International Political Sociology (2026) **20**, olag018

Bringing the Economic Back! Thinking about the Politics of Expertise Within and Beyond the Social

ANNABELLE LITTOZ-MONNET*
Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

LEANDRO MONTES RUIZ
Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

JUANITA URIBE
Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland

International Political Sociology has played a crucial role in foregrounding the question of expertise in global politics, bringing under critical scrutiny the social processes that are central to the politics of expertise. In doing so, however, questions pertaining to the political–economic conditions that intersect with these have often been left aside. We show that attending to the political–economic conditions that contain and shape the politics of expertise and cut through its "micro" elements enables us to identify three shifts. First, we identify a shift in epistemic sites, which tend to move away from international organizations and public research infrastructures toward powerful private epistemic centers that not only become core providers of knowledge that is seen as "expert," but also shape the criteria through which knowledge is validated and even the aesthetics of expertise. Second, it enables us to see that knowledge is not only valued through social processes, but through economic imperatives, so that expertise has become a seductive "commodity" like any other, even when deployed by public institutions. Third, turning to the contestation of expertise, we show that despite the preponderance of spaces of "counter-expertise," these also need to filter through market-aligned evidentiary cultures and aesthetics, to become visible.

La sociologie politique internationale a joué un rôle crucial dans la mise en avant de la question de l'expertise dans la politique globale, en soumettant à un examen critique les processus sociaux au cœur de la politique de l'expertise. Ce faisant, toutefois, les questions relatives aux conditions politico-économiques qui s'entrecroisent avec ces processus ont souvent été négligées. Nous montrons que porter attention aux conditions politico-économiques qui contiennent et façonnent la politique de l'expertise et qui traversent ses éléments ≪ micro ≫ nous permet d'identifier trois déplacements. Tout d'abord, nous repérons un changement de sites épistémiques :les organisations internationales et les infrastructures de recherche publiques sont souvent décentrées par

Littoz-Monnet, Annabelle et al. (2026) Bringing the Economic Back! Thinking about the Politics of Expertise Within and Beyond the Social. *International Political Sociology*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olag018
*Corresponding author: Geneva Graduate Institute , Switzerland.
Email: annabelle.littoz-monnet@graduateinstitute.ch
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des puissants centres épistémiques privés, qui non seulement deviennent des fournisseurs clés de savoirs perçus comme ≪ experts ≫, mais qui façonnent aussi les critères de validation des savoirs et l'esthétique de l'expertise elle-même. Ensuite, nous remarquons que le savoir ne s'apprécie pas uniquement par des processus sociaux, mais aussi par des logiques économiques. Ainsi, l'expertise est devenue un ≪ produit ≫ séduisant comme un autre, même lorsque déploiée par des institutions publiques. Enfin, nous intéressant à la contestation de l'expertise, nous montrons que malgré la prépondérance des espaces de ≪ contre-expertise ≫, ceux-ci doivent aussi se conformer à des cultures probatoires et des formes esthétiques alignées sur des logiques marchandes pour devenir visibles.

La sociologie politique internationale a joué un rôle crucial dans la mise en avant de la question de l'expertise dans la gouvernance globale, en soumettant à un examen critique les processus sociaux dans la fabrication de l'expertise. Ce faisant, toutefois, les questions relatives aux conditions politico-économiques qui s'y entremêlent ont souvent été négligées. Nous montrons ici que prêter attention aux conditions politico-économiques qui encadrent et façonnent la politique de l'expertise, tout en traversant ses dimensions ≪ micro ≫, permet d'identifier trois transformations. Premièrement, nous mettons en évidence un déplacement des sites épistémiques, qui tendent à s'éloigner des organisations internationales et des infrastructures publiques de recherche au profit de puissants centres épistémiques privés. Ceux-ci deviennent des fournisseurs centraux de savoirs considérés comme ≪ experts ≫, et façonnent les critères de validité, et l'esthétique, de l'expertise. Deuxièmement, cette perspective permet de voir que la valeur des savoirs ne repose pas uniquement sur des processus sociaux, mais aussi sur des impératifs économiques, de sorte que l'expertise est devenue une ≪ marchandise ≫ séduisante comme une autre, y compris lorsqu'elle est mobilisée par des institutions publiques. Troisièmement, nous intéressant à la contestation de l'expertise, nous montrons que malgré la prolifération des espaces de 'contre-expertise', ceux-ci doivent aussi se conformer à des cultures de la preuve alignées sur des logiques marchandes pour devenir visibles.

Introduction

International Political Sociology (IPS) has successfully revived and re-envisioned the study of the politics of expertise in global fora of governance, where "expertise" abounds in all forms. Through a long overdue *zooming in* on "knowledge" and "expertise," it has shed light on the complex political processes and practices that go into their making, as well as on their meanings and political effects. While engaging with this endeavor, IPS scholarship has effectively questioned dominant understandings of "knowledge" and "politics" as belonging to separate spheres, which are still often held in International Relations (IR) (Haas 1992; Haas and Stevens 2011). Bringing to the fore the social processes that go into the making, assembling, and translating of knowledge, it has shown that expertise itself is intrinsically political, rather than simply "used politically" (Sending 2015; Leander and Wæver 2018). Acknowledging that the making and assembling of expertise involves political processes has made it possible to also question long-held understandings of problems, whether education, biodiversity, or security, as given, fixed, and in need of solving. It has made it clear that such problems are themselves defined through processes of sense-making that deserve our attention (Allan 2017).

Such insights were gained through a focus on the *sociology* of expertise and, in particular, the micro-practices through which knowledge is made, assembled, and en-

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acted (Bueger 2015). More recently, turning to insights from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), IPS scholarship has further enriched its thinking tools, concepts, questionings, and vocabularies. It has drawn attention to the roles of material artifacts as integral to knowledge-making practices. We now know that "objects of expertise," such as big data, algorithms, projection tables, visualizations, or dashboards, are not simply neutral objects (Esguerra 2024). Not only do they have a "disposition" embedded into them (Bellanova and De Goede 2022), but they also produce autonomous effects, generating "new forms of power relations and politics at different and inter-connected scales" (Ruppert, Isin, and Bigo 2017, 2).

As IPS scholarship has focused on the "micro," the "mundane," and the "everyday" in the making of expertise, it has exposed the complexity, fragility, and hybridity of epistemic practices, the dispersion of agency, and the scattering of sites of knowledge production, accumulation, and translation (Mol 2002; Bueger 2018). Such lenses have been instrumental in helping us grasp the politics of expertise and in shedding light on dispersed, sometimes ephemeral, micro-practices of knowledge-making in global governance. Such insights have well captured that social processes are central to making a statement "expert" and that politics can operate at a micro-scale.

At the same time, we argue that the emphasis on the "social" offers only a partial view of the politics at play in the making of expertise. Focusing on practices, understood as changeable, granular, and fragile, often obscures the "political economic" dimensions that permeate the processes through which knowledge is made expert. Such processes are, indeed, underpinned by a set of broader political–economic conditions that strongly intersect with social practices. We contend, here, that understanding the politics of expertise—the processes through which certain knowledges come to be seen as relevant and authoritative—requires attending to the distribution of resources, the spreading out of market logics, and the way new spheres of accumulation are opening up. Scholars in the field of political economy have indeed shown that the production and circulation of knowledge do not operate outside the logics of capitalism (Thrift 2005; Brown 2017); yet such insights have not been mobilized to study "expertise."

As we are calling for greater attention to the political economy of expertise, we neither suggest neglecting the social, nor going back to strictly material approaches to the economy. Rather, we seek to explore how the political–economic is constantly negotiated within social practices. Thus, rather than treating political–economic conditions as forces or structures pressing in from outside, we see them as *dynamics that are constantly negotiated in the everyday practices of global politics and "seep" through expertise*. Following our colleagues, we believe that "IPS without the global economy is incomplete, just as IPE is blind without an interest in the social" (Graz, Kessler, and Kunz 2019).

To conceptualize the entanglement of social practices and political–economic dynamics, we mobilize the notion of "knowledge machineries" (Knorr-Cetina 1999). Karin Knorr-Cetina proposed to think of "epistemic machineries" to refer to the ensemble of discursive constructs, material infrastructures, and relationships that delineate scientific activity, but also the practices and the artifacts that are integral to the operation of the machinery (Knorr Cetina 1999, 12–13). This notion foregrounds the "whole" within and through which the politics of expertise unfolds, while remaining attentive to the constituent "parts"—the practices, the technologies, the artefacts—that sustain it and give it traction. We build upon this concept, yet we conceive such machineries as broader ensembles that operate *beyond the realm of academia*, and which have their own political–economic logics. Thinking through this lens provides an analytical bridge between the political–economic conditions that permeate the politics of expertise and its micro-practices.

Adopting this approach enables us to grasp that contemporaneous knowledge machineries are not operating outside broader logics of privatization, concentration,

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and marketization (Littoz-Monnet 2024): we argue, indeed, that *the politics of expertise is largely permeated by the dominance of private sites, market logics, and corporate standards of validity and aesthetics.* As contemporaneous knowledge machineries are not operating outside these logics, this has deep implications for three central dimensions of the politics of expertise: its sites, its forms, and its contestation. First, we argue that the sites of expertise production have shifted from international organizations (IOs) and their expert networks, toward private epistemic centers, which produce and accumulate knowledge, but also technologies, techniques, and networks that keep the machinery running by generating knowledge aimed at further sustaining market logics. Not only these enters become core providers of expertise, but they also increasingly delineate the criteria of validity and the aesthetics of the knowledge that is made to count. Second, we contend that in this increasingly privatized and market-driven knowledge production scene, knowledge is increasingly treated as a commodity like any other: to be valued and seen as "expert," it needs to be packaged and embellished in alignment with corporate aesthetics. Third, the politics of "counter-expertise" is also transforming. Most forms of counter-knowledges must nowadays be produced, financed, and circulated within the contemporaneous knowledge machinery and its market-based templates of valuation and visibility, placing subtle bottlenecks on what can be said and how. As even counter-knowledges are framed along such repertoires, the boundaries between activist spaces and private sites become increasingly porous.

By reintegrating the political–economic into IPS accounts of expertise, we illuminate the reconfiguration of the politics of expertise under conditions of privatization, marketization, and concentration. In doing so, we aim to contribute to a more integrated political sociology of expertise—one that takes seriously the social, material, and political–economic dimensions of knowing in global politics.

The Politics of Expertise in IPS

In recent years, the discipline of IR has seen a renewed interest in the politics of expertise in international governance and global politics. IPS scholarship has been crucial in enabling this shift, contributing to widening the scope of the questions raised by constructivist scholarship, which introduced the role of norms and ideational processes in attempting to make sense of the role of knowledge and expertise at the international level (Haas 1992; Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

IPS has both enlarged and shifted IR research toward concrete processes and practices of knowledge-making. This move was done, first, through a focus on the professional groups, communities, or fields, where knowledge is delineated and negotiated through social relations in given groups. As argued by Sending, fields are organized around governance objects; "their logic, boundaries, and social organization are closely tied up with how the objects of governance are defined" (Sending 2015, 28). Such groupings act, thus, as arenas where dominant understandings of problems are fabricated or stabilized, directly delineating how problems are governed. Scholars have, therefore, developed a rich and sociologically informed agenda on the role of professionals in global governance (Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017b; Bigo 2011; Sending 2015), often informed by a Bourdieusian understanding of the field and its "rules of the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In such accounts, recognition is a reflection of both "technical capacity and social power" (Bourdieu 1975, 19) and all participants hold different forms of resources or "capital" (social, epistemic, and financial), given by the structure of the field.

This scholarship shows how expertise is simultaneously a resource to wage in struggles for "authority" over a given domain and an achievement that often emerges out of these very same disputes (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014; Seabrooke and Samman 2016; Seabrooke and Sending 2020; Tsingou 2015; Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017a). While this body of scholarship owes a great deal to the litera-

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ture on epistemic communities (Haas 1992), it no longer treats science and politics as strictly separate domains. Instead, their fluid nexus is captured through a discussion of "revolving doors" (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2021) between academia, national and international bureaucracies, and the private sector. These dynamics are aided by "professional cross-fertilization" and "linked ecologies" across different organizations, meaning that multiple affiliations and identities are the norm (Seabrooke 2014a, b). Similarly, these accounts show how competing claims to expertise and competence (Seabrooke 2014b; Sending 2015) play a fundamental role in struggles for authority and control over different issue areas. In such struggles, the worth of claims is determined by dynamics of professional certifications, peer recognition, and elite socialization (Seabrooke 2014b; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014). "Expertise" is hence not necessarily defined by its degree of accuracy, but rather by the ability of its proponents to leverage different forms of capital and resources in order to assert their views as the appropriate interpretations and courses of action to take (Seabrooke 2014b; Seabrooke and Sending 2020; Tsingou 2015). In showing how the capacity to have "ideas that matter" (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014) largely depends on resources, this scholarship has provided us with an excellent understanding of the making of expertise in global governance, pointing to power asymmetries, the exclusivity of professional communities, and their tendency to reproduce dominant power structures and forms of elitism (Littoz-Monnet 2022). While political–economic considerations inform this literature, the scope of these analyses remains closely associated with the study of politics and policy in relation to professional groups, or elites, and the different power struggles between and within these groups.

Partly in reaction to this earlier emphasis on groups and dynamics of social reproduction, IPS then turned to the "micropolitics" of expertise, or the more ephemeral and fragile networks of relations through which authoritative knowledge is assembled (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). In putting "expertise" under the microscope, these accounts have examined the mundane elements that go into its making, and the relations, encounters, and interactions that facilitate its emergence (Sending and Neumann 2006; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Autesserre 2014). The focus is on relations, rather than structures of reproduction, so that attention is paid to the fragile, fluid, yet complex iterations that delineate knowledge-making processes; "facts" are not arrived at as a settlement of disputes among professionals, but rather as the partial culmination of oftentimes heterogeneous processes and practices.

The so-called "material turn," largely informed by approaches from the field of STS, has fruitfully complemented the practice-oriented literature and its micro focus on expertise. In emphasizing the autonomy and agentic character of the multiple entities involved in knowledge production, frameworks such as Actor-Network Theory have been particularly influential in IPS scholarship, as they remind us of the importance of connections among humans and "non-humans," foregrounding the "tracing of associations" between the multiple entities that constitute what we understand as "the social" (Law 2004; Latour 2007, 17). Such accounts have demonstrated an increased sensibility to the materiality of expertise and have shown what can be gained by focusing on objects, artifacts, and infrastructures (Esguerra 2024). These can be understood as intangible "things" that enable certain modes of seeing; as can be models, benchmarks, metrics, indicators, data, and "evidence" (MacKenzie 2008; Leander 2016; Rhodes and Lancaster 2022; Esguerra 2024); or as the tangible objects and tools that measure them and through which social reality is apprehended (Walters 2002; Morrison 2016). Some of this literature has paid increased attention to the role of aesthetics (Austin and Leander 2023; Møller et al. 2024). As part of the turn toward materiality, questions of form, sensorial engagement, persuasions, and representations, have also been foregrounded, illustrating how knowledge is portrayed, represented, and "made expert," but also how it is sought after, experienced, and used, in order to advance certain policy frames over others in the construction

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of “global” issues (Hodžić 2013; Lancaster 2016; Jasanoff 2017; Aalberts et al. 2020; Bandola-Gill, Grek, and Ronzani 2021).

Yet, while the emphasis on fluid assemblages and the materiality of expertise has helped us grasp micro-processes of knowledge-making, their politics, and the “non-neutrality” of the material, it has nonetheless not given sufficient attention to questions related to power and associated political–economic dimensions of knowledge. Such considerations are, indeed, often obscured by concerns emphasizing contingency, fluidity, and (in)stabilities. For instance, approaches that trace the distribution of agency (Mol 2002) in unbounded networks of seemingly open-ended objects, may overlook asymmetries in the ability to act upon the social world in ways that affect it as desired. By the same token, the inclination to foreground the politics of aesthetics, form, and appeals to affect, often does not focus on the asymmetries at play in reach and capabilities of influencing politics through these means.

As forceful dynamics of privatization and extractivism, market logics, as well as new spheres of accumulation, underpin knowledge-making dynamics, a single focus on “fragile structures of meaning” (Bueger 2015) may *overlook the workings of asymmetries, which might not be fully accounted for by simply “following” or “tracing” connections*. For example, nowadays, “philantrocapitalists,” or “consultants” working across scales and contexts shape the frames of reference through which problems are apprehended (Birn 2014; McGoey, Thiel, and West 2018; Littoz-Monnet and Osorio Garate 2023). Similarly, “data” is becoming a commodity managed by a few oligopolistic hands (Bilić, Prug, and Žitko 2021) and the global “knowledge machineries” underpinning expertise are increasingly privatized and market-driven (Littoz-Monnet 2024). As private actors such as corporations and businesses govern on par with states (Uribe 2024b), a different politics of knowledge landscape is emerging. Given this, an emphasis on fragility carries the risk of a “political paralysis that overlooks fundamental questions about the exercise of power” (Wachsmuth, Madden, and Brenner 2011, 339) and forgets the fact that “it is still humans and their collectives who can imagine a world” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 25). Indeed, “imagining a world,” and positing the product of one’s imagination as a “fact,” is the outcome of significant asymmetries, shaped by codes and criteria that emerged as dominant as a result of historically entrenched inequalities (Bourdieu 1989; Jameson 2008; Hooks 2015). While IPS accounts have provided us with in-depth, insightful, and nuanced accounts of the contemporary landscape of knowledge production, pointing to the social and the political in what makes a statement expert (Bueger 2015; Allan 2017; Littoz-Monnet 2022), it has also largely left aside the way *political–economic conditions are intertwined with the social, and as such shape the processes through which knowledge is made to count as “expert.”*

This is surprising, given that questions concerning economic resources, power, and markets—and the ways in which they shape the politics of knowledge—have long preoccupied political economy scholars. Early on, Susan Strange insisted that knowledge should not be treated merely as “information,” but as a distinct structure of power in the world economy (Strange 1995; May 1996). We also know that market logics pervade all spheres of life and that knowledge production is no exception: it is made and valued within the broader logics of capitalism (Thrift 2005; Lave, Mirowski, and Randalls 2010). As Wendy Brown has observed, in our contemporary societies, “knowledge is not sought for purposes apart from capital enhancement, whether that capital is human, corporate, or financial. It is, indeed, not produced for developing the capacities of citizens, sustaining culture, knowing the world, or envisioning and crafting different ways” (Brown 2017, 177). It has thus been well established by political economists that, in the context of capitalism, knowledge appears less as a public good than as a commodified asset, embedded in logics of accumulation and neoliberal rationalities (Sinclair 2000; Thrift 2005).

Yet even though clear links have been made between knowledge production processes and the world economy, enduring disciplinary divisions persist, so that such

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insights have not been mobilized to study the politics of expertise. Markets and capitalism are typically studied in the context of IPE, whereas the processes that make knowledge count as "expertise" are often approached through the sociology of knowledge and STS accounts. Even when IPE scholars focus on expertise, they tend to speak primarily to IPE communities (Seabrooke 2014a; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014). As they do so, they often do not engage with IPS insights on the significance of practices, infrastructures, material objects, and so on.

There are of course notable exceptions to this claim. Some IPE scholars have been in dialogue with IPS communities (Best 2014; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2014; Kessler 2016). Yet, as they have done so, they have adopted "IPS lenses" to examine objects and themes widely perceived as falling into the realm of the "economic," such as finance, taxation, or economic crises. For instance, Best adopts an STS lens to shed light on the enactment of *financial* expertise by global economic institutions (Best 2014). Similarly, other accounts lying at the intersection of IPS and IPE concentrate on the politics of finance (Seabrooke 2014b; Langley 2008; Kessler 2016), providing us with a stronger social analysis of financial practice, rather than a political–economic lens to examine the politics of expertise at large. We therefore propose to address this "blindspot" and explore existing entanglements between the economic, the social, and the political in the study of expertise in global governance. This, we contend, *allows us to see a different kind of politics at work when examining the question of "what knowledge counts,"* which has been at the core of IPS interrogations.

Marketized Machineries of Expertise

We argue that answering the question of "what knowledge counts" requires attending to the social, but also the distribution of resources, corporate power, the spreading out of market logics, and valuation systems inherent to capitalism. Indeed, and while the "economy" cannot exist and be meaningful outside shared social understandings (De Goede 2003; Hobson and Seabrooke 2007; Gibson-Graham 2014; Seabrooke and Samman 2016, 54), certain constructed realities—such as the logic of the market and valuation systems inherent to capitalism—have endured over time and are, as such, embedded in long-lasting structures that produce concrete political effects. Moreover, social constructions and "economic forces," whether the allocation of resources, hierarchies, or even the power of the corporate sector, are mutually reinforcing (Foucault 2010; Kessler 2016). When, for instance, all things are approached from the point of view of their "effectiveness," or as opportunities for investments, this authorizes profit-making dynamics in previously uncommodified areas. Social constructions, resources, and hierarchies are co-constitutive.

Rather than treating the political-underpinnings of expertise as forces or structures pressing in from outside, we therefore see political–economic conditions as dynamics that are constantly negotiated in the everyday practices of global politics. To explore this interplay between the broader political–economic conditions that enable, shape, and validate expertise, while not losing sight of the micro-practices that sustain, give traction, or contest such conditions, we conceive the politics of expertise as part and parcel of "knowledge machineries" (Littoz-Monnet 2024), the ensemble of ideational, material, and social elements, which "run on knowledge and expertise" (Knorr Cetina 1999), as well as the parts that make the broader ensemble function.

Scholars have recently paid attention to the socio-material ensembles that surround and permeate knowledge and expertise, using the concepts of "epistemic machineries" (Knorr Cetina 1999); "macro-epistemics" (Knorr-Cetina 2007), "knowledge infrastructures" (Edwards 2010; Langevin 2019; Bueger and Stockbruegger 2024; Bandola-Gill 2024), or yet "knowledge machineries" (Littoz-Monnet 2024). In her seminal work, Knorr-Cetina uses the concept of "epistemic machinery" to refer to the ensemble of arrangements, discursive constructs, material infrastruc-

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tures, and relationships that "make up how we know what we know" (Knorr Cetina 1999, 1). Knorr-Cetina also points out that producers of knowledge, practices, and artifacts are integral to the machinery and its operation (Knorr-Cetina 1999, 12–13). The concept thus foregrounds both the "machine" within and through which the politics of expertise unfolds, and the constituent "parts" that make it function. Adopting this lens enables us to pay attention to the co-constitutive relationship between the "structures" and its micro-manifestations: the actors, the practices, and the material artifacts that are part and parcel to the whole, the relationship of entanglement between the "machine" and its "parts" (Littoz-Monnet 2024, 4). As such, it makes it possible to capture how political–economic conditions permeate knowledge machineries in various fields—and are constantly negotiated in the everyday practices that are part and parcel of the machinery.

While Knorr-Cetina' focus was the epistemic cultures that shape scientific activity, we use the term "knowledge machineries" to reflect that we consider the broader ensembles that delineate the making and validation of knowledge *beyond the realm of academia*. We conceive the contemporaneous knowledge machinery of global governance as a "manufacturing system from which truth effects arise," a complex ensemble which includes its own rationalities, power dynamics, infrastructures of knowledge generation, epistemic subjects, valuation devices, conventions, and a configuration of objects and technologies (Knorr-Cetina 1999, 12, 2007). By paying attention to such knowledge machineries, it becomes possible to see that they have their own political–economic logics, that enable and permeate them. Knowledge machineries are indeed "embedded in certain logics, but also in specific power relations and asymmetries, whether it is about resource distribution, norms of scientific validity, or status, and they also sustain these" (Littoz-Monnet 2024, 9). Such ordering logics permeate the social relations such ensembles bundle together (Langevin 2019).

We argue, thus, that contemporaneous knowledge machineries are not operating outside the logics of privatization, concentration, and marketization: *rather, the production of knowledge is itself largely permeated by the dominance of private sites, market logics, and corporate standards of validity and aesthetics.* It is this negotiated ensemble, and the broader conditions under which it runs, that seep through the politics of expertise. This has significant implications for the politics of expertise, as will be further discussed below through an examination of three inter-twined dimensions of the politics of knowledge: the sites where expertise is produced, its material forms, and its contestation. Examining those three core dimensions enables us to see that the politics of expertise cannot be grasped through a sole focus on the social practices through which epistemic authority is gained and statements come to be accepted as expert. Instead, a focus on the "life of expertise" spanning its production, packing into specific forms, and its potential contestation, enables us to see the substance of how the "political economic" interacts with the social in shaping what counts as expertise.

Revisiting the Politics of Expertise

As knowledge machineries are increasingly marketized, this has deep implications for the politics of expertise. First, it makes it possible for private sites not only to become providers of expertise, but also delineate the criteria of validity and the aesthetics of the knowledge that is made to count. Enabled by the logics of the machinery, certain private sites indeed transform themselves into epistemic centers, which produce and accumulate knowledge, technologies, and networks, and keep the machinery running by producing knowledge that further sustains market logics. Second, we see that knowledge comes to be a commodity like any other: it is "valued" as expertise—and mobilized for governing—when it can demonstrate its "use-value" in a marketized form. To that end, it must be packaged and embellished in ways that allow it to move through the machinery's channels of recognition, in-

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cluding its corporate aesthetics. Third, this has implications for the way expertise can be contested. As alternative knowledges, or "counter-expertise," do not run outside the machinery but are themselves increasingly subject to its marketized frameworks and evidentiary standards of validity, even counter-expertise needs to be filtered through market-like dynamics to be audible.

Knowledge sites

While sociological accounts of expertise have shed light on the practices through which epistemic authority is gained and statements come to be accepted as expert (Sending 2015), situating these practices within the contemporaneous knowledge production machinery enables paying attention to questions of resources and infrastructural power, which impact which knowledge is produced in the first place. As global knowledge machineries are increasingly permeated by market logics, and resources are increasingly concentrated in private hands, we observe a significant shift in the loci of epistemic power: from the institutional spaces of IOs and their public infrastructures, toward privately owned epistemic centers. Such centers not only increasingly produce the knowledge that counts as expertise in all global governance fora, but also successfully shape the criteria of validity, relevance, and the aesthetics of "expertise."

Larger historical shifts, such as public de-investments in universities and research, the growing economic valuation of scientific knowledge, as well as the appearance of new forms of data collection, generation, and analysis, have, indeed, made it possible for corporate, industry, and philanthropic actors to become increasingly involved in knowledge-production and processing activities (Roberts and Soederberg 2012; Leander 2013; Prügl and True 2014). As a result, and despite the apparent dispersion of knowledge-making sites in global governance (Musaraj 2015; Flyverbom, Madsen, and Rasche 2017), dynamics of concentration are operating, and private epistemic centers that monopolize the forms of financial capital, technical infrastructures, and networks of support necessary to produce knowledge within the machinery have now become core providers of expertise (Williamson 2016; Elbe 2023).

Examples abound. Big Tech, Big Pharma, but also private security companies, or large consultancies, concentrate massive amounts of data, exclusive access to this harvested information, and the material infrastructures required to process them, such as algorithms (Rikap 2023) and other digital intelligence techniques used to conduct analyses and predictions (Fourcade and Healy 2016; Hester and Williams 2020). These "intellectual monopolies" give firms paramount financial, but also epistemic power, where both forms of control are strongly intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Rikap 2023). Although in ways often less visible, large philanthropic organizations also act as major funders of research programs, producers of data, metrics, cost-calculations, and projections of all sorts based on such numbers. Owing to the financial resources at their disposal, they have been able to capitalize on the novel possibilities unfolded by digitalization and the complexification of modeling techniques and thus produce metrics and estimates on "everything," that seem to surpass traditional forms of statistics in their sheer profuseness (Mahajan 2019; Littoz-Monnet and Uribe 2023). Private epistemic centers indeed possess the required infrastructures to collect vast amounts of data through mobile surveys, mobile phone apps, and the Internet, and recombine them through algorithms and data science methods (Flyverbom, Madsen, and Rasche 2017). Through such infrastructures, they produce calculations, estimates, fancy projection scenarios, and can make claims to be providing profuse, accurate, and sophisticated knowledge. Such knowledge is not just "hard to resist"; it is increasingly recognized as the expertise that IOs and other global governors need to know global problems and solve them, setting trends as to what counts as "state-of-the-art" expertise. The epistemic authority of those corporate epistemic centers therefore rests not only on the production

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and accumulation of knowledge itself, but also on their ability to shape the contours of what makes knowledge count in global governance—from criteria of relevance, validity, to knowledge aesthetics itself.

The epistemic authority of such centers also relies on "linking" with epistemic networks of support (Eyal 2013), through the creation of relationships with universities, public research bodies, and multiple offspring organizations. These networks use the data generated by those epistemic centers for the production of further studies, which make their way into prestigious scientific journals, thus circulating their knowledge and giving further authority to it (Uribe 2024b; Littoz-Monnet and Osorio Garate 2023). Such networks of support also need to be examined through a political–economic lens; they are, indeed, not simple alliances of like-minded actors or organizations, but also networks underpinned by specific funding mechanisms and partnership agreements. For instance, in global health, privileged relationships exist between the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, a data center funded by the Gates Foundation, and the journal *The Lancet*, which publishes its metrics and studies based on these (Littoz-Monnet and Osorio Garate, 2023). Resource-rich sites, in partnership with networks that sustain the circulation of their knowledge, become central providers of knowledge, which, given its profuseness and apparent qualities—sophistication, accuracy, relevance—is considered as desirable by IOs and other governors.

The knowledge produced in private sites therefore increasingly acts as the "expertise" of UN agencies (Johnson 2016; Bellanova and De Goede 2022). This is increasingly the case as IOs have been turning toward big data, through the creation of new large-scale data mining strategies, "making corporations hugely significant for the information-gathering objectives of global governance, often in partnership or in competition with international organizations and states" (Sapignoli 2021, 7). The World Bank has, for example, been incorporating datasets compiled by private businesses in its own data (Pistor 2012). In microfinance, it has heavily relied on consultancies, which established "accounting and reporting standards, the technological platform for investors to trade with location institutions, as well as the indicators used in social impact assessments" (Seabrooke and Sending 2020, 16). Global governors increasingly rely on the datasets of the private sector, which has the resources to produce such knowledge, develop technologies for data collection and transformation, and provide corporate experts with the requisite training to design and implement these technologies (Bellanova and De Goede 2022, 102). Questions of resources and inequalities delineate what knowledge can be produced, but also circulated, so that it becomes authoritative in governmental spheres.

Even more crucially, the emergence of privately owned epistemic centers strongly delineates knowledge's broader criteria of validity and relevance, favoring market-oriented ideational frameworks—where the focus is on the "cost-effectiveness" and "returns on investment" of specific interventions to address problems (de Souza Leão and Eyal 2019). Private epistemic centers not only concentrate the infrastructural capacity to produce knowledge but also normalize corporate frames of reference that align expertise with economic and financial rationalities and their favored formats. Valuation devices, such as metrics, benchmarks, and indicators, pepper global policy-making. Audit and performance evaluations, which indicators facilitate, have also infiltrated global governance (Merry 2011). Those knowledge artefacts are not only embedded in corporate rationalities, but they also adopt corporate aesthetics: logos, seductive graphs, and colorful and "interactive" visualizations make for the knowledge base of IOs, but also other governance sites. Even non-governmental organizations (NGOs) very much adopt an economistic language, cost-benefit forms of analysis, and produce forms of evidence that comply with the criteria of validity and the aesthetics of the corporate sector—as will be further discussed below. Such knowledge, as it is produced, circulated, and used to know social reality, reinforces the economization and financialization of global problems, while

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sidelining alternative epistemic perspectives. The knowledge artifacts of global machineries of knowing are embedded in its market logics, but also further sustain it and give it traction (Littoz-Monnet 2024).

Knowledge forms

In a knowledge machinery permeated by market logics, the processes that make knowledge worthy of attention and thus "expert" must also pass the machinery's channels of recognition, including its corporate standards and validity and aesthetics. For knowledge to publicly matter in global governance, it must not only be generated but also packaged, embellished, displayed, and sold in ways that make it consumable through market-like supply-and-demand dynamics, thus reconfiguring the way knowledge is valued. This shift reconfigures the way knowledge is valued. Rather than stemming from its academic "rigor" or depth, the expert status of knowledge increasingly depends on its visibility and on how effectively it is made seductive, branded, and presented to donors, investors, and corporate partners alike.

This trend toward the aestheticization of knowledge is performative, yet at the same time it signals a deeper shift, wherein knowledge comes to "count" only insofar as it conforms to corporate-style visibility. In this context, knowledge itself increasingly takes on the qualities of a commodity and is no longer revered as a "sacred object" that stands outside or above the dynamics of private exchange. Instead, it is produced as a service tailored to clients, evaluated in terms of marketability and utility. It must "be useful to someone, whether in industry or government, or society more generally" (Gibbons et al. 1994, 4). A clear example can be found in global agendas such as the "First 1000 Days" initiative, a high-profile UN-backed nutrition campaign that has been turned into a global brand (UNICEF 2021). Built around compelling narratives and visually engaging toolkits, it is designed to make nutrition legible and attractive to investors (Michelé et al. 2020).

These developments reflect both the growing role of private actors as arbiters of value and the adoption of corporate marketing strategies by IOs and other global governors. Techniques once reserved for selling consumer products, such as media campaigns, sponsorships, PR "buzz," and visualization strategies, are now integral to the production of global expertise (Ward 2012). A particularly influential role in advancing these dynamics is played by private consultancies such as McKinsey, Boston Consulting, or Deloitte. These firms have become indispensable players in the contemporaneous knowledge machinery of global governance, as they sell their expertise to IOs in the form of "deliverables" and "toolkits" (Mazzucato and Collington 2024). Rather than simply producing new insights, they specialize in packaging, repurposing, and embellishing knowledge so that it circulates in forms legible to funders, investors, and policymakers. By moving from one short-term contract to the next, consultants act as flexible (and core) components of the machinery. They do so through the deployment of visually appealing charts, trendy tools, and metrics that promise to deliver "efficiency," "order," and "harmony." In the best-selling book *The McKinsey Way*, for example, business gurus underscore the crucial role of knowledge packaging, making it clear that in order to effectively "sell" solutions, knowledge possessors must give priority to visual communication tools such as PowerPoint presentations, charts, and graphical representations when engaging with "clients" (Rasiel 1999). According to this business bible, appealing to donors requires mastering the "philosophy of charts" and tailoring visuals to resonate with target audiences (Rasiel 1999, 61). The result is an industry of seduction that is proliferating, where branding, packaging and merchandizing knowledge sometimes take precedence over substance or "political depth" (Hodžić 2013).

Yet, these dynamics are not limited to the realm of private consultancies. The emphasis on the seductive appeal of knowledge now permeates all spheres, so that IOs, expert bodies, and NGOs also invest ever significant efforts in tools mimicking

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the marketing techniques of private actors to persuade donors and investors. The "branding" activities undertaken by IOs often involve crafting eye-catching visuals, and interactive tools that enhance the perceived legitimacy and urgency of specific initiatives all while transforming them into easily digestible, market-friendly vehicles. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) offer a telling example. High-profile campaigns have turned them into a global "brand" designed to attract corporate partners and recruit "champions" through digital platforms (United Nations 2024). The official SDG website provides an extensive array of promotional materials, including downloadable logos, branding guidelines and templates, designed to ensure visual coherence and facilitate the broad circulation of the SDG brand across diverse actors and platforms. Similar strategies were deployed at the United Nations Food Systems Summit and the Summit of the Future, where private consultancies were contracted to "optimize" multi-stakeholder processes and deliver "dialogue packages" through toolkits, dashboards, and visual instruments (Uribe 2024a). The aesthetic economy is also evident in the OECD's Better Life Index, whose visibility derived as much from its statistical content than from its polished, user-friendly interface designed by a private visualization firm (Stefaner 2025).

Such efforts by public institutions to "package" knowledge increasingly depend on the collaboration of external professionals specializing in marketing, cognitive sciences, design, and all members of a burgeoning industry dedicated to the arts of "selling" through embellishment strategies. The techniques used by the Firm typically incorporate insights from cognitive psychology to enhance audience persuasion aimed at making them "adaptable" to different audiences (Davies 2015). Espeland and Stevens note that those who are hired to produce such visualizations or data embellishment, often private companies, want them to be "not only errorless but also compelling, elegant, and even beautiful" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 442). The "format" of knowledge, be it through the form of graphics, visualizations, or dashboards is part of an "aesthetics economy" (Pollock and D'Adderio 2012) in which the polished form of knowledge becomes central to its valuation within the machinery.

This has strong implications for the processes that once underpinned how expertise in global governance was valued. Increasingly, what knowledge "counts" amounts to a generic form of expertise—flexible enough to satisfy client demands and advance "best practices" aligned with prevailing neoliberal frames (Seabrooke and Sending 2020). IOs, research centers, and consultancies rely less on developing knowledge anew than on material that is constantly reformulated and standardized into "sellable" formats and a "formulaic exercise." As a result, knowledge that is labor-intensive or too complex to be disaggregated, packaged, and distributed, is pushed to the margins (Ward 2012, 126). As put by Kessler (2016, 350), in this context, "other ways of knowing or forms of expertise that highlight questions of inequality, representation, justice, etc., only enter the picture when they are *translated* into this market logic; yet they are essentially considered to be of only secondary importance to the functional necessity of "curing" the failures and making markets work." In this process, knowledge is made to count not despite, but by virtue of, its appeal to the practical needs and emotional desires of markets (Bandola-Gill, Grek, and Ronzani 2021).

Thus, beneath the surface of the "beauty" of knowledge lies a political–economic regime that propels knowledge to align with corporate-like principles in order to be seen as policy-relevant expertise, often stripping it of content and depth.

Counter-knowledges

Most forms of counter-knowledges must nowadays be produced, financed, and circulated within the contemporaneous knowledge machinery and its market-based templates of valuation and visibility. As even counter-knowledges are framed along

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such repertoires, the boundaries between activist spaces and private sites become increasingly porous (Montes Ruiz 2024).

In an era where activists strongly resort to knowledge to defend a cause, independence from the state and markets is difficult to achieve, not only as a result of the resource-intensive act of producing knowledge and reaching publics, but also because governance structures support coalitions and collaborations involving the state and markets from which the said independence is sought. Thus, while early proponents of civil society expressed enthusiasm about the capacity of civil society organizations to "speak truth to power" through their knowledge claims, scholars were quick to point to the lack of representative nature of some of the "civil society" discourses (Anderson et al. 2022), its "docility" (Coleman 2013), as well as its potential for cooptation (Amoore and Langley 2004; McKeon 2017). The notion of "autonomy from states and markets" was early on met with skepticism from various strands of critical scholarship, with Robert Cox pointing out that "the shared ideology of globalization" defined the "top-down" version of civil society, which functions as a "stabilizing agency" aimed at enhancing prevailing orders (Cox 1999).

But constraints on the possibility of counter-knowledges to emerge are not only ideological. Challenging dominant knowledge forms indeed entails that capabilities, ideational, social and material, must be secured. In an increasingly neoliberal landscape, knowledge and policy solutions must be framed in a way that attracts donors, which involves proposing actionable alternatives that are compatible with dominant discourses around "impact," "cost-effectiveness," and "scalability" (Tsing 2021; Pfotenhauer et al. 2022; Laurent and Violle 2025). Producing such knowledge templates, whether it is through the production of "evidence," "metrics," or databases, is expensive, labor intensive, and necessitates resources, professionalized staff, and well-oiled networks. As a result, activists who succeed in raising their profile and positioning themselves are often those who can comply with such demands.

In the case of climate advocacy, groups funded by business and the financial sector have gained ascendancy over other forms of activism, as they promote solutions aligned with for-profit endeavors (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014). In the case of the rising scene of anti-drug prohibition advocacy, "markets" and "social movements" oftentimes act in ways that are hard to disentangle, as the reform of illegalized substances entails opening up new market niches (Plesa and Petranker 2022; Steinberg 2022). The usage of cannabis and psychedelics by more privileged subjects in the Global North has made the boundary between activism and markets an extremely fluid one (Montes Ruiz 2024). Moreover, discussions of reform around these substances emphasize the protection of health in terms that fit biomedical standards, with corporate and private companies getting involved in the funding of derivative products using such drugs, expecting legalization to take place and financial profits to arise (Montes Ruiz 2024). Even the idea of the "activist investor" is no longer seen as an oxymoron in certain spheres and organizations (Engelen, Konings, and Fernandez 2008), but rather a resource to harness and work with. Thus, as activists and civil society actors adopt a business-oriented, pro-market epistemic orientation due to their financial entanglements with corporate entities, they also lose the very possibility of producing knowledge outside market-based templates or in opposition to it.

At the same time, further testifying to such entanglements, corporate actors are increasingly participating and intervening in global issues by mobilizing the codes and jargon of activism. Discourses centered on the "effectiveness" of given policy interventions, the "impact" of the investments that go into them, and even their benevolence and capacity to produce "good," have served as a vehicle articulating a convergence between corporate mindsets and a "call to action" style of activism, used to mobilize for and legitimize interventions. While some of the literature on philanthrocapitalism has alluded to how wealthy actors justify their role in the governance of "global issues" by invoking their resource-driven capability to provide pub-

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lic goods (McGoey and Thiel 2018), we also see how investment logics are brought into convergence with the discourse of advocacy. Venture capital (VC), for example, is well known for fashioning the interventions they invest in as revolutionary and transformational. The alleged indispensability of private actors in addressing global challenges enables them to expand their knowledge claims in ways that mimic those of activism, where making profits and doing good are presented as naturally compatible. To name an example, organizations like the COP26 sanctioned Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, which bring together the most powerful VC and investment firms in the world, declare to be committed to "drive ambitious and credible public policies that support, incentivize, and enable the net-zero transition," promote best practices for "net-zero transition" and "advance the deployment of transition finance across the economy" (Glasgow Financial Alliance For Net Zero 2025). By positing themselves and their technocentric solutions and investments as needed by means of best practices, guidelines, and "portfolio-alignment" measurement tools, such organizations not only validate their proposed solutions epistemically and through persuasions taking place in a "marketplace of ideas," but also plebiscite them by means of capital accumulation, securing additional leverage for their initiatives at the expense of others.

Corporate action and "socially oriented activism" can hence become activities with fluid boundaries, where the need, relevance, and "impact" of a given intervention involving private actors is justified through deployments of metrics, facts, and "evidence" aligned with dominant modes of knowledge valuation. Templates like those of "Effective Altruism" epitomize this convergence whereby public, philanthropic, and for-profit logics are folded into a single epistemic project under the promise of "doing good better."[1] The enmeshment between the spheres of industry and corporate worlds with those of activism takes place not only at the level of knowledge, codes, and framing, but also at the level of resources and political–economic conditions of possibility.

Paying attention to how the social and the political–economic intersect in the production of expertise shows that for counter-knowledge to be made to count within the contemporaneous knowledge machinery, it must pass through costly infrastructures, rely on specialized professionals trained in dominant evidentiary vocabularies, and operate with the same frameworks that sustain "mainstream" expertise. It also allows us to see how, by virtue of these very same processes, private actors often legitimize their knowledge claims and their alleged social orientation in ways that mimic the discursive repertoire and action toolkit of civil society actors. In so doing, they also seek a role in governance discussions not just as profit makers but as "good doers" (McGoey and Thiel 2018), something of particular salience at a time of participatory governance, multi-stakeholderism, and so-called global coalitions.

Conclusion

Either through the lenses of infrastructures, assemblages, or micro-practices, IPS has reasserted the centrality of expertise—a once "forgotten problematique"—in global politics and reminded us of its heterogeneity and socially distributed character. In doing so, it has provided us with an ontologically open vocabulary for understanding the contingent entanglements between the social and the material in the assembling of expertise.

However, although the "social" fabric of expertise seems increasingly plural and fragile, it is also shaped within a stratified space where economic resources increasingly delineate what knowledge counts, socially and politically. We thus contend that thinking in terms of knowledge machineries allows us to bridge IPS's focus on the micro-politics of expertise with IPE concerns about macro-dynamics and re-

[1] See, for example the website of "Effective Altruism" available at: https://www.effectivealtruism.org/

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sources. From such a perspective, the question of "what knowledge counts" emerges not only as one of social recognition and political contingency but as one where such dimensions intersect with broader dynamics of privatization, accumulation, and extractivism. From this vantage point, the contours of expertise emerge as less "open-ended," provisional, and ever-shifting than suggested.

In this article, we have examined the moving parts of the contemporary global governance knowledge machinery by focusing on its sites, forms, and counter-knowledges. We showed that the sites of epistemic authority have shifted from the institutional spaces of IOs and public research infrastructures toward powerful private epistemic centers. These centers not only concentrate the material resources required to produce knowledge at scale but also shape the very criteria of validity and the aesthetics through which knowledge is sanctioned. We then argued that for knowledge to count in global proceedings, it must resemble the "commodity" form. Here again, significant transformations are at play: knowledge is valued by global governors not for its research depth, but for its corporate aesthetics and its capacity to attract and persuade donors, investors, and corporate actors—"partners" on which public institutions have become increasingly dependent. Finally, we showed that counter-knowledges, meanwhile, are not external to the machinery; their audibility is often filtered through evidentiary cultures that align with market logics.

We recognize that the dynamics traced are not linear. Although they can be observed in domains as diverse as education, security, health, human rights, or climate governance (Leander, 2005; Merry 2011; Williamson 2016), in some domains, counter-trends remain significant, and the machinery operates at a different speed. In climate politics, for instance, the authority of inter-governmental science (as institutionalized in the IPCC) continues to be in the hands of climate science, even as policy instruments are increasingly marketized. In security politics, private actors such as contractors and cybersecurity firms increasingly shape the infrastructures through which expertise is enacted (Leander 2005), but intelligence and strategic decision-making remain tied to sovereign prerogatives. Even in the highly marketized domain of food politics, agroecology and food sovereignty movements have been successful in articulating and mobilizing counter-knowledges that explicitly resist valuation in market terms (Anderl and Hißen 2023). Additionally, even if the sites and loci of epistemic power are shifting, this does not mean that IOs are being marginalized across the board. In some areas, such as trade and finance, they remain central epistemic hubs, in spite of increasing questioning and constraints (i.e., WTO Secretariat through its monitoring, dispute settlement data, and trade policy reviews). These counter-trends point to the fact that there are nodes of "resistance" across fields, and that empirical sensitivity remains key when examining how political–economic dynamics shape which knowledge comes to become authoritative and relevant.

IPS' methodological pluralism, longstanding attentiveness to the relations, encounters, and frictions shaping knowledge production and its insistence on mapping such practices through heterogeneous infrastructures and loci of power, make it extremely well suited to take on this agenda. From this intellectual, political, and epistemological sensibility, IPS scholarship has helped us make sense of the intricate arrangements shaping the inequalities that affect the life and dignity of many, revealing how seemingly mundane practices, tools, and rituals often produce effects on how different needs, rights, and modes of existence are to be understood and acted upon (Hodžić 2013; Bandola-Gill 2021; Bemme and D'souza 2014; Kelly 2018).

By proposing a socio-political economy of expertise, we seek to add to this line of inquiry that has crossed between IPE and IPS and advocated for a wider definition of the "social" and the "political" (Best 2016; Kessler 2016; Seabrooke and Samman 2016; Graz, Kessler, and Kunz 2019). In contrast to approaches that risk dissolving politics into the vast sea of the "social" (Guzzini 2016), our framework insists on the importance of keeping the distributional and political–economic dimensions

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of expertise in view. Paying attention to the "machineries" of expertise enabled us to capture that marketization also pervades the politics of expertise in the context of contemporary capitalism. We believe that further research on the "machineries" of expertise of distinct domains, but also on the genealogical conditions of emergence and existence of given social-material networks of expertise, would further enrich our understanding of how the political–economic and social dimensions of knowledge intersect.

The emergence of geographically and organizationally scattered governance domains—such as AI governance, climate finance, and post-pandemic health diplomacy—demonstrate the imperative of making sense of the material, ideational, and infrastructural elements that constitute the knowledge machineries and epistemic engines of different political projects racing to define, enact, and govern competing "viable" versions of the future. By extending IPS's analytical repertoire in ways that engage with the socio-political economy of expertise, we seek to "break the spell" of the allure of seemingly inevitable projects and enable the pursuit of pluralistic and emancipatory epistemic futures.

Funding

We would like to acknowledge the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) (grant number 100017–207552) for funding this research.

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