Seeing Like an International Organisation

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ABSTRACT International organisations (IOs) often serve as the ‘engine room’ of ideas for structural reforms at the national level, but how do IOs construct cognitive authority over the forms, processes, and prescriptions for institutional change in their member states? Exploring the analytic institutions created by international organisations provides insights into how they make their member states ‘legible’, and how greater legibility enables them to construct cognitive authority in specific policy areas which in turn enhances their capacity to influence changes in national frameworks for economic and social governance. By ‘seeing like an international organisation’ we can increase our understanding of the cognitive and organisational environment that guides an IO’s actions and informs its policy advice to states, which enables a more comprehensive picture of how the everyday business of global governance works in practice. Instead of ‘black boxing’ international organisations, the contributors to this special issue demonstrate how studying IOs from the inside-out expands both our understanding of the policy dialogue between IOs and their member states, as well as how IOs and states learn from each other over time.

Keywords International organisations, cognitive authority, global economic governance, economic constructivism

How do international organisations (IOs) construct cognitive authority over the forms, process, and prescriptions for institutional change in their member states? This special issue examines this complex question through concentrating on the analytic institutions that shape how IOs ‘see’ the social environments in which they seek to effect economic reforms and embed particular intellectual frameworks as commonsense solutions to a state’s policy problems. The analytic processes through which IOs ‘see’ different societies and attempt to make them ‘legible’ through common systems of measurement and benchmarking standards constitute an indirect exercise of political power over distinct social, economic, and political systems, which rests upon the cognitive authority to measure, analyse, and prescribe institutional changes for states that is constructed by – and housed within – IOs themselves. While the processes through which IOs attempt to construct cognitive authority usually operate in the background – and tend to attract
less critical attention compared with more high profile activities such as the lending programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, or the World Trade Organisation’s (WTO) Doha Round negotiations – the lens through which IOs ‘see’ their member states nonetheless have important consequences for the content of their policy advice as well as the range and type of alternative reform prescriptions they provide. In particular, how analytic institutions within different IOs conceive the appropriate role of the state in the economy – and how they incorporate local knowledge (or not) – can act as an organisation-wide constraint that drives an IO in a particular direction and provides cognitive impulses that screen out alternative models of policy reform, or alternative explanations for policy mistakes, through erecting intellectual boundaries around the scope of policy imagination available to IOs in their everyday activities.

The issue of how cognitive authority is constructed within international organisations is closely linked to the following two big questions that continue to dominate scholarly debates in studies of global governance and the political economy of international organisations. First, how do IOs influence their member states? Second, are IOs actors in their own right, or are they hostages to the interests of their member state principals? Within the existing political economy literature on international organisations, scholars commonly seek to answer these questions by focusing on: (1) the structural variables that influence an IO’s capacity to do its job; (2) the domestic variables that influence whether or not a government adopts an IO’s policy preferences; and (3) the formal compliance mechanisms that IOs are able to employ to encourage member states to implement their policy preferences.

The analytical focus in these three common sets of explanations of IOs’ influence can be illustrated by briefly examining the extensive literature on the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) influence over its members, which together with the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has received the most sustained level of research among IO scholars. In the first group of explanations, scholars turn to international factors that constrain the IMF in how it influences domestic policy change. The most obvious constraint here is political interference in the IMF’s operations by its major shareholders through their dominance on the IMF’s Executive Board, which must approve all IMF loans, and as providers of supplementary finance for IMF programs (Gould, 2006; cf. Broome, 2008). In this scenario, the formal decision-making process within the IMF – as well as the opportunity for major shareholders to exert informal pressure – shapes the IMF’s influence when loan decisions are ‘politicised’ and explicitly reflect the strategic interests of its powerful member states rather than the needs of the country in question. The capacity for the IMF to exert an independent influence on domestic policy change is therefore constrained from the start if its major shareholders push for ‘soft’ loan conditions for allies (Momani, 2004: 895), veto loans for foes (Boughton, 2001: 1031), or promote policy conditions that serve the private interests of their major firms and commercial banks (Soederberg, 2003: 11).

The second group of explanations concentrate on the circumstances within a country that determine the direct influence of the IMF’s actions. Most important here is whether or not a government is ‘serious’ about enacting ‘IMF friendly’ policy reforms (Bird, 1996: 494), now defined by the IMF itself as the level of ‘country ownership’ of a reform program (Bird and Willett, 2004). As Ngaire Woods (2006: 72-3) suggests, the IMF’s capacity to influence domestic policy change depends on whether the IMF can find ‘sympathetic interlocutors’ in a country’s policymaking community, who are willing to listen to the IMF’s advice and steer reforms through the political process. For these sympathetic elites, IMF conditionality is not simply a
The third group of explanations of the IMF’s influence focus on the organisation itself, in particular the formal mechanisms it employs to achieve compliance on the part of borrowing states. Graham Bird (1996: 483) suggests that the IMF’s capacity to influence domestic policy change is greatest when the IMF insists on the achievement of explicit policy actions before a loan program begins (‘prior actions’), and when loan programs entail quantified performance criteria that provide the IMF with a clear snapshot of state compliance. In addition, Bird (2002b: 841-2) also argues that program completion depends on whether the net benefits of ongoing compliance (i.e., additional external finance) outweigh the costs that governments face from a loss of sovereignty over economic policy, which may increase over the life cycle of a loan program. Based on Bird’s research, the IMF’s influence is greatest when: (a) clear quantitative goals are set, including the conditions states must implement before a loan is disbursed; and (b) the marginal material benefits for states of maintaining compliance with the IMF continue to outweigh compliance costs. Notably, other IOs, such as the World Bank, have amended their view of what types of conditions should be imposed and how, suggesting that a measure of ‘criticality’ is required; that only critical policy conditions should be forged in consultation with the member state to maximise the chance of success.

Some or all of these explanations of the IMF’s influence are often found in studies of other IOs, which also draw on the importance of international or domestic factors to explain an IO’s influence or which focus on the formal compliance mechanisms that an IO has at its disposal. In particular, these three sets of explanations often serve to account for the policy influence of IOs such as the World Bank (Anderson, et al., 2006; Nielson and Tierney, 2003; Thomas, 2004), the OECD (Dostal, 2004; Sharman, 2006), the World Trade Organisation (He and Murphy, 2007; Ostry, 2006; Srinivasan, 2007), and the BIS (Chey, 2006). Where the contributions to this issue differ is by focusing on how the internal dynamics of IOs – and in particular how their analytic institutions identify and construct policy problems – shapes the influence they have over member states. By analytic institutions we mean the specialist units, departments, committees, adjudicatory bodies, and others housed by or linked to IOs that develop the cognitive framework for understanding and solving policy problems. Whether this is conducted via surveillance, through consultations, committees, research departments, or otherwise, analytic institutions seek to make an IO’s member states ‘legible’. Nevertheless, analytic institutions will reflect the IO’s priorities and constraints (including the Principal-Agent problems mentioned above). In this sense they are not free-floating or autonomous ‘epistemic communities’ (Haas, 2004), but institutions endowed with analytical capacities for a programmatic purpose.

While a burgeoning literature has developed in response to calls in the late 1990s for scholars to pay more attention to explaining the internal workings of IOs (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999: 726), much of this has focused on contributing to our understanding of change within IOs (Momani, 2005a, 2005b; Park, 2006; Vetterlein, 2006; Woods and Lombardi, 2006), instead of connecting the internal business of IOs with their external influence (see Gould, 2006; Park and Vetterlein, 2010). Rather than exploring internal dynamics in order to identify bureaucratic ‘pathologies’ that distort policy outcomes, the authors in this special issue are interested in how an IO’s analytic institutions shapes and enables the organisation’s overall capacity for external influence. The authors in this issue recognise that the activities of IOs are geared not simply
towards achieving member state compliance with specific policy regimes, but also aim at encouraging broader institutional change within member states and fostering new ways of thinking about economic and social governance. By ‘seeing like an IO’, the articles in this special issue seek to expand our knowledge of the links between IOs’ internal processes and their external outcomes.

Seeing Like an IO
The articles in this special issue aim to break new ground in understanding the sources of IOs’ influence on states by studying IOs from the inside-out to enrich our understanding of their policy dialogue with member states. We take inspiration from James C. Scott’s (1998) *Seeing Like a State* to suggest that by ‘seeing like an IO’ we can increase our understanding of how IOs seek to achieve domestic policy change and promote international policy cooperation, the ideational conditions that enable their influence, and how IOs attempt to turn these conditions to their advantage to achieve their policy preferences over time. In particular, we suggest that exploring how IOs’ analytic institutions see their member states’ economies and societies can increase our understanding of how they seek to remake a country’s institutional frameworks and promote international cooperation over a long-term horizon.

Scott’s (1998: 5-7, 11, 318) work focuses on how states try to engineer societies according to new forms of governance and control based on technical knowledge, drawing attention to the importance of the informal context in which change takes place and how this can frustrate top-down efforts to alter actors’ behaviour and the intersubjective ideas that drive their actions. Scott’s research provides a catalogue of errors in specific policy areas (such as scientific forestry, urban planning, Soviet agricultural collectivisation, and others) where a state’s overreliance on technical knowledge and faith in ‘high modernist’ ideology generated programs that created widespread social ills. Such cases are especially prominent in states with authoritarian governments and a suppressed or passive population. Under such conditions how the state sought to make the society ‘legible’ created a distorted picture of society that ignored local knowledge – or what Scott calls *métis*, the ‘knowledge that can only come from practical experience’ (Scott, 1998: 6) – of everyday actors and led to policy failures. Scott’s ultimate aim is to demonstrate that ‘seeing like a state’ permits the scholar to identify why local knowledge is important for any form of social engineering, and why this is particularly critical for analytic institutions charged with the task of policy design on a national or global basis.

Drawing from Scott, how IOs make their member states legible is clearly important in limiting the scope and content of their advice for economic policy reform and institutional change (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 67; Broome and Seabrooke, 2007). These effects may be part-and-parcel of the contemporary activities of international organisations (see Li, 2005; on the World Bank, see Neu, et al., 2006; on the OECD, see Dostal, 2004), but they are not manifested in uniform ways. Comparative analysis of how analytic institutions ‘see’ the social environment in which they act can therefore provide us with a stronger grasp of how IOs seek to influence and engineer change within their member states.

To increase our analytic leverage in understanding how IOs make states legible, the contributors to this special issue focus on specific policy areas rather than taking an across-the-board approach (including the IMF and capital account liberalisation, the World Bank and poverty reduction, the BIS and financial supervision, the OECD and tax reform, and the WTO and trade legalisation). As James Vreeland (2006: 363) suggests, studies that attempts to measure
the influence of IOs such as the IMF by creating aggregate indices of ‘policy compliance’ risk treating reforms across different policy areas as functionally equivalent. The problem with this approach is that IOs are likely to find some policy areas easier to reform than others, with the consequence that their influence over domestic policy change may either be exaggerated (in the case of reforms in less-demanding policy areas) or understated (in the case of difficult policy areas where an IO may only achieve change through incremental steps). Although studying material outcomes is clearly important, in this special issue the ‘success’ of IOs’ attempts to change domestic policies is not assessed by whether policy changes produce improved economic performance. Scott’s work emphasises the need to understand how states make societies legible and to examine the distance between how policies are designed and how they are received by the affected population (including their relationship to local knowledge that would afford domestic legitimacy to reforms). Analogous to this approach, we are interested in relating how IOs ‘see’ to their capacity to persuade states to: (a) adopt; (b) implement; and (c) sustain their particular policy preferences over time.

Recent research that aims to ‘build bridges’ between rationalist and constructivist approaches to study international organisations has explored how IOs act to socialise policymakers in their member states to internalise new governance norms (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Checkel, 2005; Johnston, 2005, 2008; Zürn and Checkel, 2005; cf. Clegg, 2010a, 2010b). Rather than focusing on the alleged end point of socialisation – the internalisation of new norms by state actors (cf. Checkel, 2001: 554) – the articles in this special issue concentrate instead on the means by which IOs construct policy problems through their analytic institutions that then provide a resource for the respective IO to persuade national actors to adopt their policy preferences. Clearly IOs’ formulation of problematics to assist with the reform of national institutions and to enhance international policy cooperation seeks to place boundaries on how member state–IO relations should be governed (cf. Sending and Neumann, 2006). The persuasiveness of these constructs is closely related to their domestic reception.

We assume that, at every step of the policy change process, IOs must persuade national actors to adopt and to sustain their long-term policy preferences, and that the end point of ‘IO socialisation’ is never reached in practice because of the range of political variables and unexpected events that intervene. This point may inadvertently be obscured when IO scholars who work on state socialisation pick ‘slam dunk’ cases of socialisation in order to strengthen their argument, such as studies of socialisation in the European Union where actors can strategically deploy norm-based arguments that draw their power from the community’s common standard of legitimacy (Schimmelfennig, 2001: 48). Where a common standard of legitimacy is shared among highly socialised states, the costs of defection from common rules are high. However, because many of the IOs examined in this special issue seek to encourage compliance with international principles that, for the most part, only constitute ‘soft law’ (see Abbott and Snidal, 2000), the costs of defection are very low, even for developing countries that are sometimes assumed to be ‘policy takers’ with less room to manoeuvre around ‘global’ policy standards (cf. Bowden and Seabrooke, 2006). Middle-range cases of socialisation tend to receive much less attention because it is more difficult to measure the weight of norms independent of other causal factors. Nevertheless, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, IOs may be able to achieve a strong incremental influence on national policies over time, without necessarily achieving full adoption and implementation of their preferences in particular policy areas. In such cases, persuasion remains an ongoing process and states may frequently display an intention to defect
on their commitments to an IO. This may make them more interesting cases to study than highly socialised states, because of the greater potential for counterintuitive insights.

By ‘seeing like an IO’, the articles in this special issue aim to explore the co-constitutive relationship between power and knowledge strategies in IOs’ analytic institutions, but without seeing this ‘power/knowledge’ nexus as determinative of agents’ behaviour (cf. Foucault, 1980: 141-2). As Woods (2006: 54-5) points out, when IOs apply abstract interpretive frameworks to understand a country this crowds out local knowledge. Indeed, following Scott (1998: 6, 11, 22), we recognise that the generic policy designs that are articulated and promoted via the contemporary activities of IOs represent formal administrative schemes to organise and make visible a wide variety of economic and social practices, a process which necessarily simplifies how such practices are understood in order to extend public authority over them. Because each country has its own specific social and economic circumstances, however, the lack of attention to local knowledge can undermine whatever advantages the use of generic policy blueprints or cognitive maps for economic reforms may have for an IO’s operational efficiency. In particular, this rarefied approach may decrease the domestic legitimacy of reforms and consequently diminish the likelihood of desired policy changes being achieved and then sustained over time (Seabrooke, 2007: 264). Moreover, if we accept the critique that ‘any system of abstract and complex knowledge has blind spots’ (Evans and Finnemore, 2001: 8), then the apparent efficiency benefit gained from standardised solutions might instead produce new problems for a country where policies are not tailored to fit local circumstances, and may result in the failure of formal policy shifts to be translated into behavioural changes in practice (Broome, 2006, 2009, 2010a). While some scholars have suggested that the policy advice of IOs needs to become more customised and context-sensitive to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of member states (Seabrooke, 2007; cf. Best, 2007), such arguments presume that the staff of IOs and national officials do in fact disagree. What may be more important in terms of understanding the influence of IOs is to examine the areas where policymakers such as finance officials and tax authorities are able to reach agreement on policy reforms with the staff of IOs.

Framing their policy advice as ‘world’s best practice’ enables the staff of IOs to identify common economic problems across different national economies, and to link a diagnosis of the causes of a problem with a generic prescription for policy solutions. There is a clear efficiency advantage for IOs in being able to deploy generic policy solutions rapidly in a crisis, rather than assuming that each economy is fundamentally different and designing more time-consuming policy advice from scratch. As these articles show, the ‘best practice’ solutions advocated by IOs can also prove useful to country officials by lending support to their own policy preferences in national bureaucratic contests. Another possible advantage is that advocating similar policy advice may help IOs to seem fair and even-handed in their relations with member states. Official ‘uniformity of treatment’ by staff for all member states is one of the primary ways that IOs such as the IMF and the World Bank claim procedural legitimacy for their activities (Cottarelli, 2005: 19). But even if this is achieved in practice, equal treatment is not always synonymous with fair treatment from the perspective of an IO’s member states.

**Beyond the Washington Consensus and the Post-Washington Consensus**

The staff of an IO are usually the primary conduit for its relations with member states – a fact which brings to the fore the intellectual frameworks and the organisational ‘rules of thumb’ that IOs’ analytic institutions generate. While these intellectual frameworks may help to make specific
practices visible in ways that enable the exercise of authority and regulation, as Scott (1998: 76) points out the staff ‘of any large organisation “sees” the human activity that is of interest... largely through the simplified approximations of documents and statistics’. In short, analytic institutions’ use of formal measurement techniques enables IOs to accumulate a stock of ‘actionable knowledge’ at the same time as defining limits on how the phenomena being measured can be understood. Whether it is the United States, Sudan, Australia, or Uzbekistan, for IOs a country is therefore ‘an object that is looked at in a particular way’ (Harper, 1998: 183). This cognitive impulse is often built into an IO’s mandate when it is established, and may be a way in which founding member states try to limit the authority of IOs and prevent ‘agency slack’ from the start (see, for example, Pauly, 1997: 87-93).

For many of the largest and most prominent IOs, this cognitive impulse is often reinforced within their analytic institutions through a clear delineation of what information is appropriate. Accordingly, IOs’ analytic institutions do not view member states as cultural, religious, or military entities, but as economic entities that are to be comprehended through an analysis of their economic policies and institutions. Like Scott’s social engineering projects, policy making authorities will simply focus their attention on a slice of social life as well as standardised measurement indicators to recommend how policy might be improved. As a result, the frameworks used by IOs’ analytic institutions to catalogue a pre-defined set of circumstances in their member states constitute an institutional discourse that can potentially become ‘a creative part of the reality it purports to understand’ (Keeley, 1990: 91), by rendering a country’s economy legible according to criteria produced by an IO’s own practices. In short, the methods through which an IO tries to establish what is going on in the economic affairs of a particular country necessarily shapes the picture that emerges. When translated into policy advice that a state may act upon, this can have a practical impact on a country’s economy by defining a policy problem, diagnosing the causes, and prescribing new forms of regulation as the solution.

To be clear, our contention here is that an IO’s analytic institutions ‘see’ their member states in certain forms that have clear outcomes for governance processes and policy reforms. The intention in this special issue is not to portray IOs’ activities as simply expressing the ideological interests of a transnational social class, hegemonic state interests, or as generic outcomes that are determined by the prevailing ideational conditions among the major international financial institutions (IFIs). This latter view is hard to sustain given the substantial differences between major IFIs such as the IMF and the World Bank, despite the 1990s hype of a ‘Washington consensus’ on economic policy (Bird, 2001; Broad and Kavanagh, 1999). The common tendency of IPE scholars during the past decade and a half to treat the notion of a ‘consensus’ between the IFIs as given ignores inconvenient empirical evidence that should constantly call into question such expedient charactisations (see Broome and Seabrooke, 2007; Kang, 2007). IPE scholars have too readily accepted as axiomatic the notion that the IMF and the World Bank go about their business by seeking to normatively diffuse or coercively impose a standard set of neoliberal ‘Washington consensus’ policies in each case. Such an approach risks mis-conceptualising how these IOs work by excluding analysis of their distinct ‘organisational personalities’ (Vetterlein, 2006), range of socialisation mechanisms (Broome, 2010b), and investigation of internal policy debates (Leiteritz, 2005; Chwieroth, 2010), and can easily exaggerate the potential for IOs to exercise direct influence over national policymakers.

Sweeping criticisms of IOs such as the IMF or the World Bank for promoting ‘Washington consensus’ policies risk treating the putative consensus as an independent variable that explains
political outcomes, rather than seeing this as a political outcome itself that needs to be specified and explained. This can create a blind spot that prevents scholars from examining actions of the IMF or the World Bank that do not fit comfortably within a ‘Washington consensus’ framework, or explaining how IOs may achieve greater influence via indirect methods through the narrowing of policy advice and options rather than direct means such as formal enforcement mechanisms. Among other things, this might diminish our capacity to explain change within IOs, or may prompt researchers to see evidence of change as simply indicating a superficial repackaging exercise that aims to improve the organisations’ public image (Fine, 2001) and to further embed the same policies by couching them in more ‘touchy-feely’ language (Jayasuriya, 1999).

In short, taking notions such as the ‘Washington consensus’ or ‘post-Washington consensus’ as an axiomatic explanatory variable risks ignoring the importance of everyday contests over ideas between and within the major IOs, as well as between IOs and their member states – and thus presents a static view of what might actually be a dynamic and changing terrain. At issue is not whether IOs such as the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, or the Bank for International Settlements generally promote policies that could be accurately characterised as ‘economic liberalism’. Rather, the point is that within this broad field of apparent policy consensus are crucial intellectual debates over policy alternatives that can have significantly different political and economic outcomes (see Crouch, 2007: 262), debates that may play out in diverse ways and which can potentially stimulate dialogue about the role of norms, law, and even democracy at the global level (Cohen and Sabel, 2006). Accordingly, by opening up the ‘black box’ of the everyday business of IOs, the contributions to this special issue aim to provide a more nuanced perspective on the interplay of ideas for policy reform and the construction of cognitive authority within IOs and between IOs and their member states.

The Politics of Knowledge in International Organisations
Collectively, the articles in this special issue provide the following four main lessons of the benefits of ‘seeing like an IO’:

1. The construction of cognitive authority affords IOs a source of indirect political power through administrative standardisation, templates for policy reforms, and mapping national variations in policy settings that is distinct from – but can also enhance – formal levers of material influence and norm enforcement mechanisms.

2. Unpacking how IOs ‘see’ the social environments in which they seek to act is an important component of the explanation for why particular policy decisions are made (or not made), as well as for explaining why IOs often find it difficult to comprehend potential policy mistakes in advance.

3. Analytic institutions are a key source of change in IOs – both with respect to changes in operational policies and in the broader objectives and values of an organisation. In short, the analytic institutions housed within IOs can play a significant agenda-setting (or trend-setting) role.
4. Through the activities of their analytic institutions, IOs can potentially engage in the classification and regulation of new sectors of the world economy, with important consequences for different types of economies.

Interpreting how IOs ‘see’ the world and map the social terrain in which they seek to act is crucial for understanding why IOs promote particular policy agendas in different national contexts – and why these top-down programmes of action often fail to achieve the intended outcomes. Each of the articles in this special issue contributes a distinctive analysis of the politics of knowledge in international organisations across a variety of policy areas (including tax, capital mobility, poverty, banking, and trade). Rather than concentrating solely on the ‘high politics’ of major power influence on the activities of IOs, the authors in this special issue are concerned with unpacking the ideational dimension of ‘everyday global governance’ (Slaughter, 2003), whereby the analytic institutions housed within IOs seek to generate the cognitive capacities to diagnose and propose solutions for global and national problems. Yet ‘seeing like an IO’ does not simply involve tracing how organisations develop cognitive frameworks in order to identify and try to solve objective policy challenges. Rather, the analytical focus in this issue centres on how IOs’ activities construct both policy problems and policy solutions in their interactions with member states.

Just as the menu of alternative solutions offered by an IO in a particular policy area is neither comprehensive nor objectively determined, nor are specific policy problems identified, diagnosed, and understood as objective facts. The process of identifying, classifying, and diagnosing the causes of national or global policy problems is a political process at every step of the way, one which is shaped by the construction of cognitive authority within IOs in the same fashion as potential policy solutions emerge through an IO’s mechanisms to make different social environments legible, and open to formal intervention through policy reforms. This point is aptly illustrated through Antje Vetterlein’s article on how the World Bank ‘sees’ poverty. As Vetterlein demonstrates, the World Bank has been a major player in shaping how dominant conceptions of poverty have evolved over time, yet the organisation remains blinkered by its cognitive belief in the causal relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction. In this respect, the World Bank articulates a universal conception of poverty – despite dissenting voices within the organisation – which legitimises a standardised and econocentric approach to its social interventions at the expense of crowding out local knowledge and understandings of poverty. In addition, Vetterlein highlights how even IOs with very large bureaucracies can be reformed from within through advocates of policy reform utilising the influence that analytic institutions wield to challenge – and incrementally change – the overall political objectives of an IO and the instruments used to achieve these policy goals. This is a particularly important point to underline from this issue – how IOs see the world is not static, but necessarily changes and evolves over time. The construction of cognitive authority within IOs constitutes an ongoing political struggle over the ideas and assumptions that guide the everyday practice of global governance. It quickly becomes clear that such ideational conflicts are never definitively ‘won’ or ‘lost’ if the activities of individual IOs are historiscised by scholars rather than simply taking a snapshot of how an organisation works at a particular point in time.

At the global level, institutionalised forms of administration and surveillance that aim at achieving greater legibility (and, hence, greater centralised control) with respect to economic activities that cut across national territories have developed in different forms and at different
speeds in recent decades, as both national and international policymakers have sought to respond to the pressures of economic globalisation. On the one hand, the international integration of national markets for trade in goods, services, and capital has complicated – and, arguably, greatly diminished – the unilateral regulatory capacities of national governments of all shapes and sizes. On the other hand, however, in many policy areas the political dynamics of economic globalisation has stimulated the extension and expansion of international regulatory authority in the pursuit of greater legibility of globalised economies and a collective capacity to exercise (some) control over the mobility of economic actors and their material wealth.

Through exploring the evolution of contemporary projects aimed at increasing fiscal legibility at the global level, J.C. Sharman’s contribution to this special issue shows how the construction of cognitive authority within the OECD over global tax regulation is analogous in several important ways to the social engineering inherent in national state-building projects. The relative success of the OECD’s efforts to map variations in national taxation regimes is both conceptually and empirically important for the study of the political economy of IOs. Empirically, the OECD’s ability to corner-the-market on ideas for global tax regulation is surprising due to the politically sensitive nature of fiscal policy, which raises the stakes involved with any attempt at international tax policy coordination relative to other policy areas, but also because of the lack of compliance mechanisms available to the OECD in comparison with the material resources available to IOs such as the Bretton Woods institutions or the legal sanctions of the WTO.

Conceptually, Sharman’s examination of the cognitive authority of the OECD suggests that IO scholars can uncover counterintuitive insights through studying how political power is exercised by comparatively ‘weak’ IOs via dynamic processes of administrative standardisation, ‘soft’ forms of global governance such as peer review and peer pressure, and the construction of cognitive templates that inform both policy reforms at the national level as well as the content of subsequent bilateral economic agreements, which may create a stepping stone to greater fiscal legibility at the global level over the long term. A similar insight is provided by Kevin Ozgercin’s article on the Bank for International Settlements and the global legibility of financial supervision. Ozgercin shows how the policy preferences of the BIS have been shaped over time by the institutional design and normative framework of the organisation, which established a lens for seeing the world of banking that generates a strong interest in favour of private authority in global financial governance in general, and a preference for open financial markets and currency convertibility in particular. Moreover, Ozgercin’s article suggests that the fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis is likely to further expand efforts to increase legibility in global financial supervision, while also intensifying political struggles over the legitimate role that private actors should play in global financial governance.

While the contributions to this special issue concentrate on exploring how a variety of projects to increase legibility at the global level through the everyday activities of international organisations enable the exercise of indirect forms of political power, the political dynamics of achieving agreement between national and international officials on broad policy principles and ‘best practice’ regulatory norms often involve the deliberate use of ambiguity in order to paper over actors’ conflicting interests. As Manuela Moschella’s article demonstrates, projects to expand an IO’s administrative jurisdiction and cognitive authority to additional policy areas through new forms of legibility and institutionalisation sometimes go hand-in-hand with obscurity over the precise details – and distributional implications – of large-scale institutional
change. Through examining the ascendance (and subsequent failure) of the IMF’s campaign to entrench capital mobility as a formal obligation of IMF membership during the 1990s, Moschella shows how ‘seeing like an IO’ requires careful examination of how the institutional machinery of an organisation operates with respect to the construction of cognitive authority and the evolution of proposals for normative change. Even in the case of such a well-known and controversial organisation as the IMF tracking internal political struggles over ideas is a complex business, as Moschella’s article illustrates through her analysis of the different roles played by IMF staff, IMF senior management, and state representatives on the IMF’s Executive Board in the deliberations over the virtues of capital mobility versus capital controls and the future role of the IMF in an era of financial globalisation.

In some ways going further than the IMF in its failed attempt to create a legal obligation to establish and maintain capital account liberalisation among its member states, the World Trade Organisation has rather quietly extended its jurisdiction into the classification and regulation of new sectors of trade in the world economy in recent years. As Jens L. Mortensen’s article in this issue demonstrates, the construction of cognitive authority within the WTO has enabled the organisation to make legally binding judgements over how trade in particular products should be classified, a process which has enormous implications for the scope of national policy autonomy and the prospects of domestic export industries in different economies. In the cases examined in his article, Mortensen illustrates how states themselves often draw upon competing discursive frames that have gained currency within the WTO dispute settlement process in order to wage trade wars against each other, which both reinforces the central role of the organisation as the holder, enforcer, and umpire of international trade rules while simultaneously increasing the scope for the WTO to create new judgments, classifications, and intersubjective understandings with respect to trade governance through the ideational politics of the dispute resolution process.

Taken as a whole, this special issue makes two claims with respect to an original contribution to existing political economy scholarship on international organisations. First, by placing analysis of the politics of knowledge within well-known organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO side-by-side with explorations of organisations that have attracted much less scholarly attention in the IO literature, such as the Bank for International Settlements and the OECD, the special issue provides a number of counterintuitive insights with respect to the relative roles, responsibilities, and political impact of these IOs. For example, the OECD is revealed to exercise a much more significant degree of trend-setting influence over global tax policy standards and benchmarks than might be assumed by a cursory examination of the organisation, in contrast to the common assumption that changes in national tax regimes are driven primarily by a combination of decisions by major powers, big business, and the activities of offshore financial centres. In short, the activities of IOs’ analytic institutions matter for understanding how the contemporary national-regional-global governance architecture operates as well as the possible future evolution of transnational regulatory regimes in the world economy. Second, the articles in this issue challenge some of the established explanations of the politics of influence within IOs and between IOs and their member states, especially the view that political influence in international organisations is primarily a matter of converting material power resources into dominance over an IO in a bargaining game model (or, on the part of IOs, using material resources to influence their member states). Control over material resources is certainly a key lever of power, but one of the main goals of this issue is to illustrate the importance of also understanding how IOs – in their capacity as intellectual actors – construct and deploy a variety
of different forms of cognitive authority to shape the policy preferences, politics, and values of actors in the social environments in which they operate.

**Conclusion**

As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, the process of ‘seeing like an IO’ can help to improve recent principal-agent approaches to understanding IOs by reorienting the focus of analysis from member state control of IOs to the sources of their autonomy, and studying how this dynamic varies across countries, policy areas, and over time (cf. the chapters in Hawkins, et al., 2006). This approach can help expand the range of international actors that are closely studied beyond the ‘usual suspects’ of major powers such as the US and its Western allies, by exploring the various roles played in the everyday activities of IOs by private and non-governmental actors as well as by other international organisations (see Gould, 2006; Park, 2005). Following Scott’s (1998) critique of states’ social engineering failures, ‘seeing like an IO’ in the case of IOs such as the World Bank, the IMF, the BIS, the OECD, and the WTO can shed new light on how their analytic institutions inform policy change and governance techniques in their member states.

The articles in this special issue start from a basic, and yet seemingly counterintuitive, hypothesis: regardless of whether they have recourse to formal compliance mechanisms, the IOs examined here are not simply ‘policy enforcers’ that are tightly controlled by their dominant member states. Rather, they have significant sources of cognitive authority and operational independence. To do their job well IOs must harness intellectual resources to persuade policymakers in their member states to adopt a common framework for understanding new institutional challenges, which brings to the fore the analytic institutions IOs employ to make the economies and societies of their members more legible. By increasing the legibility of their members’ domestic institutional arrangements through standardised forms of measurement, IOs can compare policies in their member states and propose changes for domestic reform and international cooperation. As the articles in this issue show, IOs’ analytic institutions are often the driving force behind efforts to change state behaviour, by changing how national actors think about their domestic populations and how they conceive the appropriate role of the state in international policy coordination.

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