

Austere Knowledge? The Political Economy of Ignorance in an Age of Austerity

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CPSA: G7 – Knowledge and Measurement in Political Economy Panel

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta

May 31 to June 2, 2016

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This research looks at the ways austerity constructs and interacts with ignorance, creating the conditions for its existence by applying cuts to areas which could undermine its narratives. This paper is not explicitly about the politics of knowledge (e.g. framing), but of its increasingly institutionalized absence and subsequent effects on public knowledge. I ask: how does the current macroeconomic context of fiscal consolidation (austerity) affect public knowledge in Canada? While existing research has outlined various areas in which austerity has fashioned cuts, it has not connected those policies and processes to the effects on public knowledge. In this paper, I seek to excavate the politics of agnotology (the construction of ignorance) through an analysis of how the Canadian government has politically insulated itself and citizens from knowledge, undermining public accountability in a time of austerity. I will focus on how cuts to specific areas of state research capacity undermine the development of reliable data which can report on indicators which may gauge the effect of austerity on life in Canada. At the same time, policy narratives regarding austerity are rendered more effective while public accountability of policy is rendered ineffective. Although the newly elected federal government has promised to 'govern according to evidence' and has reversed some of the previous government's policies, we will see that these changes cannot erase the effects of past cuts (Liberal Party 2015). We will focus on the 2006-15 period to parse the potential and realized effects of the intersection between austerity and public knowledge so as to develop policy lessons for the future.

The paper unfolds through a narrative trajectory, outlining a chain of related events which will illustrate some of the relationships between fiscal consolidation (austerity) and the cultivation of ignorance (agnotology). First, it is important to note that this research does not claim to prove that the government of the day *intended* to undermine public knowledge. Indeed, as will be elaborated further, agnotology need not be 'active', or intentional, to be effective. We begin by discussing the significance of studying austerity in relation to public knowledge before moving on to a discussion of methods and case selection. Next, we discuss the theoretical elements of the paper, including agnotology, structural austerity, and policy narratives. In terms of analysis, we open with a contextual overview of the broader public knowledge policy context in which this analysis takes place. We then look at the 'austerity of agnotology' to discuss the ways austerity is used as a political tool which undermines public knowledge. Next, we discuss

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the ‘agnotology of austerity’ so as to work through the specific interactions between cuts to public knowledge and policy narratives tied to austerity. I argue that the public knowledge necessary to evaluate and hold austerity narratives and policies accountable is undermined by cuts.

Significance

Austerity proponents claim that exorbitant public indebtedness is ruining the major economies and that neoliberal measures such as cutting spending (wages, prices, general spending while cutting taxes) to eliminate deficits and debts would result in economic growth (Levinson 2013, 93; Blyth 2013, 2). Why is austerity worth studying? For one, because it is still practiced heavily: while austerity has been disproven to aid growth and has been demonstrated to cause suffering, it is still a politically salient idea *which has not* resulted in the articulation of alternatives, let alone their pursuit (McBride 2014; Krugman 2014; Levinson 2013, 93). Austerity also disproportionately increases precarity, hurting the most vulnerable (Blyth 2013, 13; Marks & Little 2010, 196) and is frequently framed as a shared responsibility and ‘virtuous necessity’ (Clarke & Newman 2012, 316).

The literature evinces several possibilities for explaining austerity’s sustained salience and use, ranging from instrumental and ideological commitments to neoclassical economics (Clarke & Newman 2012, 300; Levinson 2013), psychological lock-in effects on policy elites and politicians (McBride 2014), the obfuscation of neoliberal outcomes (Levinson 2013; Pierre 1995), and the compounding effects of austerity policies (i.e. reduced revenues undermine the possibility of future spending) (Pierre 1995). Political economists have made good arguments around constitutionalization, psychological lock-in, interests (i.e. austerity as an accumulation strategy), and more. Public opinion scholars have shown that citizenries often have a short memory and do not maintain anti-austerity sentiment for very long. Discourse scholars of various stripes have illustrated the moral and ideological valences of austerity as disciplinary mechanisms and ‘regimes of truth’ (or ‘common senses’). I argue that although all of these analyses provide a piece of the picture, they are insufficient. What is discussed in the field is typically the intensity and approach of austerity, not its core assumption or diffusion. Austerity is, thus, often discussed for its effects on various institutions and people, but not as much on its effects on public knowledge. This is a key piece of the puzzle in understanding how austerity undermines resistance.

Methods

This research addresses a particular temporal period and policy space. Broadly, we are looking at the tenure of the Harper federal government in Canada from 2006-2015. We are also focused on policies which are designed and implemented at the federal level. Although subnational governments and institutions are certainly affected by federal level policies – and they are in the case of austerity and public knowledge – the focus is on fiscal policy at the federal level, both broad (i.e. general revenue and expenditure restructuring) and specific (i.e. cuts to specific departments and programs).

I draw on multiple data sites for this research. First, I surveyed budgetary evaluations by non-government actors, departmental projections, and discussions of specific programs. For example, Statistics Canada announces whether it will cut any surveys or programs at a given time. Second, I drew on scholarly and governmental sources for evidence of ‘policy narratives’ on austerity. For example, news releases on programs adjustments or new budgets which articulate a relationship between fiscal consolidation and economic performance or other metrics for policy evaluation. I focus particularly on labour market data and the long form census, both operating out of Statistics Canada.

Rather than approaching austerity and agnotology through ‘case studies,’ I approach it through a narrative. A narrative approach is a way of presenting a phenomenon as a sequence of significant event which attempts to balance between and capture the specific and contextual (Moen 2006, 60). Although this approach is typically used to organize ethnographic or subject based research, it remains useful for illustrating the effect of a sequence of events in a broader phenomenon. The narrative approach is also useful because it allows us to bring out the ways that austerity, in and of itself, is a narrative – a story about how we, as individuals or institutions, should act and perceive time and space. Specifically, the narrative approach helps us highlight the particular relationship narratives (in this case, of austerity) have with knowledge (64). Although narrative approaches typically maintain that there is no “static or objective or everlasting truth”, they highlight the contingency of narratives on the construction of ‘truths’ as the ways particular knowledges are mobilized to particular effects (Moen 2006, 63). In this case, we will use a narrative approach to highlight the interaction between austerity and agnotology in our temporal period.

Policy Narratives, Agnotology, and the Austere Conditions of Ignorance

Public accountability is contingent on what actors know and what they believe. With agnotology, knowledge is increasingly removed from the equation, allowing belief (i.e. Policy Narratives) to occupy a more prominent role. This paper leverages the insights of Narrative Policy Analysis (NPA) to highlight how ideas and narratives shape broad social discourses as well as policy conceptualization, choices, and implementation² (Pinto 2013, 96). Policy narratives are not necessarily rooted in evidence or ‘rational approaches’ to understandings; rather, they are often rhetorical tools that take the shape of metaphors and causal stories in which events and ideas are presented to convey meaning and often rationalize or legitimize a course of action (96). NPA highlights how dramatic tension is to persuade a particular action to solve a problem, illustrating how moments of crisis act as critical junctures for policy narratives (Pinto 2014, 96; Hay 1999, 317; Wardhaugh 2007, 41).

The neologism agnotology was coined by science historian Robert Proctor and linguist Iain Boal to describe the study of the conditions that promote and sustain ignorance (Bedford & Cook 2013, 2020). Some interpret agnotology not as the mere absence of knowledge (Gambrill 2010, 27), but as a force which often blocks it (Code 2014, 154). Agnotology may arise from a basic lack of knowledge, selective choice, or from an intentional attempt to deceive (Pinto 2015,

² e.g. framing welfarism as immoral dependence may be more likely to result in welfare-to-work programs instead of demand side labour market policy.

300). In any kind of evidence based practice, whether medical, public policy, or voting, knowledge is paramount (Gambrill 2010, 26). In the context of this paper, I am less concerned with motive (deliberate production of ignorance: ‘active agnotology’) as I am with effect (systemic production of ignorance: ‘passive agnotology’), and so, I take the simple definition of agnotology as an absence of knowledge *but as a socially constructed absence* (Pinto 2015, 295). Knowledge policy in Canada is not a ‘natural vacuum,’ it is the result of political, cultural, institutional, and economic frameworks which – although they may not have intended to – create the conditions for ignorance through the retrenchment of knowledge (Bedford & Cook 2013, 2020; Pinto 2015, 295).

Because policy narratives leverage rhetorical devices and discourse to construct ‘stories’, they are not necessarily based on ‘evidence’ or ‘data’ (if we might use these terms without problematizing them). Agnotology, then, may strengthen or empower policy narratives when it emerges in the context of public knowledge – if ‘evidence’ or ‘data’ on a policy area is missing or unreliable, it is more difficult to contest policy narratives in that area on an empirical level. What is left, then, are contestations over rhetoric and ideas.

A common theme in comparative political economy literatures since the 2008 economic crisis has been that we live in an ‘age of austerity’ which coalesces around measures to achieve “fiscal consolidation” through tax cuts, balanced budgets and lowering the public debt to GDP ratio, usually by spending cuts, has been enacted (Blyth 2013, Levinson 2013; Clarke & Newman 2012). Public officials have typically argued that tax cuts and spending cuts are necessary to stimulate the economy. But governments have also sought to restructure the public sector and to change the ‘microeconomic’ contexts of labour markets (in both the public and private sectors) in order to keep wage increases below increases in productivity. Overall, it is believed that such austerity measures will not only strengthen market mechanisms but also limit state expansion and keep wage increases below increases in productivity, providing essential conditions for better profit margins for business that in turn will maintain investment and employment (Dellepiane-Avellaneda 2015; Levinson 2013).

Narratives “tend to conjure the experience of participants who have a stake in an unfolding event,” and so publics are invited to ‘tacitly authorize’ policy makers to respond to such events (Vazquez-Arroyo 2013, 741). Austerity, in many ways, operates as a state of permanent crisis insofar as the future is threatened by ‘improper consumption’ in the present and past in the form of ‘exorbitant’ public expenditures which ostensibly destabilize economic growth (Levinson 2013; Blyth 2013; Vazquez-Arroyo 2013). In times of economic crisis, discourses which leverage scarcity are frequently mobilized, and so concerns about the ‘consumption’ of individuals and the state (i.e. via expenditures and tax revenues) become more acute (Hay, 1999: 317; Wardhaugh, 2007: 41). Austerity as a response to crisis is contingent on a shared narrative in which a) there is a crisis – which threatens the future – defined by way of government expenditure practices; b) the solution to that crisis is a particular orientation toward fiscal policy which emphasizes consolidation, discipline, and restraint. This is where agnotology fits into austerity, in cultivating ignorance around other perspectives, causes, and possibilities which inform and emerge out of crisis.

‘Active Agnotology’ and Silencing Knowledge

It is important to consider the broader relationship between government and public knowledge during our research period. Although austerity is not at all unique to the 2006-2015 period, it coincided with a period of what was perceived to be significant hostility to, censorship, and centralized control of public knowledge (PSAC 2014; Linnitt 2014; Whiteside 2014). During this period, a new communications policy was introduced for researchers employed by the federal government: a scientist must direct all inquiries to Ottawa regarding their published work (Semeniuk 2015). ‘Media relations specialists’ in the government have barred researchers from communicating with the public, media, and travelling for knowledge dissemination “even on ground breaking research” (CBC News 2015). For example, Ottawa banned the publication of research from Canada’s radiation detectors after the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, research that concluded that a two-degree Celsius increase in temperatures might be unavoidable, research on “unprecedented loss of ozone over the Arctic”, on the contamination of snowfall near the Alberta tar-sands with petroleum based pollutants, and more (Linnitt 2014). A 2013 report by the Professional Institute for the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC) found that 37% of federal researchers and scientists felt that within the last five years (2008-13) they were directly prevented from sharing their expertise with public or media; 25% said they were forced by government officials to modify their research for non-scientific reasons; 50% witnessed political interference in communication of scientific research (Linnitt 2014).

In addition to silencing scientists, the federal government also actively blocks information. From 2013-14, Ottawa redacted 79% of Access to Information requests (of 28,000) and censored 57% (74% for Environment Canada) (Corbeil 2015). In 2015, the government set a precedent by retroactively exempted all data for the ‘long gun registry’ from Access to Information and Privacy Acts, jeopardizing public research and accountability (Cheadle 2015).

The Austerity of Agnotology: Austerity as a Political Tool

Public knowledge – and ignorance – is significantly shaped by fiscal policy when a great deal of public knowledge is federally funded. Thus, the fiscal context of public knowledge may impact the capacity of knowledge generating institutions at the federal level. By 2015, general fiscal restructuring in Canada saw at least 37,000 federal employees fired and over \$36.8bn in cuts, bringing revenues and expenditures to their lowest levels in 50 years (‘making the government lean’) (Tencer 2014; Yalnizyan 2015; Whiteside 2014, 175). From 2005-2016, the federal government made \$48.6bn in tax cuts (Lahey 2015). \$16bn in cuts were made to personal income taxes (PIT), \$19.6bn to corporate income taxes (CIT), and \$13bn in goods and services tax (GST) cuts (Lahey 2015). Together, this represent a forecasted 21.3 percent drop in federal revenues. More specifically, potentially \$12bn a year (for 2015) in ‘income-splitting’ tax reforms,³ and \$410mn in ‘tax free savings accounts’ in 2014 alone (an increase of 84.1% since 2009, and when matured could cost \$15.5bn a year federally and \$9bn a year provincially) (Raj 2015; Macdonald 2014; Goodman 2015). Taken together, these broad shifts in revenues and expenditures during the 2006-2015 period limit the government’s fiscal capacity. This constitutes a form of ‘structural austerity’ insofar as tax cuts in the present undermine future spending capacity, thus ‘locking-in’ or ‘entrenching’ fiscal consolidation. This is particularly relevant to public knowledge insofar as federal research programs have been affected by direct cuts, resulting in closed or cancelled surveys, programs, and institutes. Limited fiscal capacity in the

³ This measure was cancelled by the new Liberal government (Golombek 2016).

form of ‘structural austerity’ means that specific cuts to federal research programs cannot be easily ‘undone’.

Our main focus will be on restructuring in Statistics Canada, including the shift to a voluntary census. However, there have been other cuts to federal knowledge generation capacity. As of 2014 there were 157 cuts or closures to federal departments, agencies, and institutes which contributed to public knowledge (CBC News 2014). In 2012, the National Council on Welfare was closed, along with its findings (Noel 2014, 211). In 2013-14 there was a 20% reduction in funding (\$66.9mn) to the Department of Labour’s ‘learning and labour market information’ activities (Tencer 2014). The Parliamentary Budget Office has seen cuts, while Environment Canada lost 700 positions (Linnitt 2013). The Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy (NTREE) was closed and the National Science Advisor position eliminated, while the Experimental Lakes Area lost \$3mn in funding (PressProgress 2015). During this period, multiple global climate research centres and stations⁴ lost funding or were cut (Linnitt 2013). Ten science-based departments and agencies are projected to lose \$2.6bn and 7,500 jobs by 2017 (Lum 2015; PressProgress 2015; Linnitt 2013). At the same time, there have been massive closures of federally funded archives and libraries (including consolidation and loss of collections from Health Canada) (Westwood 2014). Taken together a combination of cuts (austerity) and varying degrees of censorship and the centralization of knowledge undermine public knowledge on a slew of topics.

By 2014-2015, there were \$33.9mn in cuts to Statistics Canada (with another \$142.6mn by 2017; a total cut of 34% since 2010), following other cuts which saw it remove all four of its key longitudinal surveys initiated in the 1990s, reduce 34 programs, stop other surveys mid-way, and cut 31.4% of its staff (2,300), particularly in science and technology (PSAC 2014; Woods 2013; Stabile & Bednar 2013; Globe and Mail 2014; Kirby 2014). The National Population Health Survey, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, the Workplace and Employment Survey, and recently, the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) have been cut (Wolfson 2015). In 2014, the LifePaths database was cut, which was a modelling tool developed in the 1990s with data starting in 1971 to project demographic trends into the future, intended to help inform public policy on pensions, education, and healthcare (Wolfson 2015). Further, in the mid-1980s, Statistics Canada began charging user fees and implementing ‘cost recovery’ strategies for previously free statistical information, which prevents browsing data and makes accessing special tabulations exorbitantly expensive (Metcalf 2010, 493).

It is difficult to ascertain the direct impact of these cuts to public knowledge, but we can understand some effects through absence. For example, SLID, as a longitudinal survey, complimented existing cross sectional data (i.e. from the census or the Labour Force Survey, LFS) insofar as it tracked variables for *specific individuals* over time, rather than a representative sample (i.e. of random individuals) at regular intervals (as is the case for the LFS and other cross-sectional surveys which are aggregated to form a kind of time-series data) (Corak 2012). However, while cross-sectional data can tell us the unemployment rate at any given time, it cannot tell us whether the same individuals remain unemployed, or if new individuals fall into long term unemployment and what their social characteristics are (Corak 2012). SLID, and other longitudinal data, provided a depth and ‘check’ to cross-sectional and time-series data which is

⁴ Such as the Polar Environment Atmosphere Research Laboratory (PEARL), which provided ground-breaking research on climate change. Environmental researchers in the government and in universities have often produced research that questions the government’s policy agenda (Linnitt 2013).

no longer available as a result of cuts. As such, public knowledge in a slew of policy areas is limited and ignorance increased.

Despite the specific cuts above, perhaps the most significant during our research period was the suspension of the mandatory long term census. In late June 2010 the government stated that it would eliminate the mandatory long-form 2011 census (first administered in 1971) and replace it with a voluntary ‘National Household Survey’ (NHS) sent to one in three Canadian households (Thompson 2010, 377; Abu-Laban 2014, 215; Black 2015). The change was made by an Order in Council without debate, consultations, or a bill (Black 2015). The interest in the census may be due to the fact that although the collection and processing of data may be partisan free, the conclusions and policy consequences may not be (Thompson 2010, 378). Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative Government in the late 1980s first canceled the mid-decade census of 1986 to ‘save money,’ but reversed course (380). Later, Statistics Canada was criticized as an edifice of ‘big government’ by Conservatives and Liberals alike, and like other federal departments, had its budget cut during Canada’s austerity in the 1990s (380).

Former Chief Statistician Munir Sheikh, who resigned over the switch, argued that the voluntary census cannot produce the accurate and reliable data needed “for the development of good public policy, necessary programs and services, and trustworthy research” (Thompson 2010, 378). Because it is centralized and leverages the federal government’s relatively higher capacity, all the Canadian provinces rely heavily on Statistics Canada’s collection of raw data, and the long-form census had detailed data about employment, education, income, language, and even household purchases (Thompson 2010, 381; Scharper 2015). During the time of the long-form census, Statistics Canada would not publish data if the response level was below 75%, but with the NHS, the agency had to reduce that threshold to 50% so as to not discount two-thirds of census neighbourhoods (over 1,000 communities’ responses were withheld) (Freeman 2015; Black 2015). The last mandatory long-form census was held in 2006 and had a response rate of 93.5%, while the 2011 NHS had a response rate of 68.6% and cost \$22mn more than the long-form census it replaced (Scharper 2015).

As Alain Noel (2014) has said, we are witnessing “the gradual removal of the recent past” (212). These cuts result in agnotology by undermining the ability to analyze socio-economic and natural phenomena, along with all their intersections and complexities (Noel 2014 216). However, we should not reduce these changes to austerity alone: the NHS cost more than the long-form census and the centralization of communications management for federally funded research likely required more staff. These changes *increased* spending but certainly contributed to agnotology. The centralization of communications and the censorship which came of it limited what the public *was allowed* to know of federally funded research. In the case of the cuts to federal research and the introduction of the NHS, the significantly lower response rates and levels mean that there are large gaps in what we know of the country. These changes, whether done to cut costs (i.e. consolidation in specific departments) or for other reasons (e.g. the census was made voluntary because of ‘privacy complaints’) constitute a form of passive agnotology insofar as they cultivate ignorance in public knowledge (Thompson 2010, 377).

The Agnotology of Austerity: Expansionary Fiscal Consolidation as a Policy Narrative

In the previous section we discussed how austerity does (and does not necessarily) contribute to agnotology, to public ignorance. However, the effects of austerity on public knowledge also shape how we are able to understand austerity. Fiscal consolidation, in outlining

a set of (relatively) coherent ideas and policy practices, also constructs a narrative about the role of government spending on the economy, of the relationship between debt and growth, and of how we should – as individuals and institutions – conduct ourselves in light of the previous information. This policy narrative is typically rooted in particular statistics (i.e. debt-to-GDP ratios and GDP growth) and their causal connections (e.g. that high debt-to-GDP ratios limit growth) (Levinson 2013; Dellepiane-Avellaneda 2015). However, like with any policy narrative, other pieces of information are left out. For example, while some believe austerity leads to growth, do they also take into account the effect of fiscal consolidation on employment rates, quality of employment, poverty, and other indicators? What if, as a result of austerity, we were limited in that type of data (or limited in its quality)? That would constitute a form of passive agnotology in which austerity undermines our capacity to hold it accountable through social data.

Austerity is undertaken for several reasons, but primarily based on the assumption that high debt-to-GDP ratios result in stagnating growth (Blyth 2013; Levinson 2013; Dellepiane-Avellaneda 2015; Kates 2012). Although the argument that debt slows growth and that austerity would revitalize it (e.g. the work of Reinhart and Rogoff – ‘expansionary fiscal consolidation’) was empirically (incorrect and excluded data) and conceptually (a simple correlation - slow growth was more likely to cause public debt than v.v.) flawed, it still gained traction with international policy experts⁵ (Levinson 2013, 91; Blyth 2013, 13; Marks & Little 2010, 196). These cuts are believed to inspire “‘business confidence’ since the government will neither be ‘crowding-out’ the market for investment by sucking up all the available capital through the issuance of debt, nor adding to the nation’s already ‘too big’ debt” (Blyth 2013, 2).

This leads to an ‘austerity policy narrative’ in the form of ‘expansionary fiscal consolidation’ (‘EFC,’ Dellepiane-Avellaneda 2015, 393). This theory argued that rising government debt would “invariably imply future tax liabilities (‘there is no free lunch’), leaving interest rates and consumption unchanged” (393). Other authors in this tradition argued that high taxes (used to sustain high public spending, whether there was high public debt or not) constitute an economic disincentive for individuals and firms (394). Based on neoclassical assumptions of the rational, self-interested, ‘forward-looking’ individuals, EFC spread in epistemic communities, first in academia and then to international and national policy actors and entrepreneurs (394). The logic of EFC was twofold: first, in limiting government expenditure and borrowing, room would be made for the private sector in both; second, that low taxes, interest rates, and debt would inspire private sector confidence to invest (394). The ‘crucial’ case studies of EFC were disproven and complicated. Although there were certainly correlations between consolidation and growth, there was little evidence of causation (395). For example, in the case of Ireland in 1980s, post-consolidation growth was “based largely upon external factors”, such as growing exogenous aggregate demand. A recent (2006) “comprehensive analysis of fiscal consolidation in Europe” found “very strong empirical evidence pointing to the existence of a trade-off between growth and equality mediated by fiscal consolidations” (395). Which is to say that cutting government spending, although it may correlate with growth, also correlates strongly with rising income inequality (396).

An interesting finding in the EFC literature is that, in different contexts, consolidations may have no effect or positive effects on political actors’ electoral successes – although the reasons why are not elaborated in the economic literature (Dellepiane-Avellaneda 2015, 395). Insofar as expansionary fiscal consolidation is rooted in expectations – that is, in the future – it

⁵Even the multiplier assumptions of fiscal consolidation were spurious and vastly exaggerated in economic outlooks (Mackenzie 2012).

intersects with another policy narrative tied to austerity, of a moral economy which frames responsibility for reduced consumption as a necessity to secure the future of the political community (Clarke & Newman 2012, 316). The intersection of EFC with this moral economy may help to explain the rhetorical salience of austerity policy narratives insofar as economic ideas (i.e. EFC) are closely tied to moral ideas (i.e. responsibility, consumption, and the future of the political community). However, both are predicated on the idea that debt and spending are a threat to the future and that 'cutting spending' ('trimming the fat,' 'tightening belts', etc.) is the only solution. Further, both policy narratives rely heavily (outside of the academic literature – in most cases) on rhetoric and metaphors which are emboldened in the absence of reliable public knowledge (agnotology) on the 'successes' and externalities of policies based on either narrative.

For example, Ontario's 'Common Sense Revolution' promulgated by Mike Harris in the 1990s framed public debt as a 'crisis' resulting from 'irresponsible fiscal management' as opposed to trade deficits and shifts in the regional political economy (Knight 1998, 106). There was a moral resonance around budgetary deficits and their 'sources' (e.g. 'bloated' bureaucracy, public sector benefits, and lazy and dependent welfare recipients) as 'burdens on future generations' and costs which Ontario "couldn't afford," with governmental and personal austerity as the only 'responsible' solution (Knight 1998, 125; Marks & Little 2010, 196). Austerity returned to Canada after the GFC, with 2010 marking a new round of fiscal austerity featuring social service retrenchment, devolution, and privatization (Whiteside 2014, 175). Again, austerity policies were framed as responses to 'crisis' in Canada which constructed a "climate of fear" around government debt and the future promise of continued precarity so as to evoke moralizing responses targeting those (including the state) who 'consume irresponsibly' (Russell 2014, 55).

Editorials before the Ontario 2014 election stated "if you make five bucks a day, you can't spend [...] eight [...]. It's time to tighten some public belts" while another argued that government must be forced "to live within its means as families across this province do every day in tough times" (Simpson 2014; Editorial 2014). Moral austerity has engulfed the political spectrum, shifting questions to how austerity should be implemented rather than whether it should be. For example, the centre-left New Democratic Party's (NDP) Andrea Horwath stated "if citizens are expected to tighten their belts [...] its only right that government does the same" while the centrist Liberal's Kathleen Wynne tasked Finance Minister Charles Sousa with "tightening the province's belt" and said that "government could be leaner" (Horwath 2014; Babbage 2014).

Progressive Conservative candidate Tim Hudak has said directly that "we are asking government to tighten its belt, the way every day Ontarions have" so as to "bring back jobs" (Hudak 2014). During his tenure, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2010 said that "we can confront our fiscal challenge with clear and realistic plans for fiscal consolidation, or we can wait for markets to dictate the terms for us", implying that a failure to undertake austerity would undermine market confidence, reduce investment, and result in an unfavourable bond market (Clark 2010). That same year, Harper argued that "economic growth and fiscal discipline are not mutually exclusive ... they go hand in hand" (Kennedy 2012). The virtuous necessity of austerity (reduced consumption) is anchored in the futurity of economic performance and job growth, again tying moral austerity to expansionary fiscal consolidation. Here we can see how moral austerity complements EFC in framing debt and spending as a threat to the future and consolidation (austerity) as its solution.

Expansionary fiscal consolidation constructs a policy narrative which, in conversation with moral ideas, argues that spending cuts will result in economic growth and fiscal

sustainability. However, the austerity narrative does not manifest so coherently: countries which implemented austerity experienced declines in their GDP proportional to the intensity of austerity (Levinson 2013, 94; Krugman 2014). Seven years after the global financial crisis, IMF forecasts in 2015 outlined another significant decline in *potential growth* (they argued the same thing in 2012 and earlier) in austerity economies as compared to pre-recession levels: the US was pegged at just 2.0% a year in the coming years, while for Canada it was 1.8% (despite the fact that in mid-2015, we entered our second quarter of -0.6% growth, a textbook recession) (Jackson 2015; Mackenzie 2012). The IMF devotes an entire chapter outlining low rates of business investment, and concludes that they are not investing (in Canada as of 2014 capital was sitting on \$686bn) because the recovery is weak: fiscal austerity, meant to ‘open’ the field for private investment, has had the exact opposite effect (Jackson 2015; Sanger 2014).

In Canada by 2015, years of austerity cut at least 37,000 federal employees and over \$36.8 billion in cuts, bringing revenues and expenditures to their lowest levels in 50 years (‘making the government lean’) (Tencer 2014; Yalnizyan 2015; Whiteside 2014, 175), taxes were cut to their lowest share of the economy in 70 years (‘promoting private investment,’ with \$20bn *before the crisis*) (Sanger 2014; Yalnizyan 2015), interest rates reduced to 0.5% (‘monetary stimulus’) (Tencer 2015), and there was a labour surplus of 1.2mn (‘reserve army of labour,’ with hundreds of thousands more underemployed) (Sanger 2014; PEPSCO 2013). However, recovery is still stagnant: unemployment exceeds pre-recession levels (6.3% in 2006 vs. 6.9% in 2014), self-employment has increased by 8.6%, the service sector has grown by 37.8% (while manufacturing declined by 11.2%), and part time employment grew by 15.2% (PEPSCO 2013; Jackson 2015). Finance Canada’s own economic multipliers (supported by private sector economic analysis firms) show that public spending has a greater effect on economic growth: for example, for every \$1bn cut from health care and social services, the economy loses 18,000 in direct and indirect jobs and \$2bn, while an income tax cut of \$1bn will only generate 6,000 jobs and boost the economy by \$1.3bn (Sanger 2014).⁶

Despite all of the above, austerity is still salient with the public⁷ and the government, which sold shares of General Motors in an attempt to balance the budget in 2015, followed by a spending plan that locks in program spending below inflation and population growth – a ‘slow austerity’ (Rozworski 2015). The expansionary fiscal consolidation narrative is extensive, legible, and relatively cohesive in the way it intersects with moral ideas. The data which could legitimate or disprove it, however, is not: as will be discussed next, the ‘on the ground’ data – on people’s standards of living, income, and employment – is precisely the data that is the most difficult to accurately gather with the cuts to the census and Statistics Canada. This is because the foundational cross-sectional and time-series surveys which are used to gather data on the variables above a) rely on the census to validate findings and determine sample selection; b) are negatively affected by cuts.

The effects of the changes are significant insofar as many studies rely on census and cross-sectional data, particularly the monthly Labour Force Survey (McKenna 2015). For example, a 2003 study on precarious employment in Canada utilized Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey, finding that precarious employment (i.e. part-time, temporary work with few to no benefits, job security, or protections) rose between 28-34% from 1989-94 (Cranford 2003, 7). The study looked at intersections between employment categories (i.e. permanent vs. temporary),

⁶ Part of the slowdown can be attributed to the collapse of the oil market and the global volatility of commodities, which Canada is increasingly susceptible to given its dependence on resource extraction (Pittis 2015).

⁷ Over 90% believed it is a priority in an August 2015 poll (Mainstreet 2015).

union coverage, degree of regulatory protection, and income level. A cursory search on the Scholars Portal Database for “labour force survey” and “Canada” reveals 751 results, and this is in addition to the innumerable non-academic studies which rely on the data.

The voluntary National Household Survey utilized in 2011 has poor returns from the top and bottom rungs of the economic ladder (as well as across regions), leaving mainly mid-income respondents who create a false representation of Canada as a thriving middle class society (Scharper 2015). Vulnerable populations (new immigrants, Aboriginals, low-income, single parents) and those with highest income had the lowest response rate (Scharper 2015). For example, in Hamilton, a city in Southern Ontario, 17 census tracts were excluded from the 2011 census data for low response rates, compared to 2 in 2006; most of the excluded tracts came from lower income neighbourhoods more reliant on government assistance (Black 2014). Statistics Canada has (as discussed previously) seen significant cuts during the 2006-15 period, losing 34% of its revenue, 31.4% of its staff (2,300), which saw it end multiple longitudinal surveys, and reduce 34 programs (PSAC 2014; Woods 2013; Stabile & Bednar 2013; Globe and Mail 2014; Kirby 2014).⁸ These cuts are causally linked to program reductions, and also correlate with a rise in errors (McKenna 2015). The Labour Force Survey’s confidence level is only 68 per cent, as compared to the standard 95 or 99 percent (due largely to a limited sample size and inconsistent response rates) and does not include ‘difficult to reach’ communities in its samples due to insufficient resources (e.g. First Nations communities) (McKenna 2015). The cuts to Statistics Canada have elicited complaints from many economists about the quality of labour market, residential housing, and even demographic data, issues which were especially compounded by the end of the long form census (Globe and Mail 2014).

The variables I utilized to evaluate the EFC/Moral austerity narratives and those used in the 2003 labour market study are compromised by austerity. For example, unemployment is calculated based on representative stratified samples of the population. Although this data is published monthly through the Labour Force Survey, that survey relied on the Long Form Census – and subsequently, the voluntary National Household Survey (NHS) – to determine which households are surveyed and to check assumptions made (Milligan 2015). The 2015 Labour Force Survey abandoned any modeling based on the census, likely because of its low and unreliable response rates (Milligan 2015; Scharper 2015). Unfortunately, we cannot know whether these changes will affect the accuracy of the Labour Force Survey because the 2011 NHS was voluntary, nor can we determine the quality of Labour Force Surveys which relied on the NHS (Scharper 2015; Black 2014). For example, 2014 Statistics Canada data on employment categories found that 83.1% of workers in Southern Ontario are working full time (Statistics Canada 2014). However, this data may be unreliable given its dependence on the voluntary census with a selection bias favouring ‘middle income’ individuals (those who are more likely to have full time employment).

It is difficult (and not the scope of this paper) to determine *precisely* the effect of cuts to Statistics Canada and the temporary replacement of the long form census, but we can make several points confidently: a) since many surveys are in various ways modelled on or rely on the census, changes to the census affect a slew of data gathering instruments; b) a voluntary census has resulted in low response rates and significant variation across regions, making the data unreliable and unrepresentative; c) cutting longitudinal studies, which provide nuanced data on a

⁸ The agency also ran out of funding on a survey of 25,000 companies in 2012 to assess hiring needs and skills gaps in Canada, with the results left unprocessed (Globe and Mail 2014).

single sample over time, undermine valuable socio-economic data relevant to evaluating austerity.

Conclusion

The shifts catalogued in this paper have the effect of insulating particular narratives and accumulation regimes from critique by undermining public knowledge of particular policies and phenomena. For example, support for the a 2015 security bill, C-51, is contingent on how informed a citizen is: only 38% of those who have read an analysis of the bill support it compared to 82% who have not read about it (Johnson, 2015). This is why agnotology is such a threat to public accountability of government.

Under the expansionary fiscal consolidation and moral austerity policy narratives, debt is a threat to the future of growth and to the political community. Data on the effect of austerity measures – even the most frequently utilized and superficial – is undermined by austerity itself: agnotology in public knowledge is shaped by cuts to federal research capacity. With the cuts in Statistics Canada and other departments which analyze socio-economic trends, policy makers, researchers, and the public lack the capacity to effectively analyze how people are living - whether they are thriving, surviving, or neither.

Although the long form census will be reinstated for 2016, that does not reverse the effects of the 2011 voluntary census or the end of many of Statistics Canada's longitudinal studies. A robust and public data collection and production apparatus cannot, in and of itself, contain agnotology – as information can be elided, destroyed, and instrumentalized to serve policy narratives. However, the intersection of austerity and agnotology sets us back to first deal with a lack of reliable knowledge before we can even concern ourselves with its application and framing.

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