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Theory, 'truthers', and transparency: Reflecting on knowledge in the twenty-first century

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Abstract. The current era is often described in epistemic terms, as an 'information age' or 'knowledge society'. Such claims reflect ideals that are deeply ingrained in modern societies. There is a widespread assumption that successful social and political interaction involves access to information and that political power is gained when knowledge replaces obscurity. Such assumptions reflect contemporary 'epistemic folkways', which are manifested in two widespread epistemic phenomena – faith in 'transparency' and conspiracy theorising.

International Relations (IR) theorists should be well-equipped to understand such developments. However, reflection concerning epistemic matters in IR is in under attack, increasingly presented as a distraction from the formulation of empirically grounded accounts of international politics. This article argues that reflexive theory can in fact play an important role in helping IR scholars to understand contemporary epistemic folkways. Drawing on the Critical Theory of Theodor Adorno, it is argued that the transparency ideal and conspiracy theorising reflect the efforts of individuals to increase their influence in a world in which they are both objects of technical knowledge and, in principle, epistemically empowered subjects. Reflection on the subject-object relationship suggests that the pursuit of increasingly unmediated access to information is in fact a key source of reification and disempowerment.

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Introduction

The current era is often described in epistemic terms – as an 'information age' or 'knowledge society' in which progress might be achieved through such things as 'transparency' or 'big data'.[1] Such claims reflect deeply ingrained ideals and assumptions that are manifested in the attitudes and actions of international political actors, from international institutions seeking greater efficiency to individual citizens seeking empowerment. The ability of certain actors – especially government bureaucracies, security services, and private corporations – to gain access to and control of information while shielding themselves from the public gaze is increasingly a matter of concern. In this context, 'transparency' is assumed to be a means of empowering the public by changing the informational balance of power. The sense of urgency surrounding such issues is particularly pronounced in relation to international politics, defined as it is by secrecy, uncertainty, and a lack of institutional accountability.

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[1] Steve Fuller, *The Knowledge Book* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), pp. 82–7.

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As will be argued below, the overarching epistemic ideal at work here – the form of knowledge which is being promised, pursued, or hoped for – is that of unmediated access to information. An improved flow of information appears to promise more peaceful interaction, more effective governance, and greater accountability. This ideal cannot be understood in isolation from epistemic practices – that is, from the organised activity through which knowledge is actually created and pursued.[2] Global governance increasingly depends on practices through which large amounts of data are created and circulated. At a popular level, there is awareness of the importance of data, and frustration when institutions fail to live up to the ideals of openness and transparency that they frequently propound. Such frustration gives rise to a range of activities aimed at accessing secret information or revealing hidden practices, ranging from campaigning by NGOs to unauthorised information 'leaks'.

Having recognised the importance of epistemic matters some thirty years ago, and having done so with a view to exploring the connection between knowledge and power, post-Positivist IR theorists should be well-equipped to investigate these developments. Post-Positivists introduced a mode of 'reflexive' theorising in which the epistemic assumptions of theorists were linked to the interests and practices shaping international politics.[3] The use of the term 'epistemic' rather than 'epistemological' in this article is intended to reflect this shift – knowledge is not approached primarily as a matter for philosophical enquiry but rather as one of ideals and practices that are partly constitutive of international reality. Despite this heritage, the future of reflection concerning epistemic matters in IR is in doubt. For many IR scholars, of course, it always represented a distraction from the real business of providing empirically-grounded accounts of international politics.[4] However, similar assertions have recently re-emerged with 'eclecticist' calls for an approach to IR based on 'substantive' or 'concrete' international political problems rather than investigation of theoretical controversies.[5] From this perspective, discussions concerning the nature of knowledge are at best a distraction and at worst a form of superstition, to be compared to religious faith.[6] Even those who maintain the need for reflexivity worry that the concern with epistemic matters might have hindered the development of a reflexivist research programme.[7] In either case, the feeling is that rather too much attention has been paid to abstract epistemological and meta-theoretical questions at the expense of IR's true purpose which is, not unreasonably, thought to be the production of accounts of international politics which have 'cognitive impact'[8] – that is, which increase our knowledge and understanding of events, structures, trends, and/or forces at work in the world.

[2] IR's 'practice turn' has of course seen the concept of practice discussed at length in the discipline. However, it is beyond the scope of the present article to consider the nature of practice in detail. 'Epistemic practice' will simply refer to actual behaviour directed towards the pursuit of knowledge.

[3] Richard Ashley, 'Political realism and human interests', *International Studies Quarterly*, 25:2 (1981), pp. 204–36; Robert Cox, 'Social forces, states, and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory', *Millennium*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

[4] Robert Keohane, 'International institutions: Two approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32:4 (1988), pp. 379–96; William Wallace, 'Truth and power, monks and technocrats: Theory and practice in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 22:3 (1996), pp. 301–21.

[5] David Lake, 'Theory is dead, long live theory: the end of the Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 567–87.

[6] Ibid., p. 569.

[7] Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism: IR's 'reflexive turn' – and beyond', *European Journal of International Relations* (2012), online first.

[8] Ibid., p. 2.

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Such doubts are understandable, but they are problematic if they hinder engagement with the constellation of epistemic assumptions, ideals, and practices that are increasingly prominent in non-academic discussions of international politics. This article seeks to demonstrate the importance of reflexive theory as a source of insight into contemporary world politics, and in particular into some of the epistemic ideals and practices which currently define it. It seeks to show that in reflecting, we need not move away from the world of concrete political problems but, potentially, further into the web of ideals and practices through which that world is constituted and experienced. Given the increasing prominence of epistemic concerns in international politics, this task is more important now than ever.

In keeping with the goal of reconnecting reflexive IR with epistemic ideals and practices beyond academia, the article takes as its starting point the 'epistemic folkways', which shape popular engagement with international politics. It focuses on two contemporary epistemic phenomena – the ideal of transparency, already mentioned above, and conspiracy theorising. The first half of the article provides a historical sketch of the context in which the transparency ideal and conspiracy theorising emerged. Each reflects, in different ways, the widely accepted model of political interaction according to which it involves access to or control of information. In the case of transparency, the primary ideal is that of unobstructed access to information as a source of efficiency and empowerment. In practice, this entails attempts to provide or gain access to information in pursuit of more effective and accountable governance. Like transparency, conspiracy theorising reflects a belief in the connection between hidden information and political power. However, in this case, the goal is knowledge of hidden structures of power supposedly controlled by nefarious individuals or groups. The article links the assumptions in question to the emergence of an epistemically self-conscious modernity with distinctive 'technical', 'normative-political', and 'existential' characteristics.

However, if an account of epistemic folkways is to provide the insights which are demanded of reflexive IR theory, it is necessary to engage in reflection which goes beyond historicisation and beyond claims about the self-identified reflexivity of the modern West and its institutions. Part II of the article argues that the pursuit of transparency and conspiracy theorising represent attempts to negotiate the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. More specifically, and in less philosophical terms, individuals must respond to a situation in which they increasingly find themselves to have become objects of technical knowledge, but in a context where access to such knowledge is (in principle) open to any rational subject. The subject-object relationship is a substantive political issue as well as a philosophical one, and ignoring it will diminish rather than enhance any insights generated by an investigation of epistemic ideals, concepts, and practices in international politics. Reflection concerning the subject-object relationship is particularly important since appeals to transparency and conspiracy themselves promote the impression of a shift – actual or potential – to a higher stage of development in which subjects are epistemically more empowered and sophisticated. The danger is that, on its own, the sort of history sketched in Part I of the article simply confirms this story.

The reflexive position in question is developed by drawing on the Critical Theory of Theodor Adorno, for whom reflection concerning the subject-object relationship was a means of understanding both the dilemmas of theory and the challenges of modern politics. Adorno was especially concerned about the pursuit of 'false clarity'

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or 'immediacy' and with the manifestation of this modern obsession in superstition, conspiracy theories, and transparency. Drawing on Adorno, it is argued that although they do reflect the increasing centrality of epistemic concerns to international politics, the epistemic phenomena under investigation are also signs of the dominance of a particular form of reified, technical knowledge.

I. Transparency and conspiracy in the historical perspective

Transparency, conspiracy, and epistemic folkways

The norms, practices, ideals, and assumptions through which knowledge is pursued and understood beyond academia might be described, following Alvin Goldman, as 'epistemic folkways'.[9] As suggested in the introduction, such 'folkways' appear to be more relevant to international politics now than ever. Or perhaps more accurately (given that epistemic folkways must always have been significant to those following them), they currently appear with greater intensity and self-awareness than was previously the case. The examples of transparency and conspiracy theory reflect the extent to which epistemic ideals and practices shape popular engagement with international politics today. 'Transparency' is perhaps the most influential of the overtly epistemic notions at work in contemporary international politics. It is generally understood to be a property of institutions that sees them grant outsiders (in most cases the public) access to information about internal structures and procedures, thereby increasing their legitimacy and accountability. As a political ideal, it anticipates relations where such access is the norm. The ideal of transparency is of significant appeal in the context of complex structures of domestic and international governance operating with ever-larger amounts of data. First used in a political context by Jeremy Bentham, the term is now entrenched in political discourse, with its advocates ranging from activists to international organisations, governments, and corporations.[10]

The ubiquity of appeals to 'transparency' in elite discourse and widespread attempts to pursue it in practice suggest that the ideal is of considerable appeal to those wielding international power. For example, the 'Lough Erne Declaration', which followed the 2013 G8 summit, identified transparency as key to the success of private enterprise and good governance.[11] Elsewhere, 65 governments – including the UK, France, US, Brazil, and South Africa – have signed up to the multilateral Open Government Partnership which commits members to the pursuit of transparency in policymaking and public resource management. Signatories agree to take steps aimed at 'engaging civil society and the business community to identify effective practices

[9] Alvin Goldman, *Liaisons: Philosophy Meets the Cognitive and Social Sciences* (Boston MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 155. In contrast with Goldman, the term is not used here to imply a sharp separation of popular from philosophical accounts of knowledge or any hierarchical relationship between the two, but only as a means of adopting a socially grounded starting point for epistemic inquiry.

[10] Christopher Hood, 'Transparency in historical perspective', in Christopher Hood and David Heald (eds), *Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 3–23. References to transparency appear throughout Bentham's writing. See, for example, Jeremy Bentham, 'Jeremy Bentham to his fellow-citizens of France, on houses of peers and senates', in John Bowring (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Volume 4 (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838–1843a), pp. 419–59 (p. 424); Jeremy Bentham, 'Panopticon; or the inspection house', in John Bowring (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Volume 4 (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838–1843b), pp. 37–172 (p. 130).

[11] 'The Lough Erne Declaration', available at: {https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g8-lough-erne-declaration} accessed 18 December 2014.

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and innovative approaches for leveraging new technologies to empower people and promote transparency in government'.[12] The pursuit of transparency also provides a means of allaying fears about political corruption. For example, a voluntary EU 'Transparency Register' lists approximately 6,500 lobbying organisations operating in Brussels.[13] In some cases, governments, international institutions, and corporations work together in 'transparency initiatives'. For example, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) was created in 2003 following suggestions by the UK Government and has been supported by the IMF and World Bank.[14]

As these examples suggest, the appeal of transparency is especially strong in international politics, where structures for accountability have been in short supply. Under these conditions, its potential role as a form of ersatz international democracy is a key source of transparency's appeal – it has become a means for institutions over which citizens feel they have little control to claim legitimacy and at least give the impression of accountability. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that transparency is simply a rhetorical tool of the powerful; the promise of transparency is widely accepted by those seeking, to varying degrees, to reform or challenge the prevailing structures of domestic and international power. Perhaps the best known is the anti-corruption organisation Transparency International, but there are hundreds of others working for local or global transparency.[15] Most of these are concerned with anti-corruption initiatives, but the ideal of transparency has also been promoted by radical 'transparency activists' seeking to overturn existing structures of global power. For example, for Wikileaks transparency is a tool that might help citizens to 'make their own history'.[16] On this view, international politics is currently conducted on the basis of government secrecy that can be undermined by dragging secrets into the light, a strategy the most dramatic example of which is Wikileaks' publication of thousands of US State Department cables in 2007.[17]

Whatever the political promise of transparency for elites or activists, a large if understandably less celebrated part of its appeal lies in the efficiency it promises to foster.[18] If it is assumed that social, economic, and political interaction involves the circulation of information, transparency is potentially an important source of institutional efficiency and efficacy. This dimension of transparency moved to the heart of the international system with the liberalisation of the global economy and concomitant erosion of the norm of state controlled national economies.[19] Institutions such as the IMF emphasise the need for transparency partly to demonstrate their

[12] Open Government Partnership, 'Open Government Declaration', available at: {http://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/open-government-declaration} accessed 15 December 2014.
[13] European Commission, 'The revised Transparency Register: More information, more incentives, tougher on those who break the rules', available at: {http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-302_en.htm} accessed 15 December 2014.
[14] Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative website, available at: {https://eiti.org/eiti/history} accessed 18 December 2014.
[15] The Sunlight Foundation has compiled a list of over 500 transparency organisations, available at: {https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AoQuErjcV2a0dF85QTRRSEFtR3pfcjN4VHdwLVYzSXc#gid=0} accessed 10 March 2015.
[16] Wikileaks website, available at: {http://wikileaks.org/About.html} accessed 31 October 2013.
[17] David Leigh and Luke Harding, *Wikileaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy* (London: Guardian Books, 2011).
[18] Matthew Fluck, 'The promise of global transparency: Between information and emancipation', in Albena Azmanova and Mihaela Mihae (eds), *Reclaiming Democracy: Judgment, Responsibility and the Right to Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
[19] Hongying Wang and James Rosenau, 'Transparency international and corruption as an issue of global governance', *Global Governance*, 7 (2001), pp. 25–49.

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adherence to the ideal of public accountability but also because transparency is thought to be 'a source of effective financial management'.[20] The role of transparency as a source of systemic efficiency is not confined to the economic sphere. As has been noted by several IR scholars, transparency has also been important in the development of other international regime structures, such as those governing the environment, human rights, and arms control.[21] This pursuit of the smooth functioning of a given sphere of activity by means of transparency extends to the interstate system. Already in the eighteenth century, Bentham was suggesting that provision of information was a means of avoiding international conflict.[22] Today, politicians still emphasise the need for information to circulate freely in a healthy international system. In these cases, transparency is less about legitimacy or empowerment, and more to do with maintaining structures of governance through the circulation of relevant information to relevant actors.

The reasons for IR scholars to concern themselves with conspiracy theories are less immediately apparent. Conspiracy is certainly a common theme in popular culture and an obsession of large online communities such as 9/11 'truthers', but conspiracy theorising can appear as pathological or marginal and therefore of little interest to political scientists or theorists. However, there are no sound reasons for dismissing it as a subject of investigation out of hand.[23] Firstly, under some circumstances, conspiracy theories have been extremely influential. Throughout the twentieth century, elites fostered conspiracy theories in order to justify and rally popular support for attacks on their opponents. Perhaps most famously, Richard Hofstadter's classic work on the 'Paranoid Style in American Politics' describes the McCarthy-era obsession with Communist conspiracy, which came to dominate American politics.[24] Earlier, in Germany, claims about a Communist plot following the Reichstag fire had helped the Nazis to consolidate their power. The Soviets had their own uses for such paranoia – the Stalinist show trials in the 1930s took place in the context of claims about counter-revolutionary conspiracies.[25]

Even where it is not accepted at an elite level, conspiracy theorising is clearly of broad popular appeal, reflecting a set of epistemic folkways through which large numbers of individuals interpret international events. Polls frequently reveal that a substantial proportion of people are sympathetic to such conspiracy theories. One recent poll suggests that as many as 28 per cent of American voters believe in a 'globalist conspiracy' to establish a 'new world order' and 37 per cent that global

[20] International Monetary Fund, 'Fiscal Transparency, Accountability, and Risk' (August 2012), available at: {http://www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2012/080712.pdf} accessed 1 September 2013.

[21] Roland B. Mitchell, 'Sources of transparency: Information systems in international regimes', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42:1 (1998), pp. 109–30; Ann Florini, 'The end of secrecy', in Bernard Finel and Kristen M. Lord (eds), *Power and Conflict in the Age of Transparency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 13–28.

[22] Jeremy Bentham, 'A plan for a universal and perpetual peace', in John Bowring (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Volume 2 (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838–1843c), pp. 546–61.

[23] Surprisingly little has been written about conspiracy theories in IR, but see Luke Herrington, 'Beyond Boston: Conspiracy theories and international relations', e-IR Blog, available at: {http://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/16/beyond-boston-conspiracy-theories-and-international-relations/} accessed 12 November 2013; J. Dana Stuster, 'The Boston marathon conspiracy theories start', Foreign Policy Blog (15 April 2013), available at: {http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/15/the_boston_marathon_conspiracy_theories_start?wp_login_redirect=0} accessed 12 November 2013; Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, 'Conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space', *The Russian Review*, 71:4 (2012), pp. 551–64.

[24] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

[25] David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory Has Shaped Modern History* (London: Vintage, 2009).

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warming is a hoax.[26] 9/11 conspiracies still abound. And conspiracy thinking is by no means an American phenomenon (a common misconception). One 2003 survey suggested that one in five Germans believed that the US government was behind the 9/11 attacks.[27] Conspiracy theories are widespread in the Middle East and former Soviet Union.[28] As the elite conspiracy theorising of the twentieth century shows, such modes of thinking can have significant political implications.

Even where such thinking does remain on the fringes, the assumption that examination of marginal phenomena can only provide insights that are of little significance is questionable. In fact, the widespread and often unreflexive acceptance of ideals like transparency by policymakers and researchers is in some respects a disadvantage, serving to obscure the array of assumptions – philosophical and political – which, as we will see, lie behind them. In contrast, apparently pathological or extreme phenomena can provide a means of approaching more widespread patterns, structures, or assumptions from new angles.[29]

Much like transparency, conspiracy theories depend on and reproduce epistemic folkways through which actors engage with or hope to engage with world politics. In fact, as will be argued below, the epistemic folkways involved in each case are similar in important respects. Like the ideal of transparency, conspiracy thinking is of especial appeal in a world that appears to be shaped by the circulation of abundant information but in which political and social structures nevertheless remain obscure and unresponsive. In keeping with the desire to make visible a hidden wealth of politically relevant information, and in much the same way as transparency advocates emphasise the importance of information, conspiracy theories draw heavily on quasi-scientific appeal to facts and experts, albeit those which are ignored by the 'mainstream'. For example, in a piece entitled 'The Facts Speak for Themselves', one 9/11 'truther' site lists fifty 'facts' about the events of 11 September 2001.[30] Elsewhere, the testimony of 'experts' is seized upon to imbue theories with legitimacy.[31] At the same time, the structures of oppression that are supposedly identified reflect the rational actions of malevolent groups or individuals who can control access to information.

Both the transparency ideal and conspiracy thinking reflect, then, significant and related aspects of current epistemic folkways. These modes of thinking are related in important ways to international political practice. This is most obvious in the case of transparency, which appeals both to organisations that depend on the creation and circulation of information and to citizens who hope to influence them. However, conspiracy thinking is a common response to the opacity and complexity of international affairs. The apparent indifference of international actors and institutions and the unresponsiveness of the structures of global governance make conspiracy theorising in some respects a rational response for those who think that transparency will not come easily. In each case, knowledge is thought to involve access to

[26] Public Policy Polling, 'Conspiracy Theory Poll Results' (2013), available at: {http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/conspiracy-theory-poll-results-.html} accessed 12 November 2013.

[27] Peter Knight, 'Outrageous conspiracy theories: popular and official responses to 9/11 in Germany and the United States', *New German Critique*, 103:Winter (2008), pp. 165–93 (p. 165).

[28] Ortmann and Heathershaw, 'Conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet space'; Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[29] Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 7.

[30] Jon Gould, 'The Facts Speak for Themselves', available at: {911truthnews.com/the-facts-speak-for-themselves/} accessed 20 August 2013.

[31] See, for example, 'Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth', available at: {http://www.ae911truth.org/} accessed 15 December 2014.

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previously hidden data, facts, or information. With transparency, citizens gain access to information held by key institutions. Conspiracy theorists, on the other hand, act as collectors of supposedly hidden facts about the machinations of the powerful. These epistemic assumptions are tied to assumptions about the nature of political interaction which are apparent at both the popular and elite or institutional levels. In particular, it is assumed that a significant proportion of political interaction consists of the accumulation, circulation, or protection of information by atomistic actors. Access to information is assumed to be empowering, although the mechanisms through which such knowledge leads to political influence are rarely articulated in any detail by either the advocates of transparency or conspiracy theorists. As will be argued towards the end of this article, this omission is no coincidence.

Historicising transparency and conspiracy

Reflexivists seem to be especially well placed to illuminate these epistemic folkways and their international political significance. 'Reflexivity' is an ambiguous term in IR, referring to a range of theories and having several applications.[32] However, a key contribution of reflexive theorising has been to cast critical light on epistemic frameworks which are usually taken for granted, but which are partly constitutive of political reality.[33] These are structures in which scholars themselves participate. Thus, as explained by Mark Neufeld, reflexive theory is a metatheoretical stance that generates awareness of the constitutive role of knowledge within social activities and 'recognition of the inherently politico-normative content of paradigms and the normal science traditions' in which scholars participate.[34] Reflexivist IR scholars have considered in detail the links between politics and knowledge, and they have done so in such a way that knowledge is not a matter of academic epistemology but of social and political epistemic ideals and practices.

One of the simplest but most effective strategies of reflexive IR theory has been that of historicisation, which serves to denaturalise and contextualise widespread ideals and practices and to emphasise the mutability of the social world, including the epistemic folkways upon which it might depend.[35] Widely accepted norms or standards such as transparency, the advantages of which might appear to be obvious, are revealed to be the products of a particular time and place and of underlying social forces. That which, like conspiracy theorising, seems marginal or anomalous can be linked to wider social structures or trends, providing insights into what Giambattista Vico described as the 'modifications of human mind'.[36] The strategy of historicisation has been at the heart of critical post-Positivist IR from its inception, and has generally

[32] Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism'; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011), esp. ch. 6; Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, 'Reflexivity in practice: Power and ethics in feminist research on International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 10:4 (2008), pp. 693–707; Keohane, 'International institutions'; Christian Bueger, 'From epistemology to practice: a sociology of science for international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 15:1 (2012), pp. 97–109; Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, 'Advancing a Reflexive International Relations', *Millennium*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 809–23.

[33] Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, p. 160.

[34] Mark Neufeld, 'Reflexivity and International Relations theory', *Millennium*, 22:1 (1993), pp. 53–76 (p. 55).

[35] John Ruggie, 'Territoriality and beyond: Problematizing modernity in International Relations', *International Organisation*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 139–74; Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1982); Cox, 'Social forces, states, and world orders'.

[36] Quoted in Cox, 'Social forces, states, and world orders', p. 132.

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been directed against the strictures of Realism.[37] For example, Andrew Linklater has employed it in his explorations of shifting forms of moral community.[38] Robert Cox identifies historicisation as a key feature of Critical Theory and employs it to explore shifting configurations of ideas, institutions, and social forces in world politics.[39] Such a strategy provides a useful first step in the present attempt to illuminate contemporary epistemic folkways. By means of historicisation, it is possible to provide a sketch of the relationship of such folkways to a wider constellation of epistemic ideals and practices as well as to historical trends in international politics. This sketch will provide the basis for further reflection in the second part of the article.

In broad terms, the prominence of transparency and conspiracy thinking appears to reflect the extent to which modern political practices, ideals, and experience have been shaped by the reflexive character of Western modernity. The prominence of epistemic ideals and anxieties in popular engagements with international relations is in part a product of the fact that modernity has defined itself through reflexive awareness – self-knowledge – of its own processes, including those involving the generation and distribution of knowledge.[40] Western societies have reproduced themselves partly by epistemic and reflexive means, but also with ideals through which certain epistemic standards and practices have been elevated. Information about populations and their environment is collected but also knowledge about the systems for collecting that information.[41] With this, progress has come to be defined accordingly in terms of accurate and useful knowledge accumulated in ever more sophisticated ways. As transparency discourse and conspiracy thinking show, such epistemic definitions of progress and empowerment, whether collective or individual, can take a variety of forms and can appeal to a range of actors.

This form of society has been described in different ways by scholars including Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Ulrick Beck, and Anthony Giddens.[42] As Foucault shows, the shift to such a mode of social organisation is, in many respects, one to the will to knowledge or truth itself.[43] Habermas's claim that 'if we imagine the philosophical discussion of the modern period as a judicial hearing, it would be deciding a single question: how is reliable knowledge possible?' not only tells us about philosophy, but about the ideals and practices of modernity in general.[44] It betrays something of the sense of impending epistemic crisis that pervades societies built around the idealisation of knowledge – that reliable knowledge might escape us or, as Habermas fears, that an unsatisfactory answer to the question of reliability might be imposed. This concern about the knowledge upon which modernity supposedly depends is central to the idealisation of transparency and the obsessions of conspiracy theorists.

In sketching a history of epistemic modernity it will be useful to distinguish between three spheres. The context for the emergence of transparency and conspiracy has been: the emergence of *technical* knowledge based on the creation, control, and

[37] Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*; Cox, 'Social forces, states, and world orders'.
[38] Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*.
[39] Cox, 'Social forces, states, and world orders'.
[40] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).
[41] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
[42] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Penguin, 1977); Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (London: Heineman, 1972); Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*; Ulrick Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992).
[43] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (London: Penguin, 1990).
[44] Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972), p. 3. Habermas's concern is not that this question is no longer asked, but that the answer is assumed to be provided by science.

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circulation of information concerning objective reality; the *normative-political* rise of ideals and practices according to which no relevant actor is excluded unnecessarily from access to knowledge or participation in its production; and the *existential* significance for individuals who are at once objects of technical knowledge and knowing subjects – items of data, receivers of information, and interpreting members of the public.[45]

At the level of technical knowledge, forms of governance that emphasise scientific or other expertise have played an increasingly significant role in modern international relations. Scholars such as Peter Haas have identified the central role of communities of scientific experts in international relations.[46] John Ruggie has described how international epistemic communities of experts develop around *epistemes*, a label for the 'dominant way of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations and a mutual predictability of intention'.[47] In fact, the emergence of modern science and statistics is closely linked to the development of modern statecraft – Armand Mattelart describes how 'statistics' was originally defined as 'state science'.[48] While new forms of mathematical and scientific reasoning were of significant military use,[49] the eighteenth century also witnessed the emergence of the idea that the availability of information would enable cooperation and ultimately tend to make international relations more peaceful. As mentioned above, the latter idea is already apparent the work of Bentham, who identified 'information' as a key means of overcoming the conflictual nature of the system of states.[50]

Technical progress did not occur simply through the accumulation of facts and the elevated role of experts, but also involved collective or individual self-knowledge and the self-scrutiny and refinement of epistemic process and infrastructures themselves.[51] This is apparent in Bentham's now infamous proposal for the 'Panopticon', an institution in which nothing of the behaviour of the inhabitants of the system or its operation was concealed from those managing it or from the wider public.[52] In Bentham's system, information circulates, but in a controlled manner; prisoners are held in cells where they can be constantly observed and their perception of their environment tightly controlled.[53] This controlled production and circulation of information is combined with reflection, from the self-monitoring behaviour of the inmates to the management's awareness that they too are being observed.[54] Bentham's system reveals that the technical role of such transparency is not just a matter of ensuring access to relevant facts but also of maintaining effective systems with minimum effort – the efficiency and efficacy mentioned above.[55]

This applies to the system of states as much as any other. For example, it has been suggested that transparency played a role in the peace that accompanied the Concert

[45] These are employed here analytical devices rather than fundamental knowledge constitutive interests of the kind identified by Habermas.
[46] Peter Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic communities and international policy coordination', *International Organisation*, 46:1 (1992).
[47] John Ruggie, 'International responses to technology: Concepts and trends', *International Organization*, 29:3 (1975), pp. 557–83 (pp. 560–1); Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic communities', pp. 26–7.
[48] Armand Mattelart, *The Information Society: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 12–13.
[49] Ibid., pp. 14–15.
[50] Bentham, 'A plan for a universal and perpetual peace' (1838–1843c); Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 226.
[51] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), p. 21.
[52] Jeremy Bentham, 'Panopticon; or the inspection house'.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 204.
[55] Ann Florini, 'A new role for transparency', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 18:2 (1997), pp. 51–72 (p. 52).

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of Europe.[56] Frequent communication and increased openness between the European powers allowed for more peaceful interaction and, for a while, a more stable international system.[57] In the second half of the twentieth century, transparency was especially important in the emergence of security cooperation, helping to increase confidence by reducing the possibilities for 'cheating'.[58] It was central to arms control agreements, which involved various 'verification' measures to ensure compliance. International transparency has even been characterised as arms control's contribution to international politics.[59] On this view, transparency is not only useful to individual states, but also ensures the smooth functioning of the systems in which they interact.[60]

The appeal of transparency arose not only from its role in aiding the circulation of information in pursuit of technical goals. The shift to a new form of technical knowledge was accompanied by new standards of authority and legitimacy and, ultimately, by new forms of power. In particular, the development of such knowledge required that epistemic status be detached from traditional forms of authority.[61] In international relations, the shift is reflected in that from esoteric rationales for state secrecy, according to which individuals are precluded from knowing on the basis of their social status, to technical ones, according to which secrecy occurs where it is necessary for the effective pursuit of particular goals.[62] In the eighteenth century, Frederick II of Prussia could still declare that 'a private person has no right to pass public and even disapproving judgment … on sovereigns and courts … or to publish in print pertinent reports that he manages to obtain'. A 'private person' – at this time anyone not associated with the court – was forbidden from doing so since he or she was 'not at all capable of making such judgment, because he lacks complete knowledge of the circumstances and motives'.[63] There was a connection between social status and the ability to engage in politically relevant epistemic activity. Of course, contemporary governments still assert the need to protect state and corporate secrets. However, contemporary parallels with earlier forms of power are to some extent misleading. Assertions of the need for government secrecy are increasingly combined with a modern politics of knowledge according to which information can be, at least in principle, 'handled' by all relevant actors. In this new world, the latter can in principle be any citizen of the state in question. Thus, even previously top secret documents are eventually released to the public, albeit after several decades and often with considerable official obstruction.[64] Even where secrecy is ruthlessly defended, secret information can circulate to vast numbers of relevant actors. For example, approximately five million individuals – government employees and private contractors – have access to secret or top secret documents in the United States.[65]

[56] Dan Lindley, 'Avoiding tragedy in power politics: the Concert of Europe, transparency, and crisis management', *Security Studies*, 13:2 (2003), pp. 195–229.
[57] Lindley, 'Avoiding tragedy in power politics'.
[58] Robert Jervis, 'From balance to concert: A study of international security cooperation'. In Bernard I. Finel and Kristin M. Lord (eds), *Power and Conflict in the Age of Transparency* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 29–56.
[59] Florini, 'A new role for transparency', p. 51.
[60] Lindley, 'Avoiding tragedy in power politics', p. 228.
[61] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).
[62] Siselia Bok, *Secrets* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), p. 172.
[63] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 25.
[64] Recent examples include documents relating to British colonial forces torture of civilians in Kenya and the CIA's role in the coup against Mossadegh in Iran.
[65] Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2013), '2012 Report on Security Clearance Determinations', available at: {https://www.fas.org/sgp/othergov/intel/clear-2012.pdf} accessed 20 February 2014.

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The change in question was a normative-political as well as technical one. Accompanying it was the increasing expectation that validity claims be justified beyond the aristocracy to a public consisting of rational actors. This principle was key to Immanuel Kant's political theory. Kant was concerned with the procedure through which political claims are subjected to the test of publicity, a sort of communal reflection, arguing that any political maxim that cannot survive public scrutiny is not in keeping with political right.[66] This is the political parallel of the moral reasoning that he promoted, through which maxims are reflexively tested for contradiction.[67] While this sort of Kantian reflection is not epistemic in a narrow sense it does present the public sphere as a mechanism for testing validity.[68] The modern public cannot be left ignorant; authority is replaced by reflection, society scrutinises itself. As modern international systems and institutions have been built around technical knowledge and the creation and circulation of information, the possibilities and demand for public reflection concerning international matters have increased.[69]

States and citizens are increasingly confronted by forces such as environmental degradation or economic breakdown, which transcend borders and, just as they demand cooperative technical responses, increase the pressure for transnational political cooperation. Moreover, the international institutions created to address such issues themselves become part of the international reality with which individuals are confronted. As Ruggie has noted, the extension of technical knowledge generates new subjects of political choice and in turn the recognition that a collective situation – 'policy interdependence' – exists.[70] As well as new forms of interaction between states, this can generate the sense that there is an embryonic global public that is faced with such issues.[71] This can in turn trigger demands for new forms of transnational political interaction, including those that involve sharing information with ordinary citizens.[72]

Such global public deliberation would be distinct from technical knowledge. However, as suggested above, we should not lose sight of the overlap between the two. Transnational publicity requires public access to information and this information will generally be the product of technical activity. Such access is increasingly demanded and increasingly achievable, whether with the consent of the creators or owners of information or via 'leaking'. Moreover, just as technical practices require the creation of data from complex social reality, new forms of publicity involved the elevation of some supposedly universal forms or dimensions of subjectivity and the

[66] Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual peace', in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 93–130 (pp. 125–30). As Habermas explains, the public sphere was for Kant 'the principle of the legal order and … the method of enlightenment'. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 104.

[67] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

[68] Kant writes that: 'The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for all human reason.' Quoted in Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 108. In other words, publicity is a 'pragmatic test of truth'.

[69] See, for example, Nancy Fraser, 'Transnationalizing the public sphere', *Theory, Culture, Society*, 24:4 (2007), pp. 7–30; Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical foundations of the post-Westphalian Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[70] Ruggie, 'International responses to technology', pp. 560–1.

[71] This was arguably the case with the 'anti-globalisation' movements which emerged in the late twentieth century.

[72] David Held, 'Cosmopolitanism: Ideas, realities and deficits', in David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds), *Governing Globalisation* (London: Polity, 2002), pp. 305–24; Allen Buchanan and Robert Keohane, 'The legitimacy of global governance institutions', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 20:4 (2006), pp. 405–37.

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suppression of others. This is apparent if we remember the specifically bourgeois, patriarchal, and Western origins of the modern public sphere.[73] The interaction between the two spheres is further apparent if we consider the ways in which the development of new scientific instruments has spurred-on normative-political discussions in which changing ideas about the nature of knowledge have been linked to struggles over social and political power. For example, innovations in Optics in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century-France were closely linked to discussions about political transparency, and in turn to debates between conservatives and progressives concerning the nature of political power and authority.[74]

While IR scholars have long been aware of the significance of the epistemic in international politics, the epistemically-charged nature of popular engagement with the international is increasingly apparent. Most citizens are at least partly conscious of the epistemic dimension of international relations. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the context outlined above, in seeking to address political questions about legitimacy and power that have an impact on their lives, they turn to epistemic ideals as a potential source of empowerment or progress. The hope is that access to knowledge will bring empowerment and insight in relation to structures and institutions that are currently unresponsive and obscure. This combination of the individual and the social, the ideal and the practical, the technocratic and the normative makes epistemic matters a site of tension and anxiety. Near universal popular faith in transparency depends in part on acceptance of the view that social and political interaction depend on data or information, as evidenced by widespread concerns about the importance of 'personal data' and the need to protect it. In the face of apparently remote and unresponsive institutions, transparency promises political by means of epistemic empowerment and is closely linked to belief in the progressive power of publicity. Access to information appears to promise a route to the inner workings of political institutions, and thereby to power and influence.

The thwarted hope for such access constitutes part of the context for conspiracy theorising. In this case, little faith is placed in the mechanisms of transparency developed in modern societies. Confronted with institutions, structures, and systems which are obscure and threatening, but armed with modern faith in the emancipatory power of knowledge, conspiracy theorists pursue the facts in ways which avoid the paths offered by governing institutions or the mainstream public sphere. However, at another level, conspiracy thinking is a manifestation of epistemic folkways which emphasise the importance of data and its circulation. In this context, the hope that the determined citizen can, through dogged pursuit of the facts, find the truth that is 'out there' and which powerful forces would withhold from her is paramount. As Hofstadter explains,

> [t]he typical procedure of the higher paranoid scholarship is to start with such defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least of what appear to be facts, and to marshal these facts toward an overwhelming 'proof' of the particular conspiracy that is to be established.[75]

At this point it is useful to consider a third feature of the modern epistemic-reflexive constellation identified above – its constitutive but problematic relation to individual

[73] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989).
[74] Theresa Levitt, *The Shadow of Enlightenment: Optical and Political Transparency in France 1789–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[75] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, pp. 36–7.

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subjects. As Giddens points out, reflection is an existential as well as a social matter – for members of modern societies, questions about the 'basic parameters of human life' are posed and answered reflexively.[76] Foucault and Habermas have both linked the emergence of modern epistemic frameworks to the development of the self. The latter places the newly emerged public and the modern subject side by side: 'The *publicum* developed into the public, the *subjectum* into the subject, the receiver of regulations from above into the ruling authorities' adversary.' Foucault pointed to the relationship between self-reflection and the development of both more efficient ways of exercising power and the care of the self.[77] In IR, Ruggie has discussed the significance of the emergence of the 'I form' and single fixed-point perspective for the development of modern territorial states.[78] Richard Ashley's account of 'heroic practice' draws a similar connection between the modern epistemic stance, individual identity, and modern sovereignty.[79]

The epistemic folkways apparent in transparency and conspiracy reflect the way in which individuals find themselves simultaneously in the role of *objects* of a particular kind of technical knowledge, having been reduced to data, but also in that of potentially knowing *subjects* who seek access to that data and the structures in which it circulates. With the addition of this relationship, the reasons for the intensity of interest in transparency and conspiracy are further apparent. The modern experience of being an object of knowledge or being confronted by technical or scientific practices that apparently fail to serve one's interests or respond to one's demands is potentially a source of alienation to which conspiracy thinking and appeals to transparency are responses.[80] This experience will be particularly pronounced for those confronted with structures of global governance or power in which mechanisms of accountability, if they exist at all, are weak or indirect. In this context, taking the role of a knowing subject who is in theory equal to all others represents an appealing response. However, for it to be so, it is necessary that political activity, whether oriented to the technical maintenance of systems of governance, public scrutiny of those structures, or individual empowerment in relation to them, is understood partly in terms of access to and circulation of information. Thus, while the strands of modern epistemic activity identified here – technical, normative-political, and existential – are useful ideal types, it would be a mistake to distinguish too sharply between them.

II. Subjectivity and objectivity in theory and in practice

Subject and object

While it is useful to link current epistemic folkways to wider historical trends, the implication that the story of modernity can be told in terms of the shift to a new epistemic stage is problematic. This is, after all, a narrative that transparency discourse and conspiracy thinking themselves draw upon and reproduce. Implicit in each is the idea of a progression, however difficult, towards an epistemically and

[76] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 55.
[77] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 201–4; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.
[78] Ruggie, 'Territoriality and beyond', pp. 158–60.
[79] Richard Ashley, 'Untying the sovereign state: a double reading of the anarchy problematique', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 17:2 (1988), pp. 227–62.
[80] Dean, *Aliens in America*, p. 8.

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therefore politically more sophisticated society or subjectivity. Faith in transparency reflects the belief that the particular form of knowledge represented by access to information is politically empowering. Conspiracy theorising reflects considerably less optimism, but nevertheless tends to involve the assumption that politics is a conscious epistemic struggle in which nefarious and powerful actors deliberately maintain the ignorance of the masses. For the conspiracy theorist, the truth is 'out there' to be triumphantly uncovered by the determined individual. The self-consciously epistemic nature of transparency and conspiracy presents a particular challenge for IR theorists seeking cognitive impact in the supposed 'information age' – in providing an account of modernity in terms of epistemic changes, the theorist risks obscuring the tensions, contradictions, and occlusions which might accompany the tale in question. The danger is that of uncritically accepting the claim that modern politics simply *is* epistemic in the ways described above, thereby diminishing any critical insights that an account of epistemic folkways in contemporary international politics might provide. The challenge is therefore that of finding some way of rubbing epistemic history 'against the grain'.[81]

This blurring of the line between theory and political reality points to a familiar but more fundamental problem concerning the possibility of separating subject and object in IR theory. With the introduction of the subject-object relationship we appear to set foot on precisely the metatheoretical detour that critics of supposed reflexivist abstraction fear. However, our brief investigation of epistemic folkways indicates that this is not simply an academic problem. As we have just seen, the technical, normative-political, and existential dimensions of epistemic activity apparent in transparency and conspiracy can be explained partly in terms of the interaction between objectification and subjectification. Actors engage in practices of objectification while, as we have seen, participating in the construction of particular forms of subjectivity from the perspective of which objectification is possible. In the hands of citizens, transparency and conspiracy are attempts to engage with and take control of the ways in which the subject-object relationship is negotiated in practice. Contrary to assertions that such matters are a distraction from concrete political problems, therefore, the subject-object relationship is of *substantive* political importance. Ignoring it will diminish rather than enhance any insights generated by an investigation of epistemic ideals, concepts, and practices in international politics. The task facing IR theorists is that of negotiating subjectivity and objectivity themselves while seeking to develop critical knowledge of social world in which actors are doing the same.

In the remainder of this article, it will be argued that the resources for pursuing this task and thereby building on the historical sketch outlined above can be found in the Critical Theory of Theodor Adorno. Reflection on the subject-object relationship to illuminate modern epistemic folkways, on the on the one hand, and the dilemmas of theory, on the other, lies at the heart of Adorno's work. In order to illuminate the modern constellation of epistemic ideals and practices along with their political implications – that is, in order to achieve the 'cognitive impact' and insight into 'substantive problems' which is now being demanded of post-Positivist IR – Adorno reflexively subverts the subject-object distinction and with it the assumptions about epistemic progress central to the self-understanding of Western modernity.[82]

[81] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (New York: Shocken, 1968), pp. 253–64 (pp. 256–7).

[82] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Theodor Adorno, 'Subject and object', in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978 [orig. pub. 1969]), pp. 497–511.

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Importantly for the present discussion, he identifies one of the results of current articulations of the subject-object relationship – in theory and in practice – as the desire for 'false clarity'. This is not simply a philosophical error but a real social pathology, the social manifestations of which range from superstition and conspiracy thinking (especially anti-Semitism) to the pursuit of transparency in architecture.[83] The present section outlines Adorno's approach to the subject-object relationship, the following considers the implications for understanding the role of the transparency ideal and conspiracy theorising in contemporary international politics.

Before turning to Adorno, it is worth briefly considering some of the approaches to the subject-object dichotomy which IR scholars have drawn upon in responding to the risk of epistemic triumphalism identified above. Most post-Positivist reflection in IR goes beyond historicisation in order to draw out key features of prevailing epistemic constellations, which can then be subjected to critique. Poststructuralists and Critical Theorists have often done so by placing the subject-object relationship within context of a more fundamental intersubjectivity, thereby moving from the philosophy of the subject to the philosophy of language. In the case of Habermasian Critical Theory, the emphasis has been placed on intersubjective communicative reason. From this perspective, knowledge is not a matter of the correspondence between the subject's concepts and an objective reality, but of the pursuit of communicatively arrived at agreement.[84] For many Poststructuralists, following Jacques Derrida, the structure of language is such that successful representation of 'real' objects is impossible. This undermines the Western 'metaphysics of presence' according to which such signification, and therefore truth, is achievable.[85] Whatever form it takes, this intersubjectivism helps to sustain a sense of dynamism, tension, or contradiction, which goes some way to problematising the modern narrative of epistemic progress. It challenges naïve self-reflection and modern epistemic self-confidence by undermining the 'quest for self-awareness on the part of a stable, knowing self',[86] on the one hand, and the idea of objective reality, on the other.

Such reflexively-derived intersubjectivist challenges to the prevailing understandings of the subject-object relationship have provided the basis for critical accounts of international politics. For example, drawing on Habermas, Linklater identifies the 'totalizing project' of the modern nation state and challenges it with a communicative procedural universalism.[87] Drawing on Derrida, David Campbell links political violence in Bosnia to the international community's acceptance of the metaphysics of presence. Against this, he advocates an ethics of sensitivity to difference based on Derrida's theory of writing.[88] Richard Ashley's criticisms of 'heroic practice', mentioned above, reflect a similar challenge to the theoretical and political implications of the subject-object dichotomy. In each case, the overarching sociopolitical and theoretical problem reflexivists confront is that of the reificatory implications of epistemic positions concerned with the relationship between the individual subject and objective reality. This is, in each case, challenged with a

[83] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvii.
[84] Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community*.
[85] David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 185.
[86] Jürgen Habermas *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); Jacques Derrida, quoted in Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfus, 'Generalising the international', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 451–72 (p. 457).
[87] Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community*, p. 16.
[88] Campbell, *National Deconstruction*.

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reflexively identified intersubjectivity that both enables and undermines the modern subject's knowledge of objective reality.

This has been a productive strand of theorising, but post-Positivist IR theory has been hobbled by an overwhelmingly hostile attitude to the notion of 'objectivity'.[89] While this has provided some means of destabilising prevailing epistemic assumptions, it has often done so at the cost of an implicit claim to insight into formal preconditions of knowledge. As Peter Dews has argued regarding Derrida's theory, it tends to elevate the *a priori* over truth – or, in other words, claims about the fundamental structure of language over the investigation of historically contingent developments.[90] Similar concerns have been raised about the formalistic nature of Habermasian Critical Theory.[91] In either case, too much insight is being claimed for reflection, and the real dilemmas and practices of modern individuals tend to be explained away as a result.

One possible response to such problems, and also to the danger, identified at the start of this section, of uncritically affirming epistemic ideals is to reject the emphasis on the epistemic altogether. Pursuing this line of argument, Scientific Realists working in IR have asserted that questions of knowledge are distinct from questions about international political reality.[92] On this view, many post-Positivists commit what the late Roy Bhaskar referred to as the 'epistemic fallacy'. In Bhaskar's words, this is the mistake according to which it is assumed that 'statements about being can be reduced to statements about knowledge; i.e. that ontological questions can always be translated into epistemological terms'.[93] According to Scientific Realists working in IR, post-Positivists reduce the real to the epistemic.[94] The result is that

> the world, which ought to be viewed as a multidimensional structure independent of man, [is] squashed into a flat surface whose characteristics, such as being constituted by atomistic facts, were determined by a particular concept of knowledge.[95]

The epistemic fallacy might even serve an ideological function. For example, Jonathan Joseph has suggested that the concern with reflexivity that characterises the critical social theory of thinkers such as Beck and Giddens is also an element in the strategies of neoliberal governance.[96] The appropriate theoretical response, from a Realist perspective, is not to engage in further epistemic reflection, but to look for specific, real causal mechanisms.

As we shall see, there is an ideological dimension to modern epistemic ideals. However, there is no unproblematic perspective from which to search for underlying causal mechanisms. Scientific Realists understand the objectivity of reality as a precondition of science, while failing to give sufficient weight to the fact that this mode of experiencing the world has only emerged in the context of particular social

[89] Matthew Fluck, 'Truth, values, and the value of truth in critical International Relations theory', *Millennium*, 39:2 (2010), pp. 259–78; Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, 'After post-Positivism? The promises of Critical Realism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 44:2 (2000), pp. 213–37.
[90] Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 46.
[91] See, for example, J. M. Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 105–6.
[92] Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, 'After post-Positivism? The promises of Critical Realism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 44:2 (2000), pp. 213–37.
[93] Roy Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 1978), p. 36. See also Wight and Patomäki (2000), p. 217.
[94] Wight and Patomäki, 'After post-Positivism?', p. 217.
[95] Bhaskar, *Realist Theory of Science*, pp. 44–5.
[96] Jonathan Joseph, *The Social in the Global: Social Theory, Governmentality and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 159.

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conditions. That is to say, and as will be argued below, the way in which objectivity appears depends on specific articulations of the subject-object relationship which occur through the sorts of developments sketched above. While Scientific Realists acknowledge variation in ways of knowing, they prioritise a model of knowledge in which the theorist can supposedly penetrate the veil of social appearances. Such an epistemology is not neutral – the same confidence in this form of knowledge is integral to transparency discourse and conspiracy thinking. Since, as suggested at the start of this section, such phenomena serve to uncritically promote the idea of modern, epistemically driven progress, Scientific Realists risk arriving back into the sort of epistemic hubris they seek to escape.

A more convincing call for a non-Positivist account of objectivity has been made by Inanna Hamati-Ataya who argues that the development of a reflexivist IR theory with 'cognitive impact' requires a 'radical move away from *a priori* normative foundations of classical epistemology' in favour of a 'strong reflexivity' which criticises objectivism 'from within'.[97] From this perspective, following feminist standpoint epistemology, the problem with Positivist 'objectivism' is that it is not 'objective' enough, since it fails to take into account the inescapably contextual nature of knowledge.[98] According to Hamati-Ataya, a move beyond the subject-object dichotomy should be informed by social and naturalised epistemology.[99] IR theorists must recognise 'the fact that subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located has the consequence that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge'.[100]

Adorno's Critical Theory offers a means of developing a similar line of thinking in pursuit of cognitive impact. From Adorno's perspective, IR theorists' ongoing struggle with the subject-object relationship is not surprising, since the propensity of enlightened subjects to pursue various ways of making thought a 'self-sufficient totality' – that is, to suppress recognition that they are indebted to something non-subjective – is the abiding pathology of modern philosophy and society, one which is not easily rectified.[101] In line with Hamati-Ataya's attempt to rework objectivism from within, and with Scientific Realists' criticisms of post-Positivism, he insists on the 'primacy of the object' against the abstractions of subjectivism.[102] In contrast with Scientific Realism, however, the hubris of subjectivism must be challenged by means of reflection rather than a renewed faith in scientific objectivity. Unlike the Habermasian and Poststructuralist theories examined above, on the other hand, the task of reflection is the relatively restricted one of reflecting on the tensions and contradictions of current epistemic principles rather than that of uncovering preconditions of knowledge and meaning operating at some more fundamental, intersubjective level.

According to Adorno, in modern Western societies the subject has, in various ways, been elevated to the position of 'dictator' over things.[103] In philosophical terms

[97] Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism', p. 19; Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'Transcending objectivism, subjectivism, and the knowledge in-between: the subject in/of 'strong reflexivity', *Review of International Studies*, 40:1 (2014), pp. 153–74 (p. 174).
[98] Ibid., p. 154; Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity?', in Lind Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds), *Feminist Epistemologies* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 50–1.
[99] Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity, reflexivity, reflexivism', p. 19.
[100] Harding quoted in Hamati-Atayi, 'Transcending objectivism, subjectivism, and the knowledge in-between', p. 169.
[101] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 11.
[102] Adorno, 'Subject and object', p. 499.
[103] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

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the starkest manifestation of this development is Positivism, which relegates anything that cannot be reduced to logic or empirically identifiable facts to a 'knowledge-free zone'.[104] This reflects a wider intellectual tendency, apparent in various ways in other philosophical traditions, according to which cognition appears to involve only that which is immanent to the enlightened subject's system of classification and the concepts it employs, and in which unmediated knowledge is the ideal.[105] Importantly for the purposes of the present article, this philosophical trend has emerged hand in hand with social processes – especially capitalist commodification – through which the world, including human beings, is quantified and rendered into fungible units. The assumption that there is 'no remainder' when we engage with the world as rational, enlightened subjects is reflected in the key units with which modern societies operate – commodities, data, and individuals, as well as concepts. Whether in his role as philosopher or capitalist, the enlightened subject is driven by a suspicion of anything that cannot be captured with these abstract and interchangeable units. Although it has proved to be a highly effective means of controlling and therefore surviving in the natural world, this suspicion also reflects a fear of 'social deviation'.[106] It is a real of source of compulsion manifested in the institutions and structures which govern modern Western societies.[107] Because the world does not go into such units without remainder, the result is reification and suffering, or 'damaged life' – those institutions and structures are experienced as something alien and unresponsive.[108] Ultimately, this explains why 'enlightened' and rationalised European society found itself, in Adorno's day, descending into unprecedented 'barbarism' – individuals were increasingly left with a purified, formalised subjectivity which provided very little basis for resisting cruelty and domination.

The approach Adorno proposes for disclosing identity thinking and its effects is 'negative dialectics', which aims to generate a 'consistent sense of non-identity'.[109] He explains that '[t]he name of dialectics says no more than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy.' Philosophical reflection is vital to this project because it 'extinguishes the autarky of the concept, strips the blindfold from our eyes' and thereby reveals that thinking is 'entwined with a non-conceptual whole'.[110] The aim is to point to the 'constitutive character of the non-conceptual in the concept' and to move, tentatively, towards a new way of relating to the world that is not based solely on identity thinking.[111] The goal is not to abandon identity thinking entirely, however; identification of some kind is integral to thought and it is a genuine achievement of the Enlightenment to have systematised it. To abandon it would represent a real regression.[112] Rather, the as Peter Uwe Hohendahl has pointed out, the aim is to show by means of critique that 'thought processes do not [simply] reproduce facts' and that 'as long as those processes continue, they open up possibilities'. In other words, the social deviation which identity thinking would

[104] Ibid., p. 19.
[105] J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 87.
[106] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1974).
[109] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 5.
[110] Ibid., p. 12.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Adorno, 'Subject and object', p. 499.

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obstruct remains possible. Negative thought therefore has a 'utopian moment' which belies the promise of the factual modes of thinking, including, as we shall see in a moment, those reflected in the pursuit of transparency and conspiracy.[113]

Adorno's reflection reveals that current forms of reason and cognition are 'indebted' to something that they cannot fully encompass – the objective – and which they have a tendency to obscure.[114] This objectivity is not the 'dead', value-free reality associated with Positivism in IR, but encompasses the social totality which precedes the subject, the material world which the enlightened subject would subsume within its concepts, and the corporeal dimension of subjectivity itself – the subject as a 'object also a subject.[115] Importantly, however – and in keeping with Adorno's refusal to resolve or explain away the subject-object problem – while the subject is also an object, the objective cannot be understood other than as it is mediated through subjectivity. This mutual mediation of subjectivity and objectivity leads Adorno to resist the temptation to give firm definitions of either. The closest he comes is the observation that

> the concepts of what is subjective and what is objective have been completely reversed. Objective [supposedly] means the non-controversial side of things, their unquestioned impression, the façade made up of classified data, that is, the subjective; and they [mistakenly] call subjective anything which breaks through that façade, engages the specific experience of a matter, casts-off all ready-made judgements and substitutes relatedness to the object for the majority opinion of those who do not even look at it, let alone think about it – that is, the objective.[116]

While it is expressed in philosophical terms, this statement gives a sense of the fragile balance it is necessary to maintain in dealing with the subject-object relationship as it appears in epistemic phenomena of the kind under consideration in the present article.

On the one hand, modern individuals are presented with a society that increasingly operates through the circulation of 'classified data'. Under these circumstances, they turn to epistemic ideals or projects promising access to data or the facts in the hope that in doing so they will come to understand or influence the structures with which they are faced. The resources with which the individual tends to approach this façade – relentless pursuit of the facts, the demand for access to information – are, however, wrongly taken to be those of the 'objective' pursuit of the truth. These are in fact the resources of subjects who have already been shaped by identity thinking and are losing sight of the possibility of particular experience and original judgment which would really be objective (insofar as they would avoid subjectivist reification).

Unfortunately, then, the resources that appear to promise insight, progress, and empowerment are the very bricks from which the impenetrable 'façade' of modern institutions is constructed. On the other hand, those aspects of experience and activity which still partly escape the systems thereby established – art, emotion, reflection, ethics, for example – are denigrated as merely 'subjective' and relegated to the cognition-free realm mentioned above.[117] In fact, since these are things that are not easily rendered into classified data in accordance with modern subjectivism, they

[113] Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 71.
[114] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 228.
[115] Adorno, 'Subject and object', p. 502.
[116] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp. 69–70.
[117] That this process is continuing apace is apparent in claims that 'big data' is removing the need for theory. See Chris Anderson, 'The end of theory: the data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete', *Wired Magazine*, 16:07 (2008), available at: {http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/magazine/16-07/pb_theory} accessed 23 March 2015.

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potentially provide a better means of avoiding reified subjectivity and of illuminating its structures. To the extent that they have yet to be transferred to the 'non-controversial' side, such experiences and activities can give us cognitive purchase. To this extent they are more 'objective' than the resources offered by Positivism.

Given this critique, in his efforts to avoid identity thinking while highlighting the primacy of the objective, Adorno must take care not to claim conventional objective insight – that is, to adopt the position of a subject who can capture the facts in an unproblematic manner. For this reason, as well as proceeding on the reflexive basis just described, he frequently 'reads' cultural or philosophical artefacts in a way that captures the currently reified nature of the subject-object relationship while maintaining a sense that it could be articulated otherwise that it is. From this perspective, a concept or theory can be 'true' to the extent that it reflects some dimension of existing social conditions, but false to the extent that it gives the impression of their permanence. For example, Positivism can be described as 'true' insofar as it is an expression of the atomistic, alienated form of social relations shaped by the calculative rationality of capitalist society. At the same time, it is 'false' because it is incapable of recognising the distortion these social relations involve.[118] The subject-object distinction itself is 'true' to the extent that 'in the cognitive realm it serves to express the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development'. It is 'false' because 'the resulting separation must not be hypostatised, not magically transformed into an invariant'.[119] This approach captures the way in which, however reified it might have become, the subject-object relationship cannot be frozen but is, rather, always open to new articulations.

The dangers of false clarity

Adorno's critique of identity-thinking serves a 'world-disclosing' function – it illuminates and denaturalises the operation of epistemic assumptions that are usually taken for granted, revealing that they retain the character of rigid myths or superstitions.[120] More specifically, it undermines their implicit claim – identified at the start of the previous section – to represent a progression to a new epistemic stage based on ever less mediated knowledge. His approach to the subject-object relationship therefore provides the means of addressing the problems that have emerged in our attempt to provide an account of epistemic folkways in international politics. It gives a sense of what is distinctive about modern forms of knowledge – technically, normatively, politically, and existentially – while at the same time undermining the impression of epistemic progress that they tend to impose. It thereby rubs epistemic history against the grain in the manner the need for which was identified above.

This was an important task for Adorno, for whom one of the primary social and political manifestations of identity thinking was the pursuit of 'false clarity'. In keeping with the connection between enlightened thought and compulsion described above, the preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, states that '[f]alse clarity is another name for myth' which, it is pointed out, was always 'obscure and luminous at once'.[121] Like identity thinking in general, but in a manner similar to older forms of

[118] Adorno, 'Subject and object', pp. 505–6.
[119] Ibid., pp. 498–9.
[120] Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, p. 160.
[121] Adorno and Horkeimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvii.

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superstition, this modern clarity is maintained by 'tabooing any thought which sets out negatively from the facts and from the prevailing modes of thought as obscure, convoluted, and preferably foreign' and in doing so 'holds mind captive in ever deeper blindness'.[122] Moreover, the 'concept of clarity' to which 'art, literature, and philosophy must conform' is not neutral, but is defined by the 'prevailing usages' of knowledge in 'science, business and politics'.[123]

Dialectic of Enlightenment closes with a more specific warning about the dangers of pursuing false clarity and an indication of the ways in which they might materialise. A fragment entitled 'Isolation by Communication' describes the operation of clarity in more concrete terms. In this case it does not take the form of epistemological boundary-setting in support of technical knowledge, but of the transparency of material structures and relationships. The authors describe 'the glass partitions of modern offices' in which employees 'can be easily supervised by the public and their managers'. Under such conditions – which, it is worth remembering are only more prevalent in the present day – uniformity can spread while the space for 'private conversations and idylls' disappears.[124] The same theme is repeated elsewhere in Adorno's work where we find references to 'society's crystal-clear order' and 'cellophane shamelessness', and to the modern view 'that the life and experience of the people … is a kind of glass case' as a 'desperate abstraction'.[125]

Far from being a source of progress, then, the idealisation and pursuit of unmediated knowledge – of ready access to information – is a modern myth that tends to entangle subjects in the reification described above. As an ideal and a practice, clarity is the manifestation of subjectivism in the experiences, structures, and ideals of modern society. Its assertion is not only a matter of moulding cognition into a form conducive to technical success, but also of creating communities and individuals who present no obstacle to the pursuit of that same goal. The experience of those subjects and their interaction with one another becomes impoverished as a result. In the terms used in our historical sketch, the subject-object relationship is articulated in such a way that the prevailing forms of technical knowledge determine the pursuit of normative-political progress and the terms of meaningful individual existence.

The reificatory implications of the pursuit of clarity is apparent in both the transparency ideal and conspiracy theorising. Contemporary claims about the importance of transparency reflect the fact that we live in a world in which technical, normative political, and existential spheres described earlier in the article are shaped by the creation and circulation of the information. Certainly, within each of those strands, the absence of transparency *is* often experienced as a threat or obstacle. This is most obviously the case within the technical systems of global governance where it is important that the relevant actors have access to accurate information. As we have seen, transparency was also vital to the development of a modern public sphere that challenges traditional forms of authority. To this extent faith in transparency is 'true' in the Adornian sense described above – it reflects the realities of international power.

It is 'false', however, to the extent that it reflects the assumption that knowledge and social interaction are necessarily matters of the circulation of data and that, in this form,

[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., pp. 183–4.
[125] Quoted in Eric Jarosinski, 'Of stones and glass houses: *Minima Moralia* as critique of transparency', Gerhard Richter (ed.), *Language Without Soil: Adorno and Late Philosophical Modernity* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2010), pp. 157–71 (pp. 160–2).

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they currently provide a source of political empowerment. As suggested above, this is not a simple historical 'fact' but reflects a particular form of knowledge and interaction that has proved to be effective and appealing in modern societies. The reduction of large sections of life to data necessary for the creation of such information involves procedures of epistemic boundary-setting which maintain structures indifferent to the needs and experiences of the individuals whose lives they govern. It is far from clear that transparency necessarily escapes or successfully subverts this purified form of cognition. While individual instances of increased transparency achieved by campaigners – of 'plugging-in' to information-based systems – will often prove empowering, they provide no model for more general international empowerment since individuals will still be confronted with institutions run on the basis of the manipulation of data. As argued above, this is to a great extent the source of disempowerment in the first place. The ideal of transparency plays a role in driving this process onwards.

The dangers in question are apparent in the extent to which many of the international institutions and systems which transparency apparently promises to transform are already maintained on the basis of transparency. The following statement from the International Monetary Fund is suggestive of the problem:

> Fiscal transparency … is a critical element of effective fiscal management. Fiscal transparency helps ensure that governments' economic decisions are informed by a shared and accurate assessment of the current fiscal position, the costs and benefits of any policy changes, and the potential risks to the fiscal outlook. Fiscal transparency also provides legislatures, markets, and citizens with the information they need to make efficient financial decisions and to hold governments to account for their fiscal performance and their utilization of public resources. Finally, fiscal transparency facilitates international surveillance of fiscal developments and helps mitigate the transmission of fiscal spillovers between countries.[126]

While it acknowledges the importance of public accountability, the view of transparency presented here is largely that of a means to 'efficiency' and effective 'management' based on 'accuracy' and 'information'. These might be important goals, but under present conditions they are distinct from those of popular political empowerment. The form of epistemic activity being promoted is one in which the world is purged of obstacles to the smooth running of technical systems, in this case the global financial system – precisely the subjective abstraction which Adorno feared was taking hold in practice as well as in theory.

As with transparency, it is possible to 'read' conspiracy-thinking as a cultural phenomenon with cognitive content – as both true and false in a manner which captures the ongoing articulation of the subject-object relationship. Conspiracy thinking is more obviously 'false' insofar as it takes the pursuit of information and rationalisation of the world to even further extremes. That such thinking does so has long been noted. Hofstadter explains that 'paranoid scholarship'

> is nothing if not coherent – in fact, the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic; it believes that it is up against an enemy who is as infallibly rational as he is totally evil, and it seeks to match his imputed total competence with its own, leaving nothing unexplained and comprehending all of reality in one overreaching consistent theory.[127]

Conspiracy theories and other forms of paranoid thinking imbue the world with coherence, purging it of all that is ambiguous or accidental by focusing on facts and

[126] International Monetary Fund, 'Fiscal Transparency, Accountability, and Risk'.
[127] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, pp. 36–7.

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rational subjectivity. As Hofstadter points out, this is a highly rationalistic erasure of contingency according to which the world is shaped through rational actions. Each of these tendencies is, of course, at odds with good scientific practice that has always emphasised contingency and the need for critical interpretation of facts. However, conspiracy thinking is *scientistic* insofar as it reflects unquestioning faith that empiricism and rationalism provide the basis upon which progress or insight will be achieved. Like all scientism, it is a caricature of science.

Adorno identified a similarly scientistic combination of hyper-empiricism and hyper-rationalism in his analysis of the astrology column of the *Los Angeles Times*. He places such superstition within the same epistemic constellation as Positivism, in which any space for reflection has been squeezed-out:

> with the ever-increasing belief in 'facts', information has a tendency to replace intellectual penetration and reflection. The element of 'synthesis' in the classical philosophical sense seems to be more and more lacking; there is, on the one hand, a wealth of material and knowledge, but the relationship is more one of formal order and classification than one which would open up the supposedly stubborn facts by interpretation and understanding …[128]

This squeezing out of the space for reflection and interpretation is also apparent in the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that accompanied the rise of fascism. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, anti-Semitism is the behaviour of 'blinded people, deprived of subjectivity, are let loose as subjects', it is a pathology in which subjects are 'passively succumbing to the dazzlement of false immediacy'.[129] Because the exploitation involved in the capitalist system is not immediately apparent, the anti-Semite looks to the immediately available scapegoat.[130] The role of false clarity in anti-Semitism reflects the loss of judgment and of the capacity for active cognition and their replacement by readymade categories and stereotypes, a process which reflects the reification involved in enlightened thinking in general. A similar pattern is apparent in contemporary conspiracy theories, where active reflection and interpretation are rejected in favour of collection of 'the facts' and accounts of the world in terms of readymade stereotypes, villains, and scapegoats such as 'mainstream media' or 'illuminati'.

Just as with the ideal of transparency, however, there is an important truth to conspiracy thinking. Like transparency it reflects the reality of an information society in which faith in clarity has been elevated to the status of a political ideal and defining feature of individual identity. More importantly – and in contrast with most discussions of transparency – because conspiracy theorists do not believe the sources of clarity to lie in prevailing institutions, their attitude reflects the reality that many of the current structures of governance are experienced by large numbers of people as unresponsive or as a threat, and that this cannot be rectified simply by means of access to the information institutions themselves provide. In other words, it reflects the truth that technical knowledge *is* generally used to promote goals other than popular empowerment, that institutions of global governance are experienced as malicious or indifferent actors, and that the normative-political resources of the public sphere are severely depleted when it comes to dealing with them.[131] Perhaps most importantly,

[128] Theodor Adorno, 'The stars down to Earth: the Los Angeles Times astrology column', in Stephen Crook (ed.), *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 46–171 (p. 162).
[129] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 160.
[130] Ibid., p. 142.
[131] Dean, *Aliens in America*, p. 8.

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it reflects the possibility that the means of rejuvenating that sphere might lie elsewhere than within existing institutions and their transparency policies.

Nevertheless, conspiracy thinking does draw upon the same epistemic resources as the technical practices of modern institutions, which strive to create a coherent and therefore controllable reality by generating information and facilitating its circulation. For this reason it is not fundamentally counter-cultural. The fundamental problem is not simply the crude scientism and rationalism reflected in conspiracy theories, but their participation in the purification of reason in practice such that the space available for reflection and interpretation – creative thinking – diminishes. The problem is not, ultimately, that conspiracy theorists lend coherence to a society which is *in fact* characterised by contingency – the success of identity thinking is such that this is not the case in any simple sense – but that, like the advocates of transparency, they accept many of the sources of the disempowerment they want to address. Conspiracy theories reduce the public dimension of reflection identified in the first section of this article to the identification rather than the interpretation of facts and to the imputation of a malevolent subjectivity operating behind the scenes. At the level of the existential dimension of modernity, conspiracy theorising serves the same consoling function as does technical knowledge according to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; a world free from contingency and uncertainty is an appealing one to modern individuals, who are increasingly at the mercy of distant and obscure structures.

In his article on astrology, Adorno writes that:

> [I]t may well be said that astrology presents the bill for the neglect of interpretative thinking for the sake of fact gathering.[132]

The same might be said of faith in transparency and the acceptance of conspiracy theories. Both reflect an assumption that access to hidden information will offer some form of empowerment in the face of unresponsive, exploitative, or restrictive institutions and structures. In particular cases this can be true. However, at a more general level, upon close inspection, the empowerment in question turns out to extend the influence of a specific form of technical knowledge that operates by excluding and suppressing the concrete and particular. At the level of individual and collective empowerment – the existential and normative-political spheres identified above – the result is a vicious circle; empowerment in relation to institutions maintained on the basis of technical knowledge is pursued by further extending the reach of that form of knowledge. To the extent that it is assumed that access to more information simply *is* empowering, the circle is concealed. The utopian dimension of thought is equated with less mediated access to data.

Adorno identifies this tendency to assume that problems will be resolved for those with access to the facts as a recurring feature in modern culture:

> the threat-help pattern of the [astrology] column is closely related to devices more generally spread through contemporary mass culture … While there are continuous hints of conflict and unpleasantness, it implies that *whoever is aware of these situations will somehow be taken care of.*[133]

'Somehow' here stands in for the possibilities for collective and individual knowledge and reflection, which are being killed-off through the progression of identity thinking, but through which individuals and groups might begin to understand how to construct a world in which their interests really were taken care of. The appeal of this 'somehow' – the idea that through ready access to information we are empowered – is particularly strong in the international sphere, where structures for ensuring that the

[132] Adorno, 'The stars down to Earth', p. 162.
[133] Ibid., pp. 76–7.

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interests of citizens are 'taken care of' are even more lacking than elsewhere. It suggests a void at the heart of contemporary epistemic folkways and their manifestations, recognition of which must be added to any attempt to provide insight into the contemporary international politics of knowledge.

Conclusion

The transparency ideal and conspiracy theorising both reflect the epistemic folkways with which contemporary international politics is often approached in the supposed 'information age'. The sketch outlined in Part I pointed to the historical specificity of such ways of knowing and to their relationship to the technical, normative-political, and existential dimensions of modern politics and society. The negotiation of the subject-object relationship was at the heart of these developments. Telling this story turned out to be no simple matter, however. The ideas about knowledge reflected in transparency and conspiracy rest on assumptions about epistemically driven progress, which our historical sketch risked uncritically promoting. The subject-object relationship is a problem for theorists too – they participate in the processes they seek to describe. Adorno's reflexive reworking of this relationship provides a means of critically understanding the subject-object relationship as it appears in theory and in practice. It reveals that there is something pathological as well as progressive in the way it has been articulated in modern societies. The picture that emerges is that of the widespread acceptance and influence of subjectivist principles and, unwittingly, of their reificatory implications.

The purified, subjectivist reason described by Adorno is at the heart of contemporary epistemic folkways. In terms of the normative-political and existential dimensions described above, the tragedy is that actors implicitly recognise the utopian moment in thought – the possibility that it might not be confined to the structures and forms offered by modern bureaucracies and markets – and therefore pursue 'thought processes' which they hope will lead beyond current political realities. This element of utopianism is apparent in the pursuit of both transparency and conspiracy theories, and no doubt explains their appeal. However, in taking the epistemic folkways in question, individuals draw on the resources offered by identity thinking, thereby undermining their own efforts. This vicious circle belies the impression of epistemic progress, which accounts of the unique epistemic features of Western modernity, declarations that we live in an information age, the transparency ideal, and conspiracy theorising all promote. While modern forms of subjectivity are undeniably new and distinct, they represent a persistent form of compulsion that is in important respects not fundamentally different from the modes of 'superstitious' thought and traditional authority against which the Enlightenment has defined itself. In other words, the tale of progression to a new, epistemically more sophisticated era is only one strand of a paradoxical story. Only through reflection can we recognise that the simultaneous truth and falsity of this narrative.

This suggests that IR scholars should think carefully before turning their backs on epistemic reflection. The overtly epistemic terms in which international politics is conducted and in which large numbers of ordinary people engage with it point to the continuing significance of the questions about knowledge introduced into IR by reflexivists. That strand of theorising was never pursued simply as an exercise in philosophy or metatheory but was an integral part of attempts to understand the implications of the modern epistemic constellation for international politics. The sorts of epistemological questions associated with meta-theory are inextricably linked to some of the most substantive of contemporary international problems.

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