

The Narrative Hegemony of Smart Governance: Social Change through a Critical Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

The chapter discusses the impact of social change on how society views governance quality in the era of complex and interconnected policy problems. This era presents a valuable opportunity to revisit tensions between the deepening technocratic logic of formal policymaking and the social change implied by and reflected in the rise of alternative policy epistemics. The chapter focuses on the technocratic exercise of smart governance, as embodied by the smart cities concept, in considering the confrontation between late-stage technocracy and an emerging anti-technocratic agitation that manifests itself in the ‘local knowledge’ movement on one hand and in ‘anti-science’ populism on the other. Recognizing a mature literature critical of the hegemonic narrative posture of governance ideas, we explore the epistemic foundations of governance reform movements to more deeply understand a mechanism of narrative power that deserves renewed attention in the ‘smart’ era: instrumental rationalism. Smart governance, from an epistemic perspective, marks a progression in a sequence of ideas serving the long-running project to validate and normalize instrumental rationalism in policymaking. To connect this argument to social change, our approach combines the critical perspective of poststructuralism with the political economy perspective of world-systems theory. We postulate that ‘good’ governance is a vessel into which momentarily salient global norms are loaded, and that each successive iteration (e.g., smart) is considered politically viable only if emerging from existing institutional architecture and bearing the ideational legacy of instrumental rationalism. This process of narrative auto-replication yields seemingly novel ideas that are mere variations on a failed theme. The type of social change that can unseat this epistemic lock-in emerges from a more robust valorization of alternative perspectives, which we conclude this chapter by describing as an epistemic awakening.

Keywords: social change; good governance; smart cities; public policy; policy transfer; epistemics; Government Competitiveness

1. Introduction

Narratives about ‘good governance’ support and are supported by a global institutional architecture expressing itself through the normalization of policy ideals and practices. These narratives exist within a socio-political milieu that shapes varying iterations of governance reform while maintaining the dominant logic of instrumental ‘solutionism’ that underlies them. Beyond well-discussed tensions between universality and context, the diffusion of the good governance narrative (including, for this chapter’s discussion, concepts like ‘smart cities’ and ‘smart governance’) obscures or wholly silences efforts to challenge canonical notions like capitalism, democracy, and global liberalism. This chapter addresses the social and power dynamics underlying the ‘smart governance’ narrative, in particular how narratives themselves become hegemonic, evolve into ‘common-sense’ understandings, and replicate their own influence and legitimacy through global diffusion. This discussion builds on a longstanding scholarly tradition in public administration and development studies that critically assesses the diffusion of governance practices across heterogeneous contexts; most relevant to this study are world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1987) and core-periphery dynamics (Tickner, 2013; Gilpin, 1987). Our examination of narrative and epistemic¹ hegemony as a way to understand the diffusion of smart governance ideas takes timely inspiration from currently shifting dynamics around the political legitimacy of policy knowledge, as manifest in the rise of ‘post-truth’ politics (Lockie, 2017; Suiter, 2016), skepticism of science including climate denialism (Dunlap, 2013; Hoffman, 2011) and pandemic denialism (Lasco, 2020), and populist movements hostile to perceived knowledge elites and intellectuals (Motta, 2018; Rigney, 1991; Hofstadter, 1963). In particular, this study extends discussions about the consequences of social change as epistemic pushback – in an era when the normalization and diffusion of governance practices are coming into conflict with the populist and sometimes regressive politics of isolationism, nativism, and anti-elitism.

Our argument about narrative hegemony focuses not on the operational role of global institutions themselves (already well analyzed in the literature) but on the characteristics of messages they bear – messages that we maintain are shaped in the same ways over time by a dominant and enduring epistemic orientation. As such, our critical-analytical approach leads us to contemplate social change, narrative power, and political pushback by examining how knowledge for policymaking has evolved. We proceed by analyzing a long-running epistemic *leitmotif* – instrumental rationalism² – that buttresses decades of discourse and practice in policymaking, reform prescriptions, and aspirational paradigms like smart governance. We take a

¹ The term ‘epistemic’ is understood in this chapter to be the cognitive orientation shaping how knowledge is produced for policy purposes.

² Hartley and Kuecker (2021) define instrumental rationalism as follows: “the thought-system and accompanying rule-set holding that discrete and targeted policy interventions (as instruments or tools) can be successfully applied to problems expressed in knowable and well-defined terms. We use the term instrumental rationalism, as against instrumental rationality, in reference to a normative logic around which the policy profession structures its analytical thinking. If rationality is the act of being rational, rationalism is the epistemic rule-set and belief system that institutionalizes rationality.” Useful discussions of the concept with reference to public policy can be found in Schreurs (2014) and Alexander (2000). See also Hall and Taylor (1996) for a related discussion of ‘rational choice institutionalism.’

narrative perspective on the smart governance phenomenon in order to capture its reliance on epistemic selectivity in framing policy problems; that is, the narrative selects what is recognized in policy-analytical exercises and what is willfully unrecognized. This selectivity gives effect to a ‘common-sense’ narrative about the right way to govern while discursively silencing alternative perspectives even amidst the type of political and social change that now characterizes an increasingly contested policy arena. While many narratives assert their power in this way, the smart governance narrative invites deeper scrutiny because, in its technocratic orientation, it presents itself as a totalizing vision that is both comprehensive and context-adaptable. Lost in this narrative, however, is the recognition that it evolved from a particular set of narrow assumptions about public policy and more broadly about the relationship between government and society – this reflects the dearth and difficulty of voluntary self-reflection that keeps policy ideas fresh and relevant amidst evolving or disruptive circumstances (e.g., social change, geopolitical shifts, economic restructuring, and pandemics).

This chapter proceeds with a review of literature that provides the analytical basis of the subsequent discussion, including world-systems theory and narrative hegemony in policy practice. It then briefly traces the origins of the good governance narrative before discussing how the narrative has evolved and what this evolution says about policy epistemics more generally. Examining the concept’s origins and the institutions that maintain narrative legitimacy, the chapter identifies the need and opportunity for alternative understandings about governance to emerge – including new ways of thinking about and quantifying governance (an example of which is the concept of Government Competitiveness³). The conclusion reflects more broadly on the perpetuation of epistemic hegemony in governance, how the smart governance movement enables it, and how policy research and practice can challenge this hegemony in productive ways that prepare the field for the coming decades of increasingly complex policy problems, social change, and contested political settings. In so doing, the study identifies opportunities for scholarship in public administration and policy to more deeply and critically engage with the epistemic foundations of the field.

2. Co-evolution of good governance and instrumental rationalism

This chapter continues by addressing the role of instrumental rationalism as an epistemic orientation underlying the development of the global good and smart governance narratives (the latter a subset of the former). To this end, the analysis exists at the intersection of several literatures. Copious scholarship addresses the enabling processes of narrative hegemony across the social sciences and is well summarized in the field of critical policy studies by Fischer et al. (2015). Scholarship has also made progress understanding the mechanics of how global policy narratives materialize and how national governments respond to and adopt global policies (Sväterä and Alasuutari, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2011). Relatedly, there is an emerging literature about SDG localization that applies understandings about imbalances in power dynamics to the

³ Government Competitiveness is defined as “the power of government, in light of various constraints, to take resources from in and outside of the country and improve social, economic and cultural conditions of the nation in order to sustainably enhance citizens’ quality of life” (Im and Im, 2012; p. 13). Elaborating on the concept, Im and Hartley (2019) state that “the unique contribution of GC is that it goes beyond government abilities to manage or prevent market failures, and accounts for the importance of soft measures like social welfare as indicators of governance and determinants of [national competitiveness]” (p. 125).

translation of global policy into local (as opposed to national) contexts (Hartley, 2020; Patole, 2018). Finally, numerous studies have focused on operational, financial, and policymaking issues related to global policy transfer (Pal, 2020; Stone et al., 2020), many providing insights into policy practice. While there is an operable understanding about the role of power in the mechanics of policy transfer, there is less understanding about the similarly powerful if more obscure role of epistemic orientation. Efforts to fill this knowledge gap would connect theoretical studies about the nature of knowledge and understanding to the practical realities of governance reform, narratives, and international relations. This chapter is a step in that direction.

Identifying complementarities in ideas raised by the aforementioned literatures, this review begins at a high level by invoking world-systems theory (from the field of international relations; hereafter, IR) to explore the political economy of transfer in policy knowledge and best-practice governance reform paradigms. World-systems theory is appropriate for this endeavor as it takes the world, rather than the nation-state, as a unit of analysis. Given the global diffusion of governance reform prescriptions, the broadest unit of analysis can be considered the most appropriate. The intersection of world-systems theory and epistemic dynamics is captured by Wallerstein's (1987) comment that legacy modes of social scientific inquiry have been practiced in a largely uniform way worldwide and that they have had "the effect of closing off rather than opening up many of the most important or the most interesting questions" (p. 309). This claim is consistent with our proposition that the epistemic orientation of the good governance movement has a silencing effect on non-mainstream conceptualizations of policy problems (e.g., those that critique the underlying ideology of market fundamentalism, which continues to present itself as a solution even to the sustainability problem it helped create).

It is prudent at this historical moment to reflect critically on how the concept of smart governance, as a reconstitution of ideas related to 'good' governance, has moved beyond a mere policy prescription to constitute a global narrative and geopolitical force. World-systems theory posits that the world is shaped by globalization in a way that renders it a "single place with systemic properties" (Robertson and Lechner, 1985; p. 103). Under these circumstances, individual countries play a role either as the 'core,' 'semi-periphery,' or 'periphery,' leading to a whole with imbalanced power dynamics and regional differences based on respective roles in commercial activities (Kohl, 1987). While world-systems theory is applied most often to explain economic dynamics, it is also considered an analytical lens by which more abstract social concepts can be understood (Wallerstein, 1991). For example, broad applications of world-system theory that go beyond economic systems can be used for the interpretation of global policy dynamics. As such, we make the following proposition: if world-systems theory is instructive in examining the global economy, it is instructive also in examining the global policy discourse – including narratives around governance quality, sustainability, social change, and manifold other issues. In the same way that a one-world 'market' emerges in an economic context, a one-world discourse can emerge that becomes a dominant or hegemonic narrative influencing the diffusion of policy ideals (e.g., from a core with intellectual and political dominance to a periphery lacking both). Indeed, the processes by which narratives evolve and become coercive have been discussed through the lens of critical theory, including poststructuralism, in the literatures of organization science (Mizruchi and Fein, 1999), urban planning (Purcell, 2009; Forester, 1999; Jessop, 1997), and public policy (Wesselink et al., 2013; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Davies, 2011). Others have explored links to good (or smart and sustainable) governance among concepts related to the legacies of colonialism (Gruffydd Jones,

2013; Maserumule and Gutto, 2008; Anghie, 2006; Abrahamsen, 2003) and neoliberalism (Kiely, 2020; Craig and Porter, 2006; Jessop, 2002; Haque, 1999). Alternative and anti-colonialist paradigms have also emerged under the banner of concepts like ‘African ways of knowing’ (Ilmi, 2012; Nashon et al., 2007) and the ‘Pacific Way’ (Lawson, 2010; Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2005; Mahbubani, 1995). Our contribution, as previously stated, is an epistemic view that highlights an underexplored tool of hegemony, as envisioned by the above critiques and others.

In taking a ‘critical’ view of smart governance as a globalizing phenomenon, it is helpful to proceed with a theoretical anchor. One of the most common approaches is a Marxian theoretical perspective. The connection between IR and Marx’s critique of capitalism holds that the notion of a world of individual states has the effect of atomizing proletariat communities and undermining their collective solidarity and ability to assert their interests (Gold and McGlinchey, 2013). Further, the Marxist perspective proposes that the international system functions in the interests of only the bourgeoisie (capitalist or wealthy class) and thus illuminates no pathway for liberating the global proletariat (Buecker, 2003; Bernstein, 2001; Waterman, 1991). Our argument about smart governance is not inconsistent with this view, as it assumes that for whatever commercial, social, or political reason, the global mainstream view of public policy is narrowly conceived around a set of self-referential assumptions that privilege elite interests. At the same time, this study does not focus explicitly on class relations, so we instead select poststructuralism as our theoretical perspective on account of its rejection of universal laws, heuristics, and models as interpretive frames. This theoretical approach has a deep intellectual history including the work of Foucault, Butler, and Derrida (see Rajan (2002) for an overview). Referencing Derrida’s work on narrative analysis, Gold and McGlinchey (2013) state the following in a passage that accords with our argument about the epistemics (underlying truths) supporting narrative hegemony:

“If you can deconstruct language (expose its hidden meanings and the power it has), then you can do the same with fundamental ideas that shape international relations – such as the state. By introducing doubt over why the state exists – and who it exists for – poststructuralists can ask questions about central components of our political world that traditional theories would rather avoid... This approach introduces doubt to the reality we assume to share and exposes the often thin foundations that some commonly held ‘truths’ stand upon.”

Gold and McGlinchey, 2013; p. 52

We recognize that Wallerstein’s concept of world-systems can be considered structuralist in that it concerns generalizable relationships, behavioral patterns, and related constructs that arise within humanly imposed systems. However, the ‘doubt in reality’ referenced by Gold and McGlinchey is what we invoke in our critique of instrumental rationalism and is consistent with poststructuralist ideas about the need to divorce analytical understandings from the social and political constructs (or cognitive constraints) that claim to define or are credited with defining reality (see Peters (2001) and Agger (1991) for general discussions, and Edkins (2007) for a discussion focused on IR). According to Merlingen (2013), poststructuralists “argue that the will to know, including the desire to formulate context-transcending truths and to model social reality in terms of regularities, rules and laws is a disguised will to power aimed at waging war against the unruliness of human life and the interpretative possibilities of the world” (p. 3). The will to

analytically discipline social systems reflects the same type of normalizing force that we argue underlies the epistemic hegemony of instrumental rationalism and the ideas about smart governance built upon it.

3. Case: evolution of the governance narrative

‘Good’ governance has historically been a concept with more practical than theoretical meaning; the more recent era of ‘smart’ governance shows similar dynamics. As a common rallying point for public sector reform, smart governance provides a flexible if ambiguous meta-narrative that can be operationalized in a variety of ways, from serving national political interests to legitimizing policy diffusion and comparative performance measurement. Many governments have structured their reform efforts and policy agendas in accordance with certain principles of smart governance – often those promoted by institutions like the World Bank (Kulshreshtha, 2008). However, the concept lacks definitional consensus (Gisselquist, 2012) and is expressed in nearly as many ways as there are indices that claim to measure it. Given its conceptual ambiguity, its increasing influence on governance practice, and its role as a universalizing and normalizing force, smart governance and related concepts invite critical examination as discursive hegemonies in a crowded but top-heavy marketplace of normative policy ideals. At a higher theoretical and didactic level, examining such dynamics can help explain why certain policy ideas travel across contexts – in particular, the process by which ideas about good governance developed primarily in wealthy Western contexts advanced to near universal legitimacy on the basis not only of global power dynamics (Van der Wal and Demircioglu, 2020; Prince, 2012; Evans, 2009) but also, as we argue, an underlying epistemic coherence and discipline.

One legitimizing force for good governance is the ambitious, technologically informed, and increasingly well-resourced empirical project to metricize governance practice. This metricization has given rise to a rankings ‘arms race’ that now encompasses a variety of related governance concepts (i.e., smart and sustainable), many of which reflect current needs and trends in policy practice but often lack theoretical specification (Andrews, 2008). In addition to good governance as defined by global institutions and indices, examples are government and policy capacity (Wu et al., 2015), quality of government (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008), institutional development (Hoff, 2003), and bureaucratic impartiality (Riggs, 1997). Other rankings related to governance include variations on concepts like ‘smart’ (often reflecting a technological or scientific component), ‘sustainable’ (often reflecting an ecological component and more recently a social one), and ‘resilient’ (often reflecting an existential-survivalist component in the face of exogenous threats). A host of emerging policy problems also provides opportunities to deepen the governance metricization project; an example is the effort to rank policy performance regarding COVID-19 response (Haug et al., 2020). These and other ideas about smart governance, legitimized by a grey literature of reports published often by knowledge institutions allied with global governance bodies, seem to imply that an ideal form of governance indeed exists – no matter how high-level the narrative must go to achieve a justifiable universality. This narrative privileging reflects a failing that the poststructuralist perspective would consider the fallacy of universality. The inherent tension is clear: the narrative must be general in its applicability but is also empirically legitimized by a host of metrics (e.g., the more than 200

indicators used to measure policy progress at the national level on achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals).

The notion of good governance is itself ambiguous, as recognized by scholars like Grindle (2012) in her description of the concept as ‘idea inflation.’ Even amidst this conceptual messiness, however, it is possible to identify teachable optics in how power shapes narrative. The origins of the good governance movement bear important lessons about the epistemic origins of smart governance and modern governance itself. These origins lie not in the proliferation of governance rankings and indices *per se*, but at the confluence of two formative moments in the early 20th century. First, efforts to modernize governance systems and divorce them from the type of elite patronage that characterized feudalist or imperial systems led to the conceptual and practical cleavage of politics from bureaucracy or administration (Georgiou, 2014; Rosenbloom, 2008). This split enabled governance in its purely mechanical manifestation to be rationalized and optimized, in many cases independent of political and ideological loyalties. Liberated from such constraints, public servants could reconceptualize their role as one with accountability to institutions, laws, and ‘the state’ as abstract concepts (for elaborations on how the state is conceptualized, see Roberts (2020)). Politics was then relegated to serving as a mechanism for determining and exercising the ‘will of the state,’ recognizing that the representational efforts of the state, from one country to another, existed along a continuum from elite capture to full democratic equality. In whatever fashion the ‘public’ served by the state was defined (e.g., as elites, all citizens, or somewhere between), politics measured and expressed the public will in a way that could be bureaucratically ‘translated’ and actualized by legislative and executive power and delivered by the bureaucracy (see Lipsky’s (1971) notion of ‘street-level’ bureaucrats). As such, the bureaucracy was bound by a set of protocols and practices that ensured the maintenance of political impartiality while providing the flexibility to respond to legislative and executive mandates as they changed across partisan political cycles. The practical implication of this institutionalized arrangement of roles was that de-politicized bureaucratization fostered a type of operational optimization and managerialization that viewed public organizations purely as impartial and facilitative arms of government and political will.

With the institutional conditions established for the operational optimization of the public service, the second formative moment and a logical next step in the evolution of governance practice was the application of management ‘best practices.’ This phenomenon saw deep maturation with the Taylorist movements of the 1920s and 1930s (Waldo, 2006 [1948]; Thayer, 1972; Maier, 1970), as manufacturing-based practices for linear-style component assembly were applied to the tasks of office workers and bureaucrats. Parallel lines of study emerged from Weber’s (1948) writings on bureaucracy and have been carried forward in influential work by Hood (2007), among others. This way of thinking, arguably a type of epistemology to the degree that it impacted how policy problems were understood and addressed, was an ‘industrial revolution’ moment that visited the public service through reforms in managerial practice. This moment engendered a focus on technical capacities for measuring the performance of organizations, their constituent units, and individual employees. The managerial implications were clear: the tasks of ‘line’ workers in the private sector and bureaucrats in the public sector could be measured based on volume and time, enabling the more intricate definition of duties and expectations and the ability to ‘rank-and-yank’ for the purpose of hiring and promotion decisions. Given its origins in the metrics-informed bureaucratic ‘industrial revolution,’ a new managerialist ethos replicated itself across successive waves of technological transformation,

culminating in the modern moment when performance measurement is enabled by real-time monitoring capabilities and a variety of other ‘smart’ initiatives at all scales (along with the influence of such capabilities on the softer aspects of governance, including decisions about what to measure or ‘see’ and what not to). Notably, managerialism has evolved from a technology-enabled practice to a mindset, philosophy, and even epistemology of governance, potentially luring managers into believing that any aspect of work related to public service can be measured and ranked.

These two formative moments – the politics-administration divide and the managerialist influence of technology-assisted metricization – have not only shaped how policy is practiced but also bred and perpetuated a particular epistemology based on instrumental rationalism (i.e., the belief that policy problems can be fully understood, rationalized, and solved with proper policy instrument selection and calibration⁴). The power of this epistemic is not only that it influences practice but also that it so fully encompasses all aspects of how the policy field understands itself and its relationship to society that it struggles to adopt analytical distance and critical reflection (Hartley and Kuecker, 2021; Hartley et al., 2019); such analysis and reflection come from outside, through the pens of scholars and non-mainstream commentators. Instrumental rationalism and the governance managerialism that it supports are so deeply embedded as ‘common-sense’ that alternatives appear to practitioners, political leaders, and other policy operatives as wholly revolutionary and thus impractical. The discursive hegemony of smart governance is no exception to this dynamic. The concept is built on ways of thinking that have a deep history of narrative control, silencing alternative perspectives even in the face of persistent policy failures regarding ecological sustainability, broad and transformative social change, and systemic policy crises. Moreover, privileged political interests and institutions that steer the narrative are able to project their influence through the global policy ecosystem and thereby have the prerogative to shape universal understandings about governance, even in countries where the prescriptions of smart governance are often contextually misaligned.

4. Discussion: smart governance and narrative hegemony in practice

4.1 Towards smart governance

This section discusses narrative hegemony in the governance reform project and reflects on how it can be challenged and reshaped. The concept of ‘good’ governance relates to that promoted by international organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), and not necessarily the concept of good governance explored in the scholarship on public administration and policy. While narrative hegemony and the global diffusion of ideas about good governance have been thoroughly explored in the literature (Peet, 2009; Woods, 1999), there is cause for a renewed analysis through a critical theoretical perspective, for two reasons. First, geopolitical splintering is destabilizing the traditional order of power structures, including institutions and

⁴ According to Hartley and Kuecker (2020), “Rationality is the behavioural logic that observes a particular rule-set (e.g., the self-interested behaviour of an economic ‘satisficer’). Rationalism connotes a type of signalling in which individual or institutional behaviour (e.g., policymaking) embraces ‘rationality’ for specifically political, social, economic, or organizational objectives. Referring to rationalism primarily as the ‘rule of reason,’ we often preface the term with the qualifier ‘instrumental’ (i.e., the tools of policy) or ‘technocratic’ (e.g., the epistemic embraced by policymaking systems)” (p. 699).

ideological alliances that have long influenced policy problem-framing at the global level. This destabilization is usefully interpreted through the poststructuralist perspective, which has a revolutionary orientation in its rejection of received narratives reflecting imbalanced power relations. Second, growing distrust in political, economic, and knowledge elites in many countries, as explained by factors like socio-economic disenfranchisement and populist opportunism, is undermining the validity of mainstream understandings about truth. Hartley and Kuecker (2021) abstractify this phenomenon as an epistemic liminality in which legacy truth claims are de-legitimized amidst social change, anomalous data, and policy failures.⁵ These disruptive forces are now manifesting themselves in a rapidly shifting context, gesturing towards the need to ground critical-theoretical discussions within the practical exigencies of policymaking – a task more difficult before the proverbial epistemic gates were crashed by political agitation.

The critical perspective on narrative hegemony, as it relates to governance reform narratives and global policy projects more generally, provides some insight into how normative perspectives evolve into common-sense understandings. To this end, Foucault's (1968) concept of *governmentality* explores the process by which the 'governed' willingly or unknowingly submit to the directives of the 'governors' – in a way that provides the illusion of self-determinism while bounding the actions of individuals and society in accordance with the interests of a governing elite. The mechanism of coercive bounding has often been through contingent aid but can now be seen in the softer approach of normalizing policy ideals, measuring progress in adoption, and comparing performance across countries. This process reflects a type of epistemic 'tyranny' in which the seemingly innocuous act of indicizing governance practice becomes a global race to the top – or, in many cases, a race to avoid the shame of last place. While this dynamic can be observed at numerous scales, it is evident particularly in an instrumental-rationalist global policy project that has expressed itself in numerous narrative iterations. These iterations include overarching normative imperatives like 'development,' 'institutions,' 'capacity-building,' 'modernization,' 'good governance,' 'sustainability,' 'sustainable development,' and most recently the nebulous concept of 'smart.'

In considering the 'smart' narrative more specifically, the digital revolution and advanced technologies have revealed unprecedented pathways for streamlining the function of the state, including more efficient service delivery, the ability to monitor conditions and target resource allocations accordingly, and the capacity to metricize and monitor society more broadly. The smart cities movement is one of the most salient and recent manifestations of this phenomenon. Emerging not from a groundswell of popular support but arguably from the mutual interests of political and commercial elites, smart cities have been an exhibition in search of an audience. The ability to name and frame policy problems, as addressed in literature about the politics of policy knowledge, has compelled elites to shape a narrative around solutions that only technology can provide. The product of this way of thinking is a surveilled and managerialised

⁵ According to Hartley and Kuecker (2021), "ways of thinking about and doing public policy – along with policies themselves – that emerge from the fog of epistemic liminality are unknowable, and that the policy field must be prepared to divest itself from its own anachronistic thinking to remain receptive and relevant in the process of emergence that likely lies ahead." Hartley and Kuecker (2021) later state that epistemic liminality can be defined as "the period of time in the transition between system states when the state of the system is indeterminant. During this period of instability, old epistemics have lost their credibility and hegemonic status but no alternative epistemic has emerged to occupy the void."

society that has only a partial understanding of the purpose behind the flood of technology into public life. With copious public resources supporting new smart cities projects, this phenomenon will arguably be a mainstay of urban life and has the potential to propel another century of rigid, entrenched technocracy.

4.2 Narrative hegemony in practice

Seemingly divorced from practice as a matter of definition, ideology-based narratives can discipline policy practice when accompanied by mechanisms for practical translation. Accordingly, nationalization or localization of global policy narratives can be seen as a translation effort that serves the momentarily dominant narrative. That is, the architecture of global policy translation is efficient and institutionalized enough to need only the content and meaning handed down from whatever consensus narrative is being promoted at any given time (e.g., development, modernization, sustainability, or smart). Without such translation architecture and a pathway for feasible policy implementation, a narrative could lose its practical influence and coercive power. A pertinent question, then, is the extent to which the institutional architecture and the narrative content are endogenous to one another – how, in their decades-long interaction and interdependence, they become indistinguishable in ideological and epistemic orientation and thus a totalizing force resistant to change.

As an example of this dynamic, narratives about good governance often promote free markets and government minimalism as core ideals (Crawford, 2006). Despite the declining influence of international financial institutions (IFIs) in recent decades (Leipziger, 2013; Broome, 2010; Kahler, 1990), the global international economic order – as supported since the mid-20th century by IFIs and decades of national policy reforms to reduce trade frictions – continues to have significant influence ‘practicalizing’ a pro-market narrative. This narrative presents itself as a natural fit for an economic system already established and thereby renders alternative and critical visions (e.g., anti-capitalism) a bad fit or an anachronism. As the ‘rules of the game,’ institutions become parameters that exclude deviations from the capitalist norm. The practical effect, in a system so tightly bound across countries, is that pro-market reforms in their ‘common-sense’ logic become a singular and indisputable policy pathway. Given the deep connection between governance and the economy, such reform projects point towards global normalization. Given the high degree of global economic interconnectedness, these projects also work only to the extent that all member countries wholly acquiesce (thus strengthening narrative legitimacy). A country with resistant or outlier policies can be seen as an anomaly or pariah. However, the diminishing positive effect that such reforms have on the role of the state (Roberts, 2020) is potentially incompatible with the need for robust public sector capacity. While plausibly appropriate for wealthier countries whose bureaucracies grew to serve political mandates for expanded public services, the retreat of the state from the economic and public sphere in developing countries can be a substantial albatross while undercutting what little capacity to serve the public such states may already have (for a discussion about the role of the state in economic development, refer to the recently emerging concept of New Structural Economics; Lin, 2011).

Accompanying the reform movements and narratives of good and smart governance are, as previously discussed, indices to measure progress – viewed critically, these indices are disciplinary mechanisms to coerce countries into global conformity. The concept of Government Competitiveness is one example of how the field of practice might begin to challenge these

received notions of good governance and provide alternative perspectives (Im and Choi, 2018). The concept ring-fences what it measures by acknowledging its focus on certain measurable aspects of governance while avoiding higher-level claims about a totalizing vision of governance. In colloquial terms, the concept ‘stays in its own lane’ by clarifying what it can and cannot measure; it claims to be discursively disciplined and thus resistant to the type of rhetorical manipulation that might befall more nebulous conceptualizations of good governance or those that seek to measure every factor impacting governance. Government Competitiveness presents a set of tools by which governments can improve the operational and administrative aspects of public service – including efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. We recognize, however, that even these terms are loaded with narrative nuance and should be unpacked and critically evaluated against the political objectives of any given country. Further, Government Competitiveness is an example of how the governance metrics ‘movement’ might evolve because it is one of the only metrics to explicitly declare its resistance to the type of market-based ideological bias found in existing indices, to explicitly observe historically overlooked elements like social welfare outcomes, and to originate in a non-Western setting (albeit one influenced by market-based economic reforms supported by wealthy Western countries). While the concept of Government Competitiveness continues to be developed and is not presented here as a flawless alternative, the broader implication is that alternative understandings about good governance deserve, and are gaining, additional exposure in a policy field increasingly crowded with ideas that push back on the received wisdom of 20th century policy scholarship and practice.

In closing, it is important to recognize that Government Competitiveness holds itself forward as an index – that is, a method by which to measure the performance of the public sector on the same metrics across countries for the sake of comparison. The risk of such an endeavor is that the practice of comparison itself, as embodied by the term ‘competitiveness,’ can appear to endorse the idea that there is a universal standard in governance practice – a structuralist perspective that arguably bears little value in a socially and politically diverse world. As such, it is not the concept of Government Competitiveness itself that is the concern but, as with many indices, the way it is applied in normalizing a particular vision. From this perspective, it is useful to separate the metric from the managerial or political system that uses it. Many governance indices derive their legitimacy from the global institutions that fund them. In this way, as previously suggested, the epistemics of performance measurement and systems by which the resulting knowledge is disseminated are indistinguishable in their perspectives and objectives. This chapter raises this issue as a cautionary point, lest the concept of Government Competitiveness take on the same role of other governance indices in promoting privileged narratives and normative orientations. Indeed, this chapter issues a call to consider the current moment a turning point in how emergent concepts like Government Competitiveness are publicized and universalized – with their fate consigned either to the garbage heap of failed development ideas or to an epistemic reawakening that eschews old development ideas in favor of fresh perspectives on the types of complex policy problems that will define the 21st century. Efforts to measure, rank, and compare governance practice will only deepen as technology further develops and as global efforts like the SDGs seek to understand country-level progress while declaring universal success. The mechanics of individual indices may be debated, but on trial in this critique is a deeper issue: the replication of global power structures through successive waves of policy narratives bearing self-referential novelty and legitimacy. While there is analytical and theoretical purchase in measuring governance quality, a more sober expectation about the transfer and normalization of policy practice is warranted, given the social and

environmental change acting on governance systems and the endurance of wicked problems and instrumental-rationalist ways of addressing them.

5. Conclusion: towards an epistemic awakening

This chapter has critically examined the smart governance movement as a manifestation of narrative hegemony, taking the under-explored perspective of epistemic orientation to discuss how instrumental rationalism has embedded itself in the multiple iterations of the global policy project and thus represents another hurdle for embracing alternative ways of thinking about policymaking. The chapter used world-systems theory to describe the global diffusion of smart governance ideas and poststructuralism to explore how universal claims to truth in the construction of policy knowledge are confronting an increasingly contested political environment that threatens decades of epistemic authority. The practical lesson revealed by taking this critical theoretical perspective is that the policy field appears to expect that each new iteration of its global project will generate different results. That is, successive waves of new narratives are accompanied by the expectation that they offer a suitable (and politically demonstrable) enough departure from previous narratives to meaningfully address complex problems that never seem to be fully resolved. This recurrent cycle of expectation, resignation, and reformation suggests the extent to which each narrative wave constitutes a new way of thinking, a repackaging, or a marginal refinement of legacy ideas (e.g., state-society relations and how economic systems should be organized). Both long-term and short-term crises expose the deficiencies of these legacy narratives, and the underlying epistemic of instrumental rationalism explains why they only appear to be novel while never fully realizing their anticipated potential. From climate change and socioeconomic inequality to pandemic mitigation, the mechanisms assessing and addressing policy threats are malfunctioning. The continuing translation of policy ideas based on instrumental rationalism into a set of normalizing prescriptions, along with well-institutionalized efforts to transfer these prescriptions to national and local levels (coercive or otherwise), leaves little room for an epistemic self-reckoning by the field itself or a Bastille-storming moment by marginalized perspectives seeking to gain visibility and legitimacy.

Taking a broader perspective, the characteristic that these successive narratives have in common is their epistemic orientation. This orientation, as argued in this chapter, is reflected in the hegemony of instrumental rationalism – a holdover from early 20th century understandings about the separation of politics and administration and about the ability to quantitatively optimize public sector performance through technologically sophisticated monitoring and managerialist practices. What is uniquely instructive about studying the current era is that policy epistemics have doubled-down on their determinism and myopic perspective by embracing the seemingly infallible capabilities of technology; however, these epistemics clash with political and social change, as highlighted by a growing deficit of public trust in government amidst lingering policy failures. It is appropriate, then, to consider whether there is theoretical and practical value in anticipating an epistemic transition, one that steers policymaking away from old technocratic and solutionist ways of thinking and towards a new type of understanding about how policy problems are defined and how particular types of knowledge are universalized. It is pertinent also to consider whether current ideas about the translation of totalizing policy visions into local contexts are still appropriate for addressing systemic crises, and how this might challenge decades of received wisdom about policy transfer and core-periphery relations.

To remain viable and relevant in the 21st century's chaotic socio-political setting, visions of global policy projects and ways to measure their progress require a new epistemic orientation. The period of transition towards this new way of thinking is neither short nor tidy, as the interim liminality generates high uncertainty by discrediting current ways of understanding policy problems without necessarily presenting immediately actionable alternatives (Hartley and Kuecker, 2021). In short, epistemic alternatives will likely be dismissed by incumbent interests as impractical, quixotic, incomplete, and divorced from reality. Nevertheless, the absence of immediately applicable alternatives should not prevent a hard reckoning about the declining viability of legacy policy epistemics in the face of increasingly complex and interconnected policy problems. In novel conceptualizations of governance practice (including indices like Government Competitiveness) lie the seeds for generating one among many possible epistemic alternatives, as such concepts reflect a push towards metrics relevant for country contexts beyond those on which legacy indices are based. The ambition of Government Competitiveness relates not only to shifting the power balance in global policy but also at a methodological level to rethinking what is observed about governance itself, underscoring the role of epistemic orientation in crafting narratives about policy success and failure. Transformative social change, along with seismic shifts in geopolitics and problem contexts, invite scholars to engage the epistemic dimensions of the smart governance movement when interrogating the evolution of global narratives, the mechanisms of their influence and transfer, and their role in replicating power structures. These are topics in need of further theoretical and empirical exploration.

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