



Transnational bureaucracies: How do we know what they know?

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Abstract

This paper assesses geographic and especially political geographic work on transnational bureaucratic knowledge production. The term ‘transnational’ signals policy processes that blend national and extranational dynamics in institutional settings that transcend the governmental structures of states. The focus is on the international arena rather than national policy-making. The paper foregrounds the growing attention to bureaucratic processes in geography and highlights some productive arguments about spatiality and practice in that work. I stress the need for closer interdisciplinary engagements and I point to the insights that we would gain from the work of Pierre Bourdieu in that effort.

Keywords

bureaucracy, geopolitics, policy, political geography

I Introduction: Studying the obvious

A modern society is a bureaucratized society, and so the study of our time is bound up with the analysis of bureaucratic processes and institutions. In human geography, this is apparent especially in the work that draws on poststructuralist thinkers to examine knowledge- and subject- production in governmentalized social contexts. Perhaps in part because bureaucratized decision-making – one that frames complex political matters in narrowly technical terms – is the obvious backdrop of this research, bureaucracies themselves, with their specific organizational arrangements and institutional cultures, remain in the background. Approaching power in non-instrumentalist terms and avoiding the notion of rational goal-oriented actors, geographers tend to leave the nitty-gritty of bureaucratic institutions out of explicit focus. As a result, contemporary human

geography analyzes bureaucracies mostly in terms of how they interact with political actors outside the formal structures of the state. We know less about how bureaucracies act on themselves. The *effects* of bureaucratic processes are well documented in their convoluted, contested, and indeterminate character as well as their far-reaching impacts on human lives, but the *production* of bureaucratic knowledge inside policy-making institutions has received less attention.

The relative dearth of research on bureaucratic institutions is noticeable especially in the geographic study of international affairs. Most agencies of the state focus their activities on the

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inside rather than the outside of the state (as a territorial unit). Among these agencies, we know most (though not necessarily enough) about those involved in day-to-day service provision: the so-called street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 1980). Their activities and their staff are most visible to the average person and the academic alike. Foreign policy and related spheres, such as defense or trade, meanwhile remain largely out of view. When it comes to geographic work, struggles over planning regulations inside 'their' branches of the government apparatus are documented; fights around defense procurement within 'their' agencies remain obscure. This is in part because foreign policy institutions are opaque and inaccessible by design. Social service providers cannot easily close their doors to the public; defense ministries can and do. Given the far-reaching role of the foreign policy machinery in socio-spatial relations today, that apparatus requires analytical scrutiny. If international politics is at heart not about anarchical inter-state competition but about the regulation of space, it must be analyzed as a bureaucratic process. The geographies of that process then require sustained analysis (Kuus, 2014).

The production of bureaucratic knowledge is a spatial process in at least two ways. The first of these concerns the circulation of knowledge. Many of the expert claims produced in bureaucratic institutions uncritically project knowledge derived from some places to other places (Agnew, 2007; Peck, 2011). They bring places together in specific and often unequal ways. This is not simply a matter of claims being crafted in some places and then imposed on others. In more specific terms, the process is circulatory: some places are more powerful than others, but power centers too need support and feedback from other places. The second spatial aspect of bureaucratic knowledge concerns its relationship to place: the place-specific context of its production. *Where* knowledge is produced and where it circulates is integral to its effects.

Knowledge claims about places should be examined not only in terms of what they purport to do – as know-how – but also with respect to how they are produced in particular places and projected onto other places – as know-where (Agnew, 2007).

Transnational bureaucratic processes are even more difficult to trace. A great deal of the regulatory decision-making that shapes our lives today unfolds in institutional structures that blend the national with the extra-national and transcend the borders of nation-states. Whether it be the role of the International Monetary Fund in the domestic policies of nation-states, the fundamental importance of European Union (EU) decision-making in national legislative change within and beyond the union, or the role of private bodies such as the International Accounting Standards Board in governmental practices around the world, the impact of these regulatory processes is felt through national institutions but the processes themselves are transnational. They are crafted and contested inside opaque bureaucracies staffed with a multinational elite corps of experts. Although these institutions are part of larger social structures, their practices cannot be understood without considering their specific institutional features. We cannot comprehend national responses to the euro crisis without considering the peculiarity of EU decision-making (e.g. Shore, 1999; Kuus, 2014), we cannot understand the implementation of accounting standards unless we know something about the International Accounting Standards Board that develops them (Büthe and Mattli, 2011), and we cannot grasp the power of the International Monetary Fund unless we study the institutional links between finance and economic policy-making (Clark et al., 2013; Engelen et al., 2011). The European Commission employs fewer people than the governmental structures of the City of Paris but its regulations directly prompt around one-half of all domestic legislative change in the European Union.¹ Transnational

regulatory processes operate in a network-like diffuse manner; they cannot be comprehended by looking at the big picture of state and international organizations (Davis et al., 2012; Hardt and Negri, 2001). There is still a 'pressing need' to better understand how policy ideas travel: not only what ideas travel, why, and with what effects, but *how* these dispersed processes work on a daily basis (Smith, 2013).

This article works through two bodies of research in geography and related fields to foreground what we do and do not know about transnational bureaucratic knowledge production and how we might better study this process. To concentrate on bureaucracies is not to fetishize or glamorize them but to acknowledge and investigate their pivotal position in modern societies. To have any hope of doing justice to the scope and diversity of the relevant scholarship, my principal focus is on political geography and the study of international and transnational processes in that sub-field. I trace the growing interest in the institutions of international politics and I highlight the interdisciplinary interactions that aid this work. Closer attention to bureaucratic processes would enable us to analytically link international affairs to everyday social practice. It would also foster linkages with the study of transnational regulatory processes in other disciplines.

The rest of the paper will proceed through three steps. The following section, titled 'Bureaucracy and spatiality beyond the state', explains how political geography's attention to spatiality as distinct from territoriality has aided the study of transnational policy processes. It also highlights the growing engagements between political geography and international relations around the study of spatiality. The subsequent section, titled 'Policy practice in transnational fields', focuses on the geographic study of policy. Just as political geography has moved beyond the state, it has moved toward a more explicit engagement with the embodied character of

policy practice. These trends parallel developments in the neighboring disciplines. This organization – focusing first on spatiality and then on policy practice – is employed to highlight the parallels among the fields in focus and the contributions that these fields can make to each other. In both sections, I accentuate interdisciplinary engagements beyond geography as these have received less attention than conversations among geographers (e.g. Mountz, 2013; Peck, 2011; Sparke, 2006). I likewise concentrate on bureaucratic knowledge production *inside* transnational policy-making institutions and leave out other forms of transnational decision-making, such as activist networks. Taken together, the two sections elucidate the emerging work on transnational bureaucratic knowledge in geography, delineate the key arguments in that work, and point to the themes that require further elaboration.

The concluding section highlights the synergies and challenges involved in such work. It accentuates three issues. First, I highlight what geographers can learn from the neighboring social science disciplines conceptually and methodologically and what they can offer to these disciplines. The contribution lies in adding specificity to our understanding of where and how bureaucratic decision-making happens and where, therefore, lies responsibility in that process. Second, I clarify how the concept of social field, borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu, would enrich the study of bureaucratic knowledge production in geography. Third, I touch briefly on the difficulty of the kind of scholarship advocated here. Such work is time-consuming and yields slow progress – a risky prospect in today's academia. I thus stress the value of the kind of fine-grained work that can engage with transnational policy processes without being absorbed into the analytical frameworks of policy-making institutions.

II Bureaucracy and spatiality beyond the state

Human geographers, especially those working in economic and urban geography, have written a great deal on bureaucratic and policy processes. This work shows the governmentalized operation of state power in its contingent and contested character (Jessop, 2007; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010a). Influenced substantially but by no means only by Michel Foucault's work on governmentality, much of this research focuses on power beyond formal state institutions, in everyday subject-production throughout the social sphere (Larner and Walters, 2004; Sparke 2005, 2006). Political geography and the critical geopolitical scholarship in it likewise emphasize the diffuse and regulatory workings of power today (Dodds et al., 2013).

Two issues receive relatively little attention in this work. One concerns bureaucratic institutions as foci of empirical research. The circulation of knowledge claims inside such structures, whether governmental or non-governmental, national or international, remains a rare topic in political geography (Roberts et al., 2005; Prince, 2012; Häkli, 2013). As geographers look beyond formal institutions in an effort to capture broader social dynamics, it remains unclear what is the role of specific institutions, such as a particular ministry, in social life (Mountz, 2010). True, the state is not the be all and end all of social regulation – indeed it never was. A narrow focus on the state apparatus gives us flat accounts of social life (Staeheli et al., 2004). Once this is established, we still need to know how state institutions participate in regulatory processes.² Amidst the effort to (rightly) decenter the governmental apparatus, we must not lose sight of the pivotal role of that apparatus in the regulation of societal life.

Although political geographers write a great deal about the state and about the blurring of the inside and outside of the state, most do not

examine state institutions directly (Mountz, 2010: 3). They instead investigate state power from the effects of state institutions outside the realm of formal politics. When Alison Mountz (2013) highlights the sites that political geographers currently study to understand sovereign power, the state bureaucracy or institutions of any kind do not figure in her list. The same is true of Matthew Sparke's (2006) progress report on governance some years earlier. Both authors assess the field correctly: there is almost no work on bureaucracies in political geography. As a result, we know much about the narratives that state institutions project but little about the institutions themselves. For example, Richard Peet's (2003) book on the World Bank, The International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization investigates the ideological and political frames of these institutions but gives the reader almost no sense of what the approximately 10,000 people employed by the World Bank actually do at work (staff number from Peet, 2003: 112). Political discourses, such as the story of free trade, do not emerge from the public sphere as such: their production is enabled by specific, often state-sanctioned and frequently inaccessible bureaucratic institutions. We need theoretically informed and empirically grounded investigations of the geographies and sociologies of these realms (Larner, 2007, 2009; Mountz, 2010; Peck, 2011; Prince, 2012). Put differently, we need to complement the macro-level analyses of systems and discourses with micro-level accounts of how these structures are maintained on a daily basis. In order to understand the social effects of bureaucrats, we must examine the institutional contexts in which they are embedded.

The second gap in the geographic study of bureaucratic processes concerns the international arena. Most geographic work focuses on processes that, although not confined to governmental institutions, unfold in domestic settings: in state-sponsored regional, urban, or social policy. For example, the policy mobilities literature

draws evidence from the 'domestic' institutions of the state, such as city governments (McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2011).³ There are good reasons for that focus. The legal frameworks and public debates that enframe many policy processes derive their legitimacy and power from nationalism and the nation-state. The realm of international politics has no similar institutions. There is no international government to study. The state agencies formally sanctioned to deal with the international sphere are often inaccessible. Their powerful public relations arms are effective (more so than most other branches of the state apparatus) in controlling their message. The international sphere is thus left largely to political scientists and, in geography, to political geographers. This has the unintended consequence that geographic work on bureaucratic practice still displays an implicit division between the inside and the outside of the territorial state.

That division used to be common in geography: in our discipline, as in the social sciences more broadly, the state used to be the principal scale of the enquiry well into the 1990s (Agnew, 2009; Taylor, 1996). To this day, the territorial state remains the taken-for-granted frame in much of the mainstream writing on international affairs (Reid-Henry et al., 2011; Murphy, 2012). The problem is not that scholarship necessarily focuses solely on the state. The trap is rather that it still too often presumes *state-like* territorialized interest- and identity-formation as the form toward which political practices tend to converge. Political possibilities are thus trapped in a geographical imagination that casts the territorial state as the container of democratic politics. This is punctuated by the equally simplified pronouncements on the death of the nation-state, as in some of the more celebratory work on globalization. Both views assume rather than investigate the spatial forms of state power.

In parallel, even though such dichotomized assumptions endure in tacit forms, state-centrism or the presumed centrality of the

state has weakened across the social sciences, including and perhaps especially in geography. There is now a large and vibrant body of geographic research that investigates the specific construction and performance of state power in territorial and non-territorial forms (Dodds et al., 2013; Kuus and Agnew, 2008; Mountz, 2013). Many socio-spatial processes of our time are, moreover, transnational: they involve institutions that cross national borders but do not derive their authority from the state (Sklair, 2001: 2). They blend national and extra-national dynamics in ways that raise serious questions about transparency and accountability (Davis et al., 2012).⁴ This does not make these arrangements better or worse per se, but it does require specialized study. A city government or an education ministry has staff in one country (to a person in most cases); a foreign or defense ministry works through hard-to-map transnational networks. Institutions like the European Commission or the World Bank have staff around the world: of the 10,000 people employed by the latter in the early 2000s, one-fifth were based 'in the field', i.e. outside the headquarters (Peet, 2003: 112). The task is to move beyond the binary framework in which state power is declining, or not, and specify the political and spatial transformations under way (Agnew, 2009; Clark et al., 2013; Engelen et al., 2011; Jessop, 2007; Sassen, 2006).⁵ 'Transnational' in that work does not mean adding non-state variables to the analytical framework that starts with the state. It rather means a toolbox that does not necessarily start with the state: one that keeps the spatial configurations of bureaucratic knowledge a question and not an answer.

Outside geography, much of the effort to analyze the international arena is located in political science and international relations (IR). The distinction between foreign and domestic policy used to be reinforced especially tightly in these fields: the study of international politics used to be largely the study of inter-state

relations (Walker, 1993). The language of international organizations, networks, and regimes too often merely obscures an analytical framework centered on the nation-state (see Slaughter, 2004; Rodrik, 2013). In IR too, however, challenges to state-centrism have grown since the 1980s and the hold of neorealist thinking has consequently weakened (Campbell, 1998b). This has enabled the study of international affairs less in terms of how it is supposed to work and more in terms of the messy practices that do not fit neatly into neorealist or other models (Neumann, 2002; Pouliot, 2010). It has nudged IR to engage more with related disciplines, including geography (Guzzini, 2012), anthropology (Neumann, 2012), and sociology (Adler-Nissen, 2013a).

Once we investigate rather than presume the spaces and scales of international politics, we need to examine place not as a passive container but as a productive force in political practice (Agnew, 1987: 36). Just like geopolitical knowledge is produced by specific actors, it is also created in specific places. Actual places, as experienced and imagined, anchor conceptions of how the world works or ought to work and how this affects places (Agnew, 2007: 144). The specific combination of institutional settings, social networks, and the cultural milieu of a place therefore forms an integral part of bureaucratic work. The attention to local specificity does not dilute the analytical focus on trans-local practices. It rather helps us to avoid the opposite problem of analyzing these practices with a thin understanding of their place of production. Greater attention to the idiosyncrasies of places adds both rigor and color to geopolitical work (e.g. Jeffrey, 2012; Müller, 2009; Mountz, 2010; Toal and Dahlman 2011). Taken together, this scholarship in both geography and IR underscores the need to examine the daily intermingling of national and extra-national dynamics in the social settings in which this happens (Häkli, 2013).

I Bureaucratic agents

Open-ended questions about spatiality have prompted greater attention to political actors outside state institutions. True, foreign policy has remained a relatively concentrated realm of specialized elites that swirl around state agencies. They include the elected and appointed officials, academics, journalists, and pundits who are socially licensed to speak on international affairs. Located within the government apparatus as well as universities and think tanks, these intellectuals of statecraft explain international politics to domestic audiences and translate (figuratively and sometimes literally) national debates to foreign audiences (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). They offer a map of the world as a collection of particular kinds of places and they narrate the dominant story of the nation's place in that world. A great deal of geopolitical writing thus focuses empirically on what select statesmen and their advisors say or write. Career civil servants are considered only at the highest levels and principally as representatives of states. Given the role of intellectuals of statecraft in the practice on international politics, the lavish attention to these individuals is often justified. It can, however, narrow our understanding of the ways in which their statements are produced. Foreign ministers do not write speeches: speechwriters do. The phrases and modes of argument that appear in foreign policy documents are meticulously coordinated and distilled inside a highly specialized bureaucracy. An average speech by the Foreign Minister of Norway requires approximately 120 hours of work – or, more precisely, 120 hours plus ‘section meetings and canteen-talk’ by policy professionals (Neumann, 2007: 192). The task is not to downplay these professionals but to analyze in more specific terms the institutional structures that empower and constrain them in particular ways (Kuus, 2011).

As geographers turn to sites and actors beyond the formal apparatus of foreign policy, they bring new settings into the remit of geopolitical analysis. These range from the obvious sites like international and non-governmental organizations to the less self-evidently geopolitical actors like activists, artists, religious groups, refugees, or governments in exile (see Dodds et al., 2013, McConnell et al., 2012). This scholarship both moves out of foreign policy institutions and zooms in on those institutions. If geopolitics is not a set of universal principles enforced by nation-states but a contingent practice produced in specific bureaucratic locations, it becomes analytically similar to other spheres of policy. Intellectuals of statecraft become less central to the analysis and less tied to the state: they come into focus as professionals with specific backgrounds, agendas, and social roles (e.g. Kuus, 2011; Mountz, 2010, Müller, 2009). The point is not simply to add new actors or sites to the established list: artists to ambassadors, protesters to pundits. The effort is rather to illuminate the multiplicity of political actors and the diverse spaces of their daily practice. Close work on these spaces can explain how bureaucratic knowledge production actually works in offices and cubicles, restaurants and cafeterias, corner suites and windowless meeting rooms, at conferences and training courses, and around the coffee machine. This links up with a wide range of research, especially but not only in sociology, on the production of expert knowledge (Eyal and Buchholz, 2010; Prince, 2013). That work too advocates a closer look at the professionals who make expert knowledge: not only what they say and what effects they have but also how they, as socially situated agents, produce expertise. In geography, closer attention to the work on expertise advances the broader enquiry into agency and responsibility in international and transnational settings (Bachmann, 2013; Häkli and Kallio, 2013; Jeffrey, 2013).

III Policy practice in transnational fields

The first trend that undergirds a closer study of bureaucratic knowledge in geography thus relates to the more sophisticated analysis of spatiality in this and other social science disciplines. The second such trend concerns a more sustained focus on geopolitical practices rather than scripts. Although traditional foreign policy analysis acknowledges that scripts and practices do not necessarily match, empirical investigations tend to focus on the former at the expense of the latter (Neumann, 2012; Pouliot, 2010). Practices are implicitly read off of scripts. True, scripts are also practices: not the ideational background of political practice but the products of such practice. My point is not to imply a dichotomy between the textual and the material but simply to point out that the empirical evidence in most geopolitical analysis consists overwhelmingly of texts. Although there have been numerous calls to study the daily practices of geopolitics, detailed empirical work has been scant.

The task, then, is to study organizational practices as distinct from blueprints and to avoid viewing organizations as unified actors. The lingering statism of geopolitical analysis is linked to the lingering simplification of the institutions of geopolitics; treating territory as a container of politics is related to treating the state as a unitary actor (Müller, 2012: 382). Complicating the 'where' of bureaucratic power also complicates the 'who' of that practice, and the other way around. Once the distinction between geopolitics and policy breaks down, geopolitical work needs to engage with policy studies.

The growing interest in organizations within political geography intersects with a wider interdisciplinary scholarship on policy practice inside transnational regulatory institutions. Some of this work analyzes particular institutions: examples include Stephen Hopgood's (2006) study on Amnesty International, Michael

Goldman's (2005) book on the World Bank, Matthew Eagleton-Pierce's (2013) work on the World Trade Organization, and Liesbet Hooghe's (2001) research on the European Commission. Others are studies on policy apparatuses that may have a spatial centre of gravity but are not contained by any one institution: examples include Michael Barnett's (2003) book on the United Nations Secretariat, Alex Jeffrey's (2012) study of the performances of statehood in post-Dayton Bosnia, Vincent Poulriot's (2010) examination of symbolic struggles inside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Janine Wedel's (2001) and David Mosse's (2011) investigations of the development aid machinery, Cris Shore's (1999) and Merje Kuus's (2014) work on European Union policy-making, Gregory Feldman's (2011) research on the EU migration apparatus, and Yves Dezalay's and Bryant Garth's (1996) work on international business arbitration, among others. There are many more related studies: I highlight only the analyses that feature *in-depth* empirical analyses of transnational bureaucratic institutions. The empirical foci of these books are listed for a reason: all concern opaque bureaucratic spheres that cannot be mapped in terms of national spaces. Even when the policy apparatus fits inside a state, as in Jeffrey's work, the realm of practice blends national and extra-national dynamics.⁶ The above group of scholars is interdisciplinary and many, although not all, of the studies are highly interdisciplinary in their sources and arguments.

By virtue of their high-resolution lens and their focus on embodied daily practice, these studies offer relatively agent-centered or experience-near analyses of transnational policy processes. They show that bureaucratic knowledge production is more contested than it appears at first. They illuminate both the entrenched statist assumptions that undergird bureaucratic practice and the improvised and creative operation of such practice. Organizations do not advance pre-given agendas but are themselves in a constant state

of becoming (Müller, 2012: 382). The seeming stability of bureaucratic processes is fragile: it needs to be continuously reproduced lest it be destabilized by the multiple actors and the power struggles among them (Eagleton-Pierce, 2013). This cannot be studied in abstract: it requires that we carefully embed bureaucratic constructs in their actual social contexts (Peck, 2011: 794).

This highlights the agency of the professionals who work in bureaucratic institutions. The cliché of the mindless bureaucrat is often just that – a cliché. When it applies, we need to understand how this thoughtlessness is produced and maintained. The study of bureaucratic processes necessitates the analysis of bureaucratic subject-formation and takes us logically to the study of political agency in modern institutional structures (Herzfeld, 1992).

I Bureaucratic fields

Within the scholarship on bureaucratic practice, the work inspired by Pierre Bourdieu is particularly noteworthy because of its focus on social practice beyond the formal institutions of the state. This Bourdieu-influenced work is situated mostly in sociology, but increasingly also in IR and geography. There is a great deal to gain from it for our understanding of transnational regulatory institutions.

Bourdieu studies the construction of social reality by agents who are enabled and constrained by structures that are both material and symbolic.⁷ He analyzes the reproduction of power relations and our agency or capacity to act inside this process. For Bourdieu, the realm of cultural symbols is not an ideational layer on top of material practices. Rather, politics is fundamentally 'a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division, in other words the one that is dominant and recognized as deserving to dominate, that is to say, charged with symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 2005: 39). Bourdieu analyzes the mutual constitution of the habits anchored in individual minds and

bodies on the one hand and the larger fields of social relations on the other hand. He does so in an effort to avoid the divide between the idea of strategic rational action on one side and conceptions of culture as an amorphous discourse without strategic actors on the other (Williams, 2007: 3). His work shows that social strategies of individuals are 'never determined unilaterally by the objective constraints of the structure any more than they are by the subjective intentions of the agent' (Wacquant, 1996: xvi). Even in strictly hierarchical institutions, rules are not inevitable products of social forces but require continuous reproduction by political agents (Dezalay and Garth, 2002b: 307). The task is to analyze how social fields produce the actors needed to make them work.

The concept of the field – a social space that situates its agents – is central to Bourdieu's work. A field is a social space created around ongoing struggles. It may be a place, such as Wall Street (Ho, 2009), a profession, such as diplomacy (Adler-Nissen, 2013b; Kuus, 2014), or a networked sphere of practice such as global trade negotiation (Eagleton-Pierce, 2013) or international business arbitration (Dezalay and Garth, 1996). A field is a site of struggle precisely because it brings together actors with similar interests (Häkli, 2013: 347). Individuals are legitimized to enter a particular field by possessing certain social resources – capital in Bourdieu's terminology. In order to understand a social field one must identify the forms of capital required in it, but to grasp these forms of capital one must comprehend the specific logic of the field in question.

This concept helps us study transnational policy processes because it does not channel the enquiry into any pre-given spatial configuration. A field, unlike a state, has no formal boundary (Häkli, 2013; Leander, 2011: 296). It allows us to bring the national and the transnational into simultaneous view. Thus, transnational regulatory institutions operate in part through power struggles among national groups, but those

groups fight over specifically international capital. The reverse is true as well: the construction of a transnational bureaucratic space is inseparable from the promotion of national models of state (Dezalay and Garth, 2011: 278). The individuals who move in these circles are aided by a kind of cosmopolitan capital, including international education and career trajectories as well as linguistic skills. The latter extend much beyond a second language: 2011 data on 82 policy-making officials at the European Commission reveal that these individuals speak 3.63 languages on average, with five languages being more common than two (14.6% versus 11% in that group) (Suvarierol, 2011: 187–8). Such capital facilitates exchange among national elites and creates a transnational field of power: a kind of 'international of establishments' (Dezalay and Garth, 2011: 278, 291). The terms of the competition are transnational and there are many potential uncertainties and mistranslations surrounding individual positions (Dezalay and Garth, 1996: 317). This multiplies the possibilities for individuals and accentuates their agency. It also underscores the role of symbolic and cultural resources like reputation and connections in bureaucratic knowledge production. The concept of the field thus allows us to go beyond the mainstream territorial understandings of power and discern other lines of affinity and division, such as social class. By linking the strategies and tactics of power to particular struggles in concrete terms, the concept of the field helps us to avoid both a state-centered perspective as well as the equally problematic view that national resources and viewpoints get incorporated into transnational ones in any clear way (Dezalay and Garth, 1996: viii; Dezalay and Garth, 2002b: 8; Williams, 2007: 120). Bourdieu-inspired analysis complements the largely Foucaultian research in geography by its more explicit attention to political agents, their strategies and tactics, and their relationship to state and class structures. To stress the relevance of both thinkers to the study of bureaucratic decision-making is not to

deny differences between them (see Eyal and Buchholz, 2010) but to highlight the ways in which both can help us grasp transnational regulatory processes.⁸

2 *Methodological conundrums*

Conceptual claims about the governmentalized operation of power require careful empirical investigation. This is immediately evident in the work of both Foucault (e.g. 2003, 2008) and Bourdieu (cf. 1984, 1996), whose theoretical arguments are supported by a vast edifice of meticulous empirical analysis. The common denominator in much of the research discussed so far is its focus on the mundane everyday actors, artefacts, and procedures that form an essential part of political practice but are too often left out of view in the big-picture accounts of power. Where relations between things are contingent, Andrew Sayer (1992: 143) writes (in another context), ‘their form must always be an empirical question, that is, one which must be answered observing actual cases’. It is through the complexities of concrete cases, Andrew Barry (2001: 22) says along similar lines, that one gets a sense of ‘the irreducibility and contestability of the social, the disjunctures between the programmatic statements of policy and the messiness of actuality, the contingency of history, and the interference and intersections of diverse historical and geographical movements’. Empirical nuance is not a token context added to existing conceptual frameworks; rather, the conceptual argument about knowledge and power requires that nuance (Mitchell, 2002). Several of the books cited above are notable for their in-depth empirical work just as much as their conceptual arguments. Janine Wedel’s (2001) modestly-sized book on western aid to eastern Europe, for example, relies on interviews with ‘some 1,855 people’ in 1991–2000. All of these individuals were interviewed by Wedel personally, many of them several times (Wedel, 2001: 225). About 690

interviews were on-the-record; the book lists around 250 individuals who also were willing to be named in the appendix. The conversations took place in multiple institutional and linguistic contexts: Warsaw and Moscow stand out in the final narrative, but there were others, most notably Washington DC. I note this not to create a model that others should follow – this is neither possible nor necessarily desirable – but to underscore the difficulty of studying elite transnational networks.⁹

Methodologically, the analysis of social fields necessitates that we contextualize individual strategies, such as career advancement, in specific fields and the distribution of capital in them. It requires a constant back-and-forth between structural conditions and individual tactics. Such work is a fundamentally empirical effort, which cannot be done outside a specific social context (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 108). The work is necessarily slow and the findings necessarily ambiguous, but they enable the researcher to bring structure and agency into simultaneous view.

In geography, the merits of such research are broadly recognized. Speaking specifically about transnational policy processes, Peck and Theodore (2010a: 171) stress the ‘inescapable need to confront new methodologies’ when studying such processes. The challenge is to actually do it: to move from a general recognition of the value of high-resolution analysis to empirical investigations of bureaucratic practice in inaccessible institutional settings (Kuus, 2013). Several of the studies cited above tap into broadly ethnographic methods and sensibilities. In both political geography and international relations, scholars have called for greater use of ethnography to reduce these fields’ reliance on textual sources like speeches (Megoran, 2006; Müller, 2009; Neumann, 2012). This complements developments in policy studies, where there is likewise a growing recognition of the value of ‘close person-to-person contact’ in the settings studied (Schatz, 2009: 4; Shore and Wright, 2011).

In anthropology, meanwhile, the interest in policy-making institutions has led to a growing skepticism of ethnography as the gold standard of close-up work. In part because ethnography requires access to the settings studied, ethnographers study the settings that they can access. Elite bureaucracies are usually not among such settings. The fluidity of transnational policy networks tends to make a year-or-more fieldwork in one place – the traditional marker of ethnographic research – improbable logistically (lack of access) and counter-productive analytically (the object of study is a diffuse process that cannot be captured through observation). As a result, there is still a veritable glass ceiling on ethnographic work and the upper reaches of the social system remain largely in the shadow (Gusterson, 1997).

Existing research on transnational bureaucratic settings draws on a mixture of methods and data sources, including documents, media reports, and interviews. Ethnography is clearly a part of the mix, but just one part. Gearoid Ó Tuathail (1999) or David Campbell's (1998a) studies of international diplomacy on Bosnia, for example, are done entirely on the basis of documentary evidence. Most of the other studies above likewise rely substantially on textual material without sacrificing empirical nuance. In part because of their spatially stretched and diffuse character, transnational regulatory processes (and foreign policy) form a highly textual and hierarchical sphere of instructions, briefings, and press releases that collectively provide considerable insight into their production. A thoughtful study of bureaucratic processes does not necessarily require that the researcher get close to the institutions at hand. The reverse is true as well: getting close to a bureaucracy does not necessarily yield a nuanced analysis of it. The question is not which method should be used (a closed question) but how to best analyze cryptic and inaccessible bureaucratic processes (an open-ended one). When studying social practice we need to remember that:

The logic of practice lies in being logical to the point at which being logical would cease being practical. . . . Practice has a logic which is not that of a logician. This has to be acknowledged to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherencies out of it or to thrust a forced coherence upon it. (Bourdieu, 1990: 79, 86)

IV Conclusion: Zooming in and stepping back

This paper reviewed and assessed the state of geographic research in general and political geographic work in particular on transnational bureaucratic knowledge production. Foregrounding the growing prominence of such work in the discipline, it clarified what we know about transnational policy processes, what questions we should ask about these processes, and how we can try to answer these questions. Despite the flourishing work on the bureaucratized operation of power today, and in spite of the burgeoning scholarship on policy in geography and elsewhere, we know relatively little about decision-making *inside* transnational regulatory institutions. Ironically, bureaucracies receive scant direct scrutiny in geography in part because they are the taken-for-granted institutional context of socio-spatial relations today. Yet bureaucratic institutions are not simply the passive settings in which bigger social processes happen to touch down; the workings of these institutions shape these bigger processes. As ever more realms of social life are becoming regulated via transnational standards (Davis et al., 2012), we need close empirical work on the institutions that develop these standards: their recruitment patterns, institutional hierarchies, organizational cultures, and so on. We need to understand how these institutions interact with the external world (including the international arena) and how they constitute themselves as political actors. To grasp the regulatory effects of the European Commission,

the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or similar public and private institutions, we must understand how knowledge claims are made and circulated inside these bodies: through what kinds of committee meetings, workshops, and training exercises. The question is not only what claims circulate or whether they have merit but also *how* this happens.

Such work is indeed emerging as a result of two trends: growing attention to spatiality beyond state territoriality and a similar interest in geopolitical and policy practices as distinct from scripts. These trends complicate our understandings of spatiality and subjectivity. They bring political geography into closer dialogue with neighboring fields in geography and beyond: most notably political science, sociology, and anthropology. Both the study of spatiality and the examination of policy practice are fuelled by, and in turn enable, more detailed analyses of political agency in human geography (Häkli and Kallio, 2013). The work shows the contingency of bureaucratic processes and illuminates the agency of human beings in policy-making institutions.

Much of the above research is interdisciplinary. It has to be: to grasp geopolitical knowledge production, the researcher cannot retain a neat separation between the inside and the outside of the state (as an institution or a territorial unit), international relations and geography, politics and culture, and so on. The study of the international sphere can hardly do without the discipline of international relations, the exploration of ethnographic methods cannot avoid anthropology, and the use of Bourdieu must consider sophisticated research in sociology. Geographic scholarship on scalar processes and spatial practice can aid the fine-grained analyses of bureaucratic knowledge in other disciplines (Prince, 2013). When non-geographers speak about the need to understand the places and sites of diplomacy (e.g. Neumann, 2013; Shimazu, 2012), they highlight the essential place of geographic work in such context-sensitive research. In the

move toward greater specificity in the study of transnational processes, geographers' long-standing interest in place has much to add to the understanding of these processes.

Conceptually and methodologically, there is considerable affinity between the geographical work on policy and geopolitics on the one hand and the interdisciplinary Bourdieu-inspired analysis of social practice on the other. Both strands of scholarship focus on practice, examine power beyond formal institutional structures, and are concerned with political agency. Both necessitate close attention to the complexities of context: not simply what happens in an institution but what institutional, political and social context enables and constrains the various events. Both require the kind of empirical detail about informal power relations that is difficult to obtain in any social context and especially so in elite policy-making settings. The concept of the field is helpful for the study of transnational processes because of its open-ended spatial frame and its simultaneous attention to structure and agency. It allows the researcher to avoid 'the illusion of contingency' that results from simply following events (Bourdieu, 1996: 188). That illusion happens especially easily in the fast-paced world of policy-making institutions, whose self-images emphasize dynamism and novelty. Some of the best sociological work on transnational policy processes draws explicitly on Bourdieu (e.g. Dezalay and Garth, 2002a); there are emerging literatures on Bourdieu in international relations (Adler-Nissen, 2013a) as well as geography (Jeffrey, 2012; Häkli, 2013).

High-resolution work on transnational bureaucratic processes faces an additional difficulty that needs a mention here. Whether borrowing from Bourdieu or not, it necessitates empirical density. More often than not, the works cited here grow out of many years of research and (sometimes) three-digit numbers of formal interviews. They tend to include substantial sections not only on institutional

histories but also on the personal backgrounds and career trajectories of the key professionals (e.g. Dezalay and Garth, 1996, 2002a; Goldman, 2005; Ho, 2009; Greenhalgh, 2008). These are expensive studies when measured by the researchers' and their subjects' time. They are necessarily time-consuming. The work cannot be team-based given the requirements of personal contacts and at least some modicum of trust in politically-sensitive waters. This is perhaps not news in anthropology, but it is can be a hard sell in other social science disciplines.

The unstandardized and slow mode of analysis cannot be streamlined: no method can overcome the difficulty of gathering evidence inside policy-making institutions. A standardizing effort, based on questionnaires, structured interviews, research teams, coding software, and so on, would undermine the fine grain of the work. This may not necessarily happen in theory, but it does usually happen in practice. Speeding up the analysis nudges the researcher toward existing understandings of power and spatiality – toward national perspectives or positivist model-building, for example – and dilutes the focus on emerging transnational spatialities. Fast work requires good access, which in turn requires that the researcher be at least easily legible if not directly useful to the institutions that she studies. Bureaucracies have lots of information ready-made for researchers, who have substantial incentives to use that information. A seemingly harmless pursuit of efficiency does thereby channel research into the parameters set by the institution itself.

It is thus one thing to recognize the value added of the close-up qualitative work advocated here; it is quite another to do it in an academia that increasingly demands quantity: large numbers of grant dollars, team members, subjects, outputs, downloads. These difficulties cannot be analyzed in depth here, but they must be acknowledged lest we be naïve about the prospects of such work. This article tried to

show why we should insist on fine-grained or slow research, what intellectual resources we can use in that effort, and what conceptual and empirical insights we can hope to gain from it.

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Notes

1. Middle estimate, as between one- and four-fifths of all domestic legislative change in the European Union is undertaken to harmonize national law with EU (i.e. supranational) law (Kuus, 2014: 63). The commission does not adopt EU law unilaterally of course: the example simply illustrates the power of relatively small elite bureaucracies in the regulation of societal life today.
2. Progressive political actors can achieve much by working outside the state apparatus but, given the infrastructural power of the state, they must also work with and through that apparatus (Harvey, 2005: 206).
3. The analyses do in some cases examine the international connections of institutions such as city governments (e.g. McCann, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010b), but the focus of these institutions is on the domestic sphere. Although domestic institutions (such as municipalities and government ministries) are increasingly involved in transnational networking, the extra-national activities are a small part of their work. For a foreign ministry, the international arena is the principal focus of its work. I note this not to create a false dichotomy between domestic and foreign arms of the state but to note that the management of foreign affairs is highly concentrated into relatively small parts of the state apparatus.
4. Economic geographers pay close attention to such extra-national dynamics, but usually in the context of private firms rather than public policy. For a recent review see Prince (2012).

5. A detailed discussion of the work on state theory and the transformations of state power in domestic affairs is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Jessop (2007).
6. My principal concern is with the studies that offer close-up or fine-grained empirical analyses of bureaucratic knowledge production in transnational institutional settings. In order to maintain a workable focus in this paper, the list omits the studies that investigate national institutions. Examples from geography and related fields include Alison's Mountz's (2010) book on a regional office of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Karen Ho's (2009) study of Wall Street investment banks, Susan Greenhalgh's (2008) analysis of China's one-child policy, Iver Neumann's (2012) work on the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, and Martin Müller's (2009) research on the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs (Russia's diplomatic academy). I also leave out the analyses that focus on institutional culture as such (e.g. Catherine Weaver's (2008) book on the World Bank, Stacia Zabusky's (1995) work on the European Space Agency, and Annelies Riles's study (2001) of the networks of Fijian civil servants). These books also examine bureaucratic processes, but their primary concern is not with a transnational field of practice. The same can be said of the efforts to use actor-network theory to study inaccessible elite institutions (e.g. Lépinay, 2011; see also Müller, 2012). I finally distinguish this work from the related scholarship on policy mobilities in economic and urban geography because that work focuses primarily on how policy concepts travel among city governments (i.e. national institutions) (McCann and Ward, 2011; McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011). All of these bodies of work are relevant to the work on transnational bureaucracies that I advocate here, but they do not substitute for that work.
7. The use of Bourdieu in the sub-fields of geography other than political geography is beyond the scope of this paper. For a review of the relevant work see Holt (2008). For a recent assessment of Bourdieu-inspired work in political geography and related fields see Häkli (2013).
8. A thorough comparison of Foucault and Bourdieu is beyond the scope of this paper; see Eyal and Buchholz (2010) for a helpful start. Like Foucault, Bourdieu emphasizes the social embeddedness of political actors; like Bourdieu, Foucault is keenly interested in political agency (Bevir, 1999). I highlight Bourdieu's work

because Bourdieu is less well known in geography than Foucault.

9. In transnational settings, the researcher must carefully consider the influence of national agendas and networks and try to reach beyond any one such agenda or network (Kuus, 2014).

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