

The New Normal Practices of Professional Competition in Policy Controversies

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Abstract

The New Normal (TNN) is the idea that the increased levels of uncertainty, unemployment, inequality, poverty and market volatility following the financial crisis of 2008 represent a new standard societal situation that will not recover to pre-crisis levels on its own. This paper puts forward the idea that TNN has brought with it a related political shift in the conditions and expectations of policymaking. The three core features of New Normal politics are: the transnational professionalization of regulation, social acceleration and scientific controversy. I argue that the transnational professionalization of regulation is in part driven by its perceived efficacy in overcoming the pressures of social acceleration and scientific controversies on regulatory work. However, this perception glosses over serious and currently unchallenged implications for democratic process and accountability and leaves many questions as to the nature and tradeoffs of this new regulatory work unanswered. This paper thus advances the debate on the role of professionals in transnational regulation, and opens new, fruitful lines of inquiry.

KEY WORDS

transnational regulation, professional competition, social acceleration, scientific controversy

Introduction: The New Normal

The wake of the financial crisis of 2008, which rocked the financial system to its core, brought an important question to the minds of policymakers worldwide: was this a normal crisis or was this something different? In other words, could we assume that left to its own devices, the financial system would recover to pre-crisis means, or was the crisis indeed more than a flesh wound? Did it cut to the bone? The investment management firm PIMCO suggested as early as 2009 that the business cycle was not going to let industrial economies recover to pre-crisis levels (El-Erian 2010). In a commentary in the McKinsey Quarterly in 2009, Managing Director Ian Davis was even more stark: “It is increasingly clear that the current downturn is fundamentally different from recessions of recent decades. We are experiencing not merely another turn of the business cycle, but a restructuring of the economic order.” With the recovery failing to materialize in Western states, this viewpoint became increasingly accepted during 2010. This was not a normal crisis, and we would not be returning to normality anytime soon. “The New Normal” (TNN) became a business and economics buzzword around this time, before diffusing through society at large. The idea of TNN suggests that the crisis, which spread from financial markets to the real economy and thence to the institutions of the welfare state, left such a dramatic tear in the fabric of industrial societies that the post-crisis levels of increased uncertainty, unemployment, poverty, inequality, migration and insecurity were likely to prevail. Whether and to what degree these structural conditions can be ameliorated within industrial societies today is still an open question, but after half a decade of reforms and stimulus packages failing to ensure a broad recovery, it is reasonable to say that the idea of TNN has gained a fair amount of purchase.

The considerable societal externalities of the crisis naturally created a strong demand for political action. In the same McKinsey commentary referenced above, Ian Davis (2009) suggested that the two primary forces shaping competition in TNN are less financial leverage and an increased role for government. After stabilizing the financial markets, governments would face considerable pressure to reignite economic growth and provide jobs. Although they have

succeeded in stabilizing financial markets, real economic growth and jobs are still an elusive dream, especially for the societies that were the hardest hit. Governments have no choice but to rise to the challenge, however. Just as the Great Depression of the 1930s permanently redefined the scope and role of government in the US, the Great Recession will set off a similar transformation of the structure, tasks, and practices of government as it reorients itself in order to address the numerous externalities of the crisis. The New Normality of economics and finance is bound to generate a New Normality of government. This paper argues that this transformation is under way today, and that it is characterized by three forces: the transnational professionalization of regulation, social acceleration and scientific controversy. My task for the remainder of the paper is to define each of these forces as well as their interplay, and to bring forward a series of urgent questions that this New Normality of government asks of both practitioners and academics. In doing so, I argue that the transnational professionalization of regulation is in part driven by its perceived efficacy in overcoming the pressures of social acceleration and scientific controversies on regulatory work. However, this perception glosses over serious and currently unchallenged implications for democratic process and accountability and leaves many questions as to the nature and tradeoffs of this new regulatory work unanswered. This paper thus advances the debate on the role of professionals in transnational regulation, and opens new, fruitful lines of inquiry.

The transnational professionalization of regulation

The first part of this story of the New Normality of government traces its roots back to the advent of the 'regulatory state' (Anderson 1962; Seidman & Gilmour 1986). The regulatory state was coined as a concept to reflect on the changing role of the state as it aligned itself to changes in the macroeconomic environment. Following the boom of the post-World War II years, the Oil Crisis of 1973 precipitated an economic slowdown in industrialized countries. The welfare functions of the state came under increased pressure, while their funding started to dry out.

These conditions, along with ideological currents in both academia and politics and technologically induced market changes, set the scene for what is generally described as two decades of intense liberalization and deregulation. However, it is more accurate to describe this era as a shift in the relative importance of the functions of the state (Majone 1997, pp.140–141), with less emphasis on income redistribution and macroeconomic stabilization, and more emphasis on market regulation. Rather than deregulation, it is more appropriate to speak of ‘reregulation’ (Vogel 1996). Liberalization of market sectors such as telecommunications and financial services was made possible only by the creation of new regulation and agencies to oversee and determine the conditions of competition (Vogel 1996, pp.26–35). Vogel summarizes these conditions elegantly in the title of his book *Freer Markets, More Rules* (1996).

Vogel (1996) argues that although all countries responded to the same pressures to liberalize and reregulate, the outcomes and processes of reregulation differed according to national context and specifically ideational and institutional legacies. This explains why even though both Japan and the United Kingdom liberalized the same sectors at the same time, it led to less government control in the UK and more in Japan. Different organizations and orientations of national bureaucracies will interpret external pressures differently and propose different solutions. What is clear, however, is that the processes of liberalization and reregulation increased the amount of work that bureaucracies were tasked with, and hence their importance. As the wave of reform swept over industrialized countries from the 1970s-90s, it brought about a rethink of the role of the state and a corresponding reorganization of the state apparatus. One of the most important aspects of this reorganization was the rise of the specialized regulatory agency.

The rise and diffusion of the regulatory agency has been documented empirically by Jordana, Levi-Faur and Fernández-i-Marín (2011). Studying a data set comprised of 48 countries and 15 sectors for the period 1966-2007, they provide empirical proof of the rise and diffusion of regulatory agencies across industrialized countries, and segment the process into three different stages: the incubation period (1966-88), the takeoff period (1989-2002), and the saturation period

(2002-2007). According to their data, regulatory agencies are now so pervasive in advanced industrial countries that most relevant market sectors have been brought under their auspices. This prompts Levi-Faur (2005) to claim that by focusing on the neoliberal revolution we have missed the corresponding regulatory revolution. Privatization and liberalization are by necessity accompanied by an increase in regulation and regulatory agencies to oversee and control newly created markets of an increasingly complex and fast-moving character.

The comparative advantage of the specialized regulatory agency over generalist Weberian bureaucracies lies primarily in two of its characteristics: a degree of independence from political turbulence and legitimacy derived from its claim to expertise of its subject matter (Majone 1997). Independence allows the regulatory agency to pursue sustained and focused control of the regulated market sector over the long term without falling prey to short term political objectives of governmental parties. Being a specialized agency allows the organization to build up a pool of expertise on the market that it has been tasked with regulating, which provides it with legitimacy when claiming that it knows best how solve regulatory problems. Crucially, specialized agencies create demand for professional knowledge of the regulated industry, and this has been paramount in setting the stage for the professionalization of the bureaucracies. By either hiring directly or liaising through networks or communities, the role of professionals in undertaking regulatory work in advanced industrial societies increased tremendously as a result. Thus, to understand regulatory work today it is increasingly becoming important to turn to the sociology of professions.

The study of professions has evolved through two paradigms and is arguably entering a third.¹ The first paradigm its roots in early 20th century sociologists that focused on the stabilising role of the professions in society. Professionals were seen as fair and altruistic agents that were instrumental in modernizing and advancing societies, and studies focused on defining the key traits that distinguished them from other occupations. This paradigm was challenged by a

¹ See Muzio et al. (2013) for an overview and discussion of these paradigms.

framework from the 1970s onwards that placed power struggles to control and organize an occupation in the center of the analysis. In these studies, the emergence of the professions and their capacity to exclude others from their area of work became more important, with Abbott's *The System of Professions* (1988) perhaps the exemplary text from this period. This tradition saw professions as ecologies that competed for survival and linked up with adjacent ecologies in the governmental, academic or civil society spheres to improve their positions vis-à-vis each other (Abbott 2005). In recent years, the contours of a third paradigm are starting to be drawn. The location of professional work has increasingly been moved to large, complex organizations, and theorists identified a shortcoming in the traditional sociology of the professions in struggling to “deal with the broader transformation in the institutional context of professionalism” (Muzio et al. 2013, p.702). This is leading to a retheorization of professionalization and institutionalization as concurrent and mutually reinforcing processes.

This retheorization has led some to claim that professionalization projects were instrumental to the construction of the modern nation state and its institutions. Suddaby and Viale (2011) assert that professionals are key drivers of endogenous, institutional change. By drawing on their expertise, legitimacy and social capital, professionals are able to challenge the incumbent order and recreate organizational boundaries. They argue that “these skills make professionals uniquely qualified to engage in ‘institutional work’, i.e. creating, maintaining or altering institutions” (Suddaby & Viale 2011, p.436). Muzio et al. (2013) also connect professionalization projects to instances of institutional change, in order to make a strong case for always viewing them as simultaneous processes that create, maintain and change each other. They have compiled a special issue of the *Journal of Management Studies*² with eight empirical studies that explore and advance this argument. The emerging institutionalist sociology of the professions suggests that liberalization and reregulation, with its corresponding changes in bureaucratic structure, would

² See the *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 5, July 2013, Special Issue on Professions and Institutional Change.

have been impossible without the work of professionals pursuing clear objectives to increase their social and economic status.

Up until this point the argument has been constrained to the national context, and the purpose has been to highlight the steadily growing role of specialized agencies and professionals in carrying out regulatory work. Due to globalization, however, the frontiers of the professionalization of regulatory work have transcended the borders of the nation state. Processes of globalization have led to a dispersal of governance (I take governance to be synonymous with regulatory work) across a variety of actors working at multi-scalar levels from the local to the global. The most evident actors in this regard are the organizers of the globalization and regionalization of markets, such as the World Trade Organization, the Bretton Woods Institutions, and the European Union. In addition to these actors, new forms of transnational governance arrangements have emerged for example through collaboration with non-governmental organizations and firms (Abbott & Snidal 2009), standard-setting bodies and technical committees (Mattli & Woods 2009), and self-regulation and compliance systems in business and civil society actors (Braithwaite & Drahos 2000; Braithwaite 2000), among others. This has led regulatory work, even in the national context, to increasingly be carried out in dialogue between these new transnational actors and the national bureaucracies. However, a large and growing portion of regulatory work never enters the national context, but is carried out exclusively in transnational environments. Crucially, it is becoming apparent that the role of professionals is even more important in these new arrangements and transnational settings.

If professionalization projects are tied to processes of institutionalization (Suddaby & Viale 2011; Muzio et al. 2013), then it is clear that the majority of opportunities for the creation of new institutions lies in 'thin' transnational settings as opposed to 'thick' domestic environments (Seabrooke 2014). The boundaries of professional work are more settled in domestic environments, as the result of jurisdictional conflicts in previous periods (Abbott 1988; Edelman 1990; Dobbin et al. 1993). Transnational environments are more open and unsettled and thus

susceptible to jurisdictional competition between professionals in search of new areas of work and the establishment of institutions that can secure such work. The importance of professions in transnational governance arrangements has been highlighted by several authors. Thus, attention has been brought to the role of economists (Lebaron 2001; Fourcade 2006; Chwiero 2007; Stone 2013), lawyers and the legal profession (Quack 2007; Quack 2010), and accountants (Power 1999) in providing and supporting the infrastructure of economic globalization in direct connection to their professionalization projects. In the wake of the financial crisis, some have turned their attention to the role of professionals in guiding the reform process (Baker 2013; Tsingou 2013; Seabrooke & Nilsson 2014; Seabrooke & Tsingou 2014).

In short, due to reregulation, globalization and governmental rescaling, there is a need for a transnational sociology of the professions (Faulconbridge & Muzio 2012) to address the questions generated about how regulation, power and legitimacy is affected by the increasing role of professionals in regulatory agencies and in transnational governance arrangements. This article answers that call by drawing attention to two overlooked features of the transnational professionalization of regulatory work: namely, how it can be conceived as a sub-process of the social acceleration of societies, and how it affects controversies over scientific facts in policy debates. Both features have implications for how to study professionalization and open fruitful new lines of inquiry.

Social acceleration

Social theory, the attempt to explain and understand the system of social relations, reflects social transformations. Thus, the most dramatic instances of change in the way people and societies live and work have created the most fertile conditions for advancing social theory. The industrial revolution is certainly one of the most dramatic societal transformations, and it is generally understood to be the birth of modernity. More than a century and a half has passed since the birth of the modern age, and still this perhaps greatest social transformation in the history of

humanity is being subjected to renewed analysis and reflection. Modernity has been variously described as a process of increasing domestication of the environment (Marx), functional differentiation (Durkheim), rationalization (Weber), or individualization (Simmel). While temporal structures and phenomena were inherent in each of these classical analyses, no one has yet put temporality in the center of a social theory of modernity. Rosa's 2013 book *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* claims that social acceleration is the key to understanding modernity and the process of modernization.

Social acceleration, simply put, denotes the capacity of individuals and societies to achieve higher quantity per unit of time (Rosa 2013, p.65). This quantity relates to any aspect of modern experience. The number of jobs held over a lifetime, the amount of cars built by a factory per year, the increase in computer processing speeds, or the average amount of time spent preparing and eating dinner are all equally valid examples of social acceleration. To be precise, Rosa posits three distinct forms of social acceleration: technical acceleration, acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life. Technical acceleration is the most evident form of acceleration and relates to any form of "intentional, technical, and above all technological (i.e., machine-based) acceleration of goal-directed processes" (Rosa 2013, p.71). The prime examples of this are the increases in processes of transportation, communication, and production. They are the most well-known and easily measurable instances of acceleration. Moore's Law, the proposition that computer processing speeds double with regular and predictable intervals, has entered the popular imagination as another example. But technical acceleration is not only technological – it also encompasses the "acceleration of processes of organization, decision, administration and control – for example, in modern bureaucracies and ministries" (Rosa 2013, p.73). Other authors that take social acceleration seriously as a key component of modernity have contributed powerful analyses of how this mode of acceleration impacts societies (Virilio 1986; Harvey 1990). However, Rosa goes further in identifying two additional and logically distinct processes of acceleration.

Technical accelerations go hand in hand with changes in social institutions and practices. For example, the escalation of production creates and feeds off an escalation in consumption. Nevertheless, the escalation of consumption is neither causally nor logically reducible to technical acceleration itself (aside from infrastructural preconditions) (Rosa 2013, p.75). Insofar as technological acceleration has no impact on social practices and behavior, its acceleratory potential is limited. Therefore, this second category of acceleration is required. It can be described most succinctly as the acceleration of the rate of change itself, examples of this being the acceleration in the changeover in jobs, political party preferences, or artistic styles. Much of this acceleration is made possible by other forms of technical acceleration, but these social changes are not inherently goal-directed. Furthermore, there is some acceleration of social change that has no connection to technical acceleration, such as the reduction of party platforms from a four-year term to a two-year term.

The final category of social acceleration is acceleration of the pace of life. This type of acceleration becomes apparent when considering a paradox that is not fully answered by the first two types of acceleration: if acceleration allows us to do more with less, why is time scarcity increasing? The logical answer must be that concomitant with the other two types of acceleration, we are experiencing an increase in the pace of life, i.e. the amount of episodes of action or experience per unit of time (Rosa 2013, p.77). This is achieved by either a direct increase in the speed of an action, a decrease in periods of rest and empty time between activities, or by doing more activities simultaneously (multi-tasking). Objectively, this has been verified by empirical social research such as time-use studies, and subjectively, this translates into the growing sense of a lack of time, of stress, and anxiety about not keeping up.

Taken together, the three types of acceleration comprise an endless cycle of acceleration. Technical acceleration leads to the acceleration of social change, which leads to the acceleration of the pace of life, which finally leads to further technical acceleration, and so forth. Rosa claims that the self-propelling nature of this cycle of acceleration is the root driving force of the

advancement of modernity (Rosa 2013, pp.151–156). The three types of acceleration are each driven by a different motor. Technical acceleration is driven by the economic motor, and is best captured by the adage: “time is money”. Escalating production or output by acceleratory technological measures is an “inescapable compulsion” in the capitalist economic system (Rosa 2013, p.161). The acceleration of social change is driven by the social-structural motor of functional differentiation (Rosa 2013, p.184). Splitting society into functionally distinct sub-systems (such as law, politics, science, business) is a way of splitting different tasks into their constitutive parts, which allows for more manageable and faster solutions. While this is acceleratory in itself, functional differentiation also introduces more complexity by granting actors several simultaneous roles that they have to split their time between. Being unable to devote all of their time to any role, this compels actors to act faster in order to accomplish more in each role. Finally, acceleration in the pace of life is driven by a cultural motor of the promise of acceleration as the promise of the good, fulfilled life. Due to the other two types of acceleration, the realm of possible options on offer is increasingly outgrowing the realm of those attainable within an individual’s lifetime. In other words, the horizon of expectations is outgrowing the horizon of experience. Whenever modern subjects choose to do something, they are choosing not to do a growing number of alternative options. The logical answer to this is to try to run faster, in order to experience more and to live a full, realized life (Rosa 2013, pp.174–184).

Rosa thus paints a picture of the late modern society and subject as inexorably caught in a cycle of acceleration, driven by its own internal, self-propelling logic as well as powerful, external motors. For Rosa, the acceleration society is a critique of modernity and ultimately an exposition of its futility and inevitable failure. Rosa claims that we have entered a late modernity where the different sub-systems of society, running at different but accelerating speeds, have reached the point where a coherent and integrative ‘resynchronization’ is impossible. Modernity as a project of progress and rationalization has no choice but to be abandoned. We thus find ourselves in a

situation of ‘frenetic standstill’ (taken from Virilio’s *inertie polaire*) where things seem to be changing faster and faster on the surface, but deeper social structures are essentially unchanged (Rosa 2013, pp.14–15). With policymakers left increasingly powerless in the face of runaway acceleration, this should pave the way, according to Rosa, of the most likely bleak future outcome of an “unbridled onward rush into an abyss” (Rosa 2013, p.321) of ecological catastrophe, collapse of the social order, uncontrolled violence, disease and chaos. While Rosa does leave us with a glimmer of hope of alternative, more positive, but less likely futures, there is nothing in his thesis that guards him against the accusation that he is repeating the false prophecies of earlier generations of theorists who despaired in the face of (at the time) overly confusing societal developments. There are no logical contradictions in the thesis to yet unimagined reorganizations of political, social and economic orders, acceleratory or otherwise, that would result in a just, robust, and sustainable society. In spite of its Teutonic pessimism, the thesis leaves us with a number of interesting unanswered questions and useful theoretical tools to unpack the temporal aspects of governance in the New Normal, which may or may not be the first baby steps towards a reorganization that can carry us away from Rosa’s abyss.

Rosa’s key assertion that modernity is best characterized by its modes of acceleration compels us to consider the temporal attributes of governance actors and structures as well as their interplay. Core institutions such as the nation-state, bureaucracy, representative democracy and political regulation can thus be seen as accelerators of the political domain in classical modernity that are increasingly coming under temporal stress in late modernity (Rosa 2003, p.21). In classical modernity, these political institutions were established and refined in order to ‘resynchronize’ politics with accelerating developments in the economy and in social structure. For example, bureaucracy was seen by Weber as a way of speeding up administration procedures to meet the growing complexity and speed of societal development. The late modern break occurred at the point where such resynchronization becomes impossible, which Rosa roughly places at around the 1980s. The waves of reregulation, liberalization and privatization around

this time were often framed as necessary procedures in the face of the overwhelming slowness of bureaucracy (Rosa 2003, p.21). The classical accelerators have become late modern decelerators. The emerging New Normal governance arrangements relying increasingly on transnational networks of professionals and specialized regulatory agencies can therefore be reconceived as new acceleratory initiatives. In this perspective, their essential merits are derived from the perception that such arrangements are ‘faster’, more efficient, and less encumbered by bureaucratic and institutional baggage.

A fundamental condition of the late modern governance challenge is dealing with the ‘contraction of the present’. Drawing on Hermann Lübbe and Reinhart Koselleck, Rosa defines the present as the time period in which the horizon of expectations and the space of experience are congruent (Rosa 2013, p.75). Only during such time periods can conclusions about the present and the future reliably be drawn from past experience, and due to social acceleration these time periods are becoming dramatically shortened. When societies comprise different subsystems running at different speeds, this leads to the situation that what may be true in one domain has already lost its validity or may yet come to be realized in another. Rosa calls this situation the ‘noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous’, and it has important ramifications for policymaking. Under New Normal governance arrangements, distinct ecologies of actors from the political, legal, business and academic domains link up and interact in order to address policy dilemmas. Each ecology moves through time according to its own rhythm and has its own temporal grain (Abbott 2005, p.254). Each ecology therefore has distinct time horizons, with different degrees of a contracted present. This should lead to a more dramatic situation of noncontemporaneity, as the number of interacting ecologies increases. While New Normal governance arrangements allow the traditional sites of policymaking to access resources and expertise previously unavailable to them in order to increase the speed of decision-making, it should lead to a higher degree of controversy over which facts are valid, according to whom and when. There is also the question of whether the faster ecologies are better placed to make their

own voices heard at the expense of the slower ones. What is clear is that the New Normal is characterized in part by more frequent and more dramatic collisions between contrasting time horizons, leading to a sharpening noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous. In TNN, it is therefore imperative to pay heed to how temporal structures impact expectations and policy options, because they directly result in disputing claims to what is considered realistic and what is valid, and therefore to controversy.

The contraction of the present and resulting noncontemporaneity lead to what Rosa calls 'situational politics' (Rosa 2003, p.20). As the degree of security we have in conclusions about the present and the future decreases, it becomes increasingly difficult to organize large-scale, progressive and long-term political projects. Faced with runaway acceleration in other societal domains, politics becomes reactionary and 'situationalist'. This is further complicated by a temporal paradox facing policymakers today: while the demand for the time resources of policymakers increases, the scarcity of those time resources is also increasing. Pluralist democratic societies have become increasingly pluralistic due to societal disintegration through functional differentiation. Under conditions of more pluralism, deliberation times for political decisions increase. The growing externalities and contingencies of global markets also create demand for robust political regulation. However, social acceleration leads to decreasing time spans for political decisions, as policymakers are urged to act to deal with a growing number of issues that affect a growing number of people more rapidly. The window of effective policymaking is therefore always becoming smaller. This temporal stress on regulatory work must partly explain why a growing share of it is delegated to transnational professionals, and it must be seen as an attempt to meet this paradox head-on and make politics less situationalist. Whether this New Normal is the cusp of an emerging new form of modernity or simply symptomatic of the frenetic standstill of late modernity remains to be seen.

Controversy

As alluded to in the previous section, social acceleration in itself leads to increasingly common conditions of controversy in policymaking debates. This is due to both functional differentiation, which results in different perspectives on issues according to which subset of characteristics your group, ecology or profession deem most important, and also due to the noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous, by which the temporal conditions of different groups impact what is valid, not yet valid, or already outdated. There are further reasons to believe that controversy, especially of a scientific nature, will become increasingly pervasive in the New Normal. Technological acceleration leads to an increasing number of complex and poorly understood innovations with wide societal implications, thus demanding a regulatory response. The increasing time pressure on regulatory work disallows the emergence of a scientific consensus on many such issues. It is therefore important to consider how policymakers and governance arrangements deal with this uncertainty and with disputing claims as to the objective truth of scientific facts. The discussion on controversy in policy debates in TNN has ramifications for the ontological and epistemological nature of 'facts', and to illuminate this discussion we can turn to science and technology studies.

Social constructivists distinguish between 'brute facts' such as mountains and 'social facts' such as money (Searle 1995). Brute facts exist regardless of sentient agents, while social facts are constructed through the interactions between sentient agents. Although they are constructed, and thus immaterial, they have real and causal effects, but only as long as subjects participate in their construction. They can thus be said to be ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective (Searle 1995, p.63). Because of this strange, dual nature, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between brute facts and social facts. Social facts can take on the semblance of brute facts when their construction goes unnoticed or unchallenged. This is the problem that occupies Latour in his sociological investigations of scientific laboratory work.

In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour claims that modernity is built on an artificial divide between nature and society. The scientific method introduced a rigorous distinction between subjects and objects, the worlds of humans and the worlds of things. This theoretical distinction has never been reflected in practice, however. Scientific facts cannot be discovered without obvious intervention and mediation on the part of the researcher as she manipulates her equipment and interprets various diagrams, charts and readouts. The establishment of scientific facts builds on long chains of mediation. In other words, facts have never been separated from their fabrication. The dilemma thus faced by the moderns has been a Faustian choice between construction and reality – is this an autonomous fact untouched by human hands, or is this a fabrication that we have constructed? The paradox is that in theory we cannot have both, while in practice we always have. When looking at phenomena such as global warming, ozone depletion or deforestation, it becomes apparent that modern phenomena increasingly take on hybrid characteristics both natural and social. Latour concludes that moderns need to rethink the distinction between nature and society in order to meet contemporary challenges.

He continues this work in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Latour 2010), offering up the notion of ‘factishes’ as a concept that can adequately capture the dual nature of facts. Using the allegory of fetishes and idol-worship, Latour shows how pre-modern tribal peoples saw no contradiction in creating fetishes with their hands and endowing them with autonomous, divine presence. This perplexed the modern explorers who encountered them and asked them to take a stance between construction and reality: did you make these fetishes with your own hands or are they divine? The moderns, with their strict separation between nature and society, were forced to smash the false idols of the tribal peoples when they were not provided with an adequate answer. By analogy, Latour shows how the same question could be posed to modern science. Louis Pasteur’s fermentation of lactic acid was brought about by carefully manipulating a laboratory environment to observe the process. Was the fermentation then constructed or did it occur autonomously? In interpreting the fermentation, Pasteur relied on his own habits,

presuppositions, and logic, and yet concluded that others who peruse the results must arrive at a similar understanding to his own, thus holding contrasting philosophies of science simultaneously (Latour 2010, pp.16–18). Like the pre-moderns' fetishes, the scientific fact is both constructed and autonomous. In contrast to Searle, Latour does not ask whether a fact is constructed or real, but rather takes its construction as a given, and asks how *well* it is constructed. When facts are fabricated well, they can seem objective, independent, and therefore autonomous from human interference. When their fabrication is questioned, this autonomy crumbles.³

A recent telling example to illustrate the point comes from astronomy. A team located on the South Pole has been measuring the cosmic microwave background, the radiation 'afterglow' of the Big Bang, in order to make a map of how this light is polarized across a small patch of sky.⁴ The resulting map was shown to have particular, curly patterns which were interpreted as evidence of gravitational waves generated by the Big Bang. These waves were then themselves seen to support the theory of inflation, a cosmological theory about the expansion of the universe. The experiment was quickly hailed as one of the most important scientific breakthroughs in recent times. Within weeks of the press conference, however, the findings were challenged by two other independent analyses.⁵ These papers claimed that the polarization map could just as easily be accounted for by the presence of galactic dust in the Milky Way, and not the cosmic microwave background. Following these challenges, the original results were thrown into question and more precise measurements were called for. The point of this example is to highlight the important roles of (1) several steps of mediation through various scientific instruments; (2) the requirement for human interpretation at each one of these steps; and (3)

³ The notion of factishes finds a corollary in social theory in the form of the agency versus structure debate. Are subjective agents free to choose a course of action according to their intentions and logic, or are they constrained in such choices by objective structures such as economics, sociology, linguistics, genetics, etc.? In theory, social explanations are asked to choose one or the other, while in practice agents have little trouble attributing to both simultaneously. See Latour 2010, pp. 11-16.

⁴ See <http://www.nature.com/news/how-astronomers-saw-gravitational-waves-from-the-big-bang-1.14885>, accessed August 7, 2014

⁵ See <http://www.nature.com/news/big-bang-finding-challenged-1.15352>, accessed August 7, 2014

how this interpretation itself builds on other chains of mediation and theory. The construction of a 'real', scientific fact is an all too human process. The point is not to disparage the scientific method or question all science. Rather, the point is to make the human work in constructing autonomous facts apparent, while questioning their objectivity and endurance. If human work is so apparent in the world of physics, often taken as the gold standard of scientific objectivity, then where does that leave other scientific disciplines, whose 'truth claims' are often made the legitimating factor for policy?

When evaluating scientific controversies with contradicting truth claims, the task for social scientists is to question not the information of the messages but the transformative power of the messages (Latour 2010, pp.101–104). Scientific experts in their respective fields are tasked with constructing and challenging the construction of factishes, while it is up to social scientists to ask what the factishes actually do once they are called upon by policymakers. Which transformations do they generate – how and why? This shift of perspective compels us to focus more on *how* things are said in scientific policy debates, and less on *what* is said. While ideas and discourse remain important, more attention should be paid to the social and political context of discourse, or the relations that undergird flows of knowledge (Seabrooke 2014, pp.51–52). The position from which something is said impacts its transformative power more than the actual information does. When knowledge production is thus seen as socially and politically situated, it becomes important to pay attention to power relations in the policy debate (Stirling 2014).

The politics of energy choices are rife with examples of scientific claims and counter-claims to buttress and challenge policy. Stirling (2014) relies on the history of nuclear power in the Western world to illustrate how scientific knowledge is configured in order to condition social expectations as to what is realistic or unrealistic in policy debates. Once seen as synonymous with progress and modernity, nuclear power fell into disrepute following a series of accidents in the 1970's and 80's, as well as growing uncompetitiveness in the face of the liberalization of the energy sector. In current debates around energy transitions into low-carbon systems, nuclear

energy is once again being held up in some constituencies (such as the United Kingdom) as the only realistic option to power the sustainability transition, even in the face of reports giving equal viability to renewable energy options (Stirling 2014, pp.4–5). In these debates, factishes are being communicated from governmental positions of power to transform expectations of realistic and unrealistic policy options. Rather than opening up conversations around policy routes, here the factish effectively closes off those routes which vested interests deem undesirable. Stirling suggests that it is asymmetric flows of agency – power – that determine which forms of knowledge are counted as ‘reliable’, and the task for social science should be to focus more on the role of power in policy processes than challenge the outcomes of policy debates.

By looking at the nature of scientific facts, Latour and Stirling both conclude that their content is less important than their social context. Because of this, they both doubt that technocracy and evidence-based policy can offer much going forward.⁶ It becomes instrumental to analyze what factishes actually *do* and for *whom*. Therefore, we should turn to a discussion of the conditions by which professionals come to influence policy debates by the strategic use of factishes. Privileged network positions of professionals can allow them to pitch their reading of a policy controversy at key policymakers, in a way that positions their expertise as more appropriate than that of competing ecologies. Abbott (2005) suggests this may happen through ‘hinges’ (strategies that provide dual rewards in adjacent ecologies) or ‘avatars’ (institutionalizing a copy or colony of one ecology in another). This highlights the precedence of *knowing well* over *knowledge* (Lazega 1992), in other words, the precedence of relationships over stocks of information. Professionals can exploit these relationships to fill gaps in knowledge through processes of ‘epistemic arbitrage’ (Seabrooke 2014), playing off relevant pools of knowledge against each other to shape markets to their liking. In addition to these mechanisms, I suggest that reconceptualizing controversies in policy debates as clashes between opposing factishes,

⁶ Stirling (2014, p. 5) even goes on to say that the notion of a science-based decision is an oxymoron.

allows us to focus on the asymmetric flows of agency and social relations that support them, instead of being paralyzed by contradictions in the scientific subject matter.

Such a reconceptualization opens a number of interesting research questions. The relationship between the transformative effect of factishes and the amount and type of power is not understood. For example, do financial and material resources have a bearing on the transformative effect of factishes? More so or less than network position or cultural prestige? Furthermore, when social acceleration is also considered, the puzzle becomes even trickier. For example, how are factishes constructed in time? Do factishes that are constructed and communicated quickly have more or less transformative power? On the one hand, they should seem less rigorous and well-constructed, but on the other hand, there might not have been any opportunity to challenge them yet, giving them the semblance of consensus. How do different ecologies of professionals and policymakers exploit this or suffer from this? How do policymakers deal with factishes that are valid in one domain but outdated or as yet unrealized in others due to noncontemporaneity? The answers to these questions should advance the sociological understanding of professional and regulatory work while illuminating the conditions of policymaking in the New Normal.

Conclusion: the end of normality?

The purpose of this article has been to sketch out the transnational professionalization of regulatory work, and to add to the narrative of how this development is generally characterized. Globalization is thus seen to be a sub-process of the over-arching dynamic of social acceleration, which is itself the defining characteristic of modernity. Acceleration compels us to investigate the temporal conditions of policymaking in the New Normal, and I argue that the contraction of the present is a key driver to the professionalization of regulatory work. Shifting regulatory work to transnational professionals and specialized regulatory agencies allows a quicker resolution of policy issues pertaining to markets that increasingly cross borders while growing and changing

rapidly. The professionals' claim to specialized, relevant knowledge of complex and frequently highly technological markets can also be seen as a legitimating factor defending their newly acquired areas of work. Professionals are thus also favored when addressing the more frequent and pervasive situations of scientific controversy in policy debates. Controversies can be settled when factishes are employed asymmetrically to close off certain policy routes. Professionals, given their social and political prestige and clout, are well-placed to do so.

In giving transnational professionals more regulatory work under conditions of social acceleration and scientific controversy, each of these pressures are in turn creating new problems in a dialectical fashion for the new regulators. New sets of problems emerge from what was thought to be a solution. Thus, the temporal efficiency of professionals and specialized agencies is driven by adhering to a set of norms that is specific to their respective ecologies. How do we ensure that professionals act in the public interest? Without addressing this problem head-on, we run the risk of having public matters decided by self-serving professional competitions that unreflectively apply norms pertaining to their own ecologies, rather than norms that are given the chance to be decided through public conversation. By 'settling' controversies and speeding up policy decisions, this public conversation becomes more and more difficult to have. The core problem of New Normal government can be stated simply: it gives the impression of solving policy issues quickly and professionally by the work of those best suited to do so, while masking over the processes that got those people there and worsening the prospects for a public conversation about what they ought to be doing.

Returning to the Great Recession and the first usage of the New Normal with which the paper began, there is a more dire reading of these new developments in regulatory work. The New Normal can be seen as an attempt to normalize a situation of crisis: unemployment, financial instability, social upheaval, etc. This normalization, if unchallenged, can be used to legitimate a perpetual state of emergency in governments, where technocratic imperatives override democratic deliberation. Conditions of social acceleration and controversy are likely to

propel this situation forwards rather than alter it. But behind every technocratic choice lies a normative stance. You cannot run the economy without answering the question: what is the economy for? The New Normality of government is making this question more and more difficult to openly discuss, and that is its biggest challenge.

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