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The Concept of Transparency in International Relations: towards a critical approach

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Abstract

Transparency is an important concept in International Relations. The possibility of realizing transparency in practice operates as a central analytical axis defining distinct positions on core theoretical problems within the field, from the security dilemma to the function of international institutions and beyond. As a political practice the pursuit of transparent governance is a dominant feature of global politics, promoted by a wide range of actors across a vast range of issue areas, from nuclear proliferation to Internet governance to the politics of foreign aid. Yet, despite its importance, precisely what transparency means or how the concept is understood is frequently ill-defined by academics and policy-makers alike. As a result, the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of approaches to transparency in IR often sit in tension with their wider theoretical commitments. This article will examine the three primary understandings of transparency used in IR in order to unpack these commitments. It finds that while transparency is often explicitly conceptualized as a property of information, particularly within rationalist scholarship, this understanding rests upon an unarticulated set of sociological assumptions. This analysis suggests that conceptualizing ‘transparency-as-information’ without a wider sociology of knowledge production is highly problematic, potentially obscuring our ability to recognize transparent practices in global governance. Understanding transparency as dialogue, as a social practice rooted in shared cognitive capacities and epistemic frameworks, provides a firmer analytical ground from which to examine transparency in International Relations.

Keywords: transparency; International Relations; global governance; rational choice; critical theory

Transparency is a political condition valued and pursued by countless actors in global politics, and transparency promotion is central to an extensive range of policy issues. Development aid practices, Internet governance and surveillance, the accountability of international institutions, democracy promotion, nuclear weapons proliferation, and the politics of financial regulation are all characterized by the strong positive value attached to transparency. Non-governmental organizations existing solely to encourage and monitor transparency have thrived in this climate: one estimate places the number of global ‘transparency advocacy’ organizations at 500 (Sunlight Foundation, 2013). Nor is transparency subject to promotion by civil society organizations alone. Former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, reflecting a broader US foreign policy tradition that promotes transparency as a common good, stressed that ‘Historically, asymmetrical access to information is one of the leading causes of interstate conflict. When we face serious disputes or dangerous incidents, it’s critical that people on both sides of the problem have access to the same set of facts and opinions’ (Clinton, 2010). Transparency is portrayed as both

necessary and increasingly possible within a globalizing, information-centric international system.

In this context, transparency seems to offer a realistic means of generating a more accountable, peaceful, or legitimate form of international politics. Assumptions about the novelty of transparency are misleading, however. The concept lies at the nexus of epistemological, political, and religious assumptions which have defined the Western political tradition and path of modernity (Foucault 1980: 153; Jay 1993). From this perspective, the current policy vogue for transparency is the latest manifestation of a much older constellation of ideals and practices linking rationality, legitimacy, and progress with transparency.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, to find that even if the discipline of International Relations (IR) has tended not to share in the optimism of many policy makers, assumptions about transparency have played a key role in scholarly attempts to understand the global political system. The possibility of creating transparency determines positions on the offence-defence balance (Jervis, 1976), the tractability of the security dilemma (Jervis, 1978; Mearsheimer, 2001; Booth and Wheeler, 2007), or the avoidance of war (Fearon, 1995; Debs and Monteiro, 2014), among many other central issues in the field. Linked (but not antithetical) to the concept of uncertainty, transparency is often portrayed as a way in which the problems generated by anarchy can be surmounted without the need for global government. Since the 18th century Perpetual Peace essays of Kant and Bentham, the availability of information has been presented as a means of overcoming conflict and arriving at a more just international system (Kant, 1970a; Bentham, 1838-48). In the present day, transparency often appears as a source of legitimization, or even democratization, of global governance structures (Keohane and Buchanan, 2006; Florini, 2002).

IR therefore represents an interesting instance of wider tendencies within social and political theory within which transparency has gained prominence. Yet, as with uncertainty (Rathbun, 2007), transparency has been weakly conceptualized in IR. This is a significant problem. Different concepts of transparency carry with them quite distinct epistemological, ontological and normative commitments. At the same time, it is not clear how far the dominant approaches are coherent on their own merits. Clarifying the concept of transparency thereby serves two primary purposes. First, it illuminates foundational epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning various approaches to transparency, a central aim for more reflective theorizing in IR. Second, carefully interrogating the conceptualization of transparency draws out how transparency promotion tends to function in practice. The claims of IR theorists and the concerns of policy-makers interested in transparency are often located in the same constellation of ideals and assumptions, as even a cursory look at international transparency promotion reveals. Policies formulated on the basis of partial or one-sided concepts, such as Clinton's embrace of a quite rationalist take on the role of transparency in the causes of war, can often be fruitless (and costly) endeavours. A clearer understanding of transparency is therefore important in both theoretical and practical terms. The upshot is a better theoretical understanding of transparency as a concept, and a firmer handle on the extent to which it can live up to its promise as a practice.

This paper will draw on Critical Theory to analyse the conceptualization of transparency in IR. It does so as follows. First, we will note three generic concepts of transparency employed in International Relations: 'transparency-as-disclosure', 'transparency-as-dialogue', and 'transparency-as-information'. Second, we will examine treatment of transparency in the rationalist literature on war and conflict.¹ Rationalists suggest that states can inform others of their intentions – can become more transparent – by signalling willingness to pay a high cost to secure their preferred bargaining outcomes. Third,

we will unpack the underlying epistemological and ontological commitments of rationalist ‘transparency-as-information’ approaches. Focusing upon claims about the ontological character of information within RCT approaches, this discussion will expand upon earlier discussions between rationalist and constructivist approaches, in which the motivations of actors engaged in communication formed the central axis of debate (Lynch, 2002; Risse, 2000).² Rationalist approaches suggest subjectively formed preferences can be objectively signalled and interpreted. Knowledge, in this view, is a property of information itself; as a result, very costly signals objectively indicate a willingness to fight. However, we argue that this commitment cannot be made absent a far richer sociology underpinning RCT theories in which actors share norms and interpretive values.

Thus, in the concluding section of the paper, we explore whether it is possible to understand the relationship between strategic action and shared epistemological frameworks via Habermas’ Critical Theory. This discussion finds that ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ identifies the preconditions of transparency with greatest clarity and depth. Rethinking transparency in these terms – as socio-historical, as an accomplishment, not an entity – highlights both the ethical appeal of transparency, but also the fragility and contingency of these practices. At the same time, the universalist ambitions of the Habermasian project suggests a deeper, more troubling challenge to politics itself that transparency, in any guise, may necessarily entail.

Clarifying the concept of transparency in International Relations

Conceptual development is a central aspect of all work in social science. The employment of clear, useful, resonant, and precise concepts is vital to productive theoretical and empirical analysis (Gerring, 1999). Despite the increasing recognition of the central role of concept formation in the social sciences (Sayer, 2000; Gerring, 1999; Goertz, 2006), treatments of transparency in IR have undertaken relatively little of this work. Undoubtedly, definitions are provided that are more or less succinct and more or less useful for empirical study (Florini, 2002; Finel and Lord, 1999; Buchanan and Keohane, 2006; Lindley, 2003). However, these often fail to outline their constituent elements in detail. The conditions necessary or sufficient for a claim of transparency’s existence are underspecified. The historical purview of transparency as a practice, and the historical context of its theorization, is often not well laid out. The internal relations of the concept of transparency – the elements that constitute the concept, as ‘participation’ is internal to ‘democracy’ or ‘wage labour’ to ‘capitalism’ – are rarely discussed in detail. Questions around the reflexivity of the concept and its employment are not thoroughly engaged, with the relationship between scholar and object of study underspecified. While the concept of transparency may seem straightforward, its different articulations – discussed below – suggest that research on transparency needs to clarify these assumptions.

Any given concept of transparency implies a particular understanding of the furniture of the world and how it may come to be known. The visual metaphors most often used to describe transparency – ‘its fundamental idea is that of a clean window that you can look through’ (Bianchi, 2013: 9) – suggest that the world has a structure independent of us and that it is knowable in some direct sense. It is important to clarify the extent to which this common sense understanding is actually what specific usages of the concept maintain. Laying out the underpinnings of the concept of transparency allows us to remain conscious of the simplifications that concepts necessarily entail, an important step in avoiding reification (Levine, 2012). To this end, it is necessary to undertake some ground-clearing work to identify the disparate and sometimes implicit or ill-defined ways transparency is used in IR. Outlining these generic understandings is a useful first step towards developing sound

research projects on transparency in global politics; absent this step analyses will continue to risk ad hoc theorization.

The roots of the term transparent are found in 15th century late middle English, from the medieval Latin *transparent* meaning ‘shining through’ or ‘that can be seen through’ and from the Latin *transparere*, combining *trans* ‘through’ + *parere* ‘appear’ (Hoad, 2003; OED, 2014).³ Subsequent development of the term continues to have this link to appearance and to the notion of seeing through. Scientific usage refers to objects or material that can be seen through or that allow light to pass through uninterrupted. Linguistics adds ‘that can be extrapolated from surface structure’ (OED, 2014). More broadly, the term is used to denote ‘obvious in structure or meaning’ (Aarts, 2014) or ‘easily seen through, recognized, understood or detected’ (OED, 2014). Related terms used to define transparent echo these features, such as ‘frank’, ‘candid’ or ‘ingenuous’ (OED, 2014). Transparency is the quality of being transparent. In quite generic terms the concept of transparency refers to understanding some object or some communication that has an obvious and clear quality.

Recognizing ‘understanding’ as central to the concept of transparency suggests that some usages in the IR literature do not accord with generic common sense usage of the term, failing to meet criteria of familiarity or resonance (Gerring, 1999). Finel and Lord (1999: 317), for example, explicitly empty their concept of transparency of any reference to understanding:

In our definition, transparency is viewed independently of how information is interpreted. This approach allows us to isolate the effects of transparency without biasing the results. However, this objectivity comes at a price. Without solid conceptual reasons to prioritize different aspects of transparency we can only identify cases of “more” or “less” transparency.

Their concept of transparency is ‘objective’ in that they focus their attention on observable features, rather than unobservables such as preferences or beliefs. The resultant ‘transparency index’ approaches the public disclosure of information by measuring the amount (but not quality or kind, as denoted by ‘easy to perceive’) of political debate, information control, and disclosure, such as the number of political parties or the frequency of data releases. Finel and Lord limit their concept of transparency to what should be called, without harm, simply ‘information flows’; the category of ‘understanding’ is sufficiently important in general usage that using the term to refer to something being transparent but not understood seems misplaced. As we shall see, the equation of knowledge with increased quantities of information is a common feature of accounts of transparency, but nearly all such accounts stress that the increased quantity of information is understood correctly by its audience.

Despite the relatively clear meaning of the term, there is significant scope for varied concepts of transparency once its basic elements are elaborated and placed within a wider theoretical setting. Of particular interest is the ambiguity surrounding the notion of ‘understanding’ and how this quality of transparency is itself to be understood. If grasped as a quality pertaining to an object or communication this may lend itself to relatively straightforward empiricist uses of the concept. That is, an object is easily understood on its surface without need for detailed interpretation. For example, an increase in information flows may be argued to increase transparency, as any increase in information will be easily grasped – ‘extrapolation from surface structure’ is indicative here. While this is not supported by detailed studies (eg. Fung, Graham and Weil, 2005), some transparency activists seem to have this understanding, such as the Wikileaks movement or naïve forms of libertarianism. The qualities of ‘clarity’ and ‘ease of understanding’ may, in contrast, suggest a gap in social reality between appearance and essence – the creation of transparency as moving beyond

appearances to grasp the essence of an object, event or process. The generic sense of transparency is sufficiently broad that only quite sceptical positions towards knowledge production foreclose use of this concept.

Each distinct approach to transparency in IR carries with it different orientations to other key concepts in the discipline, such as the nature of the state, the character of anarchy, the dimensions of social power, and the key actors and agents driving international politics. Many IR scholars follow the common-sense liberal usage of transparency that prevails in wider political discourse, taking 'transparency' to refer to a one-way interaction between states and institutions on one side and domestic or international publics on the other (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006; Broz, 2002). The state or institution possesses information about its aims, goals, intentions, resources, and so forth and has the capacity either to disclose this information to the public or to keep it secret. This capacity, sometimes called authoritative power (Giddens, 1981), is a potential source of domination over the public. If the public is not informed about the intentions or resources possessed by the state it will not be able to come to reasoned judgements, the basis of which may be necessary to challenge public policy decisions. Government or other organizations act transparently when they increase the amount of information available to the public about their activities, intentions, and decision-making processes. Disclosure allows the public to monitor the conduct of government, holding government accountable for its conduct and acting as a check against corruption or mismanagement (Broz, 2002: 865). The public gains access to information, which it understands, generating clarity around decision-making processes. A shared framework of interpretation is assumed in these approaches. No reciprocal exchange of information from public to government is necessary to designate the relationship a transparent one. In this sense, we see an alteration in the asymmetrical management of information. In relative terms, transparency increases the power of the public over government, as the public maintains its rights to privacy and secrecy in a manner in which the state does not. We label this concept 'transparency-as-disclosure'.

While greater transparency is often claimed to dissipate a state's power over the public, this occurs only if the government has a feedback mechanism between the public's newly informed preferences and state policy. The assumption in 'transparency-as-disclosure' is that transparency carries a positive normative value, closely linked to the perceived legitimacy and accountability of governing institutions (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006; cf. Stasavage, 2004). Politics is thereby understood in a quite specific way within 'transparency-as-disclosure'. In agonistic approaches to the political, classically embodied in IR in Morgenthau's work, politics is an arena of continual contestation over normative conceptions of social life (Morgenthau, 1946). Attempts to transcend the agonism of the political risk the closure of fruitful contradictions which embody the potential for progressive social change (Williams 2005: 115-117). Paradoxically, perhaps, disclosure approaches treat the political as a dysfunctional and wholly negative sphere of society. Concealment and corruption are not, within these arguments, motivated by the pursuit of any political ideals, but are the product of self-interested and thoroughly cynical individual practices. Lying in pursuit of a larger ethical aim (such as the national interest) is illegitimate because it prevents the realization of the positive effects of transparency promotion. In this way, transparency-as-disclosure does not require democratic participation. The beneficial ends of transparency promotion are clear, and their realization is a matter of implementation, not contestation. The creation of monitory democracy, rather than participatory democracy, functions as the central aim. The political is thus something to be overcome, rather than contained.⁴ Understood in this sense, 'transparency-as-disclosure' presents a strong challenge to ideas about politics prevalent throughout the history of International Relations.

Increasingly, this understanding of transparency, developed initially to analyse relations between a state and its civil society, has been extended to cover the relationship between institutions of global governance and their constituents (Wang and Rosenau, 2001; Hale, 2008; Donaldson and Kingsbury, 2013). However, ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ has deep roots in international political thought. This conception of transparency was central to Bentham’s claim that public scrutiny could overcome the bellicosity of European foreign ministries, a claim that resonates throughout contemporary global politics.⁵ Warlike behaviour was not to be addressed with moral exhortations to act differently but via the public provision of information (Bentham, 1838-1843). Similar assumptions are apparent in Kant’s reflections on international relations, Leon Trotsky and Woodrow Wilson’s conjoined promises to end secret diplomacy after the First World War, and recent actions by 21st century transparency activists and NGOs.⁶ As a concept, then, ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ carries significant content or intension (Gerring, 1999), defining a relationship between a state or governing institution and civil society or public, in which the open one-way transmission of information, within an implicitly shared epistemic framework between government and public, is normatively desirable as it alters oppressive power relations that constrict liberty, democracy and peace.

A second conception of transparency in IR defines it as the openness required for a dialogue. This concept is most readily identified with strands of critical international relations theory drawing upon Habermas’ theory of communicative action (Linklater, 1998; Fluck, 2014; cf. Habermas, 1984, 1987), but stands in a wider tradition which emphasises the moral and political importance of mutual recognition by rationally autonomous actors. We denote this concept ‘transparency-as-dialogue’. While less intuitively appealing than transparency-as-disclosure, this understanding is often implicit in claims that transparency is a source of emancipation, empowerment or legitimacy (Fluck, 2015). Rooted in Kantian ethics, transparency is understood in terms of an ethical orientation towards others in which actors share a commitment to open, rational dialogue (Kant, 1983). Kantian openness is characterized by a willingness to engage in clear and truthful dialogue with other actors, who reciprocate due to the common disposition to allow the force of better argument to prevail in any political contest.

By emphasizing mutual recognition and the central role of interpretation, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ points to a different understanding of power, the state and the public sphere than found in ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ and, more fundamentally, it points towards a different understanding of rationality. ‘Transparency-as-dialogue’ involves less the transfer of information than mutual openness about reasons and motivations in a continual process of rational communication. Rationality for Habermas is not adherence to cost-benefit analysis but rather the intersubjective process of critical reflection. The discursive interpretation of information is emphasized over the quantity of information circulating within a given political system. The classic statement of this position, in which epistemic access is linked via procedures of cognition and justification to more just and rational forms of governance, is Kant’s transcendental formula of public right, according to which ‘All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with their being made public’ (Kant, 1970a: 126). Transparency matters for Kant not simply because it tips the balance of power – as it does for Bentham – from government towards the public but because it is a precondition for rational, and therefore legitimate, government. Publicity is a means of approximating in practice the rational consistency and autonomy Kant argues is required for moral behaviour. This Kantian understanding of transparency has been taken up by Habermas. Drawing a contrast between his theory and Mill’s liberalism, Habermas has made clear that he rejects the ideal of a totally transparent society (Habermas, 1992: 171). Nevertheless, he equates validity with that which would survive idealised public

discursive testing (McCarthy, 1978: 35). It is vital to this process – which lies at the heart of Habermas’s discourse ethics – that ‘participants can be truthful in their relations to themselves and can make their ‘inner natures’ transparent to others’ (McCarthy, 1978: 307). For Habermas, this is not simply a formal prerequisite for discourse – an approximation of this transparency plays a vital role in the historical development of the modern public sphere. The emergence of a critical public occurred in part as individuals began to make their experiences transparent to a wider public in the 18th century, initially through the medium of letters (Habermas, 1989; Stasavage, 2004: 683-688). In conjunction with the interpretation of data and the assessment of validity claims, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ entails openness about reasons and motivations that is also central to the process of identity formation and transformation. Such behaviour is not transhistorical but emerged as a result of processes of economic and social change (Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 1985).

While sharing some similarities with ‘transparency-as-disclosure’, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ therefore denotes a different content to the concept, with actors – not necessarily states or governments – committed to two-way dialogue, dependent upon their moral recognition, within a specific social and historical context. Most centrally, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ defines itself through a consideration of actors’ ethical orientation to argumentation and its stress upon the necessary interpretation of information received. As a result, it arguably better captures the aspiration for meaningful political participation and responsive institutions reflected in many calls for transparency.

A third conception of transparency has emerged in IR over the past 25 years. Within the rationalist literature on bargaining, conflict and war, the transmission of signals between states is outlined as key to a transparent understanding of actors’ intentions (Rasler and Thompson, 2005: 6-7). In contrast to the above approaches, transparency is conceptualized as the disclosure of information between states – understood as unified actors - rather than to a public. Rather than empowering publics, and thus altering hierarchical relations between political institutions and the public, rationalists examine how formally equal actors can generate transparent signals of their intentions over a conflict issue. Despite these differences, unpacking the assumptions of rationalist approaches reveals some problematic underpinnings of ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ and hidden connections to ‘transparency-as-dialogue’. We will now examine how transparency is understood in rationalist work in order to explore these connections.

Clear signals and shared understandings: rational choice approaches to transparency

While the rational choice approach to transparency shares some features with the broader ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ literature, its starting point does not derive from a focus upon corruption and democratic public deliberation. Rather, RCT approaches to war are focused upon what may be the defining issue of IR theory: the problem of uncertainty (Rathbun, 2007). Solutions to the problem of uncertainty in large part define the analytical positions that populate the discipline. The large literature on the security dilemma has focused most closely upon the dynamics of uncertainty and thus provides a prime example of this broader work (Jervis, 1976; Booth and Wheeler, 2007; Mearsheimer, 2001; Schultz, 2012: 372). Within an anarchical international system states can never be sure of the intentions of others; they have no access to others’ true intentions and the real purpose of others actions. This creates two ‘lemmas’: uncertainty of how to interpret signals sent from other states – is a military build-up aggressive or defensive? (Jervis, 1978) – and subsequent uncertainty of how one should respond in turn (Booth and Wheeler, 2007). The security

dilemma thus centres upon information flows and the absence of understanding – states have no information that can inform them with certainty of the intentions of others.

As a result, purely defensive or security-seeking policies can appear to others as preparation for war; they are simply too ambiguous to be understood as signalling any specific policy. The misperceptions and misinterpretations are sufficiently large that states can fall into conflict without intending or desiring to do so. The July crisis that led to the outbreak of the First World War serves as the classic example (Fearon, 1995: 397; Glaser, 2010). Uncertainty does not refer to an inability to understand the information one receives; the literal content of a signal is grasped, as it must be if uncertainty over intentions is to have any meaning. The literature on the security dilemma relies upon structural explanations for uncertainty and misperception, rather than the limits of human rationality as such. This is particularly important for rational choice models in IR, as we shall see in a moment.

With these basic starting points in mind we can set out the rationalist literature on war, bargaining and signalling. RCT approaches accept the basic starting points of structural realist theories – the international system is anarchic, states as a result must rely on self-help, and states are often uncertain about the intentions of other actors in the system. The signal contribution rationalist approaches develop is the reconfiguration of these general arguments into a rational choice understanding of political action.⁷ This allows for a clear and rigorous restatement of many of the positions of other theories in order to examine their underlying logic.⁸ RCT scholars assert that states are rational actors with a set of ordered and intransitive subjective preferences for outcomes in any given strategic environment. Preferences remain stable within these models and political calculations are designed to meet subjective preferences. Strategic calculations are designed to maximize utility and minimize cost or, to put it differently, to realize one's preferences with the greatest efficiency. In a formulation drawn on by RCT IR scholars, Elster provides the clearest succinct statement of this principle 'To act rationally, then, simply means to choose the highest-ranked element in a feasible set.' (Elster, 1986, quoted in Kahler, 1998: 923). Reflection upon a set of preferences is not part of this definition.

On any given issue actors will have a set of preferences that they will attempt to realize at the most efficient possible cost. Crucially, this information is privately held – other actors in the system do not know actors preferences or what policies other states will choose to secure these preferences (Fearon, 1995: 381, 391; Morrow, 1989; Glaser, 1997: 174). In the absence of this complete information states have an incentive to lie – states that bluff about their capacities or intentions may meet their policy aims at less cost than the 'honest' alternative. However, in a crisis situation it also risks a war that will make everyone worse off than a negotiated settlement, regardless of how the conflict ends (Morrow, 1989: 946). The tragedy of this outcome is conceptualized in cost-benefit terms – war is costly, and actors could have achieved an acceptable bargain over a conflict issue without having to resort to fighting. Fearon states 'As long as both sides suffer some costs for fighting, then war is always inefficient *ex post* – both sides would have been better off if they could have achieved the same final resolution without suffering the costs (or by paying lower costs)' (Fearon, 1995: 383). Even when both sides are security seekers oriented to cooperation structural uncertainty can create the least desired outcome.⁹

Rational choice approaches explain how rational actors can come to an unwanted conflict without resorting to claims of misperception or psychological explanations (Glaser, 1997), in contrast to theories of misperception, in which complete information environments cannot overcome cognitive biases (Jervis, 1976).¹⁰ In the rationalist view it is not the capacities of actors that define problems of bargaining – again, this is not the general scepticism of classical Realism – but the lack of *credible* information in the strategic environment. To this extent, RCT approaches lie within the wider modern discourse of

transparency-as-disclosure, in that the release of information, not dialogue or mutual recognition, constitutes the focus of political concern.

The rationalist literature has been centrally concerned with modelling the various costs of signalling in order to understand how and why a given signal may be granted greater credibility than its alternatives.¹¹ Given the assumption of shared standards of rationality, several potential signalling mechanisms have been theorized: engaging domestic audience costs or ‘tying hands’ (Fearon, 1994; Kurizaki, 2007; Tarar and Leventoglu, 2013); investing in ‘sunk costs’ to signal resolve, such as high military spending (Fearon, 1994; 1997); engaging reputational costs internationally (Sartori, 2002); or generating market-costs (Gartzke, 2007).¹² We will only outline the first of these, in the interest of brevity, and as the essential dynamics of signalling are the same in any case. This discussion will not assess the empirical validity of the audience costs model, as we are interested in the conceptual and theoretical foundations of RCT models.¹³

In any crisis, two actors will possess a range of privately held preferences. In a conflict over a given piece of territory, for example, there are a range of bargains that are acceptable to both sides, if one assumes, as rationalists do, that the object of contention is divisible or negotiable in some sense. Each side is, of course, incentivized to achieve the best outcome possible, thus the incentive to misrepresent the deal they would accept and the capabilities they possess. The rationalist literature has, however, added an important qualification. While states may want to misrepresent their bargaining set, they must balance this against the costs that actually going to war would impose alongside the probability of winning a conflict (Fearon, 1995). If war costs more than the range of acceptable bargaining outcomes, once the uncertain probability of victory is factored in, the resort to war would be inefficient. In order to avoid such outcomes, states whose value for war falls within these parameters have an incentive to signal their preferences to arrive at a less costly outcome.

The way to indicate one’s intentions is to generate costly signals. If an actor is highly resolved over a given issue they will be willing to invest to achieve preferred outcomes. In the audience costs literature this involves publicly signalling a willingness to fight, engaging domestic audiences by increasing the consequences of backing down.¹⁴ In this way, rationalists explain the drive for transparency as the result of self-interest and utility maximization, not an altered conception of interests or identity, in contrast to ‘transparency-as-dialogue’. Actors communicate two separate signals: first, a claim over the distribution of a given object, conveying preferences; and second, the credibility of this first claim, or an actors’ resolve in relation to their preferences. The path to infinite regress seems open here – what signals signal the resolve to be resolved? – suggesting the need for a shared interpretive ground between social actors.

Signalling and the transmission of credible, understandable, information, relies upon a number of interesting claims. In contrast to some ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ arguments, rational choice theorists do not suggest that the mere provision of more information will have any effect in leading to negotiated settlements. Rather, they investigate how it may be possible to signal the *right kind* of information.¹⁵ Overcoming uncertainty does not involve altering the structural conditions that initially generated the problem of incomplete information and the incentive to lie. Instead, actors must realize that they can achieve more efficient outcomes if they generate credible signals. In contrast to liberal institutionalism and ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ approaches focused at the domestic level, which emphasize the creation of transparency through alteration of institutions (but not structures), for RCT approaches in IR transparency is produced by actors, rather than any substantive change to the strategic environment in which the environment provides greater information.

The limits of transparency-as-information

There are a number of problematic features of these arguments, each of which point to wider problems with the way transparency is often understood in IR and beyond. First, the specific claims of rationalist theories of conflict in IR rely upon unstated assumptions of shared normative understandings between actors. Marc Trachtenberg, in his survey and critique of audience costs theory, notes

Whatever the intentions of the leaders of the democratic state, the audience costs mechanism can be decisive only if the opposing power understands why it would be hard for those leaders to back down. Unless the adversary is able to see why the democratic power's leaders' hands are tied, it would have no reason to conclude that they are not bluffing. So for the audience costs argument to hold, the adversary power has to understand that the democratic leaders would find it hard to give way for fear of incurring audience costs (Trachtenberg, 2012: 7).

Trachtenberg highlights an important potential shortcoming of rationalist approaches to signalling and transparency. For Trachtenberg, as for 'transparency-as-dialogue' and implicitly within 'transparency-as-disclosure', shared norms underpin the interpretation of signals. The strategic context within which signals are sent is thereby thicker than rationalist approaches allow. The RCT reply – that any rational actor in that strategic context would make the same decision – reduces the issue down to rationality as a property of individuals, and suggests a slightly circular reasoning pattern: a costly signal is rational because rational actors believe it. There is the related problem of signalling 'type' – security seekers will send different signals than greedy states (Glaser, 2010). How actors know 'type' is left unclear – it forms one of the assumptions of the theory, not one of its explanandum. Deciding between these different approaches rests upon how expansive a conception of individual rationality we are willing to countenance without questioning the rationalist project.

Another difficulty – one shared by some versions of 'transparency-as-disclosure' – arises from the fact that rationalism suggests that information carries the property of knowledge. Rationalists ontologize knowledge as an object that can be possessed, shared or hoarded to achieve strategic aims. This is a problematic way of conceptualizing knowledge (Sayer, 2000: 13-14). Making information available to others leads to the dissemination of knowledge, a property of the information rather than the product of complex and contested political processes. Claims that rationalism operates with a grasp of the role of 'common knowledge' shared with interpretivist approaches are slightly misleading (although, as we will see in a moment, not entirely mistaken) (e.g. Wendt, 1999: 159-162). It is not the case that rationalist understandings of common knowledge are similar to shared social norms and values. Within RCT perspectives, common knowledge simply refers to information that is known by all participants in an interaction based on the true state of the world; in Geanakoplos' example, common knowledge refers to participants' knowledge of the colour of hats, not whether they know what makes something a hat, the type of knowledge constructivists are primarily interested in (Geanakoplos, 1992: *passim*). As Rathbun notes,

Some might maintain that rationalists emphasize subjectivity, but this is not the case in an interpretive sense. When rationalists refer to differing perceptions, they are referring to differently held ideas about the strategic situation on opposite side of any negotiation or adversarial setting owing to private information. (Rathbun, 2007: 537)

Rathbun correctly notes that it is the lack of information, not problems interpreting information, which generates the specific problematics of rationalism: ‘It is a volume question, not an interpretive one. There is a quantitative deficiency, not an analytical one’ (ibid). It is not an analytical issue because the information does not need to be interpreted. Knowledge is a property of information, so that once information is shared between states knowledge is also shared. The idea of knowledge as a property of information is deeply embedded within concepts of ‘transparency-as-disclosure’, as well as ‘transparency-as-information.’ It has an immediately appealing quality – of course we must have access to information in order to have knowledge of how governments operate, what other states want, how to cooperate effectively, and so forth. Reducing knowledge to information is, however, misleading. Put simply, while all knowledge contains information, not all information can be considered knowledge.

There is also a certain disjuncture between the ability of actors to rationally understand a specific set of signals and their general inability to objectively know anything of their strategic choice setting. Actors have desires and beliefs about the value of specific outcomes, but rationalism does not claim that actors have knowledge - in any firm sense – of the actual value of goods, or even of their own abilities. For rational choice theory, beliefs do not have to be true, in the singular sense of precise knowledge about a state of the world, to be rational. Rather, they must only be ‘well grounded in the available information’ (Elster, 1994: 23). Yet ‘well grounded’, or similar formulations, leave unclear the precise nature of knowledge in rationalist scholarship. In general, RCT approaches suggest that a correspondence theory of truth is the basis of a belief being ‘true’ or not. Elster (1994) and Farrell and Rabin (1996) suggest that true beliefs correspond to ‘the facts’.¹⁶ Yet, for rationalists in IR, the *belief* by state *A* that its opponent is firmly resolved does not depend on any relationship to ‘the facts’ – to actors being firmly resolved as a fact of the world - either at a specific moment in time or in the longer term. The claim that costly signals indicate resolve is not an empirical proposition, partially because the theory is not explanatory – again, it is a theory about how states should act, not how states do act – and partially due to the subsumption of signal interpretation into the category of rationality itself. Any correspondence theory of truth is seemingly foreclosed by these moves. The validity of beliefs about signalling is not checked via recourse to a state of the world, but against an understanding of the cost-benefits that certain types of actors will pay in given choice situations.

Similarly, the idea that actors act based upon the correspondence of their beliefs to the nature of the world does not seem plausible if the criteria by which these judgements are made are *a priori*, rather than as a result of experiential learning, shared understandings of what constitutes rationality, or practical interventions into the world itself, whereby the correspondence of belief to the facts can be tested. If one takes Elster’s claim that certain beliefs are rational because ‘in the long-run [they] tend to produce more true beliefs than any alternative procedure’ (1994: 23) then rationality would seem to be historically determined, rather than the product of the nature of individual rationality as such. The implication for rationalist theory is that signalling, and transparency in international relations, is a historically specific practice involving trial-and-error. This is not necessarily a substantial problem for the rationalist conflict bargaining research programme – it is entirely reasonable to try and figure out, empirically, which signals convey intentions most effectively. It does suggest, however, that the concept of transparency in IR should account for the historical and social practices that generate the underlying conditions whereby signals can be understood, rather than attributing understanding to an ever broadening set of rational capacities or the problematic notion of knowledge as an objective property of information.

RCT accounts of strategic action must reach beyond these parameters. In fact, as rational choice theorists have explained (Schelling 1960), there is an important difference between strategic and instrumental or ‘parametric’ action (Johnson, 1991: 189). While instrumental actors simply treat rivals as they would objects in the natural world, strategic actors – as found in rationalist IR scholarship - approach others as rational, intentional beings who ‘can grasp that the pursuit of their individual plans is entangled in a web of social interdependencies’ (Ibid., 190). The RCT account of strategic action must presuppose that actors recognise the cognitive and rational capabilities of others, and that mutual recognition determines the social context in which they interact. Moreover, while rationalism is formal to the extent that it rejects direct investigation of socially specific norms and characteristics, comparison with simple instrumental action suggests that it does presuppose a *particular* set of cognitive perspectives and capabilities. For strategic action to make sense, a relatively ‘thick’ account of the common capabilities, characteristics, and attitudes of those actors is seemingly required. Rolling these necessary assumptions into rationality as such does not overcome this need.

The tension this gives rise to is manifested in the epistemological assumptions which underlie rationalist accounts of transparency in the international system. While at one level transparency is presented as a matter of access to or transmission of greater quantities of information, at another level, as explained above, for transparency to make any sense actors must rely on a raft of mutually recognised understandings, capabilities, and expectations. Knowledge is more than information, as the focus on the *quality* of information within rationalism indicates (Debs and Monteiro, 2014). These unavoidable assumptions threaten to pull apart the rationalist model and are therefore excluded from any explicit role in the conceptions of transparency which the signalling literature employs. The social ‘thickness’ of RCT suggests that, contrary to its assumptions, transparency develops out of social foundations of a particular quality. This points beyond ‘transparency-as-information’ towards the ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ model described earlier in the paper.

Cognitive and epistemic features of transparency and social interdependence

While the rationalist approach does not present, in our view, the most appropriate way to define the concept of transparency, this also does not mean that a focus upon transparency via the lens of strategic action is not valuable. Instead, it points towards a concept of transparency in which both ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ and ‘transparency-as-information’ are only conceivable within specific socio-historical contexts. Exploring these ideas through the dialogue between rational choice theory and Frankfurt School Critical Theory – a dialogue often ignored in IR – provides a means to illustrate this important point.¹⁷

Scholarship inspired by Critical Theory, particularly the version of it associated with Jurgen Habermas, has engaged the rational choice project in a series of articles since the 1980s (Johnson, 1991, 1993; Dryzek, 1993; Schiemann, 2000). Criticism of RCT from this perspective arises, in part, from the way in which its formalistic methodology and individualist ontology obscure the social dimensions of knowledge. Critical Theorists assert that, in contrast with ‘sociological’ approaches concerned with historically located social structures and shared norms, RCT depends on an atomistic model of the social world which, coupled with a formal or ‘economic’ approach, excludes a consideration of specific social forms (Johnson, 1991: 191). As we have noted above, this atomism and formalism determine the concept of transparency adopted by rationalist scholarship in IR. It cannot grasp the development of shared values, norms, practices, or capabilities, and thus cannot tell us how these strategic contexts arise, or how the shared epistemic standards necessary for transparency came into being. For Critical Theorists, this problem can be addressed by

grounding such thought in real conditions, on the one hand, and really effective but not fully realised ideals, on the other.

If we follow James Johnson in comparing RCT with one of the main manifestations of ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ and the most influential strand of Critical Theory, Habermas’s theory of communicative action, the implications for the concept of transparency in IR become apparent. Our aim is not to endorse Habermas’s wider Critical Theory, but to use his theory to draw out assumptions implicit in ‘transparency-as-information’.

RCT and Habermasian Critical Theory have more in common than it might seem (Johnson 1991, 1993). Both have been concerned to formulate ‘rational reconstructions’ of the social world and to explore what rationality in social action would involve. Habermas identifies strategic action oriented to success as one of two main forms of social action, the other being communicative action oriented to mutual understanding. While Habermas, in keeping with the historical materialist tradition, outlines a set of basic rational human capacities akin to rationalism, these capacities are not necessarily realized in actual historical practice (Geras, 1985). His is not an empirical theory but an attempt to identify the core elements of a never entirely actualised social reason by means of an account of the ‘universal pragmatics’ of speech. On the one hand, it points to particular cognitive structures and relationships which must have developed for transparency to make sense. On the other hand, those structures consist in part of idealisations and assumptions which are not necessarily realised in practice.

Habermas has drawn on the work of psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg and Robert Selman to outline an account of ‘perspective-taking’ which links different forms and levels of rationality to the emergence of particular sets of socio-cognitive capabilities. This approach highlights the specific, mutually recognised socio-cognitive characteristics and relationships that must be in place for claims about transparency to make sense between individuals, and by implication different political communities. Thus, Habermas’s account of rationality makes explicit the sorts of capabilities and relationships which rationalism presupposes. Specifically, in this approach transparency depends on the emergence of cognitive capacities for relatively sophisticated mutual recognition. Drawing on developmental psychology, Habermas elaborates the speech positions and action orientations involved in different forms of rational action. From this perspective, as actors’ socio-cognitive capabilities become more sophisticated their understanding of world becomes ‘decentred’ (Habermas, 1990: 132) - they learn to distinguish between the world as it appears to them, the world as it appears to others and the world as it really is.

Habermas provides an account of the development of strategic action in terms of the ‘integration of the observer perspective into the sphere of interaction’ which is helpful when considering the tensions we have identified in the RCT approach to transparency (Ibid. 140; Johnson, 1991). Following Selman, between the ages of 7 and 12 (Selman’s Level 2 of development) children develop the ability to ‘differentiate between the outer and the inner world of a person, to impute intentions and need dispositions, and to distinguish intentional from unintentional acts.’ (Habermas, 1990: 147). As a result, they are able to engage in the deception required for competitive action. However, at this stage psychological experiments involving two player games demonstrate that they are incapable of *strategic* action since they have no understanding of the (social) structure of a given interaction and the forms of reciprocity involved. That is to say, they have not developed a perspective from which interaction itself can be objectified. The transition from simple instrumental to strategic action comes at ages 10 to 15 (Selman’s Level 3), at which point an actor no longer only takes an ‘I–thou’ perspective but also takes an ‘observer perspective’ in relation to interaction. With this, according to Habermas, we find the ‘coordination of observer and participant perspectives’. This shift in perspective is accompanied by a different

understanding of other actors, who are now recognised as subjects ‘who intuitively follow the rules of rational choice.’ Strategic action – an ‘extrapolation of conflict behaviour guided by self-interest’ – is now possible (Ibid. 140).

Thus, there is nothing *straightforward* about transparency in social relationships. For example, actors can only engage in the transparent interaction associated with friendship if they have developed the required perspective (Selman’s Level 2). Outside of this context (in Selman’s account before the age of 7) the ideal of transparency does not make much sense – since actors do not recognise any exterior/interior difference they must assume that behaviour signals real intent and preference.

At Level 3 the actor perceives that ‘thoughts and experiences are mutually shared’ (Ibid. 144). This adds another element to the epistemic stance involved in social action and generates a context in which strategic behaviour is possible. As Johnson explains: ‘Strategic actors must be capable of grasping the web of social interdependencies in which their plans are embedded’ (Johnson, 1991: 195). Habermas’ own association of strategic action with deception alone is misleading since underlying it is a complex set of socio-cognitive capabilities and perspectives on the social world and fellow actors (Ibid.). The situation of strategic actors is, after all, distinct from Selman’s Level 2. This is not a case of equal actors who face a straightforward choice whether to deceive, as in simple competitive behaviour, or to be open, as in friendship. Rather, they are conscious of mutual capabilities and this determines their interpretation of any information they receive, and the way in which they transmit or withhold information with one another. For Habermas, this form of transparency can be most fully developed in communicative action oriented to mutual understanding.

Significantly, Habermas has also drawn links between the development of perspectives in question and the historical emergence of particular forms of social cohesion (Habermas, 1985: 89). This approach has been taken-up in IR by thinkers such as Andrew Linklater, who has used it to describe processes of international moral learning leading towards a ‘global communication community’ (Linklater, 1998). As critics have noted, the teleology which accompanies this approach is problematic (Ibid.: 68-70). However, we need not accept Habermas’s claims about the hierarchy of forms of cognition to recognise the underlying point – that the cognitive position which is adopted in relation to other actors in strategic behaviour of the kind which concerns RCT, including those involved in transparency, must be understood in partly social terms. Moreover, it must implicitly be understood as such even by those who, like Habermas and rational choice theorists, take a relatively formalistic approach to social interaction.

Even if we accept the analogy between states and persons, Habermas points to a more sophisticated conceptualization of transparency than ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ or ‘transparency-as-information’ arguments in International Relations. Within the bounds of a formalistic understanding of knowledge specific, mutually recognised, modes of thinking have to be in place for transparency to make sense – transparency has to be understood in social terms. Actors pursuing ‘transparency-as-information’ are involved in a form of social interaction in which they must recognise each other as having a relatively ‘thick’ set of capabilities. Scholars investigating transparency must therefore consider the ways in which such a social context has emerged and is maintained. Transparency is less a transcendent technocratic solution than a contingent historical product.

Of the conceptions of transparency identified here, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ best succeeds in highlighting the way in which transparency depends upon specific ways of thinking and interacting, on the particular quality of relationships as much as the quantity of information. Rationalism must assume something like these capabilities and relationships but does not itself have the resources to explain ‘how and on what basis social actors define the context in which their interactions transpire’ (Johnson, 1991: 194; Schiemann, 2000).

Rationalism in IR finds its limits at this the point, where which formalisable rational characteristics merge into socially acquired norms and capabilities.

Towards a critical approach

Transparency-as-dialogue provides the best theoretical starting point for further investigating transparency in international politics. A full exploration of how such research would proceed is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can highlight three substantive advantages of such an approach, already partially elaborated above. Two arise from the way transparency-as-dialogue expands our understanding of transparency in analytical and ethical terms. The final advantage arises, paradoxically, from considering the limits of Habermas' discourse ethics and the danger its universality presents to the political itself.

First, 'transparency-as-dialogue' provides a basis upon which to consider the implications of institutional and practitioner claims about transparency, which often assume a model that corresponds to 'transparency-as-disclosure' or 'transparency-as-information'. As suggested above, one of the practical limitations of conceptualizing transparency in these terms is that it precludes reflection on the social conditions in which interactions between institutions and publics have developed and continue to take place. 'Transparency-as-information' is not concerned with institutional change but with how actors can produce the right kind of information for a given activity, failing to consider how specific institutional configurations limit and shape transparency as a political practice. 'Transparency-as-disclosure' points to the need for institutions to change in order to provide more information, but does not encompass the social conditions in which the relationship between publics and institutions has developed. With the application of these 'problem-solving' conceptions the potential for transparency promotion to incorporate reflection on the quality of institutions, systems of interaction, and the nature of roles will remain relatively undeveloped.

For example, the promotion of financial transparency by the International Monetary Fund explicitly aims at ensuring that actors can make good financial or economic decisions, a point heavily emphasized in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (IMF, 2012). Its aim is to smooth the functioning of the global financial system, which is at least partly constituted by the model of individuals as information producers and consumers, and which practices of 'transparency-as-information' both assume and promote. Yet the assessment that an absence of information led to the GFC, or worsened its aftermath, is problematic. It neglects the ongoing structural crisis of Western economies, the politics of regulatory capture, and the ideological elements of the crisis (Brenner, 2006; Baker, 2010; Gamble, 2009). 'Transparency-as-information' offers little basis for reflection on these aspects of the global financial system (Best, 2005: 150, *passim*). In contrast, 'transparency-as-dialogue' serves a repoliticising function, opening the door to reflection on how the global economy is constituted. It would require that actors articulate and justify their structural positions of power and the current form of capitalist world order, engaging in practices of mutual recognition that point towards both enhanced democratic input and increased understanding of complex global economic processes.

Asserting that some shared inter-subjective structure of understanding is necessary for transparency to occur is, of course, not the same as ensuring that it does occur. Differences in the capacities of actors to engage in transparent political practices must be recognized at the international level, just as they have been at the domestic level (see Fung et al 2005). For example, structures of international law assume shared understanding of the law and recognize other states as equally worthy participants in the judicial proceedings. Yet, despite formal recognition, in practical terms vast inequalities exist in the capacities that actors bring

to negotiations and international treaty-making fora (Fisher and Green, 2004; Guzman and Simmons, 2005). For the ethical orientation of ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ to be realized, formal recognition must be coupled with measures to address substantive inequalities. To the extent that current practices of transparency in global politics do not undertake these practices – and, as noted above tend to gloss over political antagonisms – they will remain inadequate at best; again, the simple sharing of information cannot overcome these problems. Crafting transparent dialogue requires more than mutual openness – it requires substantive practices to remedy global inequalities (Geras, 1999). States could be willing to engage in clear and truthful dialogue, open to others and seeking to ensure the legitimacy of structures of governance, but still not appreciate the material limits of this process and the radical challenge that transparency presents to existing forms of global politics.

A second, related advantage of taking ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ as a conceptual starting point is that it more effectively captures the aspirations reflected in more radical calls for transparency along with the specific experiences driving them. This is important if IR scholars are to move beyond theories and policy prescriptions which simply repackage pre-existing institutional and elite assumptions and practices and towards accounts which can capture the reasons for the widespread popular appeal of transparency. Pursuit of transparency by such actors aims as much at enhancing mutual recognition as at redressing the information balance between the public and institutions of governance. The moral content of these claims is evident in the outrage generated by the Panama Papers, a revelation of perfectly legal and non-corrupt practices that are nevertheless morally dubious denials of ethical recognition. The appeal of radical and populist calls for transparency arises from the specific modern circumstances in which individuals experience a tension between promised recognition of their autonomy and moral worth and a reality in which these things are actually suppressed. ‘Transparency-as-dialogue’ places such aspirations at the heart of the concept while directing our attention to the conditions under which this can be a meaningful goal.

Operating within a Critical Theory framework, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ functions as both as a substantive claim about the sociological nature of transparency and as an immanent ideology critique of current conceptualizations. That is, ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ does not describe current practices of transparency in global politics in their entirety. Whatever the conceptual shortcomings of ‘transparency-as-information’ and ‘-disclosure’, these understandings *do* largely define the pursuit of transparency in practice. Understanding transparency in these terms is not illusory. Indeed, these practices operate, as all ideologies must, to practically sustain specific social and geopolitical relations and hierarchies. The social underpinnings to which ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ directs our attention – the specific forms of intersubjectivity and cognition – really are obscured in a manner which mirrors the conceptual shortcomings of ‘transparency-as-information’. Habermas’ theory is an immanent critique, both normative and descriptive, precisely because it identifies existing preconditions for the full expression of transparent politics and notes that the elements of such a practice are implicit in current practices yet are nevertheless not fully realized.

None of this shows that Habermas’ approach to transparency is a fully articulated theoretical or normative project demanding only practical application. Its value as a starting point for understanding transparency also lies in the tensions it reflects. Indeed, ambiguities inherent in ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ and its relationship to politics and the political, point to a more ambiguous dialectic of Enlightenment than often portrayed by Habermas (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002; Fluck, 2014; cf. Levine 2012: 96-97). Tensions are apparent if we consider the relationship between the theoretical basis of our critique of ‘transparency-as-information’, on the one hand, and how ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ might look in practice, on the other. Our immanent critique of rationalist treatments of transparency was based on the

insight that socially ‘thick’ cognitive structures must be in place for signalling to make sense. This claim undermines the formalism of rationalist approaches – they must assume specific social processes and relations which are constitutive of actors and ways of ‘knowing’. Taking a sociological approach to transparency seems necessary, with Habermas’ Critical Theory providing an appropriate prompt to such thinking. ‘Transparency-as-dialogue’, with its orientation towards recognition, is theoretically and normatively appealing precisely because while – as explained above – it does not simply dismiss rationalism, it pulls in the opposite direction by pointing to the specific relationships that rationalism requires but suppresses. Yet Habermas’ ‘transparency-as-dialogue’ still requires that actors define each other in relatively formal and universalistic terms, and it has the potential to exclude expressions of intersubjective recognition that do not fit. There are strict limitations on the experiences and characteristics which can be drawn upon in such practice (Linklater, 1998: 93). Simply replacing one formalism with another does not do justice to the potentially diverse forms recognition may take.

Finally, this concept may give a full account of the conditions of transparency’s emergence but nevertheless fail as a viable political strategy. ‘Transparency-as-dialogue’ sits at the intersection of the depoliticizing tendencies of rationalism and the agonistic account of politics offered by Realism and certain critical approaches in IR. It suggests an optimistic account of how we may broaden the legacy of the Enlightenment by expanding the sphere of transparency. Yet struggles for recognition have historically required highly strategic and ‘political’ action to achieve their aims. To the extent that it is universal and formalistic, transparency collapses the distance between different subjects, the very distance that it requires for its operation. Non-identity and particularity is constitutive of political agonism. Bridging the gap between particularities is the aim of transparency, yet the realization of this aim cannot be an absolute achievement without threatening its historical foundations. How this tension is negotiated – how contingent and partial forms of transparency may be realized – should be a central focus of a less hubristic, more humble approach to transparency in global politics.

Conclusion

Examining the different concepts of transparency in IR it is clear that the field uses the term in different ways for different purposes at different times. To date, each distinct theoretical approach has generated a specific understanding of ‘transparency’. Yet, as this discussion has highlighted, the concept of transparency seems to contain some underlying and unifying features which IR theorists use either implicitly or explicitly. Transparency-as-disclosure, transparency-as-dialogue, and transparency-as-information all outline concepts that attempt to grasp how political actors can communicate their actions and intentions in the interests of stability and minimal forms of cooperation. Each concept outlines, implicitly or explicitly, the centrality of understanding the information communicated. Each concept discloses some understanding of publicity and publicness as a central dimension of political interactions and outcomes.

These similarities do not override the differences between the concepts. Transparency-as-dialogue operates at a higher level of generality than either of the other approaches, refraining from defining the specific actors that constitute a transparent relationship. It stresses the central role of mutual recognition of actors as fundamental to transparency, while actors are assumed to recognize one another in the other conceptualizations. And in its strong emphasis upon shared understanding – shared epistemic

frameworks and capacities – it again contains what the other concepts assume. Transparency-as-dialogue thereby functions as a deeper concept in its content, captures the familiar and resonant meanings of ‘transparency’, articulates a broad field of application while still historically delimited, and differentiates transparency from simple quantitative information flows for theoretically clear reasons. ‘Transparency-as-information’ and ‘transparency-as-disclosure’ should continue to be used within International Relations – both capture important manifestations of the current political practice of transparency – but as concepts with adjectives, with the meaning of transparency reserved for the larger term.

Adopting this analytical practice has the benefit of retaining the boundedness that information transparency and disclosure transparency denote, while still pointing towards the broader historical and social underpinnings of transparent social relations. Such an approach also performs an integrative function in a discipline often characterized as fractured. At the very least, it would give our empirical treatments of transparency greater sophistication and facilitate dialogue between different theoretical frameworks towards some of the most important and most pressing political issues in the field.

Notes

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¹ Rationalist theories of conflict are now primarily associated with the pioneering work of Fearon (1994, 1995, 1997). However, Bull (1977) and (Keohane 1989) each use the term to refer to quite different approaches. We use 'rationalist' to reflect now standard usage in IR while remaining wary of its value connotations.

² However, our focus is not upon different logics of social action. We are interested in how shared epistemological frameworks are generated and function.

³ Tracing etymology is an important first step in concept development. See Gerring (1999: 360-362, 368) and, in practice, Williams (1976)

⁴ Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pushing us to clarify this point.

⁵ See e.g. McCarthy (2015: 111-117).

⁶ Morgenthau (1946) is a classic critique of such assumptions.

⁷ The rational choice approach has been subject to significant criticism in political science and social theory more generally. See Green and Shapiro (1994), Taylor (2006), Hindmoor (2011).

⁸ Rational choice approaches often assert their rigor and clarity in contrast to non-RCT scholarship – see e.g. Morrow (1994) and Niou and Ordeshook (1999).

⁹ The IR literature often portrays rationalism as based upon self-interested actors, but this is not a foundational assumption of RCT scholarship (cf. Lynch 2002: 195; Quackenbush 2002; Manzo 2013: 364, 369).

¹⁰ Blainey (1973) is often cited in support, but includes factors such as national morale, ideology, and even seasons as creating inaccurate information, suggesting his assumption of rationality is not reducible to the RCT approach (1973: 54-56; see also Fearon 1995: 392).

¹¹ Mercer is correct in identifying RCT models as attempts ‘to explain how one should reason, not how one actually reasons’ (Mercer 2005: 80). Elster (1994) and Glaser (2010: 2-3, 20) explicitly note that RCT models how actors should act, not how they do act.

¹² These references are only a small sample of a large literature.

¹³ For a sample of the debate concerning the existence of audience costs see Snyder and Borghard (2011); Trachtenberg (2012); Mercer (2012).

¹⁴ RCT approaches thereby seem to hold prestige or honour as a central value of domestic audiences, although this is seldom clarified.

¹⁵ The notion of ‘targeted transparency’, according to which the concept is meaningless unless it involves the transmission of relevant information in an understandable form, has been developed by Fung et al. (2005).

¹⁶ Understanding knowledge as ‘true belief’ is, of course, a highly contested position – Gettier (1963) provides the classic refutation of this claim.

¹⁷ In order stay on the same terrain as rationalist IR we do not consider the rationality of groups or the problem of treating the state as a unitary actor.