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Finkenbusch, P.

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Expansive Intervention as Neo-Institutional Learning: Root Causes in the Merida Initiative

***Abstract:** Interventions since the 1990s have greatly expanded in policy scope. While neo-liberals understand expansion as an attempt to work on the enabling preconditions of liberal market democracy, Foucauldian governmentality studies see in expansion a set of increasingly intrusive disciplinary techniques of responsabilization. This paper introduces an alternative lens: neo-institutional learning. Through a case study of the Merida Initiative, a U.S.-Mexican security cooperation agreement, the paper argues that expansion grows serendipitously out of the repetitive discovery of new, ‘deeper’ unknowns within a neo-institutional framework of analysis. Importantly, downward penetration requires deconstructing reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims. Paradoxically, then, the more statebuilders learn (empirically), the less they know (analytically).*

Keywords: statebuilding, neo-liberalism, Latin America, governmentality, neo-institutionalism

Introduction

This article elaborates on one of the most captivating aspects of international interventions today: Their tendency to continuously expand the imagined social domain requiring outside empowering care. It will summarize the most popular theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of expansion and critically discuss their respective analytical merits and weaknesses. It will, then, introduce a new conceptual lens – neo-institutional learning – and apply it to my empirical case, the Merida Initiative, a U.S.-Mexican security cooperation agreement signed in October 2007. The analysis builds on new empirical material gathered through field interviews with leading U.S. diplomats, advocacy groups and think tanks in Washington, D.C. in March 2010 and November 2011. A wide range of official U.S. documents – including Congressional hearings, reports by the Department of State, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the Congressional Research Service (CRS), as well as Congressional Budget Justifications (CBJ) and Program and Budget Guides – inform the study. Internal cable reports by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, made available through Wikileaks, have also been used.

Initially conceived as a ‘fairly straightforward foreign assistance program with a focus on equipment purchases’, U.S. assistance to Mexico under the Merida Initiative evolved rapidly into a ‘much broader security partnership’ (Mariko Silver, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy at the Department of Homeland Security, in U.S. Congress 2010a, 23). This expansion involved policy being ‘increasingly oriented toward building institutional capacity and reducing the pervasive corruption that enables drug trafficking’, thereby moving away markedly from traditional law enforcement and drug interdiction policies, which had targeted

trafficking organizations directly as part of the now discredited War on Drugs (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State 2011, 390). As this paper will expound, military equipment deliveries and technical professionalization were really just the beginning of a much more thorough discursive process of critical self-reflection on the ‘deeper’ causes of crime and violence in Mexico. That is, while the Merida Initiative started off as a response to the Mexican government’s ‘request for specific forms of U.S. equipment, training, and technical assistance’, towards the end of 2009, the strategy changed notably in order to ‘address some of the *deeper causes* of criminality in the country – institutional weakness, corruption, and a weak social fabric’ (Seelke and Finklea 2013, 14, emphasis added). There was a consensus forming within Merida’s policy community that ‘Mexico’s problems are exceedingly complex and deep-seated; [and that] any real solution to these problems will have to be no less encompassing’ (Brands 2009, 21).

At the High-Level Consultative Group’s meeting – the cabinet-level binational forum which sets policy guidelines for the Merida Initiative – in Mexico City on 23 March 2010, the Calderón and Obama governments announced a wide-ranging shift in policy strategy. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explained: ‘We are expanding the Merida Initiative beyond what it was traditionally considered to be, because it is not just about security. Yes, that is paramount, but it is also about institution-building’ (Clinton 2010). U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson summed up what would subsequently be called colloquially ‘Merida 2.0’ and, more officially, ‘Beyond Merida’ (Bow 2013, 77). In a congressional hearing on ‘Next Steps for the Merida Initiative’, Jacobson said that the Merida Initiative was shifting to ‘an engagement that [...] institutionaliz[es] Mexican capacity to sustain adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights, build strong institutions, [and] promote full civil society participation [...]’ (in U.S. Congress 2010a, 16). While traditional forms of technical assistance and equipment deliveries did not entirely stop (Olson and Wilson 2010, 3), U.S. aid policies of law enforcement and drug interdiction were significantly cut back in favour of a comprehensive institution-building strategy more concerned with the ‘enabl[ing]’ environment of public security institutions (U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2010, 8). If Merida had initially revolved around providing the ‘Mexican military with the means to make war on drug-trafficking organizations’, Beyond Merida was interested in addressing ‘root causes’ and ‘offer[ing] direct support to society itself’ (Bow 2013, 77, 94). This was an expansion of the (epistemic) policy remit of intervention driven by the progressive discovery of ‘broader context’, ‘deeper causes’, and ‘underlying issues’ (Brands 2009, 21; Seelke and Finklea 2013, 14; Ison 2011, 4). And it is against this background that I would like to propose a view of the Merida Initiative as the condensed history of post-Cold War interventionism.

The current Mexican government of Enrique Peña Nieto is ‘aligned’ with Merida’s new socio-institutional focus and its emphasis on ‘strong and resilient communities’ (Acevedo 2014, 241). Political commentators and policy analysts seem to agree that the current Mexican President shares an understanding in which ‘the problems’ roots go deeper into society with the lack of rule of law, violation of human rights, and community distrust’ (243; see also O’Neil 2012, 2–3; ICG 2015, 2–3; Felbab-Brown 2013, 4). As for the Merida Initiative itself, it has recently been consolidating its emphasis on ‘community participation’ and

resilience by supporting the Mexican government's 'We are all Juárez' program (Obregon 2011, 3; Seelke and Finklea 2015, 17–8).

The academic debate on the 'new interventionism' (Chesterman 2005, 2) has to a large extent revolved around Paris' much cited dictum of an 'updated version of the mission civilisatrice' (2002, 651). While neo-liberals, like Paris, call for enhanced policy efforts on the intangible socio-cultural preconditions of pluralist political competition and market economics, 'promot[ing] 'good' civil society while simultaneously restraining its 'bad' variant', Foucauldian governmentality studies oppose Western intervention as part of a global strategy to discipline deviant third world countries into conformity with 'liberal democratic norms', thereby reproducing problematic North-South hierarchies in which 'industrialised countries retain the moral high ground, the right to administer development and democracy to the South' (Paris 2005, 154; Abrahamsen 2004, 1454; Abrahamsen 2000, 44). Foucauldian governmentality studies seem to be animated by the view that the increasing involvement of powerful Western states and international organizations in the affairs of the global periphery is related to a strategic, hegemonic project to realize a utopian neo-liberal ideal of social, economic and political organization: A 'generalized will to empower', or Ferguson's "'anti-politics machine" run amok' (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 84, 87).

The critical point of this article is that external engagement in Mexican public security governance through the Merida Initiative was arguably *not* driven by the confident projection of liberal power, whether endorsed as a benevolent civilizing mission (Paris) or rejected as a set of 'technologies of power' through which the 'North maintains and legitimizes its continued power and hegemony in the South' (Abrahamsen 2000, ix). Intervention in the Merida Initiative evolved above all through the 'post-ideological' inability to formulate a coherent and transformative political project, rather than out of 'Western triumphalism' or 'confiden[ce]' (Cunliffe 2007, 53; Abrahamsen 2000, 43). It would seem as if U.S. policymakers were thrown into a governmental situation for which they lacked any strategic framework or grand narrative – liberal or other – capable of cohering a large-scale project of purposive external policy engagement. Somewhat counter-intuitively, expansion in the Merida Initiative grew out of an ideological void rather than a presence. Expansion was not driven by the increasing or repeated application of classic liberal episteme, but by its systematic invalidation.

Liberal statebuilding policies of the 1990s have usually been criticized for their allegedly superficial character. That is, liberal policies were thought to be sabotaged by something hidden, 'deeper' beneath the level of policy targets on which intervention had been working previously (see Fukuyama 2005, 112; 1995, 9). The lesson learnt for statebuilders was constantly the same: Policy had to go 'deeper' in order to finally enable liberal frameworks to operate properly. When policy moved 'downwards' accordingly, it was discovered with equal clarity and necessity that the new targets, too, were merely the epiphenomenal surface appearances of something even 'deeper', and so on repeatedly.

The problem with this constant downwards and backwards displacement of causal origin is that – within a neo-institutional framework of analysis – each next step of intellectual penetration requires that policymakers shed some more of their reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims. In neo-institutionalism, the 'really' relevant knowledge (and the concomitant policy objects and tools) is always

slipping away beneath policymakers' fingers, always disappearing behind the next corner, and the more corners they turn in the pursuit of knowledge, the less they actually know. More sharply: The more often policymakers draw their lessons learnt from within a neo-institutional framework of analysis, the less they positively know. And the less they know (in the reductionist, generalized sense of the term), the less they can govern in a purposive way and with the reasonable expectation of actually achieving anything (see also Finkenbusch 2014).

The analysis begins by introducing the empirical case of the Merida Initiative. With a planned initial budget of \$1.4 billion dollars, the Merida Initiative is now considered the 'centrepiece of the U.S. Government's security cooperation with Mexico' (U.S. Congress 2009, 57), a country whose rising crime levels have become a focal point of international attention (ICG 2015; IISS 2008; HRW 2011). The article will, then, move to a critical discussion of the current academic debate on liberal interventionism and how its two most important strands – neo-liberals and Foucauldian governmentality studies – understand policy expansion. Subsequently, a new concept for interpreting expansion will be introduced: neo-institutional learning. The last section applies this concept to the Merida Initiative.

The 'New Interventionism' and Expansion

External interventions since the end of the Cold War have come a long way. While initial interventionary policy, roughly until the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, focused on a set of rather limited goals such as the negotiation of cease-fire agreements or the monitoring of more plural and competitive electoral processes, contemporary metropolitan engagement in what are considered weak, failed, or fragile states and societies involves a wide variety of policy areas, from administrative reform to human rights training and psycho-social counselling (on the latter, see Hughes and Pupavac 2005). Mark Duffield, for instance, has noted that by incorporating such diverse areas as the 'types of economic and social policies pursued, levels of poverty, the degree of popular participation, the extent of corruption and criminal activity, respect for human rights, the role of women, the status of the media, psychological well-being, the quality of political institutions,' states and societies at the frontier of Western power 'have been opened up to levels of metropolitan monitoring, intervention and regulation unprecedented since the end of the colonial period' (Duffield 2003, 308). Equally, the targets of intervention have shifted notably from a narrow focus on formal state institutions to the wider associational milieu of civil society. In fact, the informal socio-cultural embeddedness of modern state institutions has moved to the centre-stage of contemporary policy discussions on state- and peacebuilding. In an OECD-study anthropologist Béatrice Pouligny, for example, stresses that the 'ethos' of institutions is not reflected in their 'formal design', but, instead, points to the 'social context within which these institutions operate and the norms that support them' (2010, 2). Failing to take these "'intangible"' ("invisible", qualitative) dimensions' into account would make state-building entirely superficial or shallow, with institutions remaining "'empty boxes"' (2010, 1, 2). It is against this background that one may read Morten Andersen's succinct observation in a recent review article that in statebuilding today 'more weight is being put on social and contextual factors [...]' (2012, 208; see also Lemay-Hébert 2013). In sum, contemporary interventions seem to be marked by a tendency of expansion that incorporates an ever-wider range of policy areas and shifts the modes of intervention and their targets

from the formal realm of state institutions to the informal, associational practices of society at large (Chandler 2013, 284).

This article focuses precisely on the discursive and analytical process through which international statebuilding – understood as the attempt to (re-) construct governance institutions capable of providing physical security and other basic public goods – has continuously expanded the realm of external regulatory practice (see also Schroeder, Chappuis, and Kocak 2013; Benner and Rotmann 2008, 43–4). More specifically, the object of analysis here is not the mere numerical increase of policy targets nor is it the new kind of ‘empowering’ policies centred on civil society. Rather, expansion will essentially refer to the cognitive amplification of the imagined social domain requiring external empowering care. What is expanding is not interventionary policy as such or the reach of governmental techniques, but the episteme of intervention – the scope and intellectual differentiation of the problem definition. As we will see further below, one might call this process epistemic expansion to the extent that it depends on the discovery and governmental incorporation of new types, objects, and domains of knowledge: The repeated displacement of the epistemologic horizon of intervention onto successively ‘deeper’ levels of causality framed in terms of known unknowns.

The ‘New Interventionism’: A Strategic Projection of (Neo-) Liberal Power?

Although they diverge in their normative evaluations, both neo-liberal scholars (Paris 2005; 2002; Chesterman 2005) and their Foucauldian governmentality critics (Abrahamsen 2000; Murray Li 2007) see the ‘new interventionism’ (Chesterman 2005, 2) as firmly rooted in the ideological premises of liberal universalism. Roland Paris, for example, has argued that peacebuilding efforts have been geared towards “‘transplant[ing]” the ‘values and institutions of the liberal democratic core into the domestic affairs of peripheral host states’ (2002, 638). For Paris, external interventions are an attempt to ‘globaliz[e] a particular model of domestic governance – liberal market democracy [...]’ (637-8). Paris sees external interveners as confidently ‘act[ing] upon the belief that one model of domestic governance – liberal market democracy – is superior to all others’ (638). Still, there is already a palpable sense of doubt and scepticism present. In order to ensure a smooth transition to liberal market democracy, Western interveners are called upon to pursue a ‘more controlled and gradual approach’ focusing on the socio-cultural preconditions of a stable pluralist political system and a competitive economic order (Paris 2005, 7–8; see also Clapham 2003, 29; critically: Chandler 2010). In this way, statebuilding seems to require naturally a ‘more interventionist and long-term approach’ to intervention (Paris 2005, 207).

In this article, then, the term neo-liberal refers to those governmental approaches that continue to pursue market democracy as the ultimate goal of intervention, but which accept that the institutional incentives of subjects with bounded rationality need to be artificially (re-) constructed in order for individual decision-making to produce collectively beneficial outcomes. As Michel Foucault wrote, neo-liberalism is concerned with decision-making subjects in ‘their environment, the milieu in which they live [...] to the extent that it is not a natural environment [...]’ (2003, 245; see also 2004).

The governmentality perspective immediately feeds off the neo-liberal account. Governmentality studies basically accept and, then, construct their analyses around the claim of neo-liberals that what is at stake in

international statebuilding projects is ‘nothing less than an enormous experiment in social engineering’ (Paris 2005, 4) aiming at the ‘creation of liberal polities’ (Kahler 2010, 22). What neo-liberals see as an essentially benevolent attempt to spread the liberal peace is criticized by Foucauldian governmentality studies as a disciplinary ‘will to govern’, strategically oriented towards pacifying the tumultuous global periphery after the failure of Structural Adjustment (Duffield 2003, 292). Rita Abrahamsen has elaborated on the way in which good governance partnerships are meant to ‘produce modern, self-disciplined citizens and states by enlisting them as responsible agents in their own development’ (2004, 1453). A range of new ‘mechanisms and techniques of auditing, accounting, monitoring and evaluation’ ‘simultaneously empower[...] and discipline[e]’ their targets by ‘constitut[ing] and regulat[ing] the[ir] identities, behaviour, and choices’ (2004, 1460?, 1462). This line of reasoning is picked up by many other governmentality-inspired authors. Kanishka Jayasuriya and Kevin Hewison (2004) continue in the same vein. They argue that participation and empowerment are ‘a means for instantiating the discipline of the market in the core of the individual participation in civil society’ (2004, 578). And Alastair Fraser stresses that ‘participation *disciplines individual participants*’ thereby ‘legitimizing the increasingly intrusive supervision of African political communities by Northern actors’ (2005, 319, original emphasis; see also Craig and Porter 2006; Murray Li 2007; Zanotti 2006).

This article will go beyond the Foucauldian governmentality perspective by arguing that the expansive dynamic of intervention cannot be reduced analytically to the production of a ‘universal liberal subject’ or the pursuit of a ‘liberal conception of civil society’ (Abrahamsen 2000, 61). Based on my reading of the empirical material on the Merida Initiative, I would like to offer a different analytical perspective on the phenomenon of expansion – neo-institutional learning – outlined in more detail in the next section.

As we will see further below, the expansive trajectory of the Merida Initiative was not born out of a governmental desire to govern as comprehensively and meticulously as possible the political, social, or economic affairs of Mexican society according to an idealized blueprint of liberal market democracy. In fact, Beyond Merida grew out of a much more defensive, even timid, learning process about the shortcomings of one’s own previous policies. This reactive learning process, as we will see, was overdetermined by the causal tenets and anti-foundational premises of neo-institutionalism and, in consequence, could not help but lead policymakers to constantly discover new, ‘deeper’ levels of causality in the endogenous self-production of governance problems in Mexico. At no point was there an implicit or explicit strategy to come up with the most comprehensive agenda for neo-liberal institution-building. I remember vividly an interview with former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Law Enforcement Affairs, David Johnson, at the National Democratic Club in Washington, D.C. in November 2011. In that conversation I asked Johnson why he thought that international interventions around the world – no matter what the occasion or specific country context – always seemed to employ a standard cookie-cutter framework of good governance, rule of law and civil society. His answer was: ‘If you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail’¹. For a long time I thought that this expression spoke brilliantly to the Foucauldian governmentality argument sketched above. Nevertheless, over the course of my empirical investigation it gradually became apparent to me that the ‘hammer’ is not at all about the alleged one-size-fits-all, top-down application of governmental discipline. Rather, the ‘hammer’ is the fact of being drawn

into a discursive learning process of neo-institutional self-critique that works through the defensive accommodation of interventionary policy being seen as too myopic. Short-sightedness, though, was not the articulation of a neo-liberal will to govern as exhaustively and meticulously as possible. Expansion in the Merida Initiative was arguably not about the megalomania or perfidiousness of neo-liberal governmentality. Instead, policymakers in the Merida Initiative were lured into a bottomless process of self-critique in which every realization of failure or ineffectiveness only forced them to think harder about what they had missed, to wonder about what was going on beneath the level of policy targets on which they had been working so far. A neo-institutional policy framework and the process of critical self-reflection that it entails repeatedly compelled the Merida Initiative to culturally, socially, and psychologically penetrate the intervened society further. But this was essentially a defensive, ‘post-ideological’ (Cunliffe 2007, 53) mode of reflection rather than a confident projection of liberal power. On the contrary, expansion in the Merida Initiative seemed to speak for a ‘post-ideological *inability* to construct a viable narrative framework within which to situate the exercise of power’ (Cunliffe 2007, 53, emphasis added). In this sense, it reflected what Mark Duffield has astutely identified as ‘a deepening malaise within the liberal project’ (2012, 487). And the way this process unfolded was reactive, inadvertent, and incremental. In other words, expansion in the Merida Initiative was a much more serendipitous and ideologically empty process than what Foucauldian governmentality studies would suggest.

Neo-Institutional Learning

Neo-institutional economics and their definition of institutions as the ‘humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction’ (North 2009, 3) are arguably the single most important analytical framework shaping contemporary policies of intervention, especially after the ‘Post-Washington Consensus’ of the mid-1990s (Hameiri 2010, 75).

The starting point for understanding expansion as an effect of neo-institutional learning lies in the peculiar way in which neo-institutional causality is constructed. Neo-institutionalism works by systematically locating causal origin within successively ‘deeper’ known unknowns (see also Chandler 2014, 50–1). Neo-institutionalism is about the permanent deferral of causal explanation, its constant projection into a known institutional context that is still to be explored before policy may work effectively. Importantly, contextualization is an ongoing and expansive analytical process in neo-institutionalism. That is because neo-institutional policymakers cannot (legitimately) employ a fixed set of sufficiently predefined reductionist concepts, which would provide a foundation or causal baseline for their analyses. They cannot significantly reduce analytically what they learn empirically. They cannot bring to bear a reductionist, self-contained analytical apparatus on the empirical objects and processes they encounter.

But, how exactly does learning within neo-institutionalism work? A critical discussion of Douglass North and his award-winning work on institutional change may provide some useful insights. The Archimedean point of North’s analysis is the problematization of the simplistic behavioural assumptions of neo-classical economics, namely instrumental rationality. In fact, the behavioural assumption of instrumental rationality is identified by North as the ‘fundamental stumbling block preventing an understanding of the existence, formation, and evolution of institutions’ (2009, 40). Instrumental rationality cannot simply be assumed or

even defined substantively in any generalized way. Indeed, rationality for North is a particular kind of institutional ‘embeddedness’: ‘[...] [M]uch of what passes for rational choice is not so much individual cognition as the embeddedness of the thought process in the larger social and institutional context’ (2010, 24). That is, rationality is a particular ‘institutional constraint’ (North 1997a, 11). So, when neo-classical theory was positing instrumental rationality as a universal behavioural assumption what it was really assuming was a ‘particular set of institutions’ (North 2009, 108). And just like human behaviour cannot be naively reduced to instrumental rationality, the conditioning institutional environment that produces it cannot be understood through a set of reductionist analytical concepts either. In fact, social sciences, including economics, may not ‘employ reductionism’ at all (North 2010, 83). Understanding collective outcomes has to be an exercise in mapping sociologically, anthropologically and psychologically the specific historic institutional context, which has conditioned individual choices into a particular collectively-harmful direction. Crucially, the main challenge for developing such a context-specific understanding is *not* to employ, as far as possible, any reductionist analytical concepts, assumptions, and categories. But without any foundational normative or analytical foundation, i.e. with everything being determined by its historical and social environment, learning from failure always involves the identification and exploration of a new, more encompassing institutional context. The search for context can have no logic conclusion in neo-institutionalism. Even though policymakers might think each time that this time around they have thought of all contextual variables, failure makes the undisputable point that they must have overlooked something, that there is a ‘deeper’ level of causality that constitutes the context of what they previously took for context. This is how learning in neo-institutionalism works. There are no stand-alone conceptual entities with originary explanatory force – no analytical foundations, that is. There is always a new context, a ‘deeper’ level of causality. The point about North being a paradigmatic case of neo-institutionalism, then, is that his framework showcases how neo-institutionalism always locates causal origin further away in institutional context. What neo-institutionalism holds out to policymakers is the never-exhausted possibility and never-fulfilled obligation to make one particular, very important recurring analytical move: contextualization. Alastair Fraser, I believe, is putting his finger on this expansive movement of critical self-reflection and its need to dig ‘deeper’ which I would like to call neo-institutional learning:

‘The [World] Bank persistently finds its every solution to the problem of African underdevelopment is undermined by factors *below* the level of its previous intervention and, driven by that discovery, has burrowed deeper and deeper into the fabric of African communities in order to finally reach the source of the problem’. (Fraser 2005, 336, emphasis added)

What exactly is it that policymakers discover in this analytical framework? What is the nature of their findings in it? Well, they find new social products to be explained by, once again, mapping their institutional context or unearthing the ‘deeper’ causal mechanisms that over-determine them. In this framework, causality, i.e. the things one needs to know, is always located in the next lower level. So, while neo-institutional policymakers *do* get to understand more and more context-specific conditioning factors or

even discover a new, ‘deeper’ epistemic level – i.e. go from political science to sociology to anthropology to (social) psychology to pedagogy – the learning process does not actually produce substantial empirical findings. Neo-institutional learning is really like drinking salt-water. Learning does not satisfy one’s thirst for knowledge. It only produces the need to learn more so that one may finally know. In neo-institutional frameworks of analysis, policymakers do not find actual answers, but more questions. Things they do *not* understand, yet; things to be understood by identifying once more their institutional context.

The key point here is that with every new step neo-institutional policymakers take in their drive to map idiosyncratic socio-institutional contexts, they have to throw overboard some more of the reductionist analytical concepts they have at hand. For every piece of context-specific understanding, policymakers have to cash in one of their reductionist liberal-universal knowledge chips, such as instrumental rationality (North 2009, 17–26). Neo-institutionalism constantly produces the effect of not-knowing-it-yet and the obligation to invalidate more reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims if policymakers want to find out. Over time, policy analysis penetrates downwards socially and backwards temporarily (‘path dependency’, North 2009, 98–9, 100, 112) and, like a snowball rolling downhill, attracts more and more objects of government, while the universal, reductionist, generalized conceptual apparatus gets thinner and thinner and the amount of generalizable, universally-applicable findings get smaller and smaller. In other words, neo-institutional policymakers accumulate (idiosyncratic) ‘deep understanding[s]’ (Fukuyama 2005, 120) and policy objects, but lose knowledge. In neo-institutionalism, lessons learnt are telling policymakers what it is that they do *not* know, yet. They are telling them that something is going on ‘beneath’ the targets of current policy and the analytical reach of the concepts which have informed it. In the wake, they are (often implicitly) telling policymakers that the existing categories of analysis were not enough or too simplistic to capture these yet-to-be-unearthed causal layers. What neo-institutional policymakers are actually learning is that they need to think differently, and that, in order to do so, they have to discard some more of the existing stock of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims. What neo-institutional policymakers are actually realizing is the uselessness or limitation of any attempt to know the world in reductionist liberal-universal terms. In other words, neo-institutional policy learning does not really produce ‘relevant new knowledge’ (Benner and Rotmann 2008, 58). It is a process of learning to *unlearn*. If there is anything that neo-institutional learning produces, it is a sort of corrosive and self-debilitating *anti-knowledge* (see also Finkenbusch 2014).

Neo-Institutional Learning in the Merida Initiative

Now that we have reconstructed conceptually how learning from failure works within a neo-institutional framework of analysis, we may attempt an alternative interpretation of the Merida Initiative.

As Brian Bow writes, throughout 2008 and into 2009, there was a growing criticism that despite the arrest (or killing) of some of the ‘most infamous cartel leaders’ there was little sign of transport routes and distribution networks being significantly affected by the Merida Initiative (2013, 86). Merida’s limited impact on the drug market led to a ‘growing sense of frustration in Washington’ and was interpreted as a sign that ‘the root problem in Mexico was the weakness and corruption of state institutions’ (86-7). According to Bow, there existed a ‘growing consensus’ among U.S. policymakers that the Mexican

government was ‘too fixated on the original ‘war-fighting’ agenda’ (89). In fact, in the run-up to Merida’s policy shift there was a wide-spread critique of traditional law enforcement policies as a ‘dysfunctional public security paradigm based on militarization and the use of force’ (Centro Prodh 2008, 1). Laurie Freeman, an outspoken NGO-critic of the Merida Initiative, opposed the agreement for its law enforcement focus, ‘paying little attention to the institutional reforms necessary to [...] resist [...] corruption’ (2008). While this kind of critique had previously been voiced primarily by a small human rights-NGO community centring on the influential Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and its Mexican counterparts, such as Center Prodh, it was increasingly picked up by Members of Congress. Clare Seelke from the Congressional Research Service, for example, observed in early 2010, how ‘debates emerged within Congress about the balance of security vs. institution-building funding’ (2010, 13). While this debate took place primarily in the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, even the U.S. Senate grew increasingly uneasy about Merida’s ‘one-dimensional approach’ which fatally neglected ‘underlying causes’ (U.S. Senate 2009, 90). ‘Beefing-up the tangible capabilities of Mexico’s police and military’ (Carpenter 2012, 206) put the focus of attention on the institutions which received U.S. equipment and training. The head of the Narcotics Affairs Section at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, for example, asked (rhetorically): ‘The stuff is coming, the real issue is do we have the right institutions in place to use it?’ (U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2009a, 3; see also U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2009b). The possibility of reorienting Merida’s policy was discussed in more detail by U.S. officials during the Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 budget preparation process (Seelke and Finklea 2011, 19; see also Representative Lee, in U.S. Congress 2010b, 6–7). At this juncture the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, was a key figure in ‘spearhead[ing] [the] reformulation of U.S. strategy’ (Bow 2013, 90; see also Seelke 2010, 23–4; Olson and Wilson 2010, 3). As Vanda Felbab-Brown from the Brookings Institution said in an interview: ‘It [Beyond Merida] was cooked up by key U.S. officials, like ambassador Pascual’². And Pascual, in turn, had a strong professional background in statebuilding operations at the State Department where he had previously served as Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (now part of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO)). Pascual had also testified in Congress on the general importance of statebuilding for U.S. foreign policy (in U.S. Congress 2008, 62) and published on the issue with prominent academics in the field (Krasner and Pascual 2005; see also Jones, Pascual, and Stedman 2009). His becoming ambassador to Mexico in 2009 had a profound impact on Merida’s policy reorientation away from traditional law enforcement and interdiction efforts towards a comprehensive statebuilding approach³. Beyond Merida’s concern for context was driven by an ontology of depth in which critical reflection implied penetrating further downwards to ‘the core of the problem’ (Stephens and Arimatéia da Cruz 2008, 11). For John Bailey, for example, drug trafficking organizations were really ‘only the most pressing *symptom*’ of a whole ‘mix of forms [...] of crime *rooted* in a robust informal economy and a civic culture marked by comparatively little confidence in the police-justice system and low compliance with the state’s law’ (2010, 3, emphasis added). Beyond Merida clearly articulated the same ontology of depth as neo-institutional statebuilding, i.e. the notion of ‘recalcitrance encountered at *successively deeper levels*’ (Fukuyama 1995, 9, emphasis added). In their discussion of context, the advocates of Beyond Merida – from human rights NGOs and think tanks to U.S. diplomats and Member of Congress – were all, in fact,

echoing Douglass North's notion of an institutional 'hierarchy, each level more costly to change than the previous one' (1997b, 6; see also 2009, 8). Bailey's understanding of Mexican 'civic culture', for example, replicates North's emphasis on the 'tenacious survival ability' of 'cultural traits' which cannot easily be changed because of their 'deep-seated[ness]' (2009, 45, 91).

The key analytical premise driving the emergence of the Beyond Merida framework is, I think, the rejection of what Pablo Prado calls a 'reductionist optic' (2009, 207). Prado's critique of a 'reductionist optic' encapsulates nicely the way in which contextualization as a neo-institutional discursive practice worked in the Merida Initiative:

'That the Merida Initiative builds on the reinforcement, be it via equipment, advisory and, definitely, enhanced power and reaction capacity, of the armed and police forces and the Mexican justice system, the way these institutions function at the moment, means to start from the false premise that the Mexican institutions charged with providing justice and protection to the citizenry find themselves detached from the galloping corruption and infiltration by narco-trafficking into their most intimate guts, and, consequently, from this *reductionist optic*, it is feasible and reliable to invest and bet on their strengthening under current circumstances'. (Prado 2009, 207, author's translation, emphasis added)

Crucially, once the recipients of traditional, liberal forms of aid (technical professionalization and equipment deliveries) were problematized on the basis of their deficient institutional environment, the definition of context grew bigger and bigger. Writing shortly after the declaration of Beyond Merida, Olson, Shirk and Selee's (2010) notion of context already went far beyond law enforcement institutions. They argued that institution-building could not possibly be 'limited to law enforcement agencies'; it would have to include 'all aspects of Mexico's governing apparatus' (2010, 27). And in his popular book 'The Fire Next Door – Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America', Ted Carpenter is probably describing the anxiety of others as much as he is revealing his own feelings when warning of the 'corruption and competency problems [...] *throughout the country's political system*' (2012, 205, emphasis added). In brief, rejecting a 'reductionist optic' (Prado 2009, 207) led policymakers to define the institutional environment in more and more encompassing terms.

The correlate seems to have been that the time-horizon of policy engagement grew accordingly. Shannon O'Neil from the Council on Foreign Relations explained to Members of Congress that Beyond Merida was 'more ambitious' and that 'focus[ing] on building institutions [was] much harder to deliver than helicopters or boats', but that held 'more promise for long-term' success (in U.S. Congress 2010a, 87). In my reading, O'Neil seems to be preparing the ground for a much more long-term and demanding policy engagement, while promising (eventual) rewards that are so much more valuable. In other words, fighting drug-trafficking organizations directly means quick, but ineffectual gains, while institution-building means long-term, but (potentially) more rewarding efforts. Or, as Maureen Meyer from the Washington Office on Latin America, explained: The 'clear lesson of nearly two decades of efforts to confront powerful trafficking organizations' is that 'quick fix solutions divert attention from the long-term reforms in the police and justice sector' (2007, 1–2). And U.S. Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement

Affairs (INL), William Brownfield, also seems to be persuading his financiers in Congress for the long haul when stating that Merida was ‘not a quick-fix: It is an ambitious, multiyear effort to address long-standing problems by building sound institutions that together will strengthen the rule of law and reduce impunity’ (in U.S. Congress 2011, 13).

Notably, what started with a concrete and specific concern for the immediate recipients of U.S. law enforcement and interdiction aid really turned into a growing and increasingly vague sensibility or awareness of the larger-than-expected scope of governance problems in Mexico. Problematizing the recipients of liberal forms of foreign assistance was really the catalyst for a growing ‘realization’ by U.S. policymakers of the ‘magnitude of the problems in Mexico’ (Meyer 2011, 7). In fact, the tendency to inflate the Other’s deficiencies may end up with a lesson learnt in which the scope of governance problems is blown so far out of proportion that external interveners are all but powerless. As Ted Carpenter explains, ‘Mexico’s drug war problems lie *deeper than any* modest institution-building subsidy from Washington can possibly fix’ (2012, 206–7, emphasis added). Carpenter’s comment, in my ears, seem to suggest that the obstacles of institution-building in Mexico might possibly be *too* big, lie *too* ‘deep’ for external interveners to do anything about them really.

In O’Neil and Brownfield’s quotes there is still the promise to ‘solve’ Mexico’s ‘longstanding problems’. But the solution is deferred far into the future and external assistance can only work indirectly. Beyond Merida, then, articulates a realization by interveners that they are unable to directly and unmediatedly solve problems in other parts of the world while increasing their involvement in a set of more complicated issues and on a more long-term basis. Here, the discourse of institution-building serves to sketch the magnitude of the Other’s institutional pathologies, identifying them as the primary source of governance problems, while simultaneously providing international interveners with both a comprehensive to-do-list and an opportunity to explain possible policy failures by pointing at someone else’s short-comings. This is a discourse that is apologetic and interventionist at the same time (see Chandler 2010, 169).

For the constructive critics of the Merida Initiative acknowledging the long-term and complicated nature of governance problems in Mexico was a major step forward. For them contextual thinking which incrementally discovers more ‘underlying causes’ (i.e. the ‘root causes’ of the ‘root causes’ of the ‘root causes’), each of which is a little bit harder to change than its predecessor, is entirely unproblematic. On the contrary, to many observers it would merely describe the positive learning curve of neo-institutional policy analyses. Nevertheless, what seems to be a reason for concern is that learning actually diminished policymakers’ sense of agency.

Interveners’ sense of political agency diminished not primarily because they were constantly discovering new ‘root causes’ in the endogenous self-production of governance problems in Mexico and each of which was a little bit more immune to ‘quick fixes’. External interveners’ sense of agency diminished because learning within a neo-institutional framework of analysis systematically disassembled the analytical tool box, the political ideologies, the reductionist systems of meaning with which metropolitan policymakers used to cohere interventionary policy. The problem with an anti-‘reductionist optic’ (Prado 2009, 207) is not primarily that the to-do-list of institution-building becomes longer and longer and that the newly added items are successively more difficult to change. The problem is that learning through an anti-‘reductionist

optic' invalidates the existing liberal-universal forms of knowledge with which one might potentially tackle the 'root causes' which are brought to the surface. That is, learning within an anti-'reductionist optic' makes the obstacles ahead grow in number and inertia while taking apart the analytical instruments with which to overcome them. In this way, the entire enterprise of institution-building becomes increasingly difficult to conceive. Paradoxically, the more policymakers were learning about the necessity to do statebuilding comprehensively and in a contextually sensitive way, the less they knew how to *do* statebuilding (see Finkenbusch 2014). That is because in a neo-institutional framework of analysis pushing contextualization further demands deconstructing some more reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims. In the process, policymakers not only discover more and more social objects which require empowering care, each of which is always a little bit more resistant to outside manipulation. They are also undercutting their own political ability to engage with these policy objects because they have been surrendering their reductionist analytical tools in order to discover them. The neo-institutional critique of law enforcement and drug interdiction policies does precisely that: It allowed policymakers in the Merida Initiative to develop a more nuanced, inclusive and socially-thick 'deep understanding' (Fukuyama 2005, 120) of Mexican politics and state-society relations. But this came at the cost of giving up the classic liberal notion of rational, responsible subjecthood, which was the basis of traditional technical assistance to Mexico. Without this kind of foundational premise, policymakers in the Merida Initiative were increasingly hard-pressed to formulate any coherent and purposive policy at all.

The flip-side of interveners invalidating their established liberal-universal forms of knowing and governing is that the burden of knowing and solving problems moves over to the intervened themselves. That is, learning within a neo-institutional framework of analysis is a process in which metropolitan interveners are able to (conveniently) portray themselves as ignorant and powerless while expecting the intervened to know and govern in their stead. While the underlying power structures between the two remain in place, the responsibility for substantial positive change shifts to those who have the least amount of political and material resources at their disposal (see also Chandler 2006; Cunliffe 2007). And, of course, Western policy elites retain the privilege of judging the final outcomes of 'locally-owned' policy efforts.

Policymakers in the Merida Initiative seemed to have paid heed to Christof Kurz' pledge to address 'deeply entrenched practices' by shifting policy towards 'informal institutional reform' (2010, 209, 229). Kurz' critique of neoclassical economics is, in fact, reminiscent of the neo-institutional perspective formulated by Douglass North and inscribed into *Beyond Merida*: 'The individuals who populate the state are members of communities and act within complex social relationships determined by their origin, family and kinship ties, and their positions within patron-client networks' (2010, 222). And again, the acknowledgment of context is bound up with a devastating attack on reductionist liberal-universal forms of knowledge. For Kurz moving beyond simplistic rational choice approaches in order to take 'path dependency' and 'informal institutions' into account involves realizing that no 'one idealized model of the state can work across time and space' (2010, 212, 218). Kurz' argument, then, seems to reflect what David Chandler has recently identified as a growing 'skepticism towards Western, liberal or modernist forms of knowledge' (2015, 70; a good example is also Heathershaw 2008). In policy terms, what Kurz advocates and what policymakers in the Merida Initiative seem to have done is to make the transition from 'solutionism' to

‘endogenous causality’ (Chandler 2015, 74–77). That is, while the Merida Initiative was initially based on the idea that ‘certain solutions were timeless and could be exported’ and that interveners possessed ‘the power, resources and objective knowledge necessary to solve [...] problems’, *Beyond Merida* appears to be a critique of this conception of intervention (Chandler 2015, 75, 74). *Beyond Merida* was a way of moving ‘away from addressing causes in universal and linear ways and towards a focus on endogenous processes and new institutionalist framings’ (Chandler 2015: 78). In this process, policymakers were able to shed their ‘thin simplifications’ (Scott 1998; see also Heathershaw 2008, 331), without necessarily becoming more capable of achieving their goals.

To be clear, this is not a pledge to know less. On the contrary, it is a pledge to know more – but in the reductionist liberal-universal sense of the term. Engaging empirical complexity may only ever be an emancipatory and productive exercise if it is done from within one reductionist theoretical framework or another. ‘[L]ooking beyond simplistic categories and recognizing the complexity of local political dynamics’ is a well-taken concern (Barakat and Larson 2014, 34). But it would seem that through the critique of ‘oversimplified and bureaucratic response[s]’ policymakers and academics alike have so far only been knocking down the existing edifice of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge without substituting it with an equally productive alternative (Barakat and Larson 2014, 26). The encounter with social reality may allow us to substitute one set of causal hypotheses and analytical concepts with another – better – one. But the attempt to engage intellectually with a rich social reality without a predefined set of foundational normative premises and reductionist analytical cuts does not actually increase our grasp of the world. Our attempt to access social reality without the ‘distorting’ influence of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims only leads us into a world which is increasingly opaque and unamenable.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the tendency of contemporary interventions to continuously expand their (epistemic) policy domain. The academic debate on the ‘new interventionism’ (Chesterman 2005, 2) has so far been dominated by neo-liberal scholars and their Foucauldian governmentality critics. While diverging in their respective normative evaluations, both perspectives see contemporary metropolitan policy engagement as part of an ‘updated version of the mission civilisatrice’ (Paris 2002, 651; see Abrahamsen 2000, 36). Reconstructing empirically the trajectory of the Merida Initiative, it was quite difficult to make out such a strategic projection of (neo-) liberal power. U.S. policymakers were arguably not on a new civilizing mission, but rather were confronted with a governmental problem for which they seemed to lack any coherent ideological framework or grand narrative.

By taking an empirically-grounded view on the Merida Initiative, I argued that it appears to be the particular neo-institutional way in which complexity, i.e. ‘root causes’, was seized upon that facilitates the self-propelled expansion of the imagined social domain covered by interventionary policy discourse. The process of neo-institutional learning brings home to policymakers the need to dig ‘deeper’ epistemologically. That is, to understand the targets of previous policy as the social products of even ‘deeper’ or more fundamental underlying institutions. Yet, when policy actors make this intellectual effort and readjust their policy practices accordingly, they are again caught up in exactly the same learning loop.

This is a serendipitous process of expansion and it was clearly discernible in the Merida Initiative. An anti-‘reductionist optic’ facilitated a creeping expansion of the epistemologic horizon of intervention (Prado 2009, 207). While advocates of Beyond Merida saw this contextualizing movement as a positive sign of critical self-reflection and the ability to propose more context-sensitive, bottom-up policy, there was a downside to it. Accessing (idiosyncratic) socio-cultural context – and, then, the context of the context of the context – necessitated the deconstruction of key analytical and normative assumptions, categories and concepts on the part of U.S. interveners, notably instrumental rationality. In this process, metropolitan policymakers were developing an ever more intimate ‘deep understanding’ (Fukuyama 2005, 120) of Mexican politics, state-society relations, and (illicit) economy while their stock of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims was shrinking: The more they learnt, the less they knew (see Finkenbusch 2014). And the less they knew in a reductionist, generalized sense, the fewer tools they had at their disposal in order to overcome the progressively more entrenched ‘root causes’ they were discovering.

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About the author

Peter Finkenbusch defended his PhD thesis on the ‘Knowledge Paradox of Statebuilding’ at the Free University Berlin in 2014. From 2010 until 2013 he worked as Research Associate at the Collaborative Research Centre ‘Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood’, Free University Berlin (peter.finkenbusch@fu-berlin.de)

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Notes

¹ Interview with David Johnson, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Law Enforcement Affairs, Washington, D.C. November 15, 2011

² Interview with Vanda Felbab-Brown, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C. April 5, 2010

³ Corroborated by interview with Geoff Thale, Maureen Meyer and Adriana Beltrán, Washington Office on Latin America, Washington, D.C. April 5, 2010; Meyer 2011