Neo-liberal civil society and the knowledge paradox: A case study of the Merida Initiative

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Workshop: “Pragmatic approaches to peacebuilding”

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Introduction
This paper will look at how the neo-liberal discourse of civil society speaks for a crisis of reductionist liberal-universal forms knowledge and associated top-down modes of governing. The analysis will start with a discussion of certification, a process by which the U.S. government annually reported on, and occasionally sanctioned, the (none-) compliance of foreign governments with U.S. law enforcement and interdictions policies. The discussion will recapitulate the major points of critique which were expressed in opposition to certification and draw out the implications of this critique for the kind of post-conditional regulation which the Merida Initiative, a U.S.-Mexican security cooperation agreement signed in 2007, subsequently engaged in. In particular, the analysis will draw out how the critique of certification involved a rejection of reductionist liberal-universal frameworks of analysis.
The second section engages with the work of Paul Lederach on peacebuilding and bottom-up forms of conflict resolution. Lederach’s argument that it is locally embedded subjects who have the requisite knowledge and political leverage for sustaining peace will serve as a paradigmatic example of all those academic and policy discussions which foreground local agency and stress the limits of outside knowability and top-down imposition. Following that, the paper will discuss how contemporary civil society policies and practices have been understood by Foucauldian governmentality studies. The analysis, here, will recur especially on the work of David Williams on the World Bank as being engaged in a “liberal project of social transformation”. Although Williams provides valuable insights into the expansive dynamic and extended scope of contemporary intervention through the neo-liberal civil society discourse, the methodological shortcoming – common to a lot of Foucauldian governmentality studies – seems to lie in the kind of knowledge-power implicitly ascribed to metropolitan policymakers. In Foucauldian governmentality studies, external interveners are still in possession of a coherent canon of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge which they are trying to impose from above through an innovative set of refined disciplinary techniques. In contrast, and as I will reconstruct from my empirical material on the Merida Initiative, neo-liberal civil society and post-conditional forms of regulation seem to be an attempt to govern after having lost that kind of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge. Put more starkly, I would like to argue that neo-liberal civil society discourse and practice are an attempt to govern (differently) after having lost the kind of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge which Foucauldian governmentality studies claim is being imposed or “embedded” in more refined and manipulative ways by post-conditional forms of regulation. In particular, the analysis will go into the logical structure of neo-institutional frameworks of understanding in order to draw out how locating causality in the socio-institutional context of subjects and the refutation of analytical reductionism continuously invite policymakers to look for the genuine representatives of truly local civil society a little bit closer to the ‘grassroots’ than they have done previously. Now, getting in touch with ‘local locals’ (Richmond 2011a; Richmond 2009; Richmond 2011b) and to enable their agency, instead of imposing one-size-fits-all policy solutions from above, requires from metropolitan policy elite to think in less universalist, reductionist ways. Neo-institutional learning, that is, invites policymakers to shed a little bit more of their crude, simplistic, Eurocentric assumptions if they really want to enable ‘local locals’. This is a paradoxical process. The more often neo-institutional policymakers learn, the less they know (in the reductionist sense of the term). In fact, the more they try to enable to agency of the Other in a none-imposing, ‘bottom-up’ way, they are actually able to do so because they are continuously taking apart their analytical and normative tools with to constructively engage with the world.
At the same time, the policy remit of enabling outside assistance grows. What we have to make sense of, then, is a somewhat ambivalent, contradictory, or paradoxical dynamic in which external interveners claim not to know the solutions anymore, but end up intervening more and more. They say that agency rests with the intervened, that they themselves cannot do ‘it’; but somehow they end up doing more and more. The answer, I suggest, lies in the way neo-institutional learning from failure works logically. Learning from failure discredits the erstwhile representatives of civil society as too universalist, as too detached from the ‘grassroots’. And it calls for enabling external policies to be less top-down the next time around. To think in less universalist terms, though, requires shedding some more established reductionist liberal-universal assumptions, categories of thinking etc. One of the major consequences of this process is that metropolitan policy elites are finding it increasingly difficult to actually formulate a conclusive, clearly articulated judgment as to whether or not regulated states and societies fulfill the set of predefined normative standards that Western policy elites somehow still feel attached to.

**Merida’s “Mechanism of Dialogue with Civil Society” as a critique of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge**

We may begin our discussion of external regulatory practice in the Merida Initiative with what it explicitly rejected: Certification. In fact, we can get a good idea of what external regulatory practice in the Merida Initiative looked like by sketching what it deliberately attempted not to be. What it wanted to avoid by all means was a return to the discredited certification process of the 1980s and 1990s. As former U.S. ambassador James Jones put it in a Congressional hearing at the beginning of the MI:

“I do think there needs to be accountability. However, [...] I hope we won’t resurrect the certification process that we had in the 1990s. That was a very counter-productive thing because you had the United States Government basically publicly grading the Mexican Government and the public officials. The political leaders in Mexico who were being graded, were actually being undercut in what they were trying to do by having this lecturing. So, accountability yes; the old certification process, no” (in: U.S. Congress 2007a, 59).

In consequence, when 15 percent of Merida funds were tied to the regular submission of (positive) human rights reports by the State Department, policymakers in Washington went through great pains not to have this obligation viewed as traditional conditionality. Representative Sanchez, for example, explained that the so-called “15%-report” did not “bear any resemblance to the flawed drug certification process” and that “the House and Senate Appropriations Committees took great care not to mirror that flawed certification process” (Sanchez, in House of Representatives 2008, H5138). And at a press conference in Mexico City, the U.S. embassy’s political counselor clarified that the 15%-report “is considered a dialogue with the U.S. Congress, rather than a certification
mechanism”, although he conceded that “Congress ultimately has funding authority” (U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2009).

In short, it is possible to trace in the Merida Initiative the emergence of a particular kind of regulatory practice, one which was cohered by a critique of certification. But what exactly made certification so problematic? How was certification criticized? And how was human rights reporting in the Merida Initiative to remedy the shortcomings of certification? For many years, the U.S. government annually compiled a list of drug-producing and drug-transiting countries, the so-called Majors List. States that found themselves on that list were subject to a variety of sanctions unless the U.S. government certified that its leadership had been fully cooperating with U.S. anti-narcotics efforts or had pursued appropriate policies on its own. Compliance was usually measured quantitatively in terms of number of arrests, drugs seizures and fumigated cultivation area. According to Ayling, certification constituted a “coercive strateg[y]” of the U.S. government to enlist foreign governments into the attempt to “further its drug policies internationally” (Ayling 2005, 376). Indeed, Ayling has captured well the openly coercive, top-down character of certification when writing that “[t]hrough this process the U.S. has conscripted drug-producing and drug-transiting states into the War on Drugs. Non-cooperative states have been threatened with a combination of aid and trade sanctions” (Ayling 2005, 376). The punitive character of certification comes out starkly in the list of negative sanctions imposed on decertified states. As Ayling enumerates, in case of decertification, U.S. representatives in multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, automatically “vote against any loan or other utilization of the bank’s funds for those countries”, U.S. security assistance may be “cut off”, non-food assistance and financing by the U.S. Export-Import Bank are “suspended” (Ayling 2005, 377–8). Trade sanctions apply, including the denial of preferential tariff treatment, the application of additional duties, curtailment of air transport and the withdrawal of U.S. customs personnel from that country (Ayling 2005, 378). In short, decertification was “coercion by way of the threat of aid withdrawal” (Ayling 2005, 378). Or, as Falco put it: “The consequences of failure appear severe: the cutoff of U.S. aid, U.S. opposition to World Bank and other multilateral development loans, and the stigma of being branded a drug-trafficking nation” (Falco 1995, 15). In other words, “[t]he key [of certification] lies in the consequences for countries of inclusion on the List” (Ayling 2005, 377). Certification, that is, worked ex post and in a punitive way through exclusion or deprivation. Certification was entirely unconcerned with the historical or institutional genesis of governmental decisions, i.e. what Fraser referred to as “process”. Certification did not care about process at all. Certification simply asked whether governmental performance on a pre-defined set of policy tasks was satisfactory or not. It was entirely uninterested in working on ‘root causes’. It only sanctioned their effects retrospectively. For its advocates, certification was a
“straightforward procedure” (Beers, in: U.S. Congress 2001, 27). But, at the end of the 1990s, certification became the object of growing critique. Certification was seen as leading policymakers into an impasse of either-or: “Many of us in Congress [...] have long sought an alternative to this process, which forces us to choose between the false alternatives of full cooperation (certification), or insufficient cooperation (decertification)” (Hutchison 1999).

Certification, it was argued, imposed a crude, “uniform” measure of evaluation on “widely differing objects”:

“[W]e could apply a single standard to such broad matters as cooperation, enthusiasm, zeal, or even the amount of drugs captured or interdicted. But how can we compare governments like that of Mexico, where the highest authorities are unusually forthcoming but middle and lower levels of government unreliable or demonstrable complicit, with Colombia, where the situation is very nearly reversed?” (Falcoff 1997).

“Recognizing differences”, in this perspective, involved “admit[ting] that a single standard of evaluation is elusive; that the problem cannot be reduced to bureaucratic formalities; that sanctions are an unwieldy, inefficient, and counterproductive weapon” (Falcoff 1997, emphasis added). There was obviously something going on beneath the current level of analysis of “bureaucratic formalities” that was much more important. Focusing on arrests and seizures alone diverted attention from much more decisive ‘deeper’ issues. It was effectively argued that certification was a “clumsy tool” because it “force[d] Washington into difficult choices between papering over problems [i.e. ‘deeper’ issues] or offending an otherwise friendly country” (The New York Times 1998). Instead of applying a one-size-fits-all standard that evaluated satisfactory governmental policy efforts, policymakers were beginning to ask themselves what it was that certification neglected to perceive, what remained outside of its view. Indeed, the approving stamp of certification was seen as hiding the most important issues within certified states. Policymakers began to realize that what certification actually did was to tap or obscure ‘deeper’ institutional deficiencies within certified states:

Certification merely “created the image that some countries were making substantial achievements in the fight against drugs. In other words, the process of certification helped some countries to hide their weaknesses and failures, because what the process measures is political will [of the national government] to fight the phenomenon, and not the effectiveness in doing so”, i.e. the institutional capacity of the bureaucratic apparatus below that government (Chabat 2000, 4, emphasis added).

Or, as policy pundit George Grayson argued in his popular book “Mexico - Narco-violence and a failed state”, the problem with certification was that Mexico only “begrudgingly [...] and sometimes superficially” complied with its regulations (Grayson 2011, 224, emphasis added).

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1 At the time, Rand Beers was Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement at the State Department.
The view that certification did not work on what was most relevant, that the really important objects of interest were out of sight was given further purchase by a critique of the unintended consequences of the specific policies that were being promoted by it, i.e. law enforcement and interdiction. In an institutional environment where “civil liberties are not effectively guaranteed, judicial systems are already weak and corrupt, and militaries commit abuse of human rights”, the top-down imposition of law enforcement and interdiction policies through certification constantly caused country-specific negative unintended side-effects (Latin America Working Group 2000). It is in this way that the critique of certification allowed a new set of governmental objects to surface, i.e. the governing capacity of state institutions and the quality of governance, and to reposition them as the new central objects of external regulatory concern.

What is most important here for the purpose of my argument is that the institutional deficiencies which the critique of certification drew attention to was formulated in terms of the inappropriate categories of analysis informing the certification process. Certification and the kind of policies it promoted were based on standardized, overly reductionist and contextually insensitive categories of understanding the drug problematic and what to do about it. They were guided solely by a narrow interest in arrests and seizures. And it was these standardized categories of thinking focusing on a single objective that could be measured quantitatively which blocked policymakers from perceiving the kind of issues that were actually relevant and that needed outside attention. The critique of certification cited above is, in fact, a critique of governing through the imposition of reductionist categories of analysis. In certification, the way governing reflected on the objects of regulation neglected the really relevant aspects of governance, i.e. institutional deficiencies (Chabat 2000), brought into stark relief by the unintended consequences of law enforcement and interdiction policies (Latin America Working Group 2000). The critique of certification, then, was really a critique of top-down forms of governing based on standardized categories of analysis. Or, as Falcoff said, certification failed to “recognize differences”, instead imposing a “single standard” of evaluation upon great empirical diversity (Falcoff 1997). The critique of certification was a critique of the ways in which standardized, reductionist categories of analysis focusing on a single issue of instrumental interest fail to touch upon the really relevant objects in the causality of governance problems, masking the empirical richness of reality, and how, in fact, top-down forms of governing that are based on a single utilitarian interest and standardized categories of analysis cause detrimental unintended consequences instead.

Critiquing certification as a standardized, over-simplified optic – hiding what is actually relevant – seems to have been a critique that was quite similar to the argument made by James Scott in “Seeing like a state” (Scott 1998; for a summary, see Scott 2010). Critiquing certification for its neglect of the governance issues which, it is now realized, are the actually important components in the production
of governance problems seems to carry within it a Scottian opposition against top-down forms of
government that recur on standardized, simplified categories of analysis. For Scott, it is the fact that
the state operates through a limited range of standardized categories of analysis and tries to impose
them indiscriminately on a diverse social fabric that causes great harm for the intended beneficiaries
of development schemes. Scott argues that “[c]ertain forms of knowledge and control require a
narrowing of vision” (Scott 1998, 11). Scott refers to this limited view as “state simplifications”, i.e.
“abridged maps” that “represented only that slice of it [reality] that interested the official observer”
(Scott 1998, 3). The power of this “tunnel vision”, according to Scott, “is that it brings into sharp
focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very
simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and
hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation” (Scott 1998, 11). Scott criticizes the
utilitarian relation to knowledge as evinced by large state bureaucracies whose “abstractions and
simplifications are disciplined by a small number of objectives [...]” (Scott 1998, 23). It is their
“sharply focused interest” which forces planners into “finding clear-cut answers to one question”
(Scott 1998, 46, see also p. 346). The synoptic view from above – in Scott’s study, the “cyclopean
shortsightedness of high-modernist agriculture” – necessarily implies that the observed phenomena
“lose their particularity and reappear in schematic or simplified forms as members of a class of
facts”, “ignoring distinctions that might otherwise be relevant” (Scott 1998, 81). Standardization is
the central aspect of “state simplifications”: “However unique the actual circumstances to the
various individuals who make the aggregate, it is their sameness, or more precisely, their difference
along a standardized scale of continuum that are of interest” (Scott 1998, 80). Now, what Scott is
most concerned with are the “dangers of dismembering an exceptionally complex and poorly
understood set of relations and processes in order to isolate a single element of instrumental value”
(Scott 1998, 21). For Scott, bureaucratic categories are simply “too coarse, too static, and too stylized
to do justice to the world that they purport to describe”, and subsequently attempt to transform
(Scott 1998, 262). What counts most for the success or failure of development projects are the “small
details that are simply too minute to be visible within a standardizing grid” (Scott 1998, 297). And it is
these neglected details – “realities that were under their [planners’] nose but not under their aegis” –
that cause an array of unintended consequences sabotaging the entire development effort; often
with devastating effects for the purported beneficiaries (Scott 1998, 260, 21).

With Scott’s critique of “state simplifications” in mind, what I found most intriguing in the policy
discussion on certification as a failed regulatory practice was a quote by the Latin America Working
Group (LAWG), a lose conglomerate of Washington-based human rights NGOs focusing on Latin
America. According to the LAWG, “[c]ertification is based on the idea that the US knows best how to
solve the international drug problem” (Latin America Working Group 2000, emphasis added). It goes
on to argue that “[…] [C]ertification is based only on the US government’s idea of what constitutes progress […]” (Latin America Working Group 2000).

And Cottam and Marenin seem to be putting their fingers on the same aspect of the kind of knowledge-power involved in certification when arguing that what is at stake in certification is “the assertion by the United States that it has the right to decide who is and who is not in compliance with international conventions and the concomitant authority to punish others for transgressions of international law, as unilaterally determined by the U.S. […]” (Cottam and Marenin 1999, 224).

I read these two quotes as indicative of how certification seems to have been premised on a position of the external evaluator that assumed universally applicable knowledge and the authority to apply this knowledge across the board in a top-down way. Certification, that is, was a practice of regulation in which external interveners assumed a bird’s eye view, replete with a universal theory of how the world works, in this case the international drug market, and from which they were able to impose a uniform set of standards and policy prescriptions, irrespective of the unique specificities of local context. And it would appear that the rise to preeminence of the problematic of institutional deficiencies and negative side-effects represents a break with this kind of universalist, top-down knowledge-power. Somehow, I found it difficult to think of Merida’s 15%-reports as a continued top-down imposition of universalist knowledge claims of the type that the LAWG is referring to in its critique of certification. Moving beyond certification was articulated through a critique of crude “uniform standards of evaluation” (Falcoff 1997) and a rejection of one-size-fits-all policies and the claims to universal knowledge that underpinned both. The unintended consequences of the policies promoted by certification and all the problematic governance issues it failed to even perceive brought home to policymakers the need to face the challenge of moving beyond imposing one-size-fits-all policy solutions and to rid themselves of their obstructive standardized categories of analysis and measurement. The critique of certification made it increasingly difficult to impose policy solutions from above through reward and punishment and to interpret the empirical diversity of intervened societies through a set of reductionist, standardized categories of analysis and evaluation. Imposing particular policies from above, as did certification, and acting in accordance with a case-unspecific universal set of categories, assumptions etc. would bear the acute possibility of missing the most relevant aspects of social, economic and political life within intervened societies and of causing negative side-effects instead. The U.S. approach, therefore, should not be to “discipline other countries developing innovative […] strategies, or to impose a rigid supply-side model on the rest of the world” (Spencer 1998). The failure of certification, then, was seen as laying in the reductionist, simplified (read universalist) underpinnings of the knowledge that interveners were wrapped-up in and, correspondingly, their top-down approach to government. The critique of certification, then,
was rather close to Scott’s critique of universalist, top-down knowledge-power as exhibited in “state simplifications”.

When the Latin America Working Group opposes certification for being based on the U.S. government’s claim to “know[] best how to solve the international drug problem”, their criticism seems to resonate quite strongly with Scott’s claim that it was the “insistence” of “hubris[tic]” policymakers that “they had a monopoly on useful knowledge and that they impose this knowledge” which “set the stage for disaster” (Scott 1998, 247). On a more general level, and as we will see towards the end of this paper, the kind of regulatory practice which succeeded certification, i.e. 15%-reporting, was concerned with some of the same epistemological and governmental issues that Scott had identified as problematic in his analysis of failed agricultural development projects: universalist knowledge claims and associated top-down forms of government. One might say that 15%-reporting in the Merida Initiative grew out of a similar line of reasoning on the limits of external knowability and top-down malleability, i.e. the locus of agency, as that in Scott’s “Seeing like a state” in that they both seem to coincide in “making a case against an imperial or hegemonic […] mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how” (Scott 1998, 6).

**Civil society: The bottom-up perspective**

We may usefully begin our discussion of the neo-liberal discourse of civil society by an analysis of John Paul Lederach’s influential book “Building peace - Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies” (Lederach 2008). “Building peace” was a landmark contribution to academic and policy discussions which foregrounded local agency as the key remedy to the negative repercussions of traditional, top-down forms of intervention.

Lederach builds up his argument from the notion of unintended, or “paradoxical”, consequences (Lederach 2008, 16). According to Lederach, “statist approach[es]” to peace-building have inadvertently facilitated the escalation and prolongation of violent conflict. Contemporary violent conflict has been marked by a “multiplicity of fluid groups and alliances” and “diffuse” “decision-making power” (Lederach 2008, 16). In this context of fluidity and multiplicity, Lederach argues, “a rigid statist approach is likely to empower a few people who claim representation and have the paradoxical consequence that, to be taken seriously by the international community, a leader must demonstrate a military capacity” (Lederach 2008, 16). In Lederach’s framing of unintended consequences, it is the under-complex, simplistic categories of understanding civil conflict and armed violence, i.e. “a rigid statist approach”, that “may explain the proliferation […] of armed movements vying for recognition” (Lederach 2008, 16–7). In fact, Lederach’s notion of unintended consequence articulates the view that it is the reductionist assumptions of representation held by metropolitan interveners that facilitate the emergence of violent actors in civil conflict situations. Unintended
consequences problematize claims to universal knowledge that are implicitly contained within the cognitive frameworks of previous interventions. Lederach elaborates further on the incompatibility between the new nature of contemporary violent conflict and universal knowledge. For Lederach, the biggest obstacle to successful peacebuilding lies in the inadequacy of existing concepts, categories, and frameworks of thinking—a “lack of appropriate and adequate concepts, approaches, and modalities for intervention” and in particular the reliance on “traditional statist diplomacy, despite its inadequacies in responding to the nature of conflicts today” (Lederach 2008, 16). Statist approaches are really too ‘high’, too undifferentiated, too crude, too reductionist to be able to productively speak to the empirical complexity and fundamentally altered nature of contemporary conflict situations (see also Richmond 2009; Richmond 2010; Richmond 2011a; Richmond 2011b). Lederach reinforces this point by discussing the irrational motivations driving conflict parties today (see also Kaldor 1999). Existing analytical frameworks are too far out of touch with the thick motivation of actors. Rational conceptions of actor behavior do not capture the “cultural and psychological elements driving and sustaining the conflict” (Lederach 2008, 17). Lederach argues that existing rationalist frameworks of understanding “view[] armed conflict as primarily motivated and sustained by substantive interests” and, hence, have sought solutions “within a framework of compromise on these interests” (Lederach 2008, 17). For Lederach, this reductionist understanding of the actors involved can only fail to achieve lasting peace. That is because contemporary conflicts are “driven by psychological elements – long-standing animosities rooted in a perceived threat to identity and survival” (Lederach 2008, 17). In other words, “[...] conflict is born out of human meaning and perception” and, therefore, is not open to traditional, rationalist forms of analysis and government (Lederach 2008, 63). It is more of an object of analysis for constructivist scholars, than for under-sociologized rational-choice theory. Policy reflection has to “go beyond the negotiation of substantive interests and issues”, “prob[ing] into the realm of the subjective” (Lederach 2008, 25).

If unintended consequences are propelled by the interveners’ ‘crude’, ‘under-complex’ universalist frameworks of understanding, what are the implications for governing? What is the point of unintended consequences for government? Well, what government has to fully acknowledge, according to Lederach, is the futility and even counter-productive effects of rational planning and top-down imposition of policy prescriptions. Lederach opposes any “mechanical formula”: “With the right plan in mind and the right materials, skills, and resources in hand, peace would just fall into place! But anyone who has lived in settings of protracted conflict or engaged in peacemaking activities in divided societies knows that standardized formulas do not work” (Lederach 2008, 23, emphasis added). Metropolitan policymakers, according to Lederach, have yet to fully appreciate that “rational and mechanical processes and solutions aimed at conflict transformation [are] not only ineffective but also in many settings irrelevant or offensive” (Lederach 2008, 24). If external policy
efforts are at all going to be “germane to contemporary conflict”, they will necessarily have to be “rooted in and responsive to the experiential and subjective realities shaping people’s perspectives and needs”, and doing so requires “shift[ing] significantly from the traditional framework and activities that make up statist diplomacy” (Lederach 2008, 24). That is, only bottom-up forms of government, “tak[ing] into consideration the legitimacy [and] uniqueness […] of the needs and resources” within intervened societies, may be able to make an outside “contribution” (Lederach 2008, 60, xvi). External policy interventions have to become endeavors of exploration, rather than imposition: “[…] [C]onsiderable attention must be given to discovering and building on the cultural resources for conflict resolution that exist within the context” (Lederach 2008, 97, emphasis added).

Bottom-up governing through enabling local agency really involves “mov[ing] beyond a simple prescription of answers and modalities for dealing with conflict that come from outside the setting and focus[ing] at least as much attention on discovering and empowering the resources, modalities, and mechanisms, for building peace that exist within the context” (Lederach 2008, 95). This is a key turning point for the consolidation of a neo-liberal understanding of civil society for it marks the displacement of agency, i.e. the kind of knowledge-power to actually solve problems, from metropolitan policymakers to those ‘at the grassroots’: “[…] [T]he greatest vitality and innovation in peacebuilding are to be found at the grassroots level […]” (Lederach 2008, 158). Lederach’s account is really an exercise in self-humbling, a realization of how little interveners can achieve when trying to impose one-size-fits-all blueprints from above. And it really abounds with praise for the creative agency of local actors. In this framework, the role of interveners is ‘limited’ to “establishing an infrastructure”, “an infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society” (Lederach 2008, xvi). So, there continues to be an important governing role for interveners. But it is essentially an indirect, enabling function, “work[ing] through existing networks” (Lederach 2008, 55, emphasis added). There continues to be a hierarchy of (in-) capacity as well as a fixed normative standard by which to judge the final outcomes of local policy solutions. But the way in which external policymakers rationalize their practices is now based on the realization that they themselves cannot solve problems anymore: “[…] [I]t should be remembered that [local] actors, not external players, are best equipped to sustain conflict transformation” (Lederach 2008, 94). In that regard, it becomes indispensable for a local “peace constituency” to emerge. External interveners themselves cannot be that constituency nor can they merely transplant such a social group from the outside. It has to be locally grown:

“An important task in the development of a framework for sustaining reconciliation is to build a peace constituency within the setting. Conceptually at a very basic level, this means that the international community must see people in the setting as resources, not recipients. In other words, citizen-based peacemaking must be seen as instrumental and integral, to sustaining change” (Lederach 2008, 94, original emphasis).
The governing role of interveners, in Lederach’s argument, should be one of “provid[ing] space, creat[ing] links with, and enhance[ing] the capacity of internal resources” (Lederach 2008, 102). Enabling the “participation of people” does necessitate outside engagement. And outside assistance, in turn, calls for a “referent set of categories that help orient our [interveners’] reflection and guide it toward concrete action” (Lederach 2008, 107). But, the external referents that Lederach proposes as orienting categories for external policy enablers are, in fact, a set of questions to which local actors have to figure out the answers for and by themselves:

> “Who has respect, linkages, and understanding across levels of conflict and across divisions?”,
> “What training/capacity building would enhance their ability to impact the situation?”, “What key networks and sectors hold potential for conflict transformation and sustaining peace?”,
> “What resources exist in the cultural context that shape sociopolitical landscapes?”, “What are the long-term visions for peaceful communities in this setting?” (Lederach 2008, 114, see table on pages 114-5).

As far as interveners are concerned, the biggest barrier to enabling local agency is their own “prescriptive models and techniques for handling conflict” (Lederach 2008, 107). That is, if policymakers ‘really’ want to enable local agency, they have to rid themselves of their “cultural baggage” and “engage the trainee as the primary resource in seeking processes and responses appropriate to the conflict setting” (Lederach 2008, 107). For Lederach, external interventions are held back by overly reductionist analytical assumptions, instead of building on and unleashing local agency as a knowledge-power resource. Policy, for Lederach, is still too universalist. If policymakers really want to unblock the local knowledge-power – the kind of local agency that holds the promise of actually solving governance problems – they have to radically purge their approaches of everything that remains reductionist, universalist, and top-down about them.

**Civil society in Foucauldian governmentality studies**

At this point, the study should discuss how contemporary civil society policies have been viewed by the most popular strand of critical IR, namely Foucauldian governmentality studies. The goal here is to reconstruct how governmentality studies propose a reading of contemporary civil society policies that is implicitly reproducing a conceptualization of intervention as informed by a universalist body of knowledge and as working through – contextually refined – top-down forms of government. The emphasis on local knowledge and bottom-up government expressed through the discourse of civil society is for governmentality studies a refinement of disciplinary techniques of normalization. Foregrounding local participation in civil society policies is somehow disingenuous because it merely obfuscates the continued imposition of externally defined (liberal) blueprints. In other words, governing through civil society, here, is still a variant of universalist, top-down knowledge-power. This is an important conceptual position demanding detailed critical discussion before we will be able
to contrast it to the interpretation of neo-liberal civil society and bottom-up government provided by
the knowledge paradox. As the analysis will reconstruct in the later sections of this paper, the way
bottom-up governing through neo-liberal civil society is thought to work is, in fact, a fundamental
critique and rejection of universalist, top-down knowledge-power. Civil society as a discursive
mediation for cohering bottom-up forms of government is actually the attempt to govern after
having lost the kind of universalist, top-down knowledge-power which Foucauldian governmentality
studies suggest is being refined by it.

Arguably, one of the most prominent representatives of Foucauldian governmentality studies is
David Williams (Williams 1996; Williams 1999; Williams 2008; Williams 2010; Williams 2012; Williams
and Young 1994). Williams’ work on World Bank development interventions as a “liberal project of
social transformation” has been hugely influential in cohering governmentality studies’ view on
contemporary civil society policies and practices (Williams 2012, 7; see Harrison 2004; Fraser 2005).
According to Williams, the civil society policies currently being pursued by the World Bank have to be
seen against the background of a set of “ambiguities” or “tensions” within liberal thought (Williams
2012, 12). For Williams, the World Bank employs a “recognizably liberal concept” of civil society and
therefore confronts the same kind of contradictions and obstacles which liberal thought identified to
the realization of its ideal. According to Williams, liberal thought has been riddled by a fundamental
tension between its “philosophical mode” and its “sociological mode”. On the one hand, “liberal
thinkers have tended to want to ground liberal thought in traits that are deemed ‘natural’ in one way
or another: autonomy [or] the ability to reason” (Williams 2008, 12). On the other hand, “many of
these same thinkers were profoundly impressed by how malleable people were – by how influenced
they actually were by religion, custom and tradition; so much so that many of these supposedly
‘natural’ traits were absent from social life” (Williams 2008, 12). Williams reconstructs in the works
of Locke, Smith, and Mill “a general tension” between “‘nature’” and “‘culture’” which drives
liberalism as a project of social transformation: “We should understand the identification of those
features of social life (tradition, religion, elites) that hinder the establishment of liberal ends and
arrangements as a key feature of liberalism’s political project” (Williams 2008, 25). Importantly, this
is not a matter of abstract theoretical discussion: “These tensions do not merely reflect diversity
within the liberal tradition, or simply a failure of internal consistency, but rather the ‘political project’
at the heart of all liberal thought” (Williams 2012, 9). For Williams, civil society policies reflect a quite
substantive (liberal) vision of how exactly the world should look like. It is the “mismatch between
what people actually think and do, and what liberals think they should think and do” that fuels
liberalism as a political project and, as such, informs World Bank policies of civil society building
(Williams 2008, 25). That is, to the extent that actual practices and mentalities deviate from the
liberal ideal of autonomous and rational subjection, civil society policies of the World Bank are
revealed to be insertion into new forms of discipline” (Williams 2008, 12). Local deviants are supposed to be “disciplined to be free” (Williams 1996, 173). For Williams, civil society policies are “social engineering” at its extreme, “inculcat[ing] good (liberal) practices” and “eliminat[ing] bad (illiberal) practices”: “In these projects Western development agencies are engaged in creating a ‘civil society’ with the right kinds of attitudes and skills” (Williams 2012, 17, 18).

So, we have a liberal ideal in theoretical reflection and a set of tensions between that image and the empirical observations derived from sociological reflection. And the way interventionary policy handles these tensions is by bending or curbing local diversity towards the ideal of autonomy, rationality, self-interest etc., thereby, inserting subjects into new disciplinary techniques (Williams 2008, 19). In Williams’ analysis of civil society policies, intervention is still guided by very substantive (liberal) role model(s), such as the autonomous rational subject. And the purpose of civil society policies is to actualize these liberal ideals, to make them real, to discipline subjects into conformity with the abstract, allegedly ‘natural’, behavioral assumptions of liberal thinking:

“They are designed to create the particular form of subjectivity necessary for the market economy to function. Among other things, these various projects and programmes are designed to teach people the basic tenets of micro-economics, to promote various forms of capitalist accounting techniques, to see the connection between products and costs, to employ recognizably modern management practices, and to use a ‘systematic’ approach to problem solving. The self which these projects are designed to create is disengaged and autonomous (freed from negative and dangerous social outcomes), innovative and reflexive (using a ‘systematic approach to problem solving’) and calculating (through functional numeracy and accounting techniques)” (Williams 1999, 95).

Civil society is really a massive and detailed disciplinary apparatus charged with effectuating or realizing the theoretical assumptions which liberal thought, in fact, posits as being ‘natural’. It is this over-determining imperative to “create liberalism” which unveil all the references to participation and ownership as mere rhetoric (Williams 2008, 30). All the talk about local ownership and participation just belies the persistent projection of liberal transformative power: “Yet despite the (it must be said, rather bland and formulaic) rhetoric of these documents, projects and programmes, on closer analysis even they (and certainly many others) betray all the ambiguities and tensions about civil society we identified within liberal thought more generally” (Williams 2012, 12). “[F]or all the talk of building on ‘indigenous’ values and institutions”, the “governance vision” of the World Bank “is of a […] society made up of groups and individuals who have attitudes, habits and mores suited to the market economy and liberal social relations” (Williams 2008, 115). The role model of the World Bank in the legal, bureaucratic and economic realm is “premised upon the individual who has no other ‘public’ ties than contractual ones he chooses for himself” (Williams and Young 1994, 97–8).

From this understanding of civil society as a liberal project of social transformation flows a particular view of external regulatory practice, as well. Or as Williams writes: “There are certain characteristically liberal ways of conceptualizing the world which account for the particular
disciplinary techniques used by the bank” (Williams 1996, 170). To recap, Williams argues that a distinctly liberal project is “expressed through the agency of the World Bank” (Williams 2008, 30). That is, civil society policies pursued by the World Bank have assumed a set of “universal” characteristics of subjection “underneath the superficial variety of culturally conditioned behavior” (Williams and Young 1994, 97). And where these social practices “diverge[] from certain liberal understandings [...] they are to be reformed” (Williams 2012, 17; see also Williams 2008, 90).

The methodological implications of this understanding of contemporary civil society policies can be drawn out nicely by reconstructing how Williams sees the emergence of good governance after the failure of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). SAPs regulated “using the ‘incentives’ associated with conditional lending” (Williams 2008, 48). Over time, though, it became clear that this kind of regulation “was not working”, that SAPs had run into a “problem of implementation” (Williams 2008, 59, 61). According to Williams, “[t]his led the Bank to consider a much more wide-ranging institutional and political reform program” (Williams 2008, 48). What SAPs proved was that “attempting to use incentives as a mechanism for inducing policy reform was less than successful” (Williams 2008, 60). The “successful implementation of structural adjustment” made it necessary to “generate” “ownership’ both within borrower governments and within social groups” (Williams 2008, 60, original emphasis). For the Bank it became increasingly clear that the issue of structural adjustment was “not [one] of ensuring compliance, but of ensuring agreement with its loan conditions” through ‘dialogue’ and ‘participation’ (read socialization) (Williams 2008, 60). In brief, the Bank was forced to “rework the attitudes and commitments of politicians and bureaucrats” (Williams 2008, 60). The problems with implementing SAPs were compounded by the “poor private sector response to adjustment” (Williams 2008, 61). Rather than a mere change in formal economic policies, it was the “institutional framework within which the private sector operated” that determined economic development (Williams 2008, 61). This got the World Bank concerned with such issues as the legal system, the regulatory framework and contract enforcement: “This implied that much more detailed institutional engineering was necessary to produce a dynamic market economy” (Williams 2008, 61). In sum, the failed implementation of SAPs and the heightened concern with institutional frameworks for the successful functioning of competitive market economies “has led the World Bank to contemplate an all-encompassing liberal project of social transformation that extends not just to countries’ economies, but also to their political, institutional and social structures, and the thoughts and behavior of individuals” (Williams 2008, 91–2). Here we can see clearly how Williams understands ‘bottom-up’ governing as still essentially a top-down exercise: “[...][T]he construction of a liberal institutional order must be accompanied by the use of techniques to effect much more micro-level transformations of behavior. The building of a liberal order must start right from the bottom” (Williams 1996, 172).
Williams is able to make the argument that what came after structural adjustment was an escalation and refinement of top-down disciplinary government because he has a view of external interveners as being in possession of hegemonic liberal-universal knowledge. It is because “[t]he Bank claimed to know better than developing country governments about what was good for their economies and societies [...]” that it is able to continue imposing policy solutions from above in ever more refined and perfidious ways. What has changed after SAP is the technical modalities through which this claim to universal knowledge is being exercised in governmental practice. That is why ‘participation’ in Williams arguments is really just a fig leaf for something known and inculcated from above: “It is hard to avoid the conclusion, not that Western donors do not really ‘want’ participation, but that it is designed to elicit the consent of certain kinds of groups to a development strategy that is significantly determined by the donors” (Williams 2012, 13–4). There are important implicit assumptions at play here about the kind of knowledge-power that external interveners are thought to possess and that consequently inform the way government is understood to operate. We may carve out these assumptions by reconstructing how Williams considers the World Bank to be engaged in what he calls “‘geographical universalism’” (Williams 2008, 21). The starting point for what Williams’ calls “geographical universalism” is again the ideal of the liberal subject, i.e. ‘nature’.

For Williams, liberal thought, as embodied in World Bank practice and policy, delineates particular traits of individuals which “are understood to be invariant and universal” which in turn “implies that the social arrangements desirable for this kind of person are also universally desirable” (Williams 2008, 20). That is, liberal thinking is grounded “in some kind of universal claim about the nature of persons” (Williams 2008, 20). As Williams explains:

“It seems safe to say that, in general at least, liberalism’s claims are grounded in an account of individuals, and that the claims about the characteristics of individuals that provide liberalism with its foundation are universalist in theoretical ambition. One of the things that follows from this general theoretical orientation is what we might call a ‘geographical universalism’. Given that all people, everywhere, are the same (they have the same ‘nature’), all people everywhere would benefit from liberal social arrangements” (Williams 2008, 21).

In other words, there is in liberalism a “genuinely universal vision”: “[...] [T]hey really want to change these lives” (Williams 2008, 21, 22). And the way this universalizing project of liberalism works in government is through “prescription” (Williams 2008, 22). But prescription only makes sense because “liberals believe themselves to be in possession of the truth about social and political affairs” (Williams 2008, 21). Williams sums this up brilliantly: “[...] [F]or being in the possession of a truth for all means liberals cannot rest easy simply in the knowledge that they are right; they must attempt, if they can, to foist this on everyone else” (Williams 2008, 21).

In other words, local subjects do not know what is best for them; the World Bank does. The World Bank knows what is best for them because it knows what their true ‘nature’ is (Williams 2008, 90).
And not only does the World Bank know what is best for other people. It also knows how to achieve it: “[A]rguments grounded on universal human nature provide the justification for closing the gap [between ‘nature’ and “actual habits, actions and practices”], and liberalism’s sociology provides the resources for thinking about how this is to be done” (Williams 2008, 26). In Williams’ account of contemporary civil society policies, external interveners are clearly still in possession of universalist, top-down knowledge-power. Universalist knowledge-power is applied through disciplinary techniques in a rather top-down way in which ‘participation’ and ‘ownership’ are really just local ideational resources to be instrumentalized or harnessed in order to more effectively embed a pre-defined, substantive (liberal) notion of the subject, society, economy and the state.

As I will further elaborate in the next section, I have some doubts as to whether metropolitan policymakers are still in possession of the kind of liberal-universalist, top-down knowledge-power that Williams seems to be implying in his discussion of World Bank practice as a “liberal project of social transformation”. It would seem that what is at stake in contemporary civil society policies, including Lederach’s understanding of how peacebuilding is to change, is arguably not liberal-universalist, top-down knowledge-power anymore.

In order to work this out, we may take a closer look at what is most intriguing about the neo-liberal notion of civil society and the attempt to empower it from the outside: The difficulty of ever identifying its genuine representatives, i.e. truly “‘local locals’” (Richmond 2011a; Richmond 2011b; Richmond 2010). It is astonishing that governmentality studies do not stumble over their own empirical findings when writing that “[r]ecent donor assessments of public consultation in the PRS [Poverty Reduction Strategy] process have consistently underscored the need to deepen and further institutionalize civil participation […]” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 50, emphasis added). It seems to me that governmentality studies make out policymakers to be more bearish than they really are. Criticizing the representatives of civil society for their limited (read Westernized or universalistic) social basis and world view is, in fact, a mainstay of constructive critics within the contemporary statebuilding project. In fact, it is key for understanding what civil society is really all about. When Alastair Fraser, for instance, criticizes PRSPs for failing to engage with the “forces driving actually existing civil society in Africa” he does not seem to take into account how precisely this kind of critique is an essential operating element of bottom-up government and its expansion through the discourse of civil society (Fraser 2005, 330, original emphasis). If governmentality studies argue that “‘civil society’ remains more promise than achievement”, why is that? Why is it so difficult for outsiders to lay their hands on ‘genuine’ civil society in order to enable what only ‘local locals’ know and – propped-up by external expertise – may be able to accomplish? Why is it so difficult to allow local knowledge to come to the fore?
Now, governmentality studies say this is due to an “idealized notion of virtuous NGOs” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 60):

“An idealized and generalized way of discussing NGOs reflects the longing of an aid industry disillusioned with state performance to identify an alternative force that can challenge and reform the public structures which are presumed to be complicit in the production and maintenance of poverty” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 60).

For Foucauldian governmentality studies, what is most important about civil society normatively is the way in which actually existing society – its messiness and impurity – relates to a liberal ideal (assumed to be informing policy), and is, due its discrepancy from that ideal, excluded from policy making. It is the “small print” of civil society that effectively excludes the actual variety of political and economic arrangements found in the world: “[…] [T]he forces of ‘civilization’ remain significantly empowered in the quest for their own particular totality” (Hopgood 2000, 3, see also “post-liberalism”, Richmond 2011a). What has changed since the early settler colonialism in North America is “a decline in the publicity surrounding the inculcation of virtue” (Hopgood 2000, 3). This is an important normative concern. Nevertheless, my understanding is that policymakers are fully aware of the ‘selection bias’ which governmentality studies so vehemently criticize in neo-liberal civil society policies. But, if that is so, then, the question we should be asking, to my mind, is how exactly governing through this critique works. As I will explain further below, it seems like Foucauldian governmentality studies are running into open doors these days, missing what is most intriguing about the neo-liberal civil society framework: The way it enables serendipitous expansion through neo-institutional learning, articulating the knowledge paradox of statebuilding. Policymakers are much more intellectually engaged than governmentality-inspired scholars would like to admit when crafting their arguments of hegemonic liberal knowledge claims and disciplinary micro-regulation. Neo-institutional policymakers are a lot more self-reflexive than they are made out to be in the prefabricated, and somehow self-complacent, critiques of civil society as undemocratic, technocratic etc. This is not to give policymakers credit for a kind of critical thinking they are obviously not doing. The point is: Policymakers themselves voice the same kind of critique against civil society policies that governmentality studies are throwing at them incessantly. But, if metropolitan policymakers themselves delegitimize the representatives of civil society for their liberal-universalist ways of thinking, and the policy solutions that derive from them, and, in reaction, try to deconstruct the ‘simplistic’, ‘reductionist’, Eurocentric theorectizations, assumptions etc. by means of which they have identified them, then, this raises important questions about the relationship between critique and government. My concern would be to start thinking about how governing through the critique of social selectivity works.
Civil society in the Merida Initiative: The knowledge paradox

In order to cohere my own theoretical interpretation of neo-liberal civil society and the way in which it facilitates serendipitous (epistemic) expansion and in order to contrast my understanding to that of more popular Foucauldian governmentality studies, outlined above, the analysis needs to go back into empirics. Let us (re-) start with the observation by the Latin America Working Group that certification entailed a claim to universal knowledge: “Certification is based on the idea that the US knows best how to solve the international drug problem” (Latin America Working Group 2000, emphasis added). Now, first of all, what I would like to reconstruct from my empirical material on the Merida Initiative is that there seems be something about the way regulatory practice is rationalized in that particular instance that indicates to us that the claim to universal knowledge to which the LAWG is alluding to has gone missing today and that, in consequence, associated forms of top-down government no longer appear to be appropriate either. I will show through my empirical material that regulatory practice within the Merida Initiative seems to be an attempt to govern differently – more from the bottom-up – and that governing through local agency, through local knowledge and power, is bound up with metropolitan policymakers having lost, i.e. deconstructed, their own claims to liberal-universal, top-down knowledge-power.

The one thing that got policymakers in the Merida Initiative thinking about new ways of governing beyond the “clumsy tool” of certification was the issue of unintended consequences. At a workshop at the Wilson Center, ITAM Professor Miguel Sarre echoed a wide-spread concern of Merida’s policy community. Sarre thought that Merida could “provide an opportunity to promote the rule of law and its accompanying security”, but that there existed “fundamental issues that must be considered if we are to ensure that this effort of bi-national cooperation is not counterproductive” (Sarre 2008). One of the issues that Sarre worried about was that “through the Merida Initiative, the Mexican and United States governments are injecting large amounts of money and technology into the Mexican military and police forces” (Sarre 2008). “On account of the poor human rights record of these institutions and the existence of corruption within them”, Sarre pledged for funding “only [to] come after reform and after accountability mechanisms are instituted” (Sarre 2008). “Otherwise”, he argued, “we might be subsidizing those we are attempting to combat” (Sarre 2008).

In fact, Sarre’s concern with unintended consequences is, in a way, quite similar to Lederach’s critique of “statist” approaches to peacebuilding. Sarre, for example, is against measuring the success of the Merida Initiative in terms of arrests and seizures in Mexico because using arrests and seizures as indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of the Merida Initiative would only “evolve into an abuse of power by prosecutors desperate to find culprits” (Sarre 2008); just like for Lederach, it were the simplistic “statist” categories of representation used to analyze civil conflict that incited local actors to engage in mass violence in order to gain international recognition as faction leaders.
Unintended consequences really loomed large in the policy debate on the Merida Initiative. They might even have been its single most important governmental problematic and even made their way into Merida’s discourse of “shared responsibility”:

“The United States is [...] in a powerful position to support Mexico’s efforts to combat drug trafficking organizations, but also has an obligation to make sure that human rights are respected in the process. If the war on drugs is a joint task, then protecting against human rights violations and other unintended consequences also should be a shared responsibility” (Shirk, Heinle, and Daly 2012, 37).

Now, the problem with remedying unintended consequences seems to be that external actors cannot effectively work on them. It must a set of *locally* rooted actors who may ensure accountability, transparency etc. Senator Leahy, for example, called on the U.S. Secretary of State “to determine and report that procedures are in place and actions are taken by the *Mexican and Central American governments* to ensure that recipients of our aid are not involved in corruption and human rights violations [...]. This is fundamental. For years we have trained Mexican and Central American police forces, and it is well known that some of them have ended up working for the drug cartels” (Senator Patrick Leahy 2008, 4613, emphasis added).

It would seem that, here, the agency to actually work on governance issues, including accountability, now lies with the intervened *themselves*. Agency resting with *local* actors becomes quite clear in the way Merida’s support of the existing Citizen Participation Councils (Consejos de Participación Ciudadana, CPCs) as well as for the newly established Mechanism of Dialogue with Civil Society (Mecanismo de diálogo con la sociedad civil) is rationalized. It is *local* actors who have the requisite knowledge-power to actually prevent unintended consequences and supervise public authorities in Mexico – not policymakers in distant Washington, D.C. In an influential staff-report to the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, Citizen Compliant Centers are seen as having a “watchdog function against abuses by authorities and [to be] promot[ing] citizen involvement” (U.S. Congress 2007b, 44). What CPCs are about is “tap[ping] citizen involvement to make the public a partner in increasing the transparency and accountability of the security sector” (U.S. Congress 2007b, 44). The task of actually supervising Mexican security institutions can only be done by local civil society. Only local civil society has the knowledge that it takes to ensure accountability. Only local civil society has the kind of knowledge that is takes to formulate policy solutions. Only local civil society actually knows how to solve governance problems. In a report by the State Department on the record of its Merida activities, it is Mexican civil society that holds the potential of knowing what to do, of how to actually solve governance problems: “[C]ivil society will not only be able to identify problems, but become active participants in identifying solutions and better practices. They will also be able to suggest training curriculum, and serve as guest lecturers in those trainings” (U.S. Department of State 2011, 61). It is the CPCs that may “provide constructive feedback” on “police education and training programs and human rights training” (U.S. Department of State 2011, 61).
And it is, therefore, local civil society that intervention has to support and enable – “leverage[ing] [its] skills and resources” (U.S. Department of State 2010a). Acting otherwise would be an act of ignorance, wasting precious resources and facilitating unintended consequences. It would neglect the fact that it is only locally embedded actors who have the requisite knowledge-power to identify and push through the correct policy solutions, including holding Mexican public authorities accountable. As one of the State Department’s 15%-reports states: “[A]s noted by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and a number of human rights NGOs in Mexico, mechanisms to communicate and follow up on ideas and concerns from civil society need to be enhanced” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 14, emphasis added). The report continues stating that “areas of opportunity exist for the improvement of mechanisms to enhance dialogue, publish information, and follow up on ideas generated by civil society” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 16, emphasis added). And it is openness to this productive reservoir of local knowledge that the Mexican government is being invited to turn. I believe this comes out starkly in the 2009 15%-report: “Mexican government representatives affirmed the mechanism seeks to create “agile communication” and “efficient exchange” of ideas by providing a forum for the Mexican government to provide information regarding the Merida Initiative, while receiving the suggestions, concerns, critiques, and experiences of the representatives of civil society” (U.S. Department of State 2009, 8, emphasis added). In this quote, the Mexican government discloses “information”, but it is really civil society that is central in terms of knowledge-power. Shannon O’Neil has equally identified Mexican civil society as the key ‘change agent’. She seems relieved to share “the good news” that local civil society organizations will work as an “indigenous groundswell [which] can help push reluctant politicians” to support reform (in: U.S. Congress 2010, 88). In Merida’s regulatory practice and discourse, local civil society bears the agency of government: “If Mexico [...] involves non-governmental organizations and civil society in the fight against organized crime, [...] then, Mexico can [“sí puede”] win this war” (Ortega and Morales 2009, 256, author’s translation, emphasis added).²

In brief, the discourse of civil society in the Merida Initiative was a discursive means for articulating new limits on the agency of external actors in the governance of Mexican public security. Outside policymakers and bureaucrats were seen as lacking the necessary local knowledge that comes from being socially embedded within a particular institutional context, and were, therefore, not in a position to formulate the kind of locally valid policy solutions that would actually matter for that particular context. Recognizing the limits to outside knowability and top-down malleability meant

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² Even where it is specifically the Mexican government that is being reported on, improving accountability is seen as an issue of enhancing civil society participation. The 15%-report from September 2010, for example, seemed to show itself satisfied with Government of Mexico efforts at “improving accountability and transparency of security institutions” because it was doing so “through greater citizen participation and involvement” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 10, emphasis added).
that the governing role of external actors could only be one of enabling, ‘empowering’ local agency. It could not possibly by a direct, top-down form of government anymore. To be sure, while direct forms of top-down government based on universalist knowledge claims are no longer feasible, this does put an end to external intervention. Rather, reallocating agency to the intervened through the neo-liberal discourse of civil society redefines the way governing from the outside works. In this framing, local actors are put into an awkward position: They simultaneously hold agency, while also being in need of outside enablement. An internal cable report by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City articulated vividly the ambivalent or torn appreciation of Mexican civil society as both the autochthonous driving force of political change and the needy object of external enablement:

“Civil society in Mexico is a nascent force with significant but unrealized potential for bringing about needed social and political change. Many of the groups contribute to the rich and surprisingly open political debate here [...] but [are] hemmed in by a political culture that is want to moving slowly in identifying and glacial in pushing for real change” (U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2010).

In this context, the governing role of external interveners is one of unblocking local governance potential through capacity-building and third-party relationship management. In September 2009, for example, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City founded a

“working group with human rights NGOs centered on [...] building trust and strengthening dialogue between the Government of Mexico and NGOs to reduce hostility [...] [and] identifying benchmarks and joint Government of Mexico-NGO mechanisms to track and measure progress on human rights complaints and cases” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 6).

As Clare Seelke and Kristin Finklea from the Congressional Research Service write, “[...] analysts have maintained that it is important to provide assistance to civil society and human rights-related non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Mexico in order to strengthen their ability to monitor [...] conduct and provide input on [...] policies” (Seelke and Finklea 2011, 23, emphasis added). Indeed, Andrew Selee from the Wilson Center discusses Merida’s civil society policies as way of “creating synergies between citizens and public authorities to confront the problem together” (Selee 2010, 8, emphasis added).

Governing indirectly and from the bottom up, through the agency of locally embedded actors is evidenced most starkly, though, in the discussion of how to enhance the “enforcement authority” of the National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 22). Although formally being a public (state) institution, the CNDH, together with the CPCs and Merida’s Mechanism of Dialogue, is the central ‘change agent’ for local accountability. In Merida’s 15%-reports, the CNDH is quite ubiquitous, and the way its governing

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3 At this point we can see how the neo-liberal civil society framework may rationalize policies which do not directly target a particular kind of associational life, i.e. civil society an actually existing set of social actors (trade unions, NGOs, churches etc.).
role is rationalized is rather informative of how external intervention through bottom-up government works. In Merida’s 2010 15%-report, for example, constitutional changes “grant[ing] CNDH greater power to enforce its recommendations and provid[ing] it with increased access to information” occupy a prime position (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 17). In fact, the report of September 2010 is the only instance of the State Department recommending to withhold funds, and it justifies its unusually clear and substantive determination with a concern for seeing through constitutional changes in Mexico which would “increase[] the power of CNDH” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 19). But again, support for CNDH is an indirect and enabling kind of intervention. It is an attempt to work on the legal framework of CNDH. CNDH holds the agency to actually ensure accountability “bring[ing] sufficient pressure to bear upon the government to comply with recommendations” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 17). It is CNDH’s ability to enforce locally formulated judgments which Merida is supposed to bolster or enable by supporting constitutional reforms and enhancing “access to Mexican government information on case details” (U.S. Department of State 2010b, 21). In a controversial report from 2011, Human Rights Watch similarly emphasized the power potential of CNDH while lamenting that “too often” its “capacity is not put use”: “Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission and state human rights commissions have the power to play a central role in preventing human rights violations and ensuring that those that have been committed are investigated and prosecuted” (Human Rights Watch 2011, 13).

So far, the analysis has revolved around the issue of how the discourse of civil society in the Merida Initiative fixed the locus of agency with the intervened themselves: Only locally embedded actors from within Mexican society possess the requisite knowledge and political leverage to actually formulate appropriate policy solutions and see them through, i.e. the kind of knowledge-power to actually solve governance problems. Concomitantly the governing role of external interveners is limited to that of enabling local agency, i.e. to assist local civil society in setting free its governing potential.

Now, policymakers in the Merida Initiative encountered a major problem in their attempt to enable local agency: the difficulty of concretely identifying genuine representatives of truly ‘local’ civil society. Instead, policymakers in the Merida Initiative repeatedly found themselves forced to discard the current representatives of civil society as not ‘local’ enough, as too internationalized. At several points in time, the erstwhile representatives of civil society were discredited for not really being ‘local locals’, for being part of an internationalized policy community which was, in fact, just as detached from indigenous knowledge-power as the interveners themselves. In a 15%-report from August 2009, for example, the State Department seemed to subscribe to the critique that access to the Citizen Participation Councils was too selective. It was expressing doubt as to the “openness” of these councils when writing that:
“Some members of civil society have been critical of what they see as a lack of openness and an exclusiveness regarding membership on the councils, arguing that the government is predisposed to assure representation by certain socio-economic sectors and interests at the expense of society at large” (U.S. Department of State 2009, 7).

Importantly, the State Department’s critique of the narrow social basis of the CPCs allowed those organizations that were part of the process to be increasingly problematized because they were seen as more interested in their own self-reproduction than in acting as the ‘change agent’ they were supposed be. The U.S. Embassy in Mexico City seemed particularly skeptical and even disappointed at the civil society representatives involved in Merida’s Mechanism of Dialogue with Civil Society when writing that the forum “produced more positive cross-talk than aggressive questioning” (U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2009). It found that “relatively few of the Mexican civil society groups are strident in” seeing the regular 15%-reports as “a means to leverage improved GOM and SEDENA transparency”: “The majority simply seek more information about how to secure funding [...]”(U.S. Embassy Mexico City 2009)⁴. Civil society representatives having being tainted or corrupted by their intimate integration into external funding mechanisms has actually been a point of concern for many constructive critics. Ulrich Schneckener, for example, warned that civil society organizations are often institutionally integrated into a set of external support frameworks which may prevent them from unfolding their governing potential and keep metropolitan policymakers from positively identifying genuine civil society representatives:

“One problem is to identify which actors exactly constitute “civil society” in any given case. [...] [E]vidence abounds that NGOs – in particular those that are externally funded – can only to a very limited extent be regarded as authentic civil society actors. More often than not local populations perceive NGOs as “foreign elements” whose services are consumed but who are not accepted as legitimate representatives. Equally problematic is [...] their subordination to the objectives of external donors” (Schneckener 2010, 72, emphasis added).

This is a key point. There seems to be a problem with identifying “authentic” civil society (Schneckener) and the problem is caused by a particular aspect of the institutional context within which civil society organizations are embedded, namely their proximity to western donors and internationalized policy processes.

We may briefly highlight here how prominent this critique figures in many Foucauldian governmentality studies. Gould and Ojanen, for instance, lament that “domestic advocacy groups” are being pushed out of the policy process while, “due to their superior resources and readiness”, “transnational agencies” become “surrogate representative[s] of Tanzanian civil society” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 8). Integration into the policy process, though, comes at a price. It demands “in

⁴ The critique of social selectivity caused by outside overdetermination seems to have been thoroughly absorbed into government. Even the International Crisis Group today finds it problematic that “there is little organized civil society that is not donor driven” (International Crisis Group 2008, 15).
exchange [...] tacit promises of cooperation” with the governments’ and donors’ development agenda (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 50). Building on Sen (Sen 2002), they criticize that NGOs were “quickly taken on board as the operational proxy for Civil Society” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 59). The consequence of cooptation into transnationalized policy processes is the emergence of an elite caste of NGOs which have little or no connection to genuine civil society, to the ‘grassroots’. They are not really local locals anymore. As Fraser states, “[t]he growth industry in civil society is thus amongst modern, professional groups willing and able to declare themselves pro-poor; express their demands in a technocratic framework; and accept the legitimacy of internationalized policy forums, including PRSP” (Fraser 2005, 333–4). It is because the institutional environment created by civil society policies within intervened societies is so heavily shaped according to the preferences and models of metropolitan policymakers that what emerges in this artificial habitat as allegedly local civil society is, in fact, quite the opposite: an “internationally oriented modern, liberal and technocratic discourse communit[y]” (Fraser 2005, 334).

Discarding the current representatives of civil society for their unrepresentativeness – caused, in turn, by the corrupting and oppressive influence of westernized policy discourses and financial dependency – is a critique that is not only voiced by governmentality studies, though. “Constructive critics” (Fraser 2005) go in the same direction. In her assessment of the PRSP process, McGee, for example, also found the latter to be dominated by an urban, professional elite and voices concern about the insufficient “depth” of participation (McGee 2002, 23). The problem with unrepresentative representatives is that instead of unblocking the governing potential of local knowledge-power, there is a danger of participation and ownership actually reproducing pre-formulated, standardized policy prescription from above: “If the Bank and Fund will only ‘endorse’ PRSPs that fit into a preconceived box of standard policies, then it’ll be just one-size-fits-all adjustment lending with a politically correct name” (Kessler 2000).

So, in the contemporary civil society framework a problem presents itself of identifying ‘local locals’ due to an institutional context of intervention dominated by western donor interests and policy discourses. We saw this problem above in the critique of CPCs and Merida’s Mechanism of Dialogue with Civil Society and it is taken up by Foucauldian governmentality studies and constructive critics alike. Now, policymakers in the Merida Initiative reacted to the problem of unrepresentative representatives by trying to ‘go local’, by trying to further decentralize the civil society process in order to include more ‘grassroots’ voices. In the 15%-report of August 2009, the State Department emphasized its efforts to expand the scope of participation beyond the elite cadre of international NGOs based in the capital Mexico City. The report stressed the importance of the “First National Forum of Citizen Participation Councils” in Morelos in June 2009 which was co-sponsored by USAID and the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City with a view to “provid[ing] exchanges on how to create more
effective councils and enhance participation by local citizens” (U.S. Department of State 2009, 16, emphasis added). Curiously, the view that civil society in the Merida Initiative was too capital-centered, i.e. too far removed from the ‘grassroots’, was echoed by various high-profile Mexican and international human rights NGOs as well. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Centro ProDH et al. identified a major deficit in the Mechanism of Dialogue with Civil Society in that its meetings “were held almost exclusively in Mexico City” making its consultations “ineffective” (Amnesty International et al. 2012). The “Mechanism” was also seen as unresponsive, as still too top-down in its proceedings because it lacked “avenues to provide input in shaping the agenda and follow-up” (Amnesty International et al. 2012). The pledges by high-profile international and domestic NGOs to ‘go local’ themselves, though, lacked credibility in the eyes of U.S. policymakers. While most self-critical metropolitan policymakers would probably agree with the need to move closer to the ‘grassroots’, there is a shadow of doubt hanging over capital-centered, elite NGOs when they advocate for further localizing the process themselves. Whatever they propose is not credible anymore, even if it is enhanced local participation that they are suggesting. If policymakers really are as self-reflexive as they appear in the above quotes, then, there is good reason to assume that they know what Gould and Ojanen know about capital-centered, elite NGOs and their need to generate credibility through connections to the ‘grassroots’:

“Credibility is the pivotal asset [...] in [NGOs’] struggle for survival. Direct links to the grassroots via viable partnerships and networking with ‘local civil society’ and ‘community based organizations’ contribute decisively toward consolidating valuable credibility. This legitimizes high-profile policy engagement in the capital which in turn enhances an organization’s own visibility in the competition for resources” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 80–1).

Judged by the degree of self-awareness exhibited above, I would assume that the imperative of propping-up (fake) credibility has probably not been lost on external policymakers. In other words, even when international NGOs pretend to be in touch with genuinely ‘local locals’ at the ‘grassroots’, it is in all likelihood not the real deal, yet. External donors and policymakers are still cut off from real civil society because even when capital-centered, international (-ized) NGOs make an effort to ‘go local’ they are most likely to remain as detached and assimilated as before. They might even “creat[e] the [‘grassroots’] organizations one needs to ‘partner’ with from scratch” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 81, emphasis added). What will really happen is that elite NGOs will “actively promote the perception that they represent genuine, autonomous interests”. But, they will actually just figure as “surrogate ‘voices’ for the down-trodden” (Gould and Ojanen 2003, 59–60).

The problem with unrepresentative representatives is that what they propose as local solutions is not really going to be locally driven, locally generated policy-thinking and advocacy action. Rather, because civil society organizations are so heavily embedded in international policy discourses and institutions, what they will be trying to sell as local will, in fact, really just be a reproduction of liberal-
universal categories. It will be, as Kessler said, “one-size-fits-all” policy solutions with a “politically correct name”. In other words, civil society representatives are disqualified because they are revealed to be just as liberal-universalist as metropolitan interveners themselves. By their own interventionary frenzy, external interveners have cultivated a detached westernized caste of NGOs which are not really ‘local locals’, but rather the bearers of liberal-universal discourse. Steeped in their ideology of liberal universalism, Western policymakers manage to interact only with a artificial or avatar civil society, instead of getting in touch with genuine alterity. To the degree that NGOs within intervened societies have been exposed to the influence of outside policy discourses and integrated into international policy frameworks, they have been assimilated to the kind of liberal-universalist knowledge claims which the (neo-liberal) civil society framework was supposed precisely not apply. They are, hence, unsuitable for generating authentically local policy solutions. And enabling that kind of (simulacrum) civil society will not really be governing from the bottom-up. Interveners have not been engaging the right kind of people; people who are located close enough to the ‘grassroots’, whose institutional embeddedness and the mental models it stimulates are not tainted by liberal-universalist tendencies of thought. That is, the disqualification of the current representatives of civil society as unrepresentative of uniquely ‘local’ ways of thinking is an escalation or radicalization of the critique of liberal-universal understandings of the world.

In order to cohere the concept of knowledge paradox and to contrast it with the view of civil society proposed by governmentality studies, it is necessary now to slightly raise the level of abstraction in the analysis. The first thing I would like to propose is that the disqualification of the unrepresentative representatives of civil society is inscribed into the way neo-institutional frameworks of analysis operate logically. In neo-institutional frameworks of analysis, the practices and “mental models” (North) of subjects, i.e. their rationality, are only as good as the institutional context within which they are embedded. Causal origin is built into the institutional context (which cannot be reduced in any definitive way). This goes for both the sources of governance problems as well as their solution. Governance problems are only locally intelligible and amenable to solution. It is the institutional setting of a particularized social context which produces mental models, including as a possibility the generation of locally pertinent policy solutions. The point is that, since this institutional context varies from one social and historical setting to another, policy solutions can only be known locally; by subjects who have been socialized within the particular institutional context of concern. Within this framework, the failure of policy brings home the realization that the local understanding, the insider-knowledge which may generate policy solutions tailor-made for the unique circumstances of the local setting in question lies a little bit deeper. Local knowledge is buried a little bit deeper in the sense that it is now seen as embodied by a new set of subjects – yet to be discovered – whose socio-institutional context should ideally possess characteristics which are a little bit more particular, a
little bit less general than was previously the case. The implicit goal seems to be to unearth and, then, enable a set of localized understandings that are always a little bit more idiosyncratic than those which have underwritten previous ‘local’ policy proposals. Fundamentally, this drive towards idiosyncratic local understandings is based on neo-institutionalism’s refutation of analytical reductionism.

Now, because subjectivity is over-determined by social context (which we cannot reduce analytically) and because policy failure is a symptom of a mismatch between reductionist frameworks of analysis and the particularities of local conflict settings, the disqualification of the unrepresentative representatives of civil society and the policy solutions they propose as ‘local’ is an ongoing dynamic within neo-institutional frameworks of analysis. Once policymakers understand and interact with societal actors within intervened societies through an anti-reductionist, neo-institutional framework of analysis, it becomes quite difficult for them to lay their hands on ‘true’ civil society. When policy fails, they are, instead, invited to look elsewhere, closer to the ‘grassroots’ in order to identify genuinely ‘local locals’ whose governance potential they, then, may begin to enable.

The flip side is that when interveners claim to know better, to know the policy solution themselves, in other words, when metropolitan policymakers are being reductionist, they are blocking local understandings from fully unfolding their governance potential. Contemporary civil society discourse is about an epistemological break with universal knowledge (from the outside) and the privileging of particularized understandings in its place (from the inside). In neo-institutional frameworks of analysis, policy failure is interpreted as a sign that interventionary practices have still been too universalist. Identifying ‘local locals’ and figuring out how to enable them effectively, i.e. without imposing oneself from above, is obstructed by universalist knowledge claims. If only Western policymakers could rid themselves of the oppressive universalist knowledge in which they are trapped, they could start to really enable ‘local locals’ and do so without prescribing solutions from above. Then, the local locals could really be in the ‘driver’s seat’ and unfold their full creative potential. The biggest obstacle to the agency of local civil society is metropolitan policymakers own liberal-universal knowledge, or any rate, what remains of it in the way they understand the world. Neo-liberal civil society is an attempt to make policy more particularistic, less universalist. And one of the key challenges in this regard is cleansing interventionary policy from any remaining liberal-universalist assumptions about how the world works. That is why Lederach’s argument is so instructive. When Lederach argues that peacebuilding should “go beyond the negotiation of substantive interests and issues”, instead “probing into the realm of the subjective”, I believe, he is making a case against reductionism and a pledge to delve into the idiosyncratic specifics of local context (Lederach 2008, 25). If contemporary conflicts were about “substantive interests and issues”, then, the political dynamics involved could be reduced analytically to a limited set of substantive issues open to
purposive political engagement, such as power sharing, material re-distribution, or the protection of minority rights. But, since they are grounded in pathological mental models generated by deep historical path dependencies, they are not amendable to direct, purposive engagement. They can only be worked on indirectly by putting in place a framework inducing changes in mentality. Then, policy solutions will be able emerge indigenously, from within society through processes of reconciliation. But, this is a path that the conflict parties will have to find and cover by themselves. As Lederach makes clear, “standardized formulas do not work” (Lederach 2008, 23). If external policy involvement wants to be “germane to contemporary conflict”, it is well-advised to be “rooted in and responsive to the experiential and subjective realties shaping people’s perspectives and needs” (Lederach 2008, 24). And, again, the predominant view is that the existing stock of liberal-universal knowledge is holding interveners back. If policymakers really intend to enable local agency they have to free themselves of their “cultural baggage”, in particular the “traditional framework and activities that make up statist diplomacy” (Lederach 2008, 107, 23).

When we sum up this line of reasoning, we begin to discern the contours of a paradox – a knowledge paradox. In the neo-liberal civil society framework, liberal-universal knowledge is problematized, analytical reductionism is rejected. Instead, external policy engagement has the objective to enable local subjects at the ‘grassroots’ to formulate indigenous policy solutions. As Lederach says, policy is to “engage the trainee as the primary resource in seeking processes and responses appropriate to the conflict setting” (Lederach 2008, 107). The goal is to move away from “prescriptive models and techniques for handling conflict” (Lederach 2008, 107). Only local civil society may come up with the pertinent policy solutions that local governance problems call for. Agency rests with the intervened. External assistance now consists in unblocking that agency, i.e. in creating an “infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society” (Lederach 2008, xvi). But, because analytical reductionism is rejected, enabling local agency requires that external interveners shed their liberal-universalist categories of thinking. Indeed, it is the unified canon of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge that prevents metropolitan policymakers from openly engaging with and enabling local civil society. When policies fail, it means that external attempts to enable local agency and the policy solutions subsequently proposed by what was mistakenly considered as civil society were still too universalist, too top-down, not bottom-up enough, and that, if interventionary policy really wants to enable local agency, it has to purge its practices a little bit more of its liberal-universalist underpinnings. In this framework, the more often policymakers draw their ‘lessons learnt’, the more knowledge they are invited to shed. The more they learn, the less they know.
Foucauldian governmentality studies or knowledge paradox?
The analysis will now proceed to a discussion of some of the differences (and complementarities) between the knowledge paradox and Foucauldian governmentality studies. It will begin by briefly recapping how Foucauldian governmentality studies view contemporary civil society policies, the emergence of post-conditionality and the process of expansion. How do Foucauldian governmentality studies see civil society as it is being rationalized and practiced by international organizations today? As two of the preceding sections drew out, Williams argues that civil society practices of the World Bank are an exercise in normalizing discipline. Local deviants are to be “disciplined to be free” (Williams 1996, 173). Ownership under the contemporary civil society framework is, in fact, a way of curbing or (re-) educating participants into the ideological tenets of liberal universalism. Ownership is “social engineering” at its extreme, “inculcat[ing] good (liberal) practices” and “eliminate[ing] bad (illiberal) practices” (Williams 2012, 17). Where actually existing identities and practices “diverge[] from certain liberal understandings […] they are to be reformed” according to the liberal ideal of self-interested subjects and modern forms of association in a market society (Williams 2012, 17). Harrison has picked-up on that interpretation of (neo-liberal) civil society. He subscribes to the notion that the World Bank is on a “universalizing mission” to “create liberal selves and appropriate institutions to police them” (Harrison 2004, 45). Harrison, though, is more interested in how seemingly innocent administrative reforms actually work as new (micro-) techniques of outside regulation and a new type of donor-state relationship. Harrison has reconstructed convincingly how the new imperative of local ownership actually operates as a much more intrusive disciplinary technique (see also Gould and Ojanen 2003; Fraser 2005). In both accounts of contemporary civil society policies, though, external policymakers relate to local ideational resources in an essentially top-down way. If local identities, mental models etc. are not flat-out discarded, they represent a valuable reservoir of know-how which is to be harnessed and exploited by government in order to do a better job at imposing pre-defined liberal-universal categories from above. The emergence of civil society as a post-conditional form of external regulation is an expression of a strategic will to refine disciplinary modes of intervention. Civil society is a way of responding to the “problem of implementation” (Williams) by innovating a set of more perfidious and manipulative disciplinary techniques.

Foucauldian governmentality studies’ reading of neo-liberal civil society as a set of refined and expanded top-down disciplinary techniques has, in fact, been reminding me of Foucault’s “The birth of biopolitics”. In the opening remarks of his discussion of neo-liberalism, Foucault objects to the common interpretation of neo-liberalism as “no more than a cover for generalized administrative intervention by the state which is all the more profound for being insidious and hidden beneath the appearances of neo-liberalism” (Foucault 2004, 130). In this reading, neo-liberalism is “Solzhenitsyn
on a world scale” (Foucault 2004, 130). That is, neo-liberalism is “made out to be nothing at all, or anyway, nothing but always the same thing, and always the same thing but worse” (Foucault 2004, 130, emphasis added).

The analytical point here is not about the ‘correct’ interpretation of neo-liberalism and the degree to which it constitutes a break or continuity with older traditions of liberal thought. What is at stake is that Foucauldian governmentality studies literature appears to be, as Foucault says, “repeating the same type of critique for two hundred, one hundred, or ten years” (Foucault 2004, 130). As Foucault puts it, “neo-liberalism is not the Gulag on the insidious scale of capitalism” (Foucault 2004, 131).

The key shortcoming of Foucauldian governmentality studies seems to lie in their implicit assumptions about the kind of knowledge-power thought to be exercised by external interveners. Williams’ notion of the World Bank as engaged in “geographical universalism” was the case in point here (Williams 2008, 21). The basis of this universalism was an idealized concept of the subject, i.e. ‘nature’. The World Bank has identified certain ontological traits which “are understood to be invariant and universal”, which, in turn, “implies that the social arrangements desirable for this kind of person are also universally desirable” (Williams 2008, 20). In other words, there is a “universalist” “theoretical ambition”: “Given that all people, everywhere, are the same (they have the same ‘nature’), all people everywhere would benefit from liberal social arrangements” (Williams 2008, 21, emphasis added). Put differently, because all people are essentially the same, all people should have one and the same political arrangement. In terms of modes of governing, it is, concomitantly, “prescription” that is central: The World Bank is actually telling people what to do and how to do it. Reductionist liberal-universal knowledge and top-down forms of government are concomitant: “[…] or being in the possession of a truth for all means liberals cannot rest easy simply in the knowledge that they are right; they must attempt, if they can, to foist this on everyone else” (Williams 2008, 21).

Despite, or maybe even because of, the emphasis on ‘the local’, on participation and ownership, Foucauldian governmentality studies assume external regulators to be imposing instrumentally a unified, reductionist corpus of knowledge. Despite public assertion to the contrary, government is still essentially a top-down project of imposing grand narrative of liberal modernity. Local understandings are exploited or harnessed instrumentally to better impose or apply liberal universalist knowledge, categories, frameworks etc. Interveners are still exercising power in a top-down form, only that this time around they try to do a more context-sensitive job. Local understandings are a means to implant the liberal-universal knowledge which interveners are still thought to possess and act upon. Nowhere does the top-down view of government come out more starkly than in Fraser’s view that neo-liberal civil society was a strategic attempt to enhance the
legitimacy of donor policies, i.e. to fend off criticism of conditionality as undemocratic (Fraser 2005, 317).

What Williams describes here is a heroic act of analytical reductionism and top-down imposition. In fact, it is so heroic that North and other neo-institutionalists would probably strongly object. The whole point of North’s paradigmatic “Institutions, institutional change and economic performance” (North 2009) was precisely that there is no “universal human nature” (Williams 2008, 26). Such an assumption would be too generalized, too reductionist and the forms of policy engagement flowing from it would be too top-down. The whole enterprise sounds too hubristic from a neo-institutionalist point of view.

And I would even go one step further. With the implicit notion of top-down, liberal-universalist knowledge-power in the background, Williams suggests that the “attempt to transplant disciplinary techniques” will open up a “site of struggle and contestation”: “Attempts will be made to subvert, resist, and undermine the operation of these techniques, while the World Bank (and others) attempt ever more sophisticated and ever more penetrative methods to discipline the actions of others in the service of a liberal transformative project” (Williams 1996, 174). Williams calls this process “indigenization” (Williams 1996, 174). Now, I would like to argue that indigenization is pretty close to what metropolitan policymakers are actually aiming for (Richmond 2011a; Tadjbakhsh 2011). Lederach showcases this nicely in his pledge to enable local “TNT” (trust, networking, and timing, or “confianza”, “cuello”, and “coyuntura”) (Lederach 2008, 97). As Lederach explains:

“Together these three concepts understand peace as a process of transformation based on resources from within the conflictive setting that provide connection before and during the conflict, and ultimately help to sustain the peace” (Lederach 2008, 97).

TNT denotes locally generated and locally intelligible ways of thinking and existing social relationships, including the forms and distribution of social capital on which the later are based. The important point is that TNT is not some sort of raw material which interveners have to appropriate. It is that which already exists locally and which needs to be enabled to play its role within the local context and by local actors. It is not something that needs to be extracted so as to allow disciplinary techniques to be refined. It is not something that needs to be harnessed, to be put into the box. As David Chandler usefully points out, in the neo-liberal “civil society approach there is no assumption that external interveners can make policies on behalf of the post-conflict subject” (Chandler 2010, 179). They cannot make policies on behalf of others because they do not know the solutions themselves. Again: Agency rests with the intervened. Only they have the requisite knowledge to formulate locally appropriate policy solutions. It is this fundamental epistemological break with liberal-universal forms of knowledge and government that we have to take in fully if we really want to get a grip on contemporary forms of post-conditional regulation and their expansion. Appreciating the nature and extent of this rupture allows us to understand how contempor...
notions of civil society involve much more than a mere “problem of implementation” (Williams). The neo-liberal conception of civil society embedded in post-conditional practices of regulation seems to speak for a crisis of meaning (Sinnkrise) in the self-understanding and world view of metropolitan policy elites. The whole theoretical and epistemological edifice of traditional liberal-universal knowledge is in uproar. Neo-liberal civil society is about an epistemological break with universal knowledge and the privileging of particularized understandings in its place. That is why the quote that certification (read traditional forms of conditionality) was premised on the “idea that the US knows best how to solve the international drug problem” (Latin America Working Group 2000, emphasis added) is so important. It points out to us that the forms of external regulation which succeeded it are quite different in the kind of knowledge claims that undergird them.

Contemporary civil society policies are not about a better, refined, more context-sensitive imposition of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims. Civil society today is a way of governing without the governors claiming ‘real’ knowledge, Knowledge with a capital “k”, the knowledge to actually solve problems, to actually know their solution. Neo-liberal civil society is the attempt to govern after having lost that kind of time- and placeless liberal-universal truth. Civil society today is an acknowledgement that external interveners do not know. Civil society today is an attempt to enable other people’s knowledge, their solutions, not to impose reductionist liberal-universal knowledge from above. Indeed, how could metropolitan policy elites be applying something that they do not have anymore? How is expansion to grow out of something of which they have less and less (instead of more and more)? How are they to apply a knowledge that they have been so consistently and rigorously throwing overboard, i.e. that they have been so successfully learning to unlearn through neo-institutional learning? In neo-institutional frameworks of analysis, as far as interveners are concerned, the biggest obstacle to enabling local agency is analytical reductionism, i.e. the set of pre-established categories and assumptions informing liberal-universal ways of thinking about the world.

Liberal-universal forms of knowledge are the most important impediment to bottom-up governing as far the interveners are concerned. It stands in the way of enabling local agency to fully unfold its creative governance potential, to generate the kind of local knowledge-power that it takes to actually solve problems. Civil society today is, in other words, a way of taking apart, of disassembling the artificial theoretical edifice of liberal-universalism and the attempt to replace it with a new knowledge of how to enable local processes of knowledge generation. The goal is to enable local actors – their modes of thinking and acting – to generate the sustainable, legitimate and effective policy solutions which interveners initially thought they possessed themselves due to the validity of liberal-universal knowledge. In the contemporary civil society framework, as long as policy fails, interveners have been too universalist, instead of not universalist enough. Policymakers react to failure by trying to be less universalist, not more universalist. Failure incites them to be less
universalist the next time they try to enable others. Failure makes policymakers recoil from ever being universalist again.

In the neo-liberal civil society framework, metropolitan enablers are invited to dig deeper in their search for true “‘local locals’” (Richmond 2011a) because they do not know; not because they know the solutions, and, now, want to extend the policy remit of top-down governmentality. It is genuine civil society, “‘local locals’”, who will be able to know how to solve a particular problem in a particular context and exercise the particular power to do so. As long as policy fails, interveners have not done enabling right, they have been imposing themselves too much, have seen the world too much through standardized categories (see Scott 1998) and they have not been enabling the right kind of people, they might even have been enabling the wrong kind of people. Ultimately, as we saw above, the expansive tendency of intervention is built into the causal tenets of neo-institutional frameworks of analysis: Causality is located in the institutional context of subjects while the former cannot be analytically reduced in a conclusive manner. The more time one spends probing the credibility of civil society representatives by a neo-institutional analysis of their social embeddedness, the harder it becomes to accept them as genuinely ‘local’ and the more sense it makes to look for subjects closer to the ‘grassroots’. As Fraser points out, in the neo-liberal civil society framework, “the state […] appears as the antithesis of bottom-up, local, sensitive and consensual processes and the demand for participation emerges as a challenge to the state’s monopoly on representing the citizenry, and from a claim that an alternative popular sovereignty resides in civil society” (Fraser 2005, 331).

Moving closer to the ‘grassroots’, to the “alternative popular sovereignty” that Fraser is alluding to, though, requires shedding some more simplistic, under-complex categories of thinking about the world. Neo-liberal civil society within a post-conditionality regime of regulation is the struggle to enable local knowledge-power and the process of shedding existing liberal-universal knowledge claims which this requires. Neo-liberal civil society as a post-conditional regulatory practice, therefore, is not about metropolitan policymakers knowing how to solve problems. It is the other way around: Neo-liberal civil society policies are based on metropolitan policymakers having lost that kind of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge and the desire to enable an idiosyncratic local alternative in its place. Identifying and enabling the locally embedded actors who do know these things, though, makes it necessary for interveners to shed their (liberal-universal) knowledge, not that they impose it, as Williams argues. Enabling civil society, then, formulates the need to shed liberal-universal knowledge, rather than to figure out how its imposition could be improved by manipulating local ideational resources better.

In neo-institutional frameworks of analysis, there is a constant drive to undermine claims to reductionist (liberal-universal) knowledge and a privileging of particularized understandings unique for each local social context. Solutions cannot be known universally or from the outside. They have to
be locally generated by a set of actors who have been socialized within the institutional context in question. The problem is that, because any given policy solution is only as good as the institutional setting of the actors who have proposed it, neo-institutional analyses tend to disqualify the current representatives of civil society for being tainted by the corrupting influence of liberal-universal discourses operating at the international level. Civil society is not idiosyncratic enough, it is too universalist. It is just as detached from ‘genuine’ local knowledge-power as metropolitan policymakers. And, therefore, what has been proposed are ineffective (universalist) policy solutions that are not sufficiently generated from the bottom-up, at the ‘grassroots’ level. Going one level deeper, though, requires from outside enablers to think in a little bit less universalist, reductionist way. The challenge is to de-bunk the logic of enabling policies a little more of its liberal-universal underpinnings. Here arises the knowledge paradox of neo-liberal civil society building: The more often metropolitan policymakers draw their lessons learnt from within a neo-institutional framework of analysis, the less they know (in a reductionist sense). And because they know less in any reductionist sense of the term, the more they have to enable ‘local locals’ to do the knowing in their stead. That is, the more they learn, the less they can govern in a traditional top-down way, the more they have to govern from the bottom-up, the more important local agency becomes. In this process though, metropolitan policymakers are systematically and continuously disassembling their stock of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims with which they used to engage with the world. In the wake of this deconstruction, it would seem that they are finding it increasingly difficult to act purposively and instrumentally in the world. That is, the more they are trying to enable the agency of the Other and to do so through analytical and normative self-deconstruction, the less they are able to authoritatively be in the world. Indeed, the more they are trying to enable the Other, the less they know how to do that successfully and without making things worse.

The pitfall in the interpretation offered by Foucauldian governmentality studies is that it favors a view of government as operating through a constant refinement of top-down disciplinary techniques in order to “secure ever more intimate supervision of African political communities” (Fraser 2005, 317). In particular, the danger would seem to lie in the reification of expansion. Foucauldian governmentality studies appear to be so concerned with making their argument about a responsibilizing, disciplinary will to govern intruding on intervened societies that they leave the actual logic of expansion substantially unreflected. Enabling local agency is in fact quite an intellectual struggle for metropolitan policy elites in which they have to learn the ‘tough’ lesson over and over again that the targets of civil society building have been too far removed from the ‘grassroots’ and that, for them, the biggest obstacle to identifying and openly engaging with truly ‘local locals’ is primarily a challenge to shed as many of their liberal-universal assumptions, categories etc. as possible. This may not prevent locally generated outcomes to be discarded as
illiberal, i.e. civil society being a socially selective process. But, the knowledge paradox suggests a somewhat more serendipitous and defensive process of expansion. And it brings out the fundamental ideological void on which ‘bottom-up’ approaches to statebuilding are based rather than speaking for a continued application of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge claims.

Conclusion
This paper has looked at the way in which the discourse and practices of neo-liberal civil society, articulate a crisis of reductionist liberal-universal knowledge-power. In the first section, the analysis dissected the critique of certification. What policymakers in the Merida Initiative wanted to avoid by all means was the impression of returning to the discredited certification process of the 1990s and 1980s. Certification was an inappropriate undertaking because it applied a uniform measurement and a grossly narrowed, standardized vision on a range of wildly differing objects – a limitation in outlook that was animated by an exclusive interest in arrests and seizures. In this way, certification actually hid what was most relevant. The key point here was that the critique of certification contained a rejection of reductionist categories of analysis and top-down forms of intervention. The critique of certification is reminiscent of James Scott’s argument in “Seeing like state”. In “Seeing like a state”, “state simplifications” were guided by a single utilitarian interest and, together with the “ideology of high modernism”, employed an overly narrow vision of social life with grave negative unintended consequences. External regulatory practice in the Merida Initiative, consequently, shifted from a focus on the substantial content of specific policies and government performance thereon to an emphasis on the procedural or institutional aspects of policy making and implementation. Instead of asking whether the Government of Mexico had the correct law enforcement policies on the book and was seizing enough drugs or arresting enough kingpins, regulatory discourse asked whether there existed a sufficiently strong human rights commission and how its regulatory influence could be strengthened from the outside.

Subsequently, the analysis delved into the work of Paul Lederach on peacebuilding. Lederach’s relevance lies in showcasing how contemporary civil society policies and discourse foreground the agency of the intervened. The knowledge and political leverage to actually solve particular governance problems in particular social settings resides with locally embedded actors. Only local civil society has the kind of knowledge-power to actually solve problems. Outside assistance may only consist in enabling or unblocking the latent governance potential of local civil society. Rather than imposing one-size-fits-all solutions from above, interventionary policy would be well-advised to focus instead on empowering the agency of locally embedded actors. As in the critique of certification, Lederach articulated a critique of reductionist frameworks of analysis which focused too much on substantive interests rather than subjective perceptions. Conflict resolution did not involve
the negotiation and accommodation of substantial material interests but an engagement with the subjective world views of post-conflict subjects and how these might be ‘shrunked’ to support reconciliation.

The next step in the analysis was a critical discussion of the most popular theoretical strand in critical IR – Foucauldian governmentality studies – and what they had to say on contemporary civil society discourse and practice. In particular, the study took a close look at David Williams’ work on the World Bank as the carrier of “liberal project of social transformation”. Williams sees interveners as imposing a unified canon of liberal-universal knowledge, a kind of idealist liberal doctrine of the self-interested, rational, and autonomous subject (i.e. “‘nature’”). Metropolitan interveners, such as the World Bank, are still confidently living in a world of reductionist assumptions and can, therefore, prescriptively impose solutions from above in an unproblematic way.

In contrast, I argued that civil society today is about western policy elite’s attempt to enable a particularistic kind of insider-understanding that only genuinely ‘local’ actors at the ‘grassroots’ hold in this or that social context. In neoliberal frameworks of intervention, civil society seems to be less about disciplining participation or micro-regulation by good governance reforms than about removing the existing stock of liberal-universal knowledge claims as obstacles standing in the way of really setting free, of really unblocking the governance potential of local knowledge-power. Now, the point is that policymakers, think tanks, NGOs etc. try to get in touch with truly ‘local locals’ and enable their agency through a neo-institutional framework of analysis in which the really relevant actors are systematically one epistemological level deeper than the current set of enabling policies and in which policymakers are called upon to shed a little bit more of their simplistic liberal-universal knowledge claims if they want to penetrate downwards further. This is a paradoxical learning process: The more policymakers make an effort to draw lessons from the failure of previous enabling policies, the more they realize the need to rid themselves some more of the obstructive baggage of liberal-universal knowledge. The more often they learn, the less they know.

This dynamic is built into the basic logical structure of neo-institutional frameworks of analysis. In neo-institutional theory, causality is located in the socio-institutional context of subjects. The choices and “mental models” (North) of subjects are only as good (or bad) as the institutional context which has produced them. When civil society representatives propose wrong policy solutions or make wrong choices, this is a sign that their conditioning institutional context is deficient. Failure is an indicator that something is wrong with the institutional context of the current representatives of civil society as reflected in the inappropriate policy solutions they have suggested. Since reductionist liberal-universal knowledge has been identified as a major barrier to genuinely enabling local ownership, a neo-institutional analysis of the social embeddedness of civil society representatives reveals to metropolitan policymakers that their counterparts have been just as universalist as they
are. Intervention has created a detached, elite caste of international NGOs whose policy proposals and actions are just as universalist (read ineffective and illegitimate) as those of external actors. Interveners have to look closer to the ‘grassroots’. Crucially, neo-institutional frameworks sacrifice analytical reductionism (universalism) for a much more in-depth analysis of unique institutional contexts (particularism). Causality does not lie in a limited set of originary causal forces but in the historical, cultural, and social specificities of a unique institutional context which cannot be analytical reduced to a delimited set of foundational, independent causal forces. In this framework, if one wants to identify a set of local actors whose institutional context is a little bit more particular, i.e. more ‘local’, and if one wants to engage with them in an enabling, i.e. none-prescriptive, way, then, the challenge is to rid oneself a little bit more of any reductionist remnants informing one’s view and engagement with the world. Only then will external interveners be able to access truly “local locals” (Richmond 2011a) and enable the agency of the Other in a non-imposing way.

In the knowledge paradox the kind of knowledge-power held by metropolitan policy elites is understood differently than in Foucauldian governmentality studies. And, in consequence, the understanding of expansion is different as well. This was brought out by revisiting what Foucauldian governmentality studies make of post-conditionality. The analysis reconstructed how post-conditionality was an instrumental or strategic means of overcoming the “problem of implementation” (Williams) by refining disciplinary techniques. Now, the knowledge paradox would suggest that post-conditionality, i.e. “process conditions” over “policy conditions” (Fraser), is born out of the realization that outsiders do not know themselves how to make state institutions and politics in post-conflict societies work in a way that satisfies liberal normative standards. That is why metropolitan policymakers find it increasingly difficult to govern in a top-down way as in certification. Governing has to be more bottom-up by enabling local understandings and power resources to formulate and implement the actual policy solutions in the interveners’ stead. In this perspective, post-conditionality is the attempt to govern (indirectly, from the bottom up) in the face of or after the realization that ‘we do not know’ the solutions anymore. Metropolitan policy elites do post-conditionality because they do not know how to make post-conflict and post-colonial institutions and political processes work from the outside. This was apparent in the way Merida’s Mechanism of Dialogue with Civil Society was rationalized. In the Mechanism, only Mexican civil society has the local, everyday understanding that will do the job of making institutions produce liberal outcomes. Only they can figure it out. That is what post-conditionality is really all about. ‘We’ do not know the road ahead anymore. If ‘we’ knew, ‘we’ could still impose specific policy prescription as in certification. Civil society as a practice of post-conditional regulation expresses metropolitan policymakers’ ignorance, their not-knowing the correct solutions anymore. It is about enabling the Other to find that out for and by himself. If metropolitan policy elites still had grand
narratives of liberal modernity, they would know the world, already. They would know how to solve problems of violence and crime in Mexico and doing so would not require any idiosyncratic understanding of ‘unique’ local context at all. Neo-liberal civil society was cohered out of the debris of liberal-universal knowledge claims. It was a way of coping with the realization that universal knowledge is useless or even counterproductive. From this point of view, it feels misplaced to present contemporary civil society policies as attempts to impose reductionist liberal-universal knowledge from above.

It would seem that the only knowledge to which western interveners may still claim a monopoly is that of designing transparent, innovative, reflexive policy processes. What metropolitan policymakers still claim as their domain of expertise is a knowledge of how to craft an institutional framework which will, hopefully, facilitate the ongoing, reflexive production of new policy solutions through trial and error. That is a policy process which will allow local solutions to emerge based on local understandings and local ‘change agents’. Moreover, this is an institutional framework that is evacuated of any explicit and substantive normative orientation, one whose sole purpose is to trigger and sustain an ongoing learning process in which suitable policy solutions may be approximated through constant trial and error, the evasion of majoritarian tendencies, and reflexive self-critique.

The neo-liberal critique of universal forms of knowledge puts metropolitan advocates of intervention into an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it is known that metropolitan policymakers cannot know how to solve the problems of so-called ‘weak’, ‘failed’, or ‘fragile’ states on behave of others; that this is a challenge for local actors. On the other hand, metropolitan policy elites still feel obliged to the normative standards of liberal democracy and market economy. Policymakers can no longer credibly claim to know how to reach the liberal peace, but there is still a strong liberal telos as to what the final outcomes should look like. The uneasy compromise has been to govern indirectly, through the agency of the intervened. The ambivalent stance seems to be that the transition may be governed by pluralism while the outcomes – whatever they may look like in detail – have to satisfy a key set of normative standards. This ambivalence is what sustains expansion through the knowledge paradox. In the knowledge paradox, policymakers are only pushed to go deeper because there is still the ambition to satisfy, through an emphasis on plurality, a set of generalized normative expectations (benchmarks).

Liberal telos and neo-institutional logic of analysis go a long way in making sense of the curious process of serendipitous expansion. They may help us grasp the somehow contradictory phenomenon of a neo-liberal discourse on civil society which says that interveners do not know what exactly there is to do, but which also leads them to do more and more. Neo-liberal civil society says outsiders cannot do ‘it’ (only the intervened can), but somehow they end up doing more and more. I have tried to show how losing top-down, liberal-universal knowledge-power strips interveners of
agency, but it lets governmental activity proliferate. Neo-institutional policymakers realize that they do not have agency (that the intervened have it), but this ‘humbling’ realization simultaneously prepares the ground for heightened governmental activism. It is activism without agency.

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