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"Informing" technologies and the World Bank

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Abstract

The current study examines how the World Bank uses an assemblage of information generation and reporting practices, bounded by accounting/financial expertises, to attempt to influence the practices associated with administering education in Latin America. Starting from the premise that these "informing" technologies make the objects of governance knowable in terms of accounting and financial expertises, we consider how accounting practices embedded within lending agreements enable, translate and regulate behaviour. Focusing on the institutional field(s) of basic education, the study offers an in-depth analysis of 15 World Bank loan agreements from across the region, plus 25 interviews with field participants from a single Latin American country. We examine how the World Bank lending agreements install a variety of informing technologies across a network of agents in Latin America. We propose that such agreements can be viewed as technologies of governance in that they diffuse financial technologies to distant fields, re-structure the habitus of these fields, and serve to reaffirm the expertise of the Bank within these fields. In this way, the World Bank increases its legitimacy with other potential borrower countries and ensures its continuing influence.

Introduction

Stronger than death-dealing war-ships, stronger than the might of devoted legions, stronger than wealth and genius of administration, stronger even than the unswerving justice of Queen Victoria's rule, are the scraps of paper that are borne over the seas, and the two or three slender wires that connect the scattered parts of her realm. (Heaton 1887–1888, p. 172, quoted in, Headrick, 1988, p. 98)

Since the early 1800s, information and information-related technologies have been central to the processes of linking together disparate geographical locales and to the compression of time and space (cf. Harvey, 1989; Headrick, 2000; Said, 1979). Notions of information and the role of

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technologies required to produce, transmit, and apply it have been incorporated into a variety of divergent theoretical perspectives. These notions have been used to explain observed changes in the spheres of economy, politics and culture, to name but a few (Amin, 2001; Giddens, 1990; Waters, 1995). However, the functioning of supranational organizations, and the roles that accounting and financial expertise play within these processes, has been neglected. Like nation states, organizations such as the IMF, OECD, World Bank and WTO attempt to govern and regulate action at distance. However, these organizations transcend national boundaries. Prior accounting research that has looked at supranational institutions has shown how they often have substantial influence over the activities of nation states. Through structural adjustment policies of the IMF, the voluntary compilation and publication of performance indicators by the OECD, the provision of loans with specific accounting conditionalities as well as technical assistance and report-writing activities by the World Bank (Neu, Ocampo Gomez, Ponce de León, & Zepeda, 2002), and trade agreements defining acceptable trade and accounting practices by the WTO (Aggestam & Loft, 2003; Arnold, 2005), these institutions not only influence practices within distant geographic and social spaces, but also come to be constitutive of these spaces.

Central to prior work on governmentality (Foucault, 1991, p. 102; Miller & Rose, 1990) has been recognition of the importance of a particular subset of governmental technologies, which we are calling "informing" technologies. These are the assemblage of information generation and reporting practices bounded and informed by accounting/financial expertises. We use the label "informing" technologies in two senses. First, in the more straightforward sense, the role of these technologies is to *inform* one party in a (typically asymmetrical) accountability relationship, about the status and actions of the second party, the one being held accountable. Second, these technologies *inform* the practice of governance, in the sense that they give character to governance, and both enable and restrict it. These informing technologies are distinctive in how they make the objects of governance knowable in terms of accounting/financial expertises. In conjunction with these particular expertises, informing technologies influence not only what information is gathered, manipulated and reported, but also how this information is acted upon.

The current study focuses on a specific geographical space—the field(s) of education in Latin America—and seeks to understand how informing technologies predicated upon financial and accounting expertises facilitate governance at a distance by one particular supranational institution, the World Bank. Since the late 1980s, the education sector has become an increasingly important site for World Bank activities, comprising approximately 10% of the Bank's annual lending (Jones, 1992). Within Latin America, education lending over this period has averaged about $200M per year (see Fig. 1) and has been an important source of education funding for cash-strapped governments.

Starting from an in-depth analysis of 15 lending agreements from various Latin American countries, plus a series of 25 interviews with field participants in a single Latin American country, we examine how World Bank lending agreements collect and enlist a variety of informing technologies. Contained within the lending agreements are financial techniques and calculations, auditing practices, accountability mechanisms, information systems and other numerical re-presentations that both directly and indirectly structure the field of education. We propose that such agreements can be viewed as technologies of governance in that they diffuse financial technologies to distant fields, re-structure the habitus of such fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and help to reaffirm the expertise of the Bank within this field, thereby increasing its legitimacy with other potential borrower countries and ensuring a continuing influence. More specifically, the analysis highlights how informing technologies are used to re-present the field in terms of new vocabularies and calculations, how through implantation of such technologies localized interventions are enabled, how new visibilities are created through attempts to construct performance indicators, and finally how monitoring and reporting are accomplished via the enlistment of auditing practices and mutually monitoring agents.