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Blinded by the slide: Ignorance and the commodification of expertise

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Abstract
This article investigates how commodification operates with reference to expertise, rather than material objects. By drawing on the work of German management consultants, it highlights three forms of ignorance that arise as part of commodifying expertise. These are here described as ignorance due to profit, ignorance due to rhetoric and ignorance due to strong assumptions. These forms of ignorance render invisible the wider socio-economic effects of consulting, hide the degree to which corporate representations may not reflect the world they purport to describe, and postulate specific yet highly skewed understandings of freedom regarding human subjects. Taken together, they point out that a distinguishing feature of the commodification of expertise, vis-à-vis that of material objects, is that it provides greater scope for the creation and use of ignorance, as it blurs the boundaries between commodity and context.

Keywords
Commodification, consultants, expertise, ignorance, services, wilful blindness

This article investigates the role of ignorance in the commodification of services.[1] It considers a subset of services, namely the creation and exchange of expertise, and argues that the commodification of expertise provides greater scope for the production of ignorance than does the commodification of material objects. To an

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extent this may be unsurprising: Anthropologists have long pointed out that different kinds of expertise inevitably engender their own kinds of ignorance. Insofar as expertise is enacted, it systematically creates ignorance by naturalising its own categories, values and performative nature (Boyer, 2008: 44; Carr, 2010). Thus, when expertise is bought and sold, different forms of ignorance inevitably are as well. However, does ignorance involved in enacting expertise also arise specifically as a result of its commodification (e.g. Pinto, 2015)? My material shows that it does and that the form that ignorance takes is one of the distinguishing characteristics that separates the commodification of expertise from that of material objects.

To make this argument, I draw on experience with German management consultants, studied ethnographically between September 2011 and November 2013. Management consultants specialise in selling expertise, that is, they provide clients with linguistic artefacts and interpretive templates meant to contribute to managers' sense-making activities (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994; Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges, 1988; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012). They are extremely successful at this. Over the last decade, consultancy revenues in Germany have almost doubled, from €16.4 billion in 2007 to an estimated €31.5 billion in 2017 (BDU, 2015, 2018).

Challenging the notion that expertise necessarily derives from possessing specialised, codified knowledge, this analysis of consultancy work practices will show that three forms of ignorance arise as part of their labour. First, consultants remain largely oblivious to the social consequences of their work due to their strong focus on pursuing profit. Second, consultants use various rhetorical techniques that constantly demand further activity – either by the client company or by themselves. Such techniques epistemically limit the analyses that they present. Last, in order to cater to the managerial position of their clients, consultants make very strong assumptions about human freedom. They assume that managers suffer from too much freedom, while staff are considered mostly unfree. Thereby, consultants preclude alternative visions of how freedom may be distributed.

To assess these three moments of ignorance in commodifying expertise, let us first consider the role that ignorance plays in the commodification of material objects. In his description of commodities under capitalism, Marx foregrounds several moments of ignorance. According to him, commodities are characterised by the labour that has gone into producing them, and by their twofold nature of having both use-value and exchange-value. In the moment of exchange, however, their use-values and their differing physical qualities are abstracted away. The concrete – that is, specific – forms of labour that have gone into them are reduced to a generalised abstract labour held to be common to all production (Marx, 1990: 126–8, 138). Eventually all forms of labour and the social relations involved in creating commodities are 'mystified', as people mistake them as being somehow inherent in the material objects themselves. It is thus via several moments of ignorance, that commodification turns every labour product into 'a social hieroglyphic' (Marx, 1990: 167) that, according to Marx, remains hard to decipher later on.

Economic anthropologists have often implied these moments of ignorance in their own descriptions of commodities. Gregory's (1982: 24) distinction between gifts and commodities, for example, defined the latter by their alienability and by the independence of their transactors. Here the ignorance of a commodity's previous production and ownership patterns is not a necessity, yet the possibility of such ignorance is a distinguishing characteristic that sets commodities and gifts apart.

Ignorance is also required in Kopytoff's (1986) discussion of commodification processes. Kopytoff considers commodities to come about via 'a feat of simplification of what is naturally an unmanageable mass of singular items' (1986: 72).[2] During moments of exchange, this singularity is lost, as it must be ignored by the buyers and sellers who seek commonalities between things. After the exchange, however, items can be singularised again, by including them into individual and cultural classification schemes. Appadurai (1986) equally foregrounds some of the socially productive affordances that the ignorance involved in commodities may bring about when produced, distributed and consumed along large international supply chains. Keenly aware that 'commodities represent specific forms and distributions of knowledge' (Appadurai, 1986: 41), he holds that the increasing alienation of producers, traders and consumers may allow culturally formed mythologies about commodities to emerge. Modern-day corporations have managed to exert some control over these processes of re-attaching meaning to anonymised objects, both within international supply chains (Tsing, 2013) and as part of improving their bottom line through branding (Foster, 2008).

Refining the productive role of ignorance in commodification further, Gershon (2000) has distinguished structural from strategic ignorance. She shows commodity fetishism to be a structural feature of Samoan capitalism, requiring people to overlook the labour that goes into producing commodities, as well as the fact that labour can never fully be alienated from the persons carrying it out (Gershon, 2000: 90). These moments of ignorance are structural insofar as they constitute a necessary prerequisite for capitalist exchange, and – I would argue – in that they are not constantly foregrounded in social interaction. Thereby structural ignorance remains itself often enough ignored. Strategic ignorance, on the other hand, occurs when Samoan families ask migrant members for financial contributions to ritual activity. Here, those eliciting funds simply assume that their relatives have access to infinite resources, actively ignoring the economically restricting factors that mark their family members' lives.

These different descriptions of commodification echo findings of the anthropology of ignorance, which has argued that ignorance can in many ways be socially productive (Gershon and Sarhadi Raj, 2000; High et al., 2012). They highlight the systematic creation of ignorance in the production and exchange of material commodities, specifically with respect to the social relations, concrete labour and material particularities of the objects in question. They further draw attention to the reconnection of knowledge, affect and emotions to previously anonymised objects. The following ethnographic section will discuss the non-affective – that is, symbolic-analytical – part of immaterial labour (Hardt, 1999: 95) through the lens of commodification, asking which specific kinds of ignorance arise as part of commodifying expertise.

Ignorance due to profit

In September 2011, I began working as a management consultant in Berlin. My colleagues and I specialised in 'strategic' managerial advice, meaning we provided market and production analyses to middle and upper management of large German corporate firms (Welker, 2011) in the public and private sector. At times, we drew up blueprints for organisational change, which included growing, shrinking or otherwise restructuring companies. On other occasions we oversaw whether and how changes approved by management were implemented, thereby disciplining large parts of a company's workforce to behave in accordance with managerial visions. Frequently, we simply supported managers with whatever tasks they needed to get done.

Management consultants wield considerable influence in Germany. It is safe to assume that every large corporation in the country is a regular customer to consulting services. Employees from various backgrounds and walks of life thereby continue to be affected by the work of consultants every day. As part of major consulting projects, tens of thousands of people may get hired or laid off, or they may see their work routines substantially changed. In such situations, the lives of their family members, friends, and business partners may equally be transformed. Moreover, management consultants have long been involved in shaping Germany's public policy, since public sector management constitutes their third largest field of activity (BDU, 2015). Thereby, they alter how the state operates on a daily basis, affecting the lives of millions of citizens in yet another way.

Against this background, it was surprising to see during fieldwork that management consultants were mostly unconcerned with the social effects of their work. Asking a 27-year-old consultant from Hamburg how he justified the fact that client company employees often lost their jobs as part of the operational improvement projects in which he specialised, he responded thus:

> *Interviewee*: I have encountered the situation in which employees [...] lost their jobs [as part of a consulting project] once. I justify this to myself and to my friends by saying, 'If we did not do this, the client company would run into great difficulties in the long run, aggravating its current problems.' I think about this a lot and I have asked myself many times whether this is right, but honestly I have not found any other answers to this problem. That is because when people lost their jobs in the cases that I am familiar with, this really was backed by efficiency gains, which truly did make them redundant. If I can build a car twice as fast as before, for example, I only need one person rather than two to build it. Yet, other reasons [for layoffs] also exist. You might [on some projects] say to yourself: Ok I simply have to make x amount of

savings now, so a hundred people will have to go, and I do not care what happens to the work they do.

FS: Does that mean that you do find it important that actual efficiency gains are made [when recommending layoffs]?

Interviewee: It can be efficiency gains or *whatever*.[3] I want it to make sense and to be justified.[4]

As in the interview above, consultants often worried personally about causing job losses. Yet, they were forced to ignore such concerns to be good at their jobs. References to potential efficiency gains, or other project prerogatives were enough to take layoffs as a given. If one challenged the reasons for layoffs explicitly, accusations of being a moralist or of not being fully dedicated to the success of one's own consultancy company were quick to follow.

A second way in which consultants ignored the social consequences of their work was reflected in their general willingness to support any kind of project, regardless of its specific content. My colleagues and I would on some occasions work to render corporate staff healthier and happier, while on other projects, we would write plans on how to extract as much work from them as possible. We would sometimes support hospitals in their attempts at improving healthcare workflows, but we would also enable tobacco companies to sell more of their products in whatever ways imaginable. We helped German ministries in their day-to-day governance work, as much as clients trying to bypass national legislation in the pursuit of profit. Some of my colleagues would back attempts at increasing vaccination rates in developing countries, while others tried to boost profits made on pet food back in Germany. This ignorance as to what constituted the social purpose of consulting was reflected in our job description insofar as we were 'strategy consultants'. Strategy, with its militaristic origins and connotations (Freedman, 2013), had the important feature of not referring to any specific kind of work content. It revealed a largely nihilistic functionalism of our labour, according to which anything would get done, as long as it paid our salaries and made some sense from a business perspective.

A third way in which we ignored the socio-economic effects of our labour was even more surprising. This was the generalised lack of knowledge among junior consultants as to whether and how their work affected the profitability of client companies. Rumours constantly circulated about how incredible the *impact* of our past projects had been. Indeed, as one of my colleagues sourly remarked, those who were most convinced and the most vocal about the beneficial effect of their own projects seemed to advance faster in their consulting careers than others. And yet, junior consultants were not systematically informed as to whether, how, and to what effect their recommendations had been implemented by clients, or how such implementation had affected production workflows, company profit or shareholder value, which was often the dominant measure for corporate success (Ho, 2009).

One reason for this was that the economic effects of consulting projects were incredibly difficult to ascertain. Client companies were large and internally heterogeneous. As such, their profitability was affected by international currency movements and the price of oil, advertisement and production improvements, hiring practices as much as legislative change, interpersonal connections as well as institutionalised structures. Moreover, as strategy consultants we were supposed to be predominantly concerned with medium-and long-term planning, improving hiring practices or defining new customer segments. Projects that dealt with medium- to long-term change would often take years to get implemented and show results.

In spite of this complexity it would have been possible to foster some kind of systematic interest in client profitability among junior consultants. After all, consultancy companies sold different methodologies of how to measure impact to their clients. Yet I never observed them using these methods themselves, and neither did most of my interviewees. Indeed, very senior consultants occasionally joked, in a self-critical manner, that our profession was particularly bad at 'taking our own medicine'. Instead, the safest way to gauge whether or not a project had been a success was whether the client managers who had originally commissioned it were content with the work achieved, and eventually re-hired us. The socio-economic effect of our work was thus primarily measured by senior consultants known as 'Partners', who stayed personally in touch with client managers and informed their junior peers in an informal and mostly unverifiable fashion that a project had been successful, or that the client had unfortunately not been able to implement past recommendations.

This wilful blindness towards the social effects of our work on wider society and on client companies was driven by a strong focus on our own profit. Carrying out our immediate tasks successfully – so the logic went – was assumed to please upper client management, who would commission further projects, which would in turn increase consultancy profits (as well as personal bonuses). Junior consultants therefore focused primarily on the analyses, reports, informal updates and suggestions for action that senior consultants and upper client management were expecting. This daily work of gathering data, analysing it and putting together presentations and workshops was so demanding that it did not leave many of my colleagues or interviewees with much opportunity for questioning the social premises of their working lives (see also Stein, 2018). A strong profit orientation thus stood in considerable conflict with musings about what might be the social implications of it all. In the interview cited above, for example, the consultant from Hamburg also highlighted that his average day in the office lasted 14 hours (from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m.) and that having the possibility of sleeping eight hours generally made for a good consulting project. Attributing this kind of ignorance to the profit motive equally explains why consultants cared a little bit more about client business performance as soon as this was explicitly made part of their job. This was usually the case when they rose in the ranks and were increasingly expected to build personal ties with senior client management in the pursuit of future projects.

There were of course exceptions and limits to this profit-oriented form of ignorance. One of my team leaders who specialised in health care, for example, had worked as a plastic surgeon before his consulting career and viscerally despised the inefficient use of resources in the German health sector. He made this clear in an interview and in frequent on-the-job jokes about how clients were constantly 'burning money'. He passionately cared for a more efficient world, so to say, showing a greater interest than most in linking his individual work as a consultant to Germany's wider health care landscape. Moreover, several colleagues who worked on projects in the public sector seemed genuinely interested in politics and in serving their country or supporting developing country governments. They also showed greater interest in connecting their work to larger socio-economic phenomena. Overall, however, the commodification of expertise required a strong focus on exactly those kinds of activities that were covered by the profit motive, thereby devaluing knowledge or care for diverging thoughts and activities.

Ignorance due to rhetoric

A second source of ignorance emerged from the ways in which consultants presented most of their major analyses and ideas. This was not done in a neutral fashion, but always in a way that would invite further activity, both from the client company, and from potential future consultants. Let me describe this by way of example. At one point in my consulting career, I was involved in writing a project acquisition letter to national government officials of a country in sub-Saharan Africa. The government in question had publicly announced that it was looking for consultancy companies to write a plan on how to increase tax income. The team that was in touch with the government and I worked on the letter remotely, hoping it would open the doors for a *pitch*, that is, a presentation of project plans to clients, on the basis of which consulting contracts could be acquired.

Our letter was organised around a Microsoft PowerPoint slideshow which would be used for the *pitch* if we were to get invited. Consultants conveyed most of their ideas to clients via such slideshows, which were usually built along a linear narrative logic. Good slideshows would follow story arcs such as *situation*, *complication*, *solution*, in which presentations first described the world as constituting a 'problem', then rendered the problem more complicated and finally provided an answer to it, usually suggesting a consulting project. This was also the case in our letter. After providing a flattering overview of our company, it outlined that our client had 'ambitious goals' that required 'tremendous investment', which in turn obliged the government in question to drastically 'increase public sector revenues'. It also highlighted the relatively low levels of government revenues today, which, on the one hand, suggested 'significant potential for [revenue] increase', but on the other pointed to the 'inadequacy of the current sources of income and the challenge that lies ahead'. It ended on the specific analyses that our team of consultants could provide.

Generally used as part of verbal presentations, slideshows enabled skilful consultants to pick up cues from their audience and respond to doubts, questions and queries on the spot. Moreover, they were usually written with a very specific subset of client managers or government officials in mind, as most of them would not be passed on to lower-level staff more widely. Consultants thus attempted to tailor each slide to reflect the worries, desires and epistemic preferences of clients, turning PowerPoint presentations into precisely targeted forms of reification, that could afford to exclude all those aspects of the world that a particular manager or government official might not care about (cf. Prentice, 2019). This promised to please client management and move them from one issue to the next so as to enable them to take decisions.

Individual consulting slides echoed the drive to action of slideshows. They were explicitly constructed so as to be persuasive (Yates, 1984) and the goal was to render them so simple and clear that they would be almost effortlessly understandable (Bourgoin and Muniesa, 2012). This effect was to be achieved by giving each slide a single main message that stood in direct and obvious relationship to its main body. The latter should ideally be a single graphical depiction of a quantitative analysis, the aesthetics of which evoked precision and control (see Figure 1). Explanatory notes, doubts and questions which would complicate a slide's main message were either reduced to footnotes or bullet points on the side. This ensemble of aesthetic and narrative features made it easier for the managerial audience

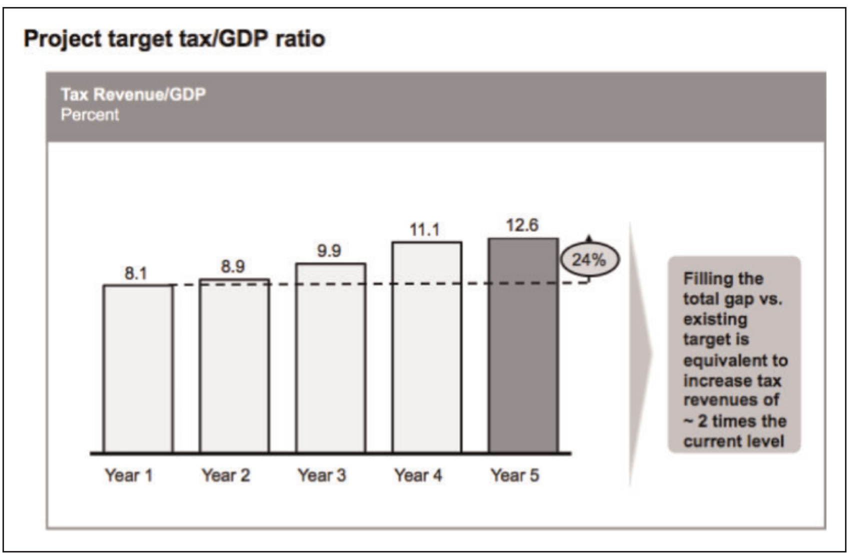

Figure 1: A slide used in the project acquisition letter
Note: Slide has been simplified and numbers have been altered.

to feel convinced during a presentation, and to take decisions on future activity right away.

These action-oriented features of slideshows and individual slides extended right down into the concepts we used. I will outline this here with reference to the notion of 'gaps'. Our letter had the somewhat dry title 'Examining Potential Government Revenues and Income Gaps'.[5] It read:

> [Previously outlined weaknesses] result in 'revenue gaps' between revenues that ought to be obtained and revenues that are actually achieved. The present request for [our study] arises from a need to [...] quantify the revenue gap for each revenue category, identify priority categories and quick wins, and ultimately generate detailed policy measures to close the gaps and achieve potential revenues.

It was striking how often the idea of 'gaps' would arise in consulting work. To provide just a few examples, Deloitte (2016) hopes to close the 'programmatic gap' in Germany's digital advertising; Bain & Company (2015) holds that 'German banks face a yawning earnings gap'; KPMG (2016) highlights a widespread organisational 'trust gap in data and analytics'; EY (2016) see a 'financing gap' in the German start-up sector; and PWC (2014: 1) identified in their latest international family business survey, a 'generation gap', a 'credibility gap' and a 'communications gap'. This focus on gaps might be emblematic for commodified expertise more widely. Anthropologists and other scientists, for example, tend to be quite skilled at locating 'gaps in the literature' themselves, usually while in the process of writing funding applications.

The gaps that consultants 'uncovered' on a daily basis arose in highly variegated sectors of the economy and on different analytical scales. Thus gaps could be identified between entire countries, between businesses, between business units or between individual employees. While all these gaps were synchronic in nature, diachronic ones were equally important. For example, one of the most relevant slides in our letter, pointed at gaps within a single entity, over time (see Figure 1).[6] Since gaps relied on the analytical scales that had been chosen, and scaling always depends on people's vantage points (Summerson Carr and Lempert, 2016) gaps can be considered created, rather than found. The popularity of gaps in consulting and in the corporate world in general thus points to the fact that the term must play a highly useful role for the actors who popularise it.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term 'gap' as 'An unfilled space or interval; a blank or deficiency; a break in continuity. Also, a disparity, inequality or imbalance.'[7] On the one hand, the term thus makes reference to negative attributes, which revolve around notions of difference, absence or non-existence. On the other, there are positive ones, which refer to a presupposed underlying unity of the objects around it. These positive attributes seem stronger than in the synonym 'difference', as differences may exist between things that have little to nothing in common.

The underlying unity that gaps evoke also serves as a normative ideal that has somehow become disturbed or tarnished as gaps tend to be undesirable, yet mostly not too great to be overcome. As consultancy and other corporate documents continue to make clear, gaps can be 'bridged', 'filled' or 'closed'. Thus, in postulating gaps rather than otherness or apartness, my colleagues usually made the assertion that something was not right, but that it could be fixed if only it was acted upon. Contrary to the term 'difference', which can have positive normative connotations (Heywood, 2018) 'gaps' created a sense of negative abnormality that invited activity.

In spite of their heterogeneity, the gaps that we tended to describe had two features in common. First, as in the slide in Figure 1, we often represented them via the technology of commensuration that is the bar chart. In their simplicity of form, bar charts could symbolise any quantified entity or activity imaginable, always in the same form. Thereby they echoed the comparative affordances and reductionist moments that come with the universal equivalent that is money (Marx, 1990). At the same time, their form was not quite as abstract as numerical depiction, but meant to have an immediate effect on the reader. When arranged in increasing or decreasing order, they affectively conveyed relations of size between the entities in question (see also Zaloom, 2012a). Their perfectly flat tops invited – maybe even imposed – comparison, by allowing readers to imagine a line stretching out from their ends to above or below the bars nearby. Thereby, even temporal differences could be made commensurate and comparable in the chart's spatial idiom, which reduced all qualitative difference to that of size alone, evoking the intuitive understanding that enables immediate decision-making described above for slides in general.

Second, gaps always compared an actual entity to its potential self. When a business or government unit was compared to its planned performance (as was the case here) this was quite obvious. However, this potential was also invoked when comparing two currently existing entities. For example, while working on the project acquisition letter, I was also part of two consultancy teams that had been hired by a health insurance company. There, one of our colleagues had the task of assessing the company's 'sales performance'. Thus, she got hold of the sales data and created a bar chart that plotted the insurance salespersons next to one another along the x axis, adding bars above them that depicted the number of their individually made acquisitions over a certain period of time. She then arranged them from best to worst performing salesperson before trying to find out what lay behind the success of the best of them, hoping to pass their secrets on to the others. This in turn would close the 'performance gaps' between sales staff. The top performers thereby served as exemplars that all other colleagues were expected to emulate, that is, they would be idealised as a physical manifestation of the potential of their peers (Humphrey, 1997). This logic seemed to be at work regardless of the contexts or contents of the gaps in question, blurring the difference between representation and exemplar.

This rhetorical focus on what could be was reflected in how we described the world in project *pitches*. As several of my work mentors and senior colleagues taught me, pitches tended to be structured around two main logics. In the first one, a potential world was desired by the client company and only just out of reach. This logic was known as the ‘pot of gold’, the ‘mountain of gold’ or the ‘low-hanging fruit’, expressions that emphasised either the high appeal of a potential world or its easy accessibility. The second logic, frequently applied when pitching for cost-reduction projects, was one where the expected future was highly undesirable. It was known among my colleagues as ‘imminent doom’ or the ‘cliff-hanger’. In these cases, hospitals were making substantive losses, company shares were rapidly losing value, and government entities were about to overspend their budgets. Each of these examples was assumed to end in disaster, that is, in bankruptcy, hostile company takeovers or a lack of public finances.

Both logics posited stark differences between actual world and expected future, as compared to potential worlds. They described potential worlds as preferable and held that they could be realised, if action – carried out with the help of consultancy experts – was taken right away. With our support, so the story went, clients would be able to reduce some of the friction between the world that was, and the ideals that could be (Tsing, 2005). Thus, as long as clients were not deemed to live in the ‘best of all possible worlds’ (Look, 2013), more activity might be required to bring it about. This outlook hints at the potentially infinite commodification of expertise. Each new analysis was likely to uncover additional moments of imperfection, and consulting thus seemed to have a limitless capacity for autopoiesis.

In summary, consulting slideshows, individual slides and analytic concepts used words and graphics to describe a world that was easily comprehensible and constantly invited action, both from clients and from consultants. To enable this readiness for action and a belief in a better future, my team had to ignore various uncertainties. Thus, in writing our letter, we were not actually sure about the exact size of the potential tax increases or the precise steps that the government needed to take. At least in part, this was because we lacked an embodied, long-term and concrete exposure to the country we were writing about as well as the tax collection practices we aimed to improve. I was based in eastern Germany, and had never been to the country in question, and as far as I could tell from telephone and email correspondence, most other members of our team had not worked there before either. Yet, in order to sell our expertise, these doubts had to be ignored. This ignorance seemed to be a structural and often unconscious feature of my peers. In telephone conferences in which we discussed our letter’s *storyline*, the senior consultants responsible for it repeatedly stated that they were convinced that the country in question could raise much more revenue if only tax collection practices were improved. They shared a strong belief in an assumedly non-fictional utopia that would surpass whatever the world was like today (see also Moore, 1990).

Ignorance due to strong assumptions

A third form of ignorance, that marked the work of management consultants relates to assuming an unequal distribution of human freedom (Laidlaw, 2002) between managers and staff. Going back to the metaphor of gaps discussed above, we find that in some strands of contemporary Western thought, such as for example in the work of John Searle, the idea of a gap is fundamental for the description of free human decision-making. In arguing against a deterministic view of human consciousness, Searle holds that humans often experience having several reasons for choosing an action but that they are ultimately in a position to select which particular reason to act on (Searle, 2001b: 65–6). In taking conscious decisions, they have some scope to choose which one of the reasons operating on them will ultimately be effective. Searle argues that this and other experiences of human decision-making are indicative of a series of gaps. There is a gap between the reasons for the decision and the making of the decision. There is a gap between the decision and the onset of the action, and for any extended action, there is a gap between the onset of the action and its continuation to completion (2001a: 493–4). Searle's description of these gaps is linked to the discussions of potentiality earlier, in that he considers the gap to be 'that feature of our conscious decision-making and acting where we sense alternative future decisions and actions as causally open to us' (2001b: 62).

This view that subjects were capable of such 'causally open' decisions was implied in our letter and in public reports of consultancy firms, as they systematically suggested that the readership actually had freedom in deciding how to act on the gaps they faced. Indeed, our letter's entire structure was devised so as to influence our potential clients in their choice of whether or not to work with us. The same was true for the various reports talking about 'gaps' cited at the beginning of this article. They are part of marketing efforts via which consultancy companies try to convince potential clients to engage in one kind of activity rather than another.

Consulting slides, such as Figure 1 presented ideal types of unconstrained decision-making, marked by clear-cut options and hard-and-fast choices. In fact, the management consultants I got to know saw their own role as filling all three kinds of gaps identified in Searle's work, in that they wanted to provide clients with the right reasons for making a decision (e.g. by outlining reasonable options to them); they aimed to translate already taken decisions into corresponding human action (e.g. by organising workshops aimed at altering staff thought and behaviour); and they tried to ensure the cohesion of extended action (e.g. by increasingly remaining involved in implementing projects over extended periods of time, disciplining and supporting the employees involved). Each of the gaps constitutive of conscious decision-making therefore formed a potential source of consultancy revenue.

Intriguingly, in the acquisition letter, the balance between freedom and constraints was assumed to be tilted differently, depending on the kind of subject in question. When addressing high-rank government officials who might buy our services, the 'gaps' involved in decision-making received a lot of attention. Yet when speaking about lower-rank government officials involved in raising revenues, it stressed the constraints under which they were operating. Tax collectors might not be incentivised to work towards the right goals, they might be using outmoded tools and techniques, or they might not know how to target the right revenue channels. A skilful manipulation of such constraints was assumed to lead them to behave differently, in line with the goals of our plans. Thus, consultancy documents such as the ones mentioned here differentiated between two kinds of subjects: the managers suffering from the freedoms involved in decision-making, and their subordinates understood to work primarily according to workplace constraints. Freedom had to remain unequally distributed. If all subjects were considered as free as the high-ranking government officials we addressed, the imponderabilities of the social world would be too large to plan ahead. If all subjects were as constrained as low-level employees, there would be little need for expert advice at the top.

It was unclear to my team whether these differences in freedom were actually true. On the one hand, the fact that they may not be was not usually a subject of debate. Our lack of concern for this question implied that consultants generally took this skewed distribution of freedom for granted. On the other hand, our daily practices somewhat undermined the notion that clients were principally defined by their freedom and that they were suffering from the responsibilities assumed to come with it. Day-to-day consulting clearly tried to take constraints to unencumbered decision-making among top managers into account. Consultants worried about the emotional states of managers, their aesthetic preferences, and the power hierarchies that dominated their lives. Whenever Partners or other senior consultants had not been present at a client meeting, for example, they asked in subsequent debriefs about clients' personal reactions. They were keen to know which aspects of a discussion had gotten clients angry, concerned or bored, whom they liked and whom they did not want to work with, and if any gossip had come to the fore. Senior consultants displayed a constant concern with such personal ties and emotions, as well as with the aesthetics of dress and of the PowerPoint slides we presented. I believe this showed that management consultants never *fully* ascribed to the story of unconstrained managerial choice. While they adhered to many of the tenets of rational choice in official discourse, daily practice was often marked by ignoring them and by acting in line with a 'substantive approach' to economics, that is, one which highlighted the constraining factors within which economic decisions are made (Ortiz, 2005: 63).

To summarise, as consultants we assumed that freedom systematically lay with the managers we talked to, not with the employees we talked about. Alternative conceptions of the distribution of human freedom were at times adhered to in practice, yet systematically ignored in the documents we produced.

Conclusion: An interplay of ignorance

This article has shown that the commodification of expertise brings about several different forms of ignorance, namely ignorance due to profit, ignorance due to rhetoric and ignorance due to strong assumptions. These stood out in the work of management consultants, yet other forms of ignorance can surely be found in other service sector field sites. In the examples above, they meant that consultants remained blind to their work's social effects, blind to the representational accuracy of their analyses, and blind to the validity of their assumptions regarding personhood and freedom. These forms of ignorance lay on a continuum that spans structural and strategic ignorance mentioned above. While cunning senior consultants were certainly trained in and aware of a host of strategic behaviours that would make them more attractive to clients, they also considered a focus on immediate tasks at hand, on the positive economic potential of the world, and on the manifold options inherent in managerial decision-making to reflect basic common sense. This supports the insight that wilful blindness should be thought of as a spectrum ranging from deliberate unawareness to normalised blindness (Bovensiepen and Pelkmans, 2020).

Each of these three forms of ignorance has an important recursive moment to it. The ignorance stemming from the pursuit of profit reflects and furthers its own context. That is because consultants are often hired to distinguish the essential from non-essential aspects of corporate activity, that is, those aspects that add value to company products, profits and shares from those that do not. Consultants attempt to live up to and foster this ideal. They do this by engaging exactly in those activities that are profitable for themselves, while ignoring most others. They thereby reflect and exemplify the focus on profit-maximising tasks that they were hired for in the first place.

Similarly, the ignorance due to rhetoric reinforces the premises of service delivery, as the service is provided. Consultants will only be hired if their work promises to make a relevant difference in client company performance. They will thus more often than not establish a vision of actual and potential client performance that instantiates and advances the conviction that such a difference is indeed possible and that drives clients and themselves towards further activity. This vision, which justifies hiring consultants in the first place is also woven through the slideshows, individual slides and key concepts that they employ.

Last, consultancy companies ostensibly work to support managers who are held to suffer from too much freedom. This is done by suggesting different ways in which managers could alter employee constraints so as to increase their economic productivity. In establishing and presenting such options to their clients, consultants attempt to advance managerial freedom and alter – maybe even foster – employee constraints. The fact that freedom might not be as unequally distributed as they assume does not matter for this recursive moment to occur.

Taken together, these three forms of ignorance provide the possibility for a fourth one, which may distinguish the commodification of expertise from that of material objects. In each form of ignorance mentioned above, the commodified service *mirrors and furthers* the conditions of its own existence, blurring the boundaries between object and context. This makes it hard to tell where the useful, yet immaterial object that is being exchanged ends, and where the world that it interacts with begins. This recursive nature of commodified expertise is akin to what Zaloom (2012b: 277) has called 'reflexive reason'. Expertise is both the object of exchange as well as a detailed description of the world in which it itself is traded. In addition to the myriad forms of ignorance that *surround* material objects, commodified expertise thus has ignorance woven through its core.

This raises the question of what fetishisation may look like in the context of commodified expertise. One distinguishing feature may be temporal: while in Marx's analysis a material object's use-value precedes its exchange-value, only to then be ignored as part of exchange, the services analysed here co-established their use-value *while* being exchanged. Due to the self-referential nature of expertise, its use-value and exchange-value are largely established simultaneously. Second, the fetishisation of expertise might not lie in overestimating it in its concrete manifestation as an object. After all, in the cases described above, the expertise under discussion was mostly immaterial, unable to be fully embodied by the tangible carriers used for its provision, and often verbally presented in slideshow-based presentations. Instead, the commodity fetish may here lie in the *context* that the commodification of expertise brings about, that is, in the creation of a world in which monetised expertise is increasingly enabled and required.

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Notes

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2. Kopytoff uses the term 'commoditization' rather than 'commodification'. For the purposes of this article I consider the terms interchangeable. For a possible distinction between the two meanings see Stein (2017: 134).
3. Terms printed in italics were used by German consultants in the English original.

4. 'Dass es einen Sinn hat und fundiert ist.'
5. Quotes from the letter have been slightly altered for confidentiality reasons.
6. Numbers have been slightly altered here to preserve anonymity.
7. See: http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/76658?rskey=kpURui&result=1#eid

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