foreclose the types of questions that can be asked about the success or failure of a particular policy paradigm: in that sense, they militate to undermine the legitimacy of more traditional prudential risk-based approaches to international “insecurities” (Bigo 2004).

A second exploration by social scientists of how experts and bureaucrats contribute to the production of ignorance in international affairs, even when they claim to fight the opacities of traditional state politics, is the literature on the production of indicators, ratings, benchmarks which now circulate everywhere in the transnational world of global media and international organizations ((Espeland and Sauder 2007; Espeland and Vannebo 2007; Davis, Fisher, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012). The recent emphasis by IOs and transnational expert groups on the production of indicators also participates in actively construing policy assumptions as belonging to the realm of the certain and unquestionable global—in the sense of universally shared—and consensual common sense. Indeed, working within the Foucaultian tradition, sociologists and socio-legal scholars have focused in particular on the mobilization of ‘auditing technologies’ (Rose and Miller 1992; Strathern 2000; Power 1997) and indicators used to evaluate compliance and performance, and they have showed how the practice known as ‘governance by indicators’ (Davis, Fisher, Kingsbury, and Merry 2012) has created new power asymmetries between regulators and producers of yardsticks, indexes, and ratings (whose practices and policy assumptions remain unquestioned) on the one hand, and the nations and private entities whose practices are classified, quantified, and benchmarked on the other hand. Most ‘global governance’ apologists who applaud the increasing use of benchmarking in policy research forget to underline that, for example, rating agencies and other benchmarking firms involved in policy evaluation are not particularly good at their job (judging by their failure to forecast sovereign defaults in the late 2000s). Furthermore, the global move toward financial de-regulation, combined with the increased production of ratings and ad hoc assessments by private credit rating agencies (CRAs), has created incentives for international organizations such as the IMF to hide some of the economic risks associated with the policies CRAs rate highest, in order to avoid confronting CRAs’ economic assumptions—as a sudden
downgrade could provoke a panic among market actors and a global crash (Pénet and Mallard 2014). As a result of this questionability of the evaluators’ assumption, the distinction between policy failure and success is conveniently blurred (Best 2014).

Thus, whereas a now growing body of literature on global governance has insisted on the epistemic gains produced by the new presence of experts and knowledge in international policymaking, with its thousands of transnational multi-stakeholder regulatory platforms (Büthe and Mattli 2011), we build on these various trends in STS scholarship and socio-legal research to insist on the necessity to pay attention to the expansion of ignorance in new zones where active self-deception is pursued by coalitions of transnational interests and international organizations. With the appearance of a new form of ‘transnational governance’ (Djelic and Sahlin Andersson 2006; Abbott and Snidal 2009; Halliday and Shaffer 2014), we acknowledge that experts and knowledge producers indeed play a key role, by setting up global norms, establishing best practices and monitoring compliance with contractual commitments, whether their expertise concerns financial regulation, climate change, nuclear proliferation, human rights, or labor policies; but we also pay attention to the fact that they often remain as unreflexive about their own practices as they are inquisitive about their subjects’ practices, thus often compounding pre-existing asymmetries of power based on race, gender, class and other social markers.

We call on social scientists to pay more attention to the ways ignorance is managed and produced within such transnational contexts, where we can find more or less reflexive uses of ignorance for strategic goals. Indeed, scenario-making exercises of the type described above only form the most active ways of creating that kind of soft ignorance and self-deception which we find in other bureaucracies. Sometimes, international bureaucracies only have to rely on what Terry Halliday (in this volume) calls “plausible folk theories” (PFTs) to ensure that policy assumptions and principled beliefs remain untested—hence, the reason why ‘agnostic proceduralism’ is situated on the bottom line of table 1. But plausible folk theories also blur the distinction between hard factual knowledge, which is positively backed by observable and painstakingly amassed empirical generalities, and untested principled beliefs. As in the case of the discourses deployed by the World Bank in particular, these PFTs’ parsimony, face validity, and rhetorical compactness, allow unexamined premises and logics to remain unchallenged: by affirming multiple times short, simple compact messages—like ‘global governance is good’ (Moretti and Pestre 2015)—, they
imprint on the public’s mind the notion that truths and untruths are not ontologically different but rather, two variations of the same color. These PFTs thus share many characteristics associated with the way ‘bullshit’—in the words of philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005)—operates in organizations: as “a form of discourse which roves across topics, buzz words and conjectures without stopping to test its own worthiness against any criteria of truth (whether that be a comparison with empirical reality, basic criteria of reason or some kind of inter-subjective checking against broadly shared social understandings of reality)” (quoted in Spicer 2013:657) For instance, as Moretti and Pestre (2015) show, part of the self-validating component of what Halliday (in this volume) calls a PFT is achieved by tautology: “packing numbers of positive and mutually reinforcing terms into the same theoretical formulation, and deploying terms that convey a good in itself (e.g. ‘governance’ is assumed to be good by definition).”

Often, the generation of new unknowns through such reorganization can seem paradoxical, particularly given that such restructuring has often resulted from efforts to counter the prevailing opacity that characterized international relations before the twentieth century (Keohane, Macedo, and Moravcsik 2009). But such a paradox should not come as a surprise, as in many policy fields, the lack of attention being paid to the effectiveness and impact of policies, which is built on the asymmetries between (unreflexive) knowing subjects and the (reflexive) objects of knowledge whose behavior is heavily scrutinized (Lorentz 2012), is redoubled by the fact that the latter mapped onto international asymmetries of power between the great and the less advantaged nations of the world—a situation that is so entrenched that we, social scientists, forget that the management and ownership of private rating agencies which rate countries’ economic policies is dominated by US (private) actors (Krisch 2005), something that subordinates non-US voices to US authorities in public policy debates. Thus, the transnational governance by indicators has often lead to redouble old social divisions with new hierarchies of expertise between those who can legitimately ‘know’ the nature of transnational problems and those who can be legitimately excluded (Hardt and Negri 2000; Blyth 2002).

More generally, ‘soft governing’ or ‘soft regulation’ happens in great part through various kinds of socialization, acculturation, peer pressure and persuasion mechanisms that often diffuse and propagate ‘superior ways of being and doing’ as if they had a priori righteousness underpinning their existence, even when that claim to
righteousness is either left unarticulated or rationalized in a rhetorically meaningless or circular way, such as by justifying the new method through terming in ‘modern’ rather than ‘traditional’ (Meyer et al. 1997). When boundaries are drawn between the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional,’ a symbolic violence—e.g. a ‘violence that is soft, invisible, unknown as such, chosen as much as suffered, a violence that is full of trust, obligation, personal loyalty, gift and debt, from mutual recognition and piety, and all these notions associated with the morality of honor’ (Bourdieu 1980:219)—is exercised within international affairs. Adopting an ‘ecumenical’ approach to the study of epistemologies of power in the global administration of things and the broader ordering of human and non-human beings seeks to address these ‘symmetry failures’ associated with classical approaches to global governance.

4. **Willful Ignorance as Resistance to Power**

The knowledge techniques by which experts and states made some parts of their society either legible or invisible do not date from and the rise of transnational governance in the last thirty years (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ferguson 2005). Colonial states have long relied on a range of tools such as maps, categorization or statistics to represent society, make it ‘legible’ and allow intervention on it (Das 2004; Jayasuriya 2004; Mitchell 2002). Scott (1998) analysed the technologies by which colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th-centuries turned vulnerable populations within the global south into objects of social scientific knowledge and experimentation, often assuming as a condition of intervention that the latter lacked sufficient self-knowledge to contribute rationally to a better understanding of how to govern them. Scott highlighted how states purified the representation of various populations in order to subjugate them, and in turn how populations’ responses subverted the predictive logics of technologies of governing based on modernist visions. In other words, the governing authorities’ processes of purification – their strategic effort to annihilate or simply ignore native practices that didn’t align with a governors’ pre-determined concept of rationality – provided a means for resistance. Compared to the contributions of socio-legal scholars working on ‘governance by indicators,’ this point thus opens a new dimension in our understanding of the role of ignorance in international politics: indeed, the subjects whose behaviours have become heavily monitored by the rise of transnational governance can shape their
practices in order to move within the obscurities left by such new governance techniques. They are strategic actors and not solely passive observers in the battles of great powers and international organizations to impose new legibility projects.

Scott’s (1998) analysis and that of his followers are in line with a growing body of work from race and gender theorists who have developed more holistic understanding of ignorance that does not relegate it to a necessarily subordinate position to knowledge when it comes to understanding power structures. For instance, Alison Bailey (2007), building on work by Charles Mills (2007) on the problem of ‘white ignorance,’ has introduced a normative understanding of the phenomenon of ‘strategic ignorance’ that resonates with our treatment of ignorance. In our reading, as in Bailey’s, the deployment of ignorance is not inevitably a pernicious act, used to obscure ‘deeper’ knowledge, but is often a commendable individual and institutional survival device – deployed to realize goals that often command widespread moral approval just as easily as they invite moral rebuke. When found in the international politics such willful ignorance can manifest itself as investigators, researchers, and other data-driven experimentators seek to preserve the autonomy of their discursive and reflexive space from state determination: refusing to engage with the state (whether colonial or post-colonial) may lead them to willingly ignore certain types of data and assert the autonomy of science from the realm of politics.

Other strategies exist to counter the logics of state hegemony. For instance, Bailey’s (2007: 88) innovative claim is to suggest that various marginalized groups often strategically harness their own recognition of white ignorance in order to subvert it. ‘Strategic ignorance,’ Bailey writes, ‘is a way of expediently working with a dominant group’s tendency to see wrongly’. She gives the example of Frederick Douglas, an abolitionist leader and former slave who recounts some of the ways that he purposefully exploited other people’s ignorance in order to rectify his own. In his autobiography, Douglas explains that he was able to fool white boys into teaching him how to write by telling any white boy that he met that he was certain that he could manage to write as well as they could. Incredules that a black boy could actually read, the boys accepted the challenge, and would often delight over Douglas’s errors, showing him the various ways that he had been wrong. “In this way,” Douglas writes, ‘I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible that I should never have gotten in any other way’ (Bailey 2007: 88). Is Douglas’s deception morally questionable? Most would agree that it is not; that Douglas’s
strategic deployment of feigned ignorance was courageous rather than condemnable. Other laudable examples of the deliberate use of ignorance are visible in law; in scientific experimentation; and in employment practices (for a survey, see McGoey 2012; Moore and Tumin 1949).

The brief example drawn from Douglas’s autobiography helps to underscore why it is misguided to presume that the deployment of ignorance inevitably suggests a lack of moral reasoning or a rejection of scientists’ tendency to abide by the epistemic rules of factual determinism. In practice, the desire not to know, or the ability to feign ignorance, can function in practice as a moral assertion of one’s worth and one’s equality and a desire to protect critical dialogue from the threats of state hegemony. In societies where marginalized groups are tacitly or explicitly exhorted to ‘know their place’, the unwillingness to do so becomes a political act (Mills 2007). Despite the importance of this point, the onus to grasp its full implications is still resisted within disciplines that view knowledge as epistemologically superior to ignorance, and therefore tend logically to associate knowledge with the command and exercise of power. Until now, the field of ignorance studies has largely failed to extend this discussion to the arena of state relations. In general, the study of political regimes as well as the category of ‘nation’ itself has not been subjected to the same type of scrutiny that scholars of ignorance have extended to gender (Tuana 2006); the economy (Friedman 2005); or the development of scientific knowledge (Dan-Cohen 2016). The realm of international politics has been curiously ignored even by the scholars of ignorance who have tried to elevate subjugated discourses and constructed ignorance to a level of parity with investigations of knowledge production.

5. **Articles summaries**

With this volume, we thus hope to place the analysis of epistemologies of power, and the multiple ways they articulate truth-production and ignorance at the center of the scholarly debate on global governance. Not all contributors engage explicitly with practices and concepts associated with transnational governance, critical race theory, or STS scholarship, but all are sensitive to the ways that disciplinary understanding today across the social sciences can contribute to debating the place of knowledge and ignorance in recent trends associated with the rise of transnational governance.
Halliday’s article explores the way that IOs involved in the regulation or deregulation of the global economy, like the OECD and some of its associated agencies like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), are apt to present rosy and simplistic visions of the future thanks to rhetorical tools which Halliday calls ‘plausible folk theories,’ something he characterizes as having the follow core components: “parsimony, face validity, rhetorical compactness, ambiguity, affinity with extant beliefs, and unexamined premises and logics.” He suggests that plausible folk theories “appeal because they offer solutions that seem to work. They are optimistic… and they are cheap” – characteristics which may explain why IOs so often come to believe in the self-perceptions that they construct for themselves as agents of ‘good’ governance (Rist 2002). In the cases Halliday describes, deception stems less from a conscious act of cynical manipulation, but from the collective aim among IO employees to remain relevant to their clients in highly competitive policy games, especially if the IOs clients (member-states or private actors) require no empirical foundation for particular policy recommendations. Why would an IO invest in empirically testing policy assumptions if its recommendations sounded true to its clients? Here, calculative ignorance is partly fueled by economic considerations (computing risks and probabilities is expensive) but also by fear of losing the heart of the clients, whose policy preferences are typically already well-known to the IO. Thus, often empirical testing or retesting of core ideological assumptions presents a significant risk for the IO, which explains why for instance, “the FATF and IMF, as architects of the global Anti-Money Laundering/Counter-Terrorism Financing (AML/CTF) regulatory structure, proceeded with the maintenance of ignorance as a strategic choice” (Halliday, this volume). Here, calculative ignorance goes hand in hand with the maintenance of ambiguity over the kind of future that is envisioned by IOs (desirable future are often gestured toward, for instance, by pointing at examples of past achievements without offering detailed description). Furthermore, as Halliday writes, the “blurring of outcomes or end-states or what would constitute success or failure has indeed become a stratagem of self-defense by many IOs who cannot be held accountable for their interventions if no clear standards of success can be delineated.” For these reasons, the epistemology of power he exemplifies with the cases he reviews are closely tied to the ‘agnostic proceduralism’, which we presented above – see table 1.

Pénet’s analysis is focused on IMF loans to Greece, and specifically the IMF’s
use of scenario-mapping to extend the range of possible futures beyond the realm of the possible and plausible. In Pénet’s words, “scenarios and forecasts not only model the future, they also shape the present with distributive effects on the type of decisions that actors can undertake” (Pénet, this volume; see also Mallard and Sgard 2016). Pénet suggests that a tacit obligation placed on IMF risk-management experts was the need to obscure the risks associated with the conditionalities imposed upon the Greek government in exchange for debt reimbursement relief and restructuring. A key underlying objective for IMF policymakers was to deflect attention to the fact that the main beneficiaries of the Greek program would be the creditors of the country, whose loans were secured through additional IMF funding. Pénet argues that IMF experts on debt sustainability manipulated the probabilities associated with various debt scenarios, thereby allowing policymakers to circumvent binding organizational rules that should have prevented the Fund from offering more loans to Greece. Still, here, the case presented is not exactly a case of cynical realism, which would assume the active policing of the boundary between public lies and private conspiracy. In fact, the IMF left many clues for those who could decipher them that its staff did not see eye to eye with the European authorities who insisted on hiding the possibility of failure. Here again, we see the deployment of a kind of ‘agnostic proceduralism’, whose robustness was however tested more quickly than the predictions formulated by Halliday would have us believe. In fact, a minority of insiders within the IMF repeatedly (even if vainly) tried to publicize their opposition to the continued austerity policies and called for higher self-reflexivity on the part of the European financial authorities, showing that plausible folk theories are themselves dynamic and subject to reversals.

Seroussi’s article also attends to the ancillary risks of knowledge production within IOs. Empirically, his analysis centers on the prosecution of Mathieu Ngudjolo and Germain Katanga, two militiamen from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who separately stood trial before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes alleged to have occurred during the Second Congo War. Ngudjolo was acquitted, while Katanga was later convicted – one of the very few convictions to have occurred at the ICC during its nearly 15-year history. As Seroussi describes, the cases hinged on the difficulty of ‘translating’ (Latour 1987) the individual responsibility of war criminals into a juridical language grounded on an established jurisprudence, as well as the difficulty of gathering reliable factual evidence from war
zones or former war zones. Indeed, as Seroussi notes, the collection of evidence is one of the most difficult tasks in judgments about contemporary conflicts such as the war in the Congo, because the ICC lacks investigative capacities, and because violence is often ongoing, making the work of prosecutors almost impossible to achieve. To address this problem, Seroussi suggests that ICC judges purposefully devised an amended theory of responsibility which, although it had figured explicitly in only a relatively limited set of precedents, had the seeming merit of enabling prosecutors to prove the guilt of the accused by appealing to facts that seemed uncontroversial to ascertain (such as the biological age of the child soldiers who the accused were accused of recruiting), as well as by pointing to the conduct of different platoons, whose visible actions could be upheld as evidence of the guilt of both officers and soldiers (as the latter were assumed to automatically comply with the orders of the first). Seroussi’s article reinforces a key insight from ignorance studies: that solutions designed to solve internal organizational issues often create more problems than they resolve. He suggests that the ICC judges were not fully convinced by the jurisprudence associated with their own adopted theory of responsibility, but they chose it for pragmatic reasons – a strategy that backfired as the cross-examination of witnesses seemed to reveal how little ICC prosecutors knew about the context and organizational behavior of guerilla units, since it appeared that responsibility for war crimes was distributed among a much wider range of actors than anticipated. The ‘translation’ devised by ICC stakeholders ultimately failed.

Niederberger’s article also focuses on local knowledge-procurement and the unexpected or intended costs and risks of information collection. His article pays particular attention to the ways that increased knowledge can undermine client relationships at IOs by yielding new information that IOs might have little organizational desire or ability to act upon. In his words, “Knowledge means power, but pursuing knowledge empowers others” (Neiderberger, this volume). Empirically, his article examines the role of UN Panels of Experts who are tasked by the Security Council to carry out investigations into issues such as human rights abuse and the violation of economic sanctions. Officials and adjunct experts working for international organizations are often acutely aware that their investigative powers are very limited, and that attempts to overcome these limitations while in the field can expose them to the risk of dependency and gift expectations from their interlocutors. In such instances, according to Neiderberger, appointed UN experts often seek to
nurture “investigative ignorance.” He suggests that this tactic is often deployed in order for UN-appointed experts to maintain their independence and autonomy when deployed to local fields – rather than necessarily for the sake of blame-avoidance. Thus, this article moves the focus of the issue away from the analysis of ‘agnostic proceduralism’ and closer to what we termed ‘factual determinism,’ as characterized by the willingness to thwart knowledge from emerging that might erode the experts’ autonomy to carry out critical investigations effectively and their consequent reliance, for better or for worse, on more circumscribed data – see table 1.

Heimer’s article explores the World Health Organization’s (WHO) response to the 2002-2003 SARS epidemic. Her analysis raises similar points as Niederberger on the incentives for a ‘will to ignorance’ (McGoey 2007) within large organizations, but with different directionality. Rather than shielding themselves from knowledge that could compromise their own individual scope for action, the experts she engages with are preoccupied with the dilemma of how to act decisively when an evidence-base is weak or compromised by an actor’s incentives to hide or minimize the threats posed by emergent information. In this case, Chinese health officials faced the possibility of severe domestic legal repercussions if they prematurely warned the WHO of the global dangers suggested by early signs of an ‘atypical pneumonia’ virus. They were therefore slow to alert the WHO. Staff at WHO, meanwhile, were restrained by international health regulations from acting as urgently as some insiders wanted to act, because legal regulations limited the UN health agency from declaring health emergencies until they had official information from a state actor about the scale of a looming health catastrophe. A range of stakeholders began leveraging information leaks – gossip; rumour; local knowledge – to pressure the Chinese government to issue official reports about the scale of the virus’s spread; socially sufficient information, in Heimer’s framing, was thus molded into the type of technically sufficient information that WHO staff required in order to be able to effectively act.

Mallard’s article presents a case wherein the creation of ignorance is more closely linked to the adoption of an epistemology of ‘cynical realism’. Here, rather than documenting the formulation of lies at one point in time, he deploys the effects that cynical lying has on successive cycles of policy reformulations, and he introduces the concept of “antagonistic recursivities” to capture a joint process of jurisdictional national expansion and covert executive action, the effect of which can undermine the ambition to expand jurisdictionally. Through an empirical study of nuclear
nonproliferation efforts, he suggests that when a new cycle of international policy reform was introduced as the UN Security Council focused its efforts on fighting ‘private’ nuclear proliferation, these new policy measures compounded the risk that earlier national ‘cover-ups’ would be exposed, leading cynical policymakers to take steps to keep national secrets buried, even at the cost of derailing the new policies that they themselves were in the process of pushing forward. The resulting dysfunction in the policy realm can thus be explained by the need to maintain consistent stories across successive periods; to avoid the loss of honor that comes with the admission of public lies; and sometimes, the need to protect one’s own record in government to avoid judicial prosecution. As comes clear from his analysis, ‘cynical realists’ did not gain more power by trying to cover their tracks and avoiding public criticism; rather, they enclosed themselves in a self-defeating sequence whose direction they could hardly reverse—a process reminiscent of the cycle of lies and self-deception at work during the Vietnam war (Arendt 1971). This illustrates one famous quote from one of the favorite authors of neo-conservative foreign policy thinkers, Ayn Rand, who writes in *Atlas Shrugged* that

> People think that a liar gains a victory over his victim. What I’ve learned is that a lie is an act of self-abdication, because one surrenders one’s reality to the person to whom one lies, making that person one’s master, condemning oneself from then on to faking the sort of reality that person’s view requires to be faked…The man who lies to the world, is the world’s slave from then on. (Rand 1957)

Thus, cynical realism may not always be the preferred epistemology of the all-powerful, but rather, the mark of fragility among leaders whose position of power no longer allows them to assert the absence of ontological difference between truth and untruth.

6. Conclusion

Our term ‘ecumenical epistemology’ helps to develop a vocabulary of epistemological equilibrium, furnishing a semantic means to keep in check the instinctual inclination to inevitably associate ignorance with negative individual or
group characteristics such as powerlessness or stupidity. In the social sciences, there still remains a widespread presumption that knowledge is more powerful than ignorance, despite ample evidence of the many ways that it is does not. Take the anecdote from Suskind that we related earlier – his exchange with the Bush advisor. Suskind reported the aide’s disparaging remarks about ‘the reality based community’ in a quietly high-minded way, relying on readers to decipher who the fool was in the retelling. Clearly, it is the Bush aide who comes across as a self-righteous ideologue – one whose anti-scientific delusion, if not lunacy, stems from his obvious disdain for the value of empirical truth. And yet, if the off-hand quip had been deemed scientifically notable itself – as evidence of a widely held belief among US neoconservatives that the US is and should be treated as exceptional in every way, and thus not beholden to either international law or accepted conventions of scientific truth – then perhaps the emergence today of ‘alternative facts’ would not strike so many observers as the anomaly that they wish to see it as.

By providing an original perspective on the way truth and ignorance combine themselves in international politics, we hope to convince sociologists and social scientists to rethink the terrain of moralism and develop more nuanced understanding of the multiple ways by which the powerful draw on ignorance to further subject those without power to their domination – and how the powerless battle that imposition. If the realist approach is dogged by a soft of excessive cynicism, perpetually readied to discern and to censure blatant state lies even while less obvious forms of concerted ignorance pass unremarked, social scientists should not underestimate the way that seemingly benign efforts to foster more transparency at the global level can result in opposite effects to the goals envisioned. We hope that our collective mapping effort and typology-building exercise will open a way forward for future analyses of how epistemologies of power contribute to emancipate and/or reproduce hierarchies of power at the global scale.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of relations that are being wilfully ignored*</th>
<th>Asymmetries of power between nations</th>
<th>Legal/natural constrains &amp; givens</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ontological status of ignorance vs. truth</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear status (truth and lies clearly distinguished)</td>
<td><strong>Factual determinism</strong> - norm of sovereignty state equality - fact-based policymaking - willful ignorance of data whose production may engender power asymmetries between knowledge holders (IOs like IPCC or UN panels of experts &amp; epistemic communities)</td>
<td><strong>Cynical Realism</strong> - focus on great power politics - policymaking based on calculative alliance politics - legal opacity maintained by the policing of separate public/private communicative spheres (realist politicians &amp; diplomats)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muddy status (truth and ‘alt truths’ indistinguishable)</td>
<td><strong>Agnostic Proceduralism</strong> - universal inclusiveness - plausible folk theories &amp; new forms of anticipatory knowledge - strong moral underpinning for policy prescriptions (IOs like the IMF, the FATF, or the ICC)</td>
<td><strong>Hopeful constructivism</strong> - claims to national exceptionality and manifest destiny - denial of the applicability of fact-based approaches to global problem-solving - strong moral and personal underpinnings for policy decisions (neo-imperialist leaders)</td>
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* We represent these epistemologies as belonging to clearly distinguishable cells in a 2x2 table, which runs the risk of caricaturing positions, as well as erasing the continuities and zones of convergence between each epistemology. We are well aware that this representation simplifies reality for pedagogical purposes.

** In table 1, we associate the names of the contributors to this special issue with specific cells, in order to signal where the reader can find examples of such epistemologies of international politics. At the same time, these are approximations, as each contributor presents more than one example of epistemology. Hence, some contributors straddle one or two cells.

**Table 1:**
A Symmetrical Approach to Epistemologies of Power in International Politics