Making Migration Knowable and Governable: Benchmarking Practices as Technologies of Global Migration Governance

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Using the theoretical toolkit of material-semiotics, this article theorizes global migration governance as a governing technology that constitutes migration as an object of global governance. Methodologically, the analysis draws on event observation of the International Organization for Migration’s International Dialogue on Migration. Empirically, the article uses the illustrative example of the International Organization for Migration’s Migration Governance Index to make the case for a material-semiotic account of global migration governance more concrete. Overall, the article seeks to examine and enhance the contribution that practice-theoretical approaches make to the analysis of global governance.

Beyond the “Missing Regime” Thesis: Understanding Global Migration Governance as a Governing Technology

Today, migration is recognized by states, intergovernmental organizations (IOs), experts, and civil society as a global reality that can no longer be governed in isolation and instead must be managed through global cooperation. The last major transboundary problem to be governed unilaterally, migration is anomalous in comparison to other global phenomena; it suffers from a “a global governance deficit,” or a lack of institutionalized cooperation at a global level (Ghosh 2000; Betts 2011; Castles 2011). While no global regime encompasses the full spectrum of migration, various bilateral agreements, multilateral conventions, technical standards, and legal norms regulate interstate relations on migration and state behavior toward migrants (Aleinikoff 2003). Overall, powerful host states have been reticent to engage multilaterally on migration and, until recently, have refused to engage in a global dialogue on migration. Yet, the absence of a global regime has not prevented states and IOs from seeking to generate a more coordinated response to the challenges posed by migration. To date, states and IOs have cooperated to address refugees, asylum, and stateless persons; human-smuggling and trafficking; and, to a limited extent, the rights of migrant workers. Although this institutional architecture has evolved over the past two decades, global cooperation is hindered by a fragmented set of actors with different normative mandates. A recent UN and International Organization for Migration (IOM) report includes no fewer than twenty-eight UN and migration-related actors, including the interagency Global Migration Group (GMG) and ten additional UN agencies (IOM 2013).
Despite a fragmented institutional architecture, the global dialogue on “well-governed migration” has evolved significantly since the turn of the millennium. In the absence of a global regime, “there is a rapidly emerging ‘bottom-up’ global migration governance framework,” led by states and IOs creating “ad hoc forms of multilateral migration governance,” with global policy dialogues playing a leading role (Betts 2011, 2). In the context of these uncoordinated developments both within and beyond the UN system, global policy dialogues have sought to fill a global governance gap, manage institutional fragmentation, and generate consensus on the value of a cooperative approach to migration. Often dismissed as “talking shops” due to their informal and nonbinding format, global policy dialogues such as the UN High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, the Global Forum on Migration and Development, and the IOM’s International Dialogue on Migration are the most significant sites of global migration governance in which the knowledge of migration management is produced.

What is “global” about migration governance, if there is no comprehensive global regime (Krasner 1983)? The term global suggests more than the redistribution of power and authority and the proliferation of nonstate actors. Indeed, global can be redefined in social rather than exclusively spatial or geographical terms; it can be used to describe the constitutive governing technologies that discursively frame the world as one place and, by extension, migration as a normal part of a globalizing world (Kalm 2010; Corry 2013, 57). These governing technologies perform a “federating discourse” of migration management in which migration is rendered knowable and governable through the construction of a technocratic understanding of migration and how to govern it (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Ashutosh and Mountz 2011; Pécoud 2014, 63). With this in mind, global migration governance can be used as an analytical construct to describe a more fundamental shift in how migration is governed as an object of global governance. By moving beyond traditional definitional criteria, global migration governance can be used to signify more than institutionalized cooperation on migration. Instead, it can be used to analyze the governing practices through which migration is constituted as an object of global governance by states, IOs, and other nonstate actors.

To date, scholars of migration have focused on the question of why global migration governance remains the “missing regime,” despite its essentially global nature (Ghosh 2000). Scholars have utilized international relations theory (IR) to explain “why migration is regulated as it is” (Betts 2011, 20), that is, why its institutional architecture is underdeveloped in comparison to other collective action problems. In contrast, this article asks how migration is governed in the absence of a global regime. As discussed below, the conventional theoretical toolkit of IR proves ill-equipped when it comes to providing an answer. Therefore, we have to look outside of the intellectual mainstream of the discipline for theoretical tools that can provide an alternative account of global governance. Using the theoretical toolkit of “material-semiotics,” global migration governance can be understood differently, not as a global regime but as an interrelated set of governing technologies that constitute migration as an object of global governance. The term material-semiotics, following Law, better captures the diversity of the theoretical resources within actor-network theory (ANT), which describes not a theory per se but rather a diasporic “family of material-semiotic tools” for tracing the “enactment of

1 For the IOM (2010, 11), global migration governance consists of two fundamental elements: “the complex international legal instruments that constrain States’ behavior in migration governance, and the forums that allow for cooperation on it.” This article is concerned with the latter.

2 Andrew Barry distinguishes between a technical device—“a material or immaterial artefact”—and a governing technology, which refers “not just to a device in isolation but also to the forms of knowledge, skill, diagrams, charts, calculations and energy which make its use possible” (Barry 2001, 9). A governing technology is a “method for achieving a given aim which includes the use of one or more devices, but also the knowledge and skills which make it possible for the devices to be used” (Barry 2001, 69).
materially and discursively heterogeneous relations” that constitute actors, objects, and networks (Law 2009, 42).

Scholars are undoubtedly familiar with semiotics and Saussurean structuralism, which describe the ways language and the meaning of words are produced relationally within systems of linguistic signs. Material-semiotics pushes this logic of semiotic relationality beyond the discursive to encompass the social and material. In principle, everything acquires meaning relationally through difference and within a network of humans and nonhuman objects, in which the elements of a network define and shape one another. Material-semiotics, a kind of "relational materialism," argues that subjects and objects are constituted through practices that perform sociomaterial relations (Law and Mol 1995, 277). In material-semiotics, knowledge is a social product; yet, it is also material. Knowledge—and the actors and practices that perform this knowledge—are the relational effects of “a network of heterogeneous materials" (Law 1992, 381). Knowledge is always embodied in material forms and performative practices, such as PowerPoint presentations, blueprints, and scientific instruments, which are the product of sociomaterial relations (Law 1992, 381). Knowledge inherently involves power relations and a strategic process of “organizing and ordering those materials," and, in this regard, abstract knowledge must be translated into technical devices, thereby converting that which is less mobile into mobile and material form (Law 1992, 381; Law 1986, 12). Paper documents, graphs, and figures represent a more mobile medium than face-to-face interaction, and these methods for translating abstract knowledge are more durable than their human counterparts, making them ideal candidate materials for “long-distance translation” (Law 1986, 15). Material-semiotics highlights the ways power is exercised and knowledge is made durable, mobile, and tractable. Scholars working in this tradition illustrate how methods of translation—practices for transforming knowledge into material form for the purpose of enhancing the capacity to exert power at a distance—empower actors to leverage their authority beyond the initial site of knowledge production (Law 1986, 12). Translation, thus defined, describes a method of remote control that works to “collapse the distance” between micro and macro, enabling actors to exert influence on a larger scale from a central node in a network (Law 1986, 31–32).

This emphasis on the mutual constitution of knowledge and power relations resonates with Foucauldian ideas (Nexon and Pouliot 2013). For this reason, material-semiotics can be understood as an “empirical version” of poststructuralism and Foucauldian thinking (Law 2009, 145). A range of scholars have demonstrated the power of integrating Foucauldian analytics of governmentality with insights from ANT (Rose and Miller 1992). The analytics of governmentality adopt a broad definition of technology, and, like ANT, governing is a technical practice (Barry 2001, 5), which involves materials and inscription devices (Latour 2005). Furthermore, both theoretical traditions share a relational understanding of power and a performative ontology (Best 2014; Bueger and Gadinger 2014). In this view, power must be understood as a relation—not a resource or cause. Consequently, since power only exists as a relation, the question of “how” power operates—the practices through which it is exercised, in which knowledge is performed and enacted—becomes central. Simply put, power relations and knowledge are performed in practices. In this regard, the purpose of knowledge is not simply to investigate a pre-existing state of affairs. Knowledge is performative, not simply descriptive; it creates the epistemic objects it seeks to represent and, in so doing, actively intervenes to enact a version of reality. Knowledge accrues power through performances: it must be performed in specific sites, inscribed in material form, and reenacted in other locations through further performances if it is to travel across time and space with authority (Porter 2015).3

3 Practice-theoretical approaches share a commitment to the concept of performativity. While there are competing notions of performativity, practice-theories understand entities, networks, and objects as the product of the ongoing
Due to their ontological and epistemological similarities, in this article I subsume insights from global governmentality studies and ANT under the label of material-semiotics. This article aims to show that material-semiotics offers a powerful theoretical toolkit for analyzing global governance. Using this theoretical toolkit, this article aims to demonstrate how migration is made knowable and governable through specific sites and practices of global migration governance. To this end, the article theorizes global migration governance as a governing technology in which states and IOs construct migration as a “global governance-object” (Corry 2013). Global migration governance can be traced, I argue, by analyzing the governing technologies that bring migration into being as an object of global governance and perform it as a global reality to manage in technical and pragmatic ways.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section two provides a short history of global migration governance. Section three briefly scans existing literature on global governance and migration, global governmentality studies, international practice theory, and ANT. Section four introduces concepts from global governmentality studies and ANT in order to develop a material-semiotic understanding of global migration governance. Section five illustrates the potential of this approach with a brief examination of the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) International Dialogue on Migration and their Migration Governance Index, a benchmarking metric used to define and evaluate well-governed migration. The article concludes by reflecting on the ways in which the performative power of the Migration Governance Index empowers the IOM, helping to consolidate its expert authority and institutional identity as the global lead agency in migration management.


When did migration become an object of global governance? The current global dialogue on migration governance can be traced back to 1994 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, which resulted in the first comprehensive program of action on international migration. Chapter 10 of the Cairo Declaration on Population and Development, considered “one of the most comprehensive texts on international migration adopted by the international community to date” (IOM 2013, 22), urged states to address the challenges and opportunities posed by migration, its developmental effects and humanitarian consequences. This declaration was adopted by more than 180 countries, and despite regular reference to the Cairo Declaration in global policy dialogues since 1994, none of the recommendations have been implemented.

Since Cairo, a significant shift has occurred in the understanding and governance (or “management”) of migration, in large part because of the establishment of informal and nonbinding global consultative processes on migration, which have highlighted the value of interstate cooperation on migration. According to the UN, “the increase in knowledge and awareness about the multifaceted nature of human mobility” and its development potential changed the global discourse and governance of migration significantly during this time; consequently, migration came to be understood through a managerial and technocratic discourse as a global reality to manage and not a problem to be solved (IOM 2013, 19). Simply put, though states were reluctant to commit to a binding, multilateral system on migration, they began to recognize that shared challenges and complementary objectives could be addressed through greater global dialogue. The UN and other IOs, such as the

performance of sociomaterial relations. The concept of performativity rejects the conventional notion that objects or structures have a fixed identity—they are open and emergent processes that are constructed and maintained (i.e., performed) in and through sociomaterial relations and practices. In this regard, objects and structures are implicated in an ongoing process of performance and are therefore always emergent (see Buenger and Gadinger 2014, 72).
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IOM, UNHCR, ILO, and the GMG, played a major role in facilitating this changing discourse.

Following Cairo, multilateral cooperation stayed dormant during the 1990s and into the early 2000s as predominantly migrant-receiving states refused to bring migration into the UN system or hold a global summit on migration. The disagreement over how and whether to pursue global migration governance is exemplified by the most significant multilateral treaty that emerged during this time, the International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families, which remained dormant from 1990 until 2003, only to come into force after enough migrant-sending states had ratified it. A testament to the entrenched Global North-South divide, the convention is ineffective because northern host states refused to ratify it. According to the official history, the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by an enduring tension that continues today, between a growing desire “for rights-based and multilateral approaches to migration governance” and the principles of state sovereignty (IOM 2013, 22).

The global dialogue on migration intensified in the mid-2000s, when migration ascended to the top of the global governance agenda. Since this time, the global dialogue has gathered considerable momentum. With a proliferation of landmark reports, institutional mechanisms, and global policy dialogues, migration has become an object of global governance: the establishment of the IOM’s International Dialogue on Migration (2001), the Berne Initiative (2001), the creation of the Global Migration Group (2003), landmark reports by the Global Commission on International Migration (2005), the appointment of a special representative for international migration and development (2006), the UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (2006/2013), the Global Forum on Migration and Development (2007), and the attempt to “mainstream” migration into global governance via the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015). In September 2016, the UN General Assembly convened a major international summit to address “large movements of refugees and migrants,” resulting in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in which UN member states committed to strengthening global governance through the development of a “global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.” The global compact, based on principles found in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, marks the initial steps toward the “first comprehensive global framework for cooperation on international migration,” “guided by a set of common principles and approaches that will allow the field of migration to foster more collaboration between Member States and relevant partners on international migration” (IOM 2017b).

While no single UN agency is responsible for the entire spectrum of migration, the IOM is the “global lead agency” on migration, whereas the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) focuses on refugees and stateless persons and the International Labour Organization (ILO) focuses on migrant workers. Unlike UNHCR and the ILO, the IOM’s mandate encompasses a range of migration-related issues, from capacity-building and emergency operations to knowledge production and facilitating global policy dialogues. Established in 1951 to resettle displaced persons following the Second World War, the IOM has expanded dramatically over the past decade due to a growing knowledge and interest in migration, with 162 member states, numerous inter- and nongovernmental organizations, nine states holding observer status, over 450 field offices, and ninety-five hundred operational staff (IOM 2016c). While the IOM has always acted in close partnership with the UN, recently, in September 2016, the IOM became a “related organization” to the UN, representing a major development in the institutional architecture of global governance (IOM 2016a). In becoming a related organization within the UN system (it does not have full membership status), the IOM will continue to advance the understanding of migration and “focus the world’s attention on the challenge of global migration as a reality to be managed rather than as a problem to be solved”
The IOM is the central, albeit often overlooked, actor in global migration governance. It plays a critical role in facilitating dialogue and producing knowledge, in part through its International Dialogue on Migration (IDM), the most longstanding global policy dialogue on migration. In principle, as an IO, the IOM is a technical service provider acting at the behest of states. Yet, in practice, as this article will show, the IOM exercises a significant degree of autonomy as an expert authority with the power to define migration and how to govern it. Global governance depends upon authoritative representational practices and expert knowledge (Larner and Walters 2004). In this regard, governing practices in which the discourse of migration management is produced and translated into technical devices are critical to the IOM’s political legitimacy. I argue that the IOM’s Migration Governance Index (MGI) empowers the IOM as it enters the UN system and seeks to consolidate its institutional identity as the expert authority in a fragmented field. The MGI is critical to legitimizing its institutional identity as the global lead agency: it has performative effects on power relations that change how actors and objects relate to one another in an increasingly crowded landscape of global governance. Later in the article, the analysis zooms in on the IOM IDM as a site of global migration governance by examining the IOM’s Migration Governance Index, a benchmarking metric introduced at the 2016 IDM for comparative assessments of well-governed migration.

Global Governance and Migration

Global governance is an established part of the conceptual vocabulary of IR (McGrew and Held 2002; Hale and Held 2011; Weiss and Wilkinson 2014). Scholars have highlighted the most significant actors of global governance such as international organizations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), nongovernmental organizations (Boli and Thomas 1999), private authority (Cutler, Haufler and Porter 1999; Hall and Biersteker 2002), and global civil society (Pasha and Blaney 1998). Yet, the discipline has largely ignored global migration governance. As a result, our understanding is impoverished, theoretically underdeveloped, and empirically underresearched. One might conclude that this lacuna exists for a reason: because there is no global regime for regulating migration, scholars have looked elsewhere to analyze global governance, focusing on other global issues such as public health (Thomas and Weber 2004), development finance (Best 2014), environmental issues (Hoffmann 2012), and trade (Wilkinson 2013).

To be fair, scholars have not completely ignored global migration governance, though few have utilized theories and concepts from IR (cf. Newland 2010; Betts 2011; see also Hansen, Koehler, and Money 2011; Kunz, Levenex, and Panizzon 2011; Hollifield, Martin, and Orrenius 2014). For example, Bhagwati (2003) makes the case for a supranational institution, a “World Migration Organization,” whereas for Hatton (2007), there are no rational grounds for World Trade Organization–style negotiations or major reforms to existing institutional structures. The most comprehensive empirical overview and theoretical account comes from Alexander Betts (2011). For Betts, global migration governance (or the lack thereof) is ultimately the structural effect of an anarchical system in which states engage in self-interested action in the absence of any central authority or comprehensive institutional framework. In this anarchic environment, states’ relative “migration power” (Betts 2011, 22) is largely determined by the structure of the international system and their position in a hierarchical order. These uneven power relations between North and South allow powerful migrant receiving states to shape migration politics according to their interests.

The analysis briefly alludes to the “epistemic role” of powerful actors, whose understanding of migration structures “the boundaries of the possible” in migration governance, with migrant-receiving states and IOs occupying a critical position in...
“shaping dominant ideas” about migration (Betts 2011, 23). However, the analysis only scratches the surface of IOs’ role in knowledge production, as well as the significance of power and authority in global migration governance. Indeed, one is left with the impression that ideas promulgated by IOs are epiphenomenal and ultimately reducible to state interests. More significantly for the purpose of this article, the analysis is symptomatic of a widespread weakness within research on global governance—the governing technologies through which something is constituted as an object of global governance are taken for granted. This omission is likely the byproduct of an intellectual inheritance—the analysis inherits the shortcomings of mainstream IR, in which “global” objects are treated as given, as “exogenous factors” exercising causal effects from above (Jackson and Nexon 2002). Thus, the question of how powerful political actors objectify something as an object of global governance is ignored. This explanation for the absence of a greater institutionalized cooperation is limited because it fails to sufficiently problematize how migration is constructed as an object of global governance in the first place.

Of course, there are other intellectual resources to draw on which examine the ontological status of governance-objects by foregrounding practices of governing. In IR, the most obvious source is constructivism. Constructivist scholars are well-equipped to explain how ideas and discourse shape world politics. Constructivists have highlighted the diffusion of norms and ideas through transgovernmental networks (Slaughter and Hale 2011), international organizations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), global civil society (Scholte 2002), epistemic communities (Haas 1992), and transnational advocacy networks (Carpenter 2007). Although constructivist scholars have highlighted the role of powerful IOs in knowledge production, they have said remarkably little about “how knowledge production unfolds in practice” (Bueger 2015, 1), focusing instead on agenda-setting, policy-making, implementation, enforcement, evaluation, and monitoring. Furthermore, though constructivists have extensively theorized subject-formation and how subjects of world politics are socially constructed through mutually constitutive patterns of interaction (Wendt 1994; Weldes 1999), constructivists treat objects of global governance as given and thus fail to sufficiently analyze subject-object relations and how objects are objectified as global and governable to begin with (Corry 2013).

Outside of the intellectual mainstream, global governmentality studies provide helpful theoretical tools for analyzing power/knowledge and the productive power of governing practices. In recent years, scholars have generalized Foucauldian analytics of governmentality on to the global level (Larner and Walters 2004; Selby 2007; Hindess 2008; Rosenow 2009) to examine, inter alia, how IOs conduct the conduct of states (Merlingen 2003; Barnett and Duvall 2004; Neumann and Sending 2010). Around the same time, a small but discernible literature on the global governmentality of migration management emerged (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Geiger and Pécoud 2010). Examining political discourse and the “programmatic texts” and “international migration narratives” promulgated by IOs (Kalm 2010; Pécout 2014), this work has little to say about the ways in which the discourse of migration management is produced and translated into governing technologies that generate authority and power (cf. Larner and Le Heron 2002). Rather than uncritically grafting Foucauldian analytics on to the global and searching for discursive representations of the governing rationality of migration management, then, the focus should instead be on “governmentalities being assembled and in the making” in and through specific sites and instruments (Voß 2016, 144).

Another body of scholarship that might help make sense of the role of knowledge practices in global governance is international practice theory. In recent years, IR has become a “trading zone” in which scholars share theories about how practices structure world politics (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 8). Within
IR, practice-theoretical approaches are most closely associated with Bourdieu, and the most influential proponents of Bourdieusian practice theory are Adler and Pouliot (2011). Adler and Pouliot offer a relatively minimalist definition of practice as a process of performing tacit knowledge: “competent performances,” or “socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 4). Yet, the Bourdieusian notion of practice as “habitual task performance” (Cetina 2001, 184) offers a theoretically restrictive understanding of practice. While Bourdieusian approaches to practice, based on concepts of field and habitus, excel at theorizing social reproduction and explaining historical continuity within fields of practice, scholars have questioned their explanatory power in theorizing change and discontinuity (Barnes 2001, 35; Best 2014).

Critics point out that not all practices in world politics are habitual activities that simply perform or enact tacit background knowledge. Take for example the work of political experts, consultants, and analysts from states and IOs; they utilize benchmarking and other technical practices that involve “a treadmill of incessant learning and feedback” qua ongoing policy dialogue, data-gathering, monitoring, and evaluation (Larner and Heron 2002, 215). The main actors of global governance, Best explains, are technocrats and social scientists engaged in “translating the messiness of the world into useful abstractions (reports, tables, matrices, scores, indexes) that can then be deployed to govern their unruly [global governance] objects” (Best 2014, 24). Instead of looking for stable fields of practice governed by coherent logics and rules, Best argues it is better to examine knowledge-making practices in which reflexive actors forge networks in response to nonroutine problems of global governance.

Accordingly, IR scholars have looked to ANT—or material-semiotics—for concepts that can help theorize the technical devices that form the sociomaterial basis of global governance; over time, ANT has come to be understood as a unique contribution to practice-theoretical approaches, distinct from Bourdieusian theories but with a similar interest in practices and relations (Nexon and Pouliot 2013; Best 2014; Bueger and Gadinger 2014). In “translating” insights from ANT into IR (Barry 2013), scholars have brought into focus the significance of governing technologies and benchmarking practices, models, and metrics used to compare and quantify global governance-objects, noting how indicators and indices actively construct the objects they seek to measure (Hansen and Porter 2012, 420; Rocha de Siqueira 2016). Research on “global governance by indicators” has illustrated the ways political power is exercised indirectly at a distance through technical devices that constitute global governance-subjects and objects (Davis et al. 2012; Broome and Quirk 2015). ANT offers a relational and performative understanding of power in which actors act as “mediators” (Latour 2005) with the power and authority to objectify and translate what is political, complex, and essentially contested (e.g., “well-governed migration”) into material inscriptions. In this view, benchmarking, metrics, and indicators are effective inasmuch as they exercise a kind of performative power that constructs a relationship of expert authority between the producers of knowledge and subordinate actors, in the process shaping the identities of both the measurers and the measured (Sending and Lie 2015, 996).

To examine and enhance the contributions of this literature, this article sketches out a material-semiotic understanding of global migration governance by examining the IOM’s Migration Governance Index (MGI). To provide the theoretical groundwork to describe and explain the significance of the MGI, the next section theorizes migration as a global governance that is objectified and translated through governing technologies and technical devices.
Migration as Global Governance-Object

Global governance is focused on specific kinds of political entities (Barry 2013), what we might call global governance-objects. What is a global governance-object? According to Corry (2013, 87), a governance-object is distinct, malleable, and politically salient from the perspective of governance-subjects. First, it is distinct in that it can be considered a “meaningful category or entity.” Second, it is malleable insofar as it is governable and can be made the “target of steering efforts” through governing technologies; for instance, the availability of benchmarking practices that make a governance-object knowable and measurable. Third, a governance-object is politically salient in that it is understood as meaningful from the perspective of relevant actors; it must resonate culturally and historically with their identities and interests. Finally, to be a global governance-object, governing technologies designed to “steer” it must discursively frame the object through reference to the world as a single space of action. By redefining the global in social rather than territorial or spatial terms to refer to the constitutive governing technologies that frame the world as a single space, Corry’s account of global governmentality shifts the analytical focus to “mentalities of governing that presuppose the world as one place rather than mentalities of governing that govern literally the whole world” (Corry 2013, 57). For instance, global health refers to “health understood and operated upon through a global perspective, subject to global governance techniques, development efforts and regimes of governing that reference the world as one place” (Corry 2013, 57).

In what sense is migration a global governance-object? The global dialogue on migration suggests that migration is a distinct entity in its own right. With the so-called European refugee crisis, migration has become more politically salient than ever before—its global implications are undeniable, as the recent New York Declaration makes clear. At the same time, migration has become an object of governing technologies in ways hitherto unseen. For instance, the production of technical devices such as migration metrics aspires to anchor the global policy dialogue on migration through the creation of a common framework for defining and measuring well-governed migration. In this sense, migration has become a global governance-object. Governing technologies render migration knowable and governable through a discursive framing of “migration management,” in which migration is understood as a normal part of our global reality to manage for the benefit of all (Kalm 2010; Geiger and Pécoud 2010). Powerful IOs such as the IOM contribute to this technocratic framing of migration as a catalyst for development if it is “well-governed” in accordance with universal principles of human rights, free markets, and so forth (Pécoud 2014).

The constitution of migration as a global governance-object not only has discursive and epistemic effects, that is, it brings new knowledge into being. It also has social and material effects in the sense that it contributes to the epistemic construction of political order (Voß 2016). Political orders, according to Corry’s account of global governmentality, are constituted by actors oriented toward global governance-objects. As a result, epistemological changes in how objects are understood have social and material effects on power relations in global governance. However, Corry’s account does not sufficiently explain how global governance-objects are made, overlooking the technical devices through which they are objectified. This is where insights from ANT can help by providing theoretical tools to explain the significance of technical devices and their effects on power relations. Following Callon (1980), objectification is a practice of translation in which social phenomena are translated into material form—text, surveys, and scientific instruments—that can circulate across different contexts in a way that performs relations of power and knowledge.

In the next section, the article shows how the MGI objectifies and translates well-governed migration. One way to analyze the governing technologies through which
migration is constituted as a global governance-object is through the method of event observation. Event observation provides “an ideal opportunity to understand how different actors engage in joint practices or negotiate their worth,” and direct event observation of global policy dialogues in which groups of actors interact offers a viable way to study global migration governance (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 86–87). In what follows, I analyze the practice of making migration knowable and governable at the 2016 IDM by examining the MGI. This analysis draws on my experience as an academic observer at the 2016 and 2017 IDM in New York City at the UN Headquarters.

Making Migration Knowable and Governable at the International Dialogue on Migration: The IOM’s Migration Governance Index

The IOM has identified the lack of adequate data as a “chronic obstacle” to the governance and discourse of migration globally, wherein ideological agendas and political interests tend to dominate (IOM 2013, 118). The paucity of data is considered an impediment to greater institutional cooperation and a cause of public misconceptions about migrants and migration. The capacity to define, measure, and evaluate governance globally is essential to well-governed migration—in the words of an IOM analyst repeating the well-known management maxim, “you can’t manage it if you can’t measure it.” That is, in an area historically informed by misinformation and xenophobia, migration cannot be governed unless policy development and institutional design is informed by reliable data. To address these global governance gaps in leadership as well as knowledge, the IOM’s IDM and other global consultative processes have emerged as significant sites that facilitate the global dialogue on migration and the exchange of technical expertise on migration. In this regard, the IDM functions as a construction site in which the technocratic discourse of migration management is translated into technical devices.

Founded in 2001, the IDM is open to IOM member and observer states, inter- and nongovernmental organizations, media, academia, and the private sector. The IDM “provides a space to analyse current and emerging issues in migration governance and to exchange experiences, policy approaches and effective practices” (IOM 2017a) and “a forum to States as well as international and other organizations for the exchange of views . . . and the promotion of cooperation and coordination of efforts on international migration issues” (IOM 1954). Each year, the IDM is guided by an overarching theme selected by the IOM membership and discussed during informal consultations and workshops, concluding with the IOM Council Sessions. The 2016 IDM was dedicated to in-depth dialogues between member states and with other stakeholders on the follow up and review of migration-related targets in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The 2016 IDM consisted of two intersessional workshops focused on an in-depth discussion of the migration-related targets of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (IOM 2016b, 3). In September 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted seventeen SDGs and 169 accompanying targets as part of the 2030 Agenda. The 2030 Agenda recognizes the “positive contribution of migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development” and the need for states to “cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration” (UN 2015). The 2030 SDGs represent a critical milestone in global migration governance and “a historic step” toward mainstreaming migration into global governance (IOM 2016b, 6).

The first intersessional workshop at the UN Headquarters in New York City examined the “tools and mechanisms available to help Member states measure progress on migration-related Sustainable Development Goal targets” (IOM 2016b, 4). The SDGs contain several migration-related targets. Particularly apposite to migration is SDG 10, “Reduce inequality within and among countries,” and specifically
target 10.7, to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies” (UN 2015). The targets identified in the SDGs highlight that migration is a complex, “multi-dimensional reality” which calls for an “analysis that effectively conceptualizes migration governance and identifies clear, measurable indicators to assess the level of policy sophistication” (IOM 2016b, 9).

On day 1 of the 2016 IDM, session 2, “Methods of Monitoring Migration-Related Targets in the SDGS,” included a presentation on “Measuring Well-Managed Migration Policies (SDG 10.7)” (IOM 2016d). The presentation by Leo Abruzzese, global director of public policy, economics, and politics at the Economist Intelligence Unit, presented the key findings of the IOM’s Migration Governance Index (MGI). Borne out of “an appreciation for these connections between development, migration, governance and metrics” (IOM 2016c, 7), the MGI, commissioned by the IOM and designed by the Economist Intelligence Unit, is an analytical framework and benchmarking metric for global cross-comparison of country-specific migration governance. Specifically, the MGI has three goals:

Goal 1: Use internationally agreed definitions of “well-managed migration”

Goal 2: Go beyond existing research to produce a more comprehensive understanding of migration governance, using a unique scoring system

Goal 3: Provide a tool to assist governments in evaluating the scope of their policies; help them identify gaps, and set priorities around institutional capacity on migration. (IOM 2016d, 2)

At the 2016 IDM, the IOM unveiled the initial pilot project version of the MGI. The MGI examines fifteen countries selected on the basis of geographic region, levels of socioeconomic development, and migration country profiles (i.e., whether they are predominantly countries of immigration or emigration). The MGI is an “input-based benchmarking framework” that uses seventy-three qualitative questions “to measure performance across five domains identified as the building blocks of effective migration governance,” including institutional capacity, migrant rights, safe and orderly migration, labor migration management, and regional and international cooperation and other partnerships (IOM 2016d).

According to the presentation, the research program was a multistage process from framework creation to model finalization (IOM 2016c).

First, secondary research was conducted on existing migration governance metrics and indices, such as the Migrant Integration Policy Index and the Commitment to Development Index, in order to assess existing migration governance indicators.
Subsequently, analysts from the Economic Intelligence Unit developed a draft analytical framework for benchmarking migration governance. In collaboration with the IOM, in July 2015, a group of fourteen technical experts convened a day-long workshop in London to refine the analytical framework. The panel agreed to five domains and the key indicators developed for monitoring progress in each domain of the MGI. Finally, a full scoring metric was developed using seventy-three qualitative subindicators and an evaluation methodology. The Economic Intelligence Unit created country-specific profiles on migration governance structures and qualitative scorecards to inform the overall evaluations of each country and identify best practices in institutional design among the initial sample set of fifteen countries assessed under the pilot project (IOM 2016c, 10–17).

At the 2016 IDM, the IOM explained the process behind the creation of the MGI and presented the key findings of the initial pilot project, in which countries are assessed according to whether their institutional capacity to manage migration is “emerging, developed or mature.”

An exhaustive analysis of the MGI exceeds the scope of this article. However, it is worth reflecting on the specific domain and indicators most relevant to global governance, the domain of regional and global cooperation. The MGI offers a set of rationales, subindicators, and scoring schemes for measuring regional and global cooperation. Indicator 5.1, “Signature and ratification of international conventions,” offers several subindicators as a proxy for well-governed migration. The rationale behind this indicator is that “International conventions, treaties and laws build the basis for efficient migration governance” and that once a treaty has been ratified, this indicates “a state’s willingness to act in accordance with international agreements” (IOM 2016c, 72). Subindicators assess the signature and ratification of the main international treaties on migration, such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Convention on the Rights
the Child, conventions on statelessness, and other multilateral agreements (IOM 2016c, 72). Indicator 5.2 measures whether a state participates in regional governance and regional consultative processes with neighboring countries. Indicator 5.4 on “global cooperation” assesses the degree of states’ participation in relevant intergovernmental organizations, that is, IOM or UNHCR and their governing bodies, and the extent of engagement with global consultative processes, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development. In sum, by tabulating a country’s score on a variety of indicators across five domains, the MGI functions to define and comparatively assess well-governed migration.

The MGI combines standard-setting and evaluation in which states’ relative performance and progress in achieving migration-related targets under the SDGs can be tracked and comparatively assessed. According to the IOM, the MGI is not designed as a ranking device because such a purpose “would be controversial and ultimately unproductive” (IOM 2016c, 7). Rather, the IOM says, the MGI aims to assist states in assessing migration governance challenges; the metric represents a “point of departure” aimed at advancing the discourse and governance of migration globally by “taking a definite step towards clarifying what ‘good governance’ can actually mean” (IOM 2016c, 7). While the strategic intentions behind the MGI are debatable, the MGI has a “strategic materiality” (Law 1992). As a technical device of “inscription,” the MGI has performative effects in which social relations of power between and among the IOM and member states are inscribed in material form. The MGI makes the evaluation of “country-specific migration governance structures” possible by making material distinctions and rendering visible hierarchies between states based on their institutional capacity to manage migration.

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1 It may seem contradictory to talk of strategy when using a network ontology. Yet the empirical studies in material-semiotics share a longstanding concern with strategy (Law 1992). In material-semiotics, strategy implies materiality and making material distinctions (Law and Mol 1995, 281). Strategy is intrinsically linked to social change and is inconceivable without representation, which makes it possible for actors to act strategically because it allows them to imagine the future. In material-semiotics, agency and intentionality cannot be located with reference to traditional distinctions between subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans. Technical devices are more reliable, politically and rhetorically, hence their popular appeal—they embody social relations in materials more durable and dependable than human actions. In other words, technical devices can be strategically designed to have a politics (Law and Mol 1995, 281).
Importantly, the MGI “is not a rigid tool, and its model and findings are not set in stone” (IOM 2016c, 7). Its modifiability allows it to better reflect evolving expertise on migration and provide a more accurate way to monitor national and global progress toward migration-related SDGs (IOM 2016c, 7). In this regard, the MGI is not simply a static device. Rather, the MGI derives its power from its capacity to translate the expertise of migration management with authority across time and space, enabling the IOM to monitor global progress toward migration-related SDG targets and thereby anchor policy dialogue in a number of national, regional, or global sites over time. The strategic materiality of the MGI derives in part from its evolving reflexivity: it can be modified as the pilot project evolves, more data is compiled, and more countries are added to the index. As the meaning of well-governed migration undergoes a process of translation into indices and indicators, the MGI can be updated accordingly to more accurately reflect the meaning of “well-governed migration,” an evolving area of expertise (Geiger and Pécoud 2010). As a technical inscription device, the MGI is a “mutable mobile” (Law and Mol 2001); it can be updated as more countries are added to the MGI. The MGI (and by extension the IOM) gains power and authority in part because of the “ever-perfectible” character of its data and knowledge, which can be improved over time to reflect ongoing developments within this growing field of expertise (Rocha de Siqueira 2016).

As more states are evaluated as part of the MGI, more cross-country comparisons will be possible, allowing it to function as a “repository” for best-practices in institutional design. This repository of information will be used by the IOM to produce the knowledge required to evaluate “policy progress over time,” allowing for comparative assessments of state progress toward the SDGs and offering a way to translate global development goals into national commitments through measurable indicators (IOM 2016c, 7). In this regard, the MGI translates the meaning of well-governed migration into material objects, which can, in turn, circulate as truths far beyond the UN Headquarters, within wider networks of national, regional, and global governance related to the 2030 SDGs.

Power and Authority in Global Migration Governance: Translation, ANT, and IR

The article has so far described the ways the MGI contributes to the constitution of migration as a global governance-object, by making migration knowable and governable. In closing, it is worth asking what is the role of the IOM, and what are the effects of the MGI? These questions cut to the core of a central debate in IR, which concerns the relative autonomy and power of IOs (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Whether and to what extent the IOM is a political actor which exercises autonomy, power, and authority must be examined in the context in which it operates, in the “episteme” of state sovereignty (Neumann and Sending 2010). In this context, the IOM seeks to legitimize its institutional identity vis-à-vis its member states and other IOs, such as the UNHCR, the ILO, and the GMG. Against this backdrop of a fragmented institutional architecture in which IOs compete for power, authority, and limited material resources (Pécoud 2014), it is difficult to describe the role of the IOM, which acts in partnership with a range of UN agencies but remains on the periphery of the UN system as a related organization. With an ambiguous relationship to the UN and a nonnormative mandate, the IOM is less constrained compared to the other IOs and their relatively narrow mandates. In this sense, the ambiguous role accorded to the IOM can be a source of strength. Still, in the absence of a global regime to justify its role, as it enters into the UN system the IOM seeks to legitimate its institutional identity and consolidate its expert authority as the global lead agency on migration. To do so, it frames its political interventions as technical, pragmatic and, in short, nonpolitical. This is particularly important in this context,
where migration has been considered too controversial to be the subject of global dialogue and cooperation.

Member states delegate to the IOM authority over a range of issues, inter alia, facilitating global dialogue on migration through the IDM and offering technical expertise and operational assistance to states in a range of areas (IOM 1954). This does not mean that the IOM and the knowledge it produces is simply epiphenomenal of state interests, however. Rather, the IOM acts within a “zone of discretion” demarcated by state interests and, like other IOs, it is autonomous by design, by virtue of its delegated authority (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 4). Member states delegate to the IOM the authority to define and evaluate well-governed migration because it is in their interest to do so; they are not capable of performing this role due to their relatively limited knowledge and experience, and so this task is delegated. Yet this delegated authority forms the basis for the IOM’s expert authority. Indeed, its 2016 entry into the UN as a related organization was conditional upon the IOM’s institutional identity as an expert authority: a nonnormative, technical service provider acting in the service of others.

Briefly summarized, the power of the IOM stems from the authority that constitutes it (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 29). In stark contrast to the clear normative mandate and moral authority of the UNHCR and the ILO, however, the IOM has no legal protection mandate and rarely goes against state interests. Yet the IOM’s delegated role empowers it to contribute to transforming the global discourse on migration through knowledge production. By circulating within networks of global governance related to the SDGs, the MGI has effects on power relations in that it induces states and other actors to defer to the IOM’s expert authority. It therefore empowers the IOM and enables it to enroll member states and other IOs into its normative agenda and federating mission. In the language of material-semiotics, technical devices perform sociomaterial relations of power; in effect, the MGI works to alter states’ conduct around migration governance and thereby federate state and nonstate actors into the IOM’s normative agenda of well-governed migration.

As bureaucracies and rational-legal authorities, the authority of IOs depends on their capacity to appear neutral, acting as a technical service-provider for others (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Despite its claims to impartiality, it is clear that the IOM plays a significant political (and not simply technical) role in global migration governance. There is a distinct political dimension to the IOM’s delegated “apolitical” role in facilitating global dialogue and knowledge production. To be sure, the IOM cannot impose norms or regulate state behavior directly. Through the production of authoritative knowledge, however, the IOM can construct a relationship of authority among states and nonstate actors. Although the MGI may not have regulatory effects, it has constitutive effects—by classifying the world, fixing meaning, and diffusing norms (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), the IOM’s interventions foster and draw upon a global discourse of migration management. By emphasizing the ways in which migration can be managed for the benefit of all parties and engendering a “disciplining” effect in which states internalize the norms of well-governed migration, through the MGI, actors are enrolled into the IOM’s normative agenda and defer to its expert authority (Andrijašević and Walters 2010; Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

As bureaucracies, the power and authority of IOs depend on their capacity to construct a relationship of authority between the producers of knowledge and the targets of benchmarks (Sending and Lie 2015). The IOM’s authority depends on its capacity to enroll others into its normative agenda, making them defer to its expert authority through the production of authoritative knowledge. Of course, certain forms of knowledge are more authoritative and effective when it comes to exercising power. The political appeal of quantitative data means global benchmarks have emerged as a popular governing practice for legitimating various actors and interests. Benchmarks are perceived as neutral and value-free assessments, hence their
popular appeal, but they will always be political (Davis et al. 2012, 28). Like other global benchmarks, the MGI represents a normative agenda and embodies a claim to expert authority and the power to define migration and how to govern it. While these normative values are obscured by the technocratic gloss of numbers, the MGI translates abstract data into actionable knowledge, giving it meaning and purpose (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 7).

In this regard, the IOM is not merely an intermediary, acting at the behest of states with no real autonomy nor power. Nor does the IOM simply “transmit” norms (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Rather, it translates norms and, in this regard, the IOM is an important mediator or translator (Latour 2005), a political actor in its own right, one which plays a key role in facilitating the global dialogue on migration and translating the know-how of migration management into technical devices that can circulate across networks and embed power relations. In ANT, translation describes the exercise of power indirectly and practices of governing from a distance through knowledge, a governing process strengthened by material inscriptions in technical artefacts (Barry 2013, 414). The MGI resembles other global benchmarking practices of translation, which involves several components: simplification (the decontextualization of culturally specific details and the emphasis on general properties); commensuration (the production of indicators and metrics); reification (the translation and quantification of complex political phenomena into fixed and universal categories); and symbolic judgment (the comparative assessment of relative performance) (Broome and Quirk 2015).

The MGI does not give the IOM the power to compel other actors to conform to its vision of well-governed migration. Yet the MGI is powerful insofar as it empowers the IOM by legitimizing its institutional identity and consolidating its expert authority. The MGI embodies a normative agenda, which is translated into comparative assessments of institutional capacity. By enabling symbolic judgments of performance, expressed through numerical values, the MGI constitutes power relations and helps to empower the IOM vis-à-vis member states and other IOs. Here human agency is obscured because it is transported onto technical devices; the autonomy of benchmarks can appear to operate independently of their producers, those who can subsequently recalibrate them and use them to leverage their power and extend it into new spaces of global governance. The IOM’s power comes from its ability to use its expert authority and deploy knowledge, which constitutes the social reality of migration. In this regard, authority is constructed through sociomaterial relations and practices, which gives the producers of knowledge the capacity to induce others to defer to its authority and symbolic judgments.

In the language of material-semiotics, actors seek to enroll allies into networks via technical devices (Callon 1984). In this view, power is decentered. Power is not a resource possessed by an actor but instead describes how powerful actors channel action and align the interests of subordinate actors toward achieving their strategic goals (Porter 2015). Powerful actors translate their interests by rendering a problem in a technical (i.e., less contestable) form that aligns interests toward a collective goal. If successful, other actors are enrolled—by accepting the roles accorded to them as countries with “emerging, developed or mature” migration governance, they defer to the authority of powerful actors and their symbolic judgments. In this view, though power and authority are decentered, powerful actors nonetheless function as key nodes in networks. A successful benchmark, Porter observes (2015), can be treated as an “obligatory passage point” because it reduces the complexity of the world to manageable bits of data that can be manipulated by an actor who possesses authoritative knowledge. The MGI empowers the IOM in relation to other IOs and expands its expert authority over others. Like other global benchmarks, the effects of the MGI, indeed its effectiveness, depends on its capacity to consolidate expert authority. The MGI is effective because it is performative: it legitimates the IOM’s institutional identity as an expert authority and the global lead agency and establishes
a common point of reference among otherwise distinct and distant actors (Sending and Lie 2015).

As Pécoud (2014, 64) notes, the global dialogue on migration is a relatively recent development and, by definition, a dialogue implies divergent views between participants. Therefore, the global dialogue must be anchored by a shared knowledge and conceptual vocabulary, which makes discussion possible. In this regard, the MGI provides the material-semiotic glue that binds participants together, making migration legible as a global reality that can be managed for the benefit of all. In the absence of a shared perspective, the production of shared ideas represents a way to bridge the divide between actors whose interests often diverge. Reliable data and models serve a strategic purpose of making the global reality of migration more manageable. Through the global dialogue on migration, the IOM seeks to federate a range of actors with different views and enroll them into its normative agenda. In this regard, the MGI anchors the global policy dialogue on migration and serves as a common framework for action in global policy dialogues, empowering the IOM to cast symbolic judgments and monitor state progress toward migration-related targets in the 2030 Agenda.

Concluding Reflections

Scholars have analyzed global migration governance by providing macrostructural explanations for why migration governance is the way it is. This scholarship has dedicated little attention to specific governing technologies and technical devices through which subjects and objects of global migration governance are constructed and brought into sociomaterial relations of power and authority. In contrast, the aim of this article was to contribute to research on global migration governance by theorizing and empirically investigating the MGI, a benchmarking metric used to make migration knowable and governable. The article demonstrated how technical devices make it possible for the IOM to act at a distance. As this brief illustration suggests, benchmarking practices perform the sociomaterial “ordering work” (Hetherington and Law 2000) of translating the IOM’s agenda of well-governed migration into material form that can travel across a fragmented field of actors and help consolidate the IO’s expert authority and legitimize its institutional identity as the global lead agency in migration.

Benchmarking practices have social and material effects—not only do they discursively constitute global governance-objects, they help constitute power relations by inscribing a relationship of authority between the producers of knowledge and the targets of benchmarks. Through the MGI, migration is objectified and translated into technical devices that can circulate across national and global contexts, thereby drawing geographically dispersed actors together, socially and materially, into a global network.

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