

Strategic narratives and self-fulfilling prophecies: towards a political science of performativity

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Abstract

Earlier work (e.g. Hay, 2002; Rosamond, 1999; Hay and Rosamond, 2002) considered the ways in which actors might seek to elaborate a compelling narrative of no alternative around ideas such as 'globalisation'. The argument was that the establishment in popular discourse of the social fact of globalisation had the potential effect of constraining/shaping both technical and normative conceptions of the politically possible. Behind this analysis lay a presumption about the 'reality effects' of globalisation discourse, and it is to the political analysis of these 'reality effects' that this contribution turns. The concept of the 'self-fulfilling property' was given sociological purchase in the classic work of Robert K. Merton (1948; 1957). Merton was interested in how a proposition that was demonstrably false could become empirically true. This idea parallels work on 'performativity' – the idea that a proposition may constitute or instantiate an object to which that proposition refers. 'Performativity' is the subject of well-known (and varied) theoretical treatments by the likes of J.L. Austin (1962) and Judith Butler (1997) and has been used in recent work on the sociology of Economics (MacKenzie, 2006). The promise of these approaches to the social world is that they automatically validate work that takes ideas and discourses seriously. If meaningful change and discernible behavioural effects can be seen to originate in the ideational domain, then many of the standard objections to this kind of work melt away. That said, pursuing the idea of 'reality effects', 'self-fulfilling prophecy' and 'performativity' brings forth a series of theoretical and methodological dilemmas. This contribution will offer reflections on three of the most prominent. The first is the extent to which instrumental rationality has a place in the political science of performativity. To what extent do actors knowingly summon up a falsehood in discourse with a view to constituting a world consistent with their preferences for the future? The second is about which actors can (and in what circumstances can they) enact performativity loops or potentially self-fulfilling prophecies? The third is a question of sequencing. At what point is it possible for a proposition to be capable of becoming self-fulfilling? Does it have to have a *priori* status as a social fact? And how would this be validated empirically?

-I-

Scholars who take ideas and discourses seriously routinely encounter the objection that they are studying secondary phenomena. Ideas, it is said, typically perform one of two functions in the social world. They are either epiphenomenal to the material world or they are resources available to actors whose interest-driven behaviour requires rhetorical justification and/or ideational concealment. To buy into such critiques is to presume that to study ideas is to be distracted from what must really matter. There may be interesting things to say about the architecture of rhetoric and discourse, but ultimately good social and political science is actually about disabusing the social world of some of the ideas that are recurrently propagated (particularly) by elites. If a government's legislative programme is premised on the claim that condition x requires the pursuit of policy y , then it is much more important to interrogate the empirics of the relationship between x and y than examining the discursive construction of $x \rightarrow y$. If social scientific doubt can be cast on the idea that $x \rightarrow y$, then (a) the government's credibility is questioned and (b) the assertion about x as that which sets imperatives that yield no alternative but y is exposed as mere rhetoric. Indeed we might be tempted to conclude (c) that a government determined to implement y has mobilised the spectre of x in order to justify the pursuit of y (and to close down discussion on alternatives to y) and (d) that the government in question has an interest-driven rationale – that has nothing

whatsoever to do with x – for favouring policy y . This example concedes that the ideas in question (about the nature of x and about the presumed imperative-setting relationship between x and y) are important to a degree because they have the potential to make it easier for the government to bring forward its policy choice, but they are still secondary. After all, it is policy y – its formulation, implementation and its operation – that will impact upon the real lives of the governed community. And if the purpose of social science is the adjudication of social reality, then the social scientist’s gaze should settle on reality rather than rhetoric in the first instance.

Naturally, there are numerous well-rehearsed objections to any line of argument that *prima facie* treats ideas as second class objects of social science. The relatively recent boom in ideational and constructivist scholarship in political science and IR would not have been possible without the capacity of its proponents to disturb the reasoning presented in the previous paragraph. This is not the place to go through the numerous and usually persuasive ways in which the various strands of ideationally-inclined work, ranging from relatively soft rationalism through to poststructuralism, have justified their existence. Rather the intention here is to take the position outlined in the opening paragraph (or at least significant chunks of it) on its own terms, to accept its broad premise, but still to come out arguing for the importance of ideas as objects of social and political analysis.

How might this be done? The argument here is about what we might call the ‘reality effects’ of ideas and the (strategic) narratives that accompany them. Think again about the ultra-stylised example presented in the opening paragraph. Accept for the time being that the government has interest-driven reasons for pursuing policy y . What if that interest is consistent with or deeply implicated in a world that takes on the attributes of x ? And what if our heroic social scientists have indeed been able to demonstrate that x as a description of social reality is flawed, erroneous, mythic etc? An interesting inversion has taken place. The government’s discourse maintains that condition x necessitates policy choice y , but we now know that policy y is actually a key means to realise condition x (which is what the government actually wants to achieve). The $x \rightarrow y$ relationship is as empirically bogus as it ever was (at least at for the time being), but if y is enacted then the world will resemble more and more the features of x . The realisation of x through the enactment of y will then lead to a social reality where x does indeed $\rightarrow y$. This is summarised in box 1 below, which stylises this sequence yet further by locating the process simply at three points in time (t_0 - t_2).

Box 1

t_0 – if x were true, then x would $\rightarrow y$; but x is demonstrably false despite discourses which say otherwise; therefore y is not an automatic policy choice, premised as it is on the existence of something that is known to be non-real.

t_1 – the government has won the argument (on an empirically false premise) that $x \rightarrow y$; therefore, y is enacted

t_2 – the effects of policy y are to make the world progressively more x -like (which is what the government always wanted); the more the world resembles x , so the more true is the proposition that $x \rightarrow y$.

One point worth stressing about this process is that the rhetoric – the deployment of ideas about x and the imperatives that it supposedly sets – is not incidental. The government's ability to win the argument about $x \rightarrow y$ is integral to its capacity to legislate y and ultimately to realise x .

The discovery of such patterns in the social and political world would presumably settle any arguments about the marginality or insignificance of ideational analysis. If we could show that ideas can be *realised* in this way (something which at t_0 is nothing more than abstract speculation with no empirical evidence to support it, but which at t_2 is now actually true as a description of the world), then presumably it would be hard to maintain the claim that ideas do not matter. For surely this would be evidence of very high quality that ideas really do matter? We would, in other words, have demonstrated the existence of self-fulfilling prophecies.

This paper is an attempt to think through some of the questions that arise in relation to developing a political science of self-fulfilling prophecies. It will probably be clear that the stylised example with which we opened glosses over some rather acute problems. The paper is written as an attempt to think through some of the key problems and to map a way in which the study of self-fulfilling prophecies might proceed, especially in relation to the operation of globalisation discourse. The paper continues with a discussion of 'unfinished business' in the literature on globalisation discourse. It then thinks about the potential of extant work on self-fulfilling prophecies and 'performativity', before laying out a framework for thinking about performativity in relation to 'myths' such as globalisation and their associated worldviews and programmatic ideas.

-II-

The structure of the deliberately simple example above resembles some rather familiar (and by now quite venerable) observations about globalisation. If 'globalisation' is substituted for x , then y becomes a series of policies – privatisation, deregulation, flexible labour markets, low taxation, welfare retrenchment and so on – that have been deemed to be necessary responses to the non-negotiable imperatives set by globalisation. A literature on discourses of globalisation has sought to show that the deployment by policy-makers of ideas about globalisation has been an important feature of the political economy of capitalist societies in the past two decades. There are several threads running through such literature. Three are worthy of attention here. One key claim is that the concept of globalisation can be a powerful framing device. Once established as a social fact amongst key groups, then certain secondary claims – usually about substantive policy¹ – are rendered more logical and more persuasive. *If* globalisation is a reality, *then* (for example) large scale welfare retrenchment is inevitable. In short by 'backgrounding' the idea that the world is global-ised/ising, policy-makers create space for certain types of policy argument while, at the same time, closing down alternative paradigms. Thus globalisation discourse is one of the key ways through which (a) neoliberalism is constructed as a necessary and desirable policy paradigm, and (b) the utility

¹ But also about the character of the pre-globalised past and the spatialities of the globalised present (see Cameron and Palan, 2004)

and value of Keynesianism as an economic policy toolkit is downgraded and rendered obsolescent. A second finding in this literature is that globalisation discourse can – and frequently does – take on different forms in different places. This does not just mean that the term means different things in different places or different institutional contexts (although this does appear to be the case). It also means that the logics deemed to follow from ‘globalisation’ will also differ. Crudely, it is possible to find politicians and policy makers in different contexts operating with very similarly designed arguments (*if* globalisation, *then* ...). Yet what globalisation connotes may differ (‘liberalisation’, ‘westernisation’, ‘Americanisation’ etc) and what it implies may differ (‘liberalisation’, ‘resistance to liberalisation’, ‘protection of threatened values/policy frameworks’ etc). The third claim is that both globalisation and its consequences/corollaries operate in discourse both technically and normatively. In other words ideas about globalisation do not just capture claims about what is (purported to be) objective and what is (necessarily) rational in terms of actions and behaviour. They are also carriers of values. One may hold positive, negative or ambivalent orientations towards globalisation, and from these normative positions will follow clear preferences for appropriate action/behaviour/policy. Equally, it is possible to hold an identical technical understanding of globalisation to a normative opponent. Neoliberals and social democrats may agree precisely about what globalisation is, but they may draw radically opposed normative inferences from that initial analytical agreement. Together these three claims suggest (a) that globalisation discourse has become a very powerful and pervasive strategic narrative, (b) that the character and quality of strategic narratives around the idea of globalisation is contextually variable, (c) that strategic narratives of globalisation can proceed through technical and normative legitimation, and (c) that, in many ways, the politics of globalisation is a contest between rival strategic narratives.

In this work, for the most part any ‘reality effects’ of globalisation discourse are implied. In previous work, we offered the beginnings of a case for thinking about globalisation in this way. One of the central premises of research on globalisation discourse is that the inclination to stop at the adjudication of whether the discourse is ‘true’ misses a key point. The point, put simply, is that in the social world the acceptance of an idea or its widespread use is at least as important as whether the idea (as a description of material reality) is accurate.² The emphatic refutation of an idea through good social science may not be enough to dissuade policy actors from behaving in accordance with the idea or – perhaps more importantly – premising subsidiary claims upon it. It remains still the case that policy is made in the name of globalisation despite a very substantial academic literature that refutes or qualifies the central tenets of the economic globalisation thesis. We took this basic point a step further by asserting something more provocative. The picture of policy-makers holding a false idea that they continue to act upon was, it seemed, an all too static depiction. What was more

² This formulation raises another hugely significant point, to which we will return, but which is worth noting now: are discourses of globalisation used knowingly and instrumentally or do actors assimilate and believe the premises that they espouse?

interesting was to think about the dynamic effects of the policies being made with reference to the condition of globalisation:

[P]olicy-makers acting on the basis of assumptions consistent with the hyperglobalization thesis may well serve, in so doing, to bring about outcomes consistent with that thesis, *irrespective of its veracity* and, indeed, *irrespective of its perceived veracity*. (Hay and Rosamond, 2002: 148, emphasis in the original)

The case of tax competition offered an illustration of the limits of conventional empirical adjudication (see also Hay, 2002). In a globalised world, runs the argument, governments cannot set levels of corporation tax too high. Globalisation means that capital is mobile and capital mobility implies the possibility of capital flight. Over-taxation is bound to lead capital to depart for jurisdictions with more favourable corporate tax regimes or to decline to invest in the country in question at all. Imagine two parallel universes. In the first, this hyperglobalisation claim about the relationship between the level corporate taxation and capital flight holds. In the second it is false. But the variable that influences actual policy – whether taxation levels are lowered or raised – is how government perceives the relationship between inward investment and the rate of relevant taxation: does it believe or act upon the premises of the globalisation hypothesis? If governments do believe the globalisation thesis or act in accordance with it, then the policy outcome will be a lowering of corporate tax rates. Lower or diminishing corporate taxation rates would be an expected feature of a globalised world, as would be a tendency for governments to engage in competitive ‘races to the bottom’ in order to secure or attract the investment of mobile capital.

-III-

Most discussions of the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies (SFP) cite Robert Merton’s (1948) discussion of the phenomenon as the social scientific point of origin. Merton’s paper, later worked into his magisterial book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957), drew attention to the complex relationship between prevailing narratives about African Americans and the reproduction of social structures that excluded and marginalised African Americans from various aspects of social life. For example the notion that African Americans were less ‘competent’ members of society was given credence by the idea that they were prone to break strikes and neglect the wider interests of the unionised working class. This tendency might be attributed to cultural factors (origins in the pre-industrial South) or material circumstances (naturally low standards of living) or racial predisposition (although Merton is most interested in the assimilation of this belief by ‘fair-minded’ white citizens and less in its propagation by out and out racists). The actuality, argued Merton, was that black workers were widely and systematically prevented from joining labour unions. As such they could barely help being cast in the role of strike-breakers or ‘scabs’. The *reality* of strike-breaking African Americans was the self-fulfilment of a series of *false* claims about the character of non-white Americans. Merton’s much-cited definition thereby revolves around a distinction between the dynamics of truth and falsehood: ‘[t]he self-fulfilling prophesy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come *true*’ (Merton, 1957: 423).

The classic example of the SFP, where ‘the release and social circulation of a description or prediction enhances its validity’ (MacKenzie, Muniesa, Siu, 2007: 3), is found in the phenomenon of the bank run. Here a perfectly healthy bank can be put out of business if its customers, acting on the basis of a (false) perception that the bank is insolvent or is on the verge of becoming insolvent, act decisively and in sufficient numbers to withdraw their deposits. No bank would be in a position to honour all such requests at short notice, and the likelihood of a full-scale bank default (and thus actual insolvency) increases as greater proportions of depositors seek to secure their cash.

Henshel (1982) summarises the wide application across many fields of the concept of SFP in its first three decades as an academic topic. The idea became particularly prominent in educational psychology where studies were able to point to the self-fulfilling effects of teacher expectations (if pupil *x* is construed as a ‘trouble-maker’ by her teacher, then a ‘trouble-maker’ is precisely what she will become) and the constitutive effects of systems such as testing, selection, streaming and so on. Sociologists were interested in how the labelling of behaviour or of individuals as ‘deviant’ would – sure enough – propagate that very deviancy or produce deviant individuals. Scholars interested in the sociology of the Economics discipline (rather than economists themselves) were thirty years ago anticipating a now growing literature on the performativity of economic ideas and axioms (see below). There were perhaps fewer examples in political science and IR. Exceptions included work on the way in which opinion polls (meant, of course, to be passive records of public attitudes and preferences at fixed points in time) can unleash ‘bandwagon’ effects that ultimately determine public opinion (Marsh, 1984). In other words, instead of acting as passive bystanders in the political process, opinion polls may have an independent effect upon electoral outcomes. Their function of supplying information about the balance of public opinion could affect the way in which individuals formulate their preferences (and at an aggregate level this constitutes ‘public opinion’).³ The most developed discussions of SFPs in IR have been developed, not surprisingly, in studies of conflict escalation and conflict resolution (for example Deutsch, 1983; Geller and Singer, 1998). There is significant emphasis on fields of expectations, where what really matters are actors’ perceptions of their adversaries’ ‘expectations regarding future reality’ (Levy, 1983: 90). As Levy puts it: ‘[p]articularly dangerous in this regard is the *erroneous* belief that the adversary believes that war is inevitable, for this may generate a self-fulfilling prophecy and preclude efforts at crisis management and conciliation’ (Levy, 1983: 90-91, emphasis added).

Again we find the reference to error in the first instance becoming the stimulus for action that renders the error true. There is, of course, a very significant analytical problem associated with any insistence that the defining feature of SFP is the transformation of falsehood into truth. In Merton’s hands, SFP seems to be restricted to situations where the initial prediction/expectation/idea is wrong. He can afford to be interested in this family of cases since he seems to assume that there is a true or false definition of any situation independent of what social actors believe or know (Krishna, 1971: 1104). And this runs counter to the

³ Whether it is opinion polls themselves or the way in which opinion poll data is communicated and disseminated that has the independent effect is another (though far from insignificant) matter.

position that we laid out in relation to the veracity or otherwise of globalisation discourse (see above), where objective truth was less interesting and analytically significant than whether the phenomenon in question was deemed to be true. As Krishna puts it in his thoughtful and sympathetic critique of Merton: '[t]here is ... no correlation between the actual situation and the outcome independent of the belief that men hold about the situation. The question of the "reality" or "unreality" of belief, to use Merton's phrase, is thus quite meaningless in the situation' (Krishna, 1971: 1105). This clearly leads us away from a situation where we might be able to compare simple 'reality' shifts between t_0 and t_2 . Krishna's epistemological position is one with which most ideational scholars would be more comfortable. As summarised by Blyth (2010: 175), the position goes something like this: '[a]gents do not stand outside of reality but constitute it through their actions. We do not see the generators of reality directly. Rather all outcomes are mediated, as are our responses to those outcomes'. Rather than showing that the proposition made at t_0 is false, we can at least show that it is contestable, debated, even refuted. In the case of the link between globalisation and taxation, we might invoke any one of the various refutations of the broad globalisation hypothesis or we might equally draw upon studies that cast doubt on the 'truth' that taxation levels are the primary determinant of inward investment decisions. The point is not to engage in a game that focuses exclusively on the adjudication of 'truth', but rather to show that key agents (the 'prophets' if we like) are predicating policy choices upon truth claims and that these truth claim-policy linkages and their dynamic effects are worthy of our attention in and of themselves. In any case, our capacity or otherwise to adjudicate truth need not require us to become entrenched in one of two diametrically opposed epistemological positions with hard core positivism at one pole and extreme interpretivism at the other. The truth about the existence of globalisation is beset with serious analytical dilemmas (Rosamond, 2005), but it is relatively straightforward to map trends in levels of corporate taxation over time. It is possible, in other words, to detect 'reality effects'. The trick then is to link these to 'prophetic' activity: more on this anon.

More recently attention has shifted away from SFPs to the analogous phenomenon of 'performativity'. First use of the term is often attributed to a near contemporary of Merton, the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin (1962). Austin's discussion of 'performative utterances' illustrated how saying was not always about simply describing. To say could also be *to do* or *to bring into being*. He is (literally) talking about speech acts. And perhaps the reason that the more recent literature has preferred the vocabulary of the performative over the idea of the SFP is illustrated in the whole thrust of Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*. The book takes on the (then) prevailing view amongst philosophers that utterances were only descriptive statements. If utterances are nothing but descriptive statements, then it follows that they are open to empirical adjudication. They can be verified as true or refuted as false. Performative utterances by their very nature are neither true nor false. A performative utterance is not about reporting the world correctly or incorrectly. It involves, in whole or in part, doing something in the world (Austin, 1962: 5). With this starting point, it matters much less whether the 'prophecy' is verifiable in the first instance. In any case, that would be to assume that the 'prophecy' amounts to a statement that dares us to investigate its veracity

rather than being a form of action in the world.⁴ What is interesting about prophecies is the extent to which they can be transformative acts, As Donald MacKenzie and colleagues put it, writing about the performativity of Economics:

The issue that needs to be tackled in relation to economies and economics is not just about ‘knowing’ the world, accurately or not. It is also about producing it. It is not (only) about economics being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ but (also, and perhaps more important) about it being ‘able’ or ‘unable’ to transform the world (MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu, 2007: 2).

Judith Butler has, perhaps more than anyone, emphasised the role of performative dynamics in processes of social reproduction. The ‘realities’ of gender appear substantive because of ‘a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief’ (Butler, 1988: 520; see also Butler, 1997). Again, Butler is less interested in showing why typical constructions of gender are wrong *a priori* and much more attentive to the performative dynamics through which gender patterns are constituted and naturalised.

Butler suggests that the ongoing naturalising performance of gender has the effect of rendering invisible its act of creation. The act of prophecy disappears in its own self-fulfilment: ‘[t]he authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness’ (Butler, 1988: 522). If gender is naturalised then it is assumed to be timeless – and, of course, timeless phenomena do not possess a moment of active creation. This formulation contains an important claim about the assimilation of an idea or a narrative by those most responsible for propagating it. This in turn poses, by implication, a serious issue for scholars of performativity and SFPs. The exploitations and inequalities following from the social assignment of gender roles clearly advantage some social groups at the expense of others. Yet more or less all contemporary feminists would not argue that those benefiting most from the reproduction of patriarchal structures and practices will actively and knowingly manipulate and disseminate gendered discourses in full knowledge of their essential falsehood. The point about the reproduction of patriarchy, as well as its corollaries such as sexism, is that their most active proponents evidently believe them to be based upon truth.

Three intermediate observations follow. First, it is perhaps mistaken to think of the act of prophecy only occurring at t_0 . If we think about performative utterances as active interventions in the world, then we should also expect to see them occurring *throughout* relevant social processes (i.e. at t_1 and t_2 as well). Second, prophets can forget they are prophets because they are what we might call ‘believing prophets’ rather than ‘strategic prophets’. How we distinguish – empirically – between a ‘believing’ and a ‘strategic’ prophet is as difficult an issue as it is important. We return to this question shortly. Third and equally

⁴ Of course, there will be a particularly interesting sub-set of utterances that are performative in Austin’s terms, but which present themselves as if they are descriptive. This would seem to be the case in relation to some of the globalisation discourse alluded to earlier, but perhaps what qualifies them as performative utterances is the way in which they purport to report a truth that is beyond argument (e.g. ‘the borderless world economy where productive and finance capital is fully mobile is a world in which there is little space for the state to indulge in the expansive welfare policies of the past’).

important is the question of temporality: is it possible to think about performativity or the self-fulfilment of prophecies over long time periods. For example, elements of ancient Greek philosophy – ideas surrounding the concept of democracy say – (a) can be read as performative utterances, but (b) cannot be thought of as being realised meaningfully until the second half of the twentieth century, the best part of two and a half millennia after conception.⁵

Some of the most prominent recent work on performativity has concentrated on rather more narrow time spans and on more or less clear cases of performative utterance. The object of many of these studies is the performative qualities of Economics (Callon, 1998; Cheriau and Jarrow, 1998; Felin and Foss, 2008; Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton, 2005; MacKenzie, 2006; 2009; MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu, 2007). The literature ranges from fairly crude work that exposes the effect of economic theories (whose taken for granted micro-premises are at best dubious) upon human behaviour⁶, to the magisterial work of MacKenzie on the relationship between modern academic theories of finance and the operation of financial markets. What unites this work is (a) deconstruction of the idea that theories are external to the reality they describe and (b) that economic theories do not simply report the world of the economy, but (can) actively shape its operation and (c) that the discipline of Economics provides a rich repertoire of performative utterances. MacKenzie (2006: 15-25) is careful to distinguish between a number of different ways in which Economics might demonstrate performativity. They are worth rehearsing here. The first type, he calls ‘generic performativity’. This is a very loose conception of performativity: the deployment or use of some part of the knowledge archive of Economics by an actor/actors in the economic process (performance = use). The second is ‘effective performativity’ is not just about use, but use that has a discernible impact on real economic processes. The analytical separation between these two sub-types of performativity is important because it presumes that use does not necessarily yield effect. Third, MacKenzie arrives at a much ‘harder’ conception of performativity, which he labels ‘Barnesian performativity’.⁷ This species of performativity is about more than simply having an effect. It describes a situation where the interaction between the economic model and the real economy shapes the latter in ways that better conform to the original precepts of the former. The fourth type is ‘counterperformativity’, where Barnesian processes are reversed (i.e. the model interacts with the economy and the economy responds in ways that make the original model less valid).

This categorisation is useful for those who might wish to take the study of performativities to domains other than Economics. That said, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which Economics provides a special – and perhaps more researchable – case. We have hinted that the study of globalisation discourse might provide an important application of these ideas.

⁵ We owe this example to philosopher colleagues who mobilise something like it as an objection to the idea of applying the concept of impact (integral to the UK’s putative Research Excellence Framework – REF) to their discipline!

⁶ This is not to say that work on the performative effect of (for example) rational actor assumptions is not useful or interesting. Far from it. The adjective ‘crude’ is used here to describe the not necessarily helpful claim that such microfoundations are ‘wrong’ in a basic truth-as-correspondence sense.

⁷ After the sociologist Barry Barnes (1988)

The concept of globalisation is inchoate and vague. Its intellectual and discursive origins are obscure. A number of academic fields lay claim to its study (and thus its authorisation). MacKenzie and his colleagues tend to talk about the (potential) performativity of quite specific things – the Black-Scholes-Merton model of option pricing theory is MacKenzie’s well-known case. These are easy to identify performative utterances and their impact is relatively easy to follow empirically. Moreover, Economics stands as an authorised body of knowledge with identifiable boundaries, in part because of its strong disciplinary quality. It has a very clear self-image of what it is and what it is not. MacKenzie himself says that he shies away from the idea of ‘prophesy’ (preferring ‘performativity’) because he wants to study more than beliefs and ideas (2006: 19).

This feeds helpfully into broader questions about what Giddens (1987) calls the ‘double hermeneutic’: in the course of investigating and classifying the real world, social scientists ‘export’ concepts into the world that they are studying. This is clearly an issue for authorised bodies of knowledge production, where ‘prophecies’ emerge or spill over from methodologically robust encounters with the world. Economics is one (if not *the*) emphatic instance of this, but the problem is also picked up by Marsh (1985) in her study of the self-fulfilling effect of opinion polling. She suggests that these SFP-like qualities of polls create potentially deep problems for ‘the possibility of stable prediction in the social sciences’ (1985: 51). Opinion polls are perceived as robustly constructed predictions⁸ about a future outcome. Yet this very act of scientific prediction may have an independent effect upon the outcome because it is – like it or not – an intervention in the world and not just a mere description of it.

-IV-

In this section we sketch out very briefly, in light of the foregoing, how a globalisation discourse could be studied in terms of SFP and performativity. Before proceeding, we will focus on three problems that need to be confronted if such work is to be done. The first, we have touched on already: the extent to which instrumental rationality has a place in the political science of performativity. To what extent do actors knowingly summon up a falsehood in discourse with a view to constituting a world consistent with their preferences for the future? Alternatively, do actors genuinely believe what they utter? The question is as acute when addressing utterances about the presumed causal connection between globalisation and – say – the necessity of flexible labour markets as when thinking about the authorship of an economic model or the physical design of an actual market space (Garcia-Parpet, 2007). In terms of typologising, we might recall our earlier distinction between ‘strategic’ and ‘believing’ prophets, and find some potential use in it. There is perhaps a third category, the ‘unwitting’ prophet – exemplified by the rumour-mongers who draw conclusions based upon deeply imperfect information to precipitate a bank run. In the case of globalisation discourse – which tends to be propagated by elites – it is the first the distinction between the ‘believing’ and ‘strategic’ prophets that is most interesting. The challenge here is

⁸ Again, most pollsters would not be happy with the idea that opinion polls are, in and of themselves, predictive tools. They tend to prefer to characterise polls as robustly constructed (and thus accurate) snapshot representations of public opinion at particular moments in time.

to find ways of distinguishing empirically between the two categories. The use of factor analysis to interpret questionnaire data designed to probe core beliefs is one such promising method (Smith and Hay, 2010)

The second issue is asks which actors can (and in what circumstances can they) enact performativity loops or potentially self-fulfilling prophecies? Discussion of the first issue intimated that ‘prophets’ can be unwitting and thus by definition non-elite. Butler’s approach to is a reminder that performativity is an ongoing process of social reproduction that requires widespread performance of particular propositions about gender characteristics and gender difference. As such we should look for recurrences of the prophecy/performative utterance throughout the performative life cycle, and we should be prepared to find that the mantle of prophet may be transferred from actor to actor. For example, the appearance of performative utterances about globalisation in the public statements of trade unions would, on the face of it, suggest not only successful dispersion of the discourse beyond its core neoliberal origins. It could also be read as part of the multiplication of prophets. We then encounter an issue about the point of origin of an idea with performative qualities. Do we need to trace a concept to its source, however obscure that might be? Or should we focus on what we construe to be the first moment of performative utterance? The question of the circumstances in which actors can unleash performativity loops has two senses. The first requires specification of criteria for establishing the success of a performative utterance (MacKenzie’s four-fold distinction would be very useful here). The second is to ask whether there are certain circumstances in which performativity can happen? Bank runs are more likely in periods of economic crisis. In this case the ‘unwitting’ prophet’s perception is not just influenced by her close observation of the bank that holds her life savings. It is also a function of the general climate of crisis and radical uncertainty. It might be argued, following the lead of an influential strand of ideational scholarship, that performativity is only possible in situations of radical uncertainty where normal the normal rational risk calculus is no longer trusted or deemed reliable. Just as there is a space for new ideas to come to the fore in such circumstances, so there is space for the plausible performative utterance. Indeed the latter may be one way in which the former moves from the domain of informed speculation to become ‘common-sensical’. Alternatively, performativity can be seen as a generic and pathological social condition.

The third issue – a question of sequencing – has been partially addressed. At what point is it possible for a proposition to be capable of becoming self-fulfilling? Does it have to have a *priori* status as a social fact? And how would this be validated empirically? Perhaps we can put this even more starkly. *What is it that becomes self-fulfilling?* In the course of the foregoing we have intimated that there are many candidates: equations that imagine the operation of an as yet non-existent market; a misplaced perception that a bank is in crisis; a set of social norms that reproduce pernicious power structures and which is so intense a social fact that it’s prophecy has been forgotten; a set of propositions about the optimal form of human government that were formulated in an ancient society and which have not been widespread in practice until the past 50 years. Rather than looking at the variety of instances perhaps it is better to think about this issue in another way. Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton

(2005), who concentrate on the double hermeneutic qualities of economic theory, suggest, three types of self-fulfilment: institutional design, norms and language. Institutional design inscribes the theories of institutional designers upon the social world and institutions create systems of incentives that structure subsequent actor behaviour (a formulation with classically historical institutionalist overtones). What self-fulfils here are propositions about how the social world should be organised institutionally and in policy terms. And the realisation takes place through the interaction of social actors with those institutions. Social norms describe the utterance's/prophecy's contribution to what is considered normal in the social world. A prime example is the norm of self-interest, presumed to be indigenous to human beings, but something that is reproduced *with the effect that* and *because* in numerous contexts self interest is perceived to be the socially appropriate mode of behaviour (Miller, 1999; Ratner and Miller, 2001). Finally language is the framework for comprehending the world. This is technically the domain of the linguistic utterance as action, although, of course, the other two types of self-fulfilment proceed through discursive construction.

If language/discourse is the medium through which all performative utterances proceed, then something might be made of the normative/technical distinction that remains. The idea here is to suggest that prophecies may persuade, proceed, and self-fulfil for normative or technical reasons. They may appeal to a logic of appropriateness (if *x*, then *y* should happen - normative reasoning) or a logic of consequence (if *x*, then *y* follows logically or must happen as a result) (March and Olsen, 1998).⁹

Discourses of globalisation clearly involve more than generic appeals to the broad concept. As we have seen, they embody both normative appeals and the invocation of technical logics of no alternative. They also link claims about the actuality of broad geo-economic conditions to preferences for specific policies. They also sit within, feed off and contribute to intellectual frameworks such as neoliberalism. This suggests that when we consider the politics of performativity in relation to globalisation, we should think about relationship between three levels of ideas, which we might tentatively arrange in a hierarchy (see table 1, which locates potential comparators to the globalisation hierarchy¹⁰). At the top of the hierarchy is the broad governing myth.¹¹ While there may be extensive academic and even technical literatures on the myth in question, its discursive elaboration is likely to be imprecise. Its technical and normative imperatives will be assumed rather than stated in discourse. Its primary intellectual framework, neoliberalism, acts a source of authorisation and functions as a relatively coherent worldview underpinning the prevalent version of the globalisation thesis. It is also generative of specific programmatic ideas that are clear derivatives of the myth and world view. Programmatic ideas can be constructed as technical solutions or as normatively appropriate, and provide the evidential sites for the adjudication of the success or otherwise of the prophecy in question.

⁹ Campbell's (1998) typology, distinguishing between cognitive and normative levels of ideas on the one hand and between foreground and background idea on the other, is also useful here.

¹⁰ On the clash of civilisations as self-fulfilling prophecy see Bottici and Challand, 2006.

¹¹ 'Myth' is used here in the Aristotelian sense of *mythos* – the first step in a plot rather than something that is of necessity wrong or erroneous

Table 1: Ideational hierarchies

<i>Myth</i>	Globalisation	Clash of Civilisations	Cosmopolitanism
<i>Worldview</i>	Neoliberalism	Neoconservatism	Liberal internationalism
<i>Programmatic idea (example)</i>	Flexible labour markets	Regime change	Humanitarian intervention

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