

Historical Claims to the International: The Case of the Suez Canal Experts

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What IR scholars refer to as “the international” gets constructed and performed to specific ends, depending on time and place. This results in a plurality of claims to the international, subject to historical variation. To bring such variation into view, this article shows how nineteenth-century claims to internationality were tied to particular conceptions of legitimacy. The article explores this legitimation-by-experts through a case study of the 1855–56 Suez Canal Commission. Based on original archival research, the article shows that expert advice played an important role in claiming the internationality of the Suez Canal by limiting contestation to technical aspects. The central argument is that expertise and claims to the international can get constituted in arrangements that are intended to produce legitimacy. These arrangements narrow the terms of contestation in self-serving ways. A technocratic claim to the international was tightly linked to the mobilization and making of the Suez Canal experts, on two fronts. One, expertise and internationality were repeatedly articulated in conjunction, so they would signify each other. Two, the article shows that expert involvement was driven by legitimation concerns more than by epistemic optimization purposes. In sum, the article proposes a new way of historicizing internationality claims and sheds light on the distinctiveness of international expertise.

Lo que los académicos en el campo de las RRI llaman «lo internacional» se construye y se desarrolla con fines específicos, dependiendo del tiempo y el lugar. Esto da como resultado una pluralidad de reivindicaciones relacionadas con lo internacional, sujetas a una variación histórica. Este artículo demuestra, con el fin de dar visibilidad a esta variación, cómo las reivindicaciones de internacionalidad del siglo XIX estaban vinculadas a concepciones particulares de legitimidad. El artículo estudia esta legitimación por parte de expertos a través de un estudio de caso de la comisión del canal de Suez de 1855–56. El artículo demuestra, basándose en una investigación de archivo original, que el asesoramiento por parte de expertos jugó un papel importante en la reivindicación de la internacionalidad del canal de Suez al limitar la respuesta a los aspectos técnicos. El argumento principal es que tanto el conocimiento como las reivindicaciones sobre lo internacional pueden constituirse mutuamente a través de acuerdos destinados a producir legitimidad. Estos acuerdos reducen los términos en que puede producirse una respuesta de manera egoísta. Existía una reivindicación tecnocrática sobre lo internacional que estaba estrechamente vinculada a la movilización y a la producción por parte de los expertos del canal de Suez, en dos frentes. En primer lugar, la experiencia y la internacionalidad se articulaban de manera reiterada en conjunto, por lo que se dotarían de significado mutuamente. En segundo lugar, el artículo demuestra que la participación de expertos fue impulsada en mayor medida por preocupaciones de legitimación que por propósitos de optimización epistémica. En resumen, el artículo propone una nueva forma de historizar las reivindicaciones sobre la internacionalidad y arroja luz sobre el carácter distintivo de la experiencia internacional.

Ce que les chercheurs en RI appellent « l'international » se voit interprété et appliqué pour servir des fins précises, en fonction du lieu et de l'endroit. Ainsi apparaît une pluralité de revendications de l'international, soumise à des variations historiques. Pour mettre en lumière ces variations, cet article démontre que les revendications d'internationalité du dix-neuvième siècle étaient intrinsèquement liées à des conceptions spécifiques de la légitimité. L'article analyse cette légitimation d'experts à l'aide d'une étude de cas de la commission du canal de Suez (1855–1856). En s'appuyant sur une recherche archivistique d'origine, l'article montre que les conseils d'experts ont joué un rôle important dans les revendications d'internationalité du canal de Suez en limitant la contestation d'aspects techniques. L'argument central est que l'expertise et les revendications d'internationalité peuvent se constituer conjointement dans le cadre d'accords visant à produire de la légitimité. Ces accords restreignent les conditions de contestation de façon intéressée. Une revendication technocratique d'internationalité était étroitement liée à la mobilisation et la construction d'experts du canal de Suez, à deux égards. D'abord, l'expertise et l'internationalité étaient souvent avancées de pair, pour finalement devenir interchangeables. Ensuite, l'article montre que l'implication d'experts était davantage motivée par une volonté de légitimation que par des objectifs d'optimisation épistémique. En somme, l'article propose une nouvelle manière d'historiciser les revendications d'internationalité et met en lumière le caractère distinctif de l'expertise internationale.

Introduction

In 1855, French diplomat-turned-entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps needed to decide on the optimal route for a canal across the Suez Peninsula in Egypt. The choice was between a direct route cutting through the isthmus, competing with Robert Stephenson's Alexandria-Cairo railroad; or an indirect route via the Nile, favored by Alexandrian merchants. A Suez Canal would not only modernize global commerce, but represent a major intervention in Egyptian

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affairs. It was also certain to become an imperial game-changer. In a word, the stakes were high. To settle the issue, Lesseps convened an *International Commission on the Isthmus of Suez*, a committee of experts drawn from across Europe—none from Egypt. At least temporarily, this commission strengthened the canal enterprise with a stamp of expert approval. How exactly did this particular combination of expertise and internationality legitimize a project that could easily have seemed like barely disguised French imperialism?

This article suggests that the answer depends on how we conceptualize historical claims to the international. The Suez Canal experts, the article argues, were crucial for generating a technocratic claim to internationality—an internationality that could be achieved only with the help of experts: a circular logic, chiefly empowering those who convinced their audiences that the experts sided with their goals. As the article will demonstrate, Lesseps managed temporarily to persuade industrial capitalists, potential shareholders, and an increasingly enthusiastic wider public of two inextricably linked things: that his commission gave genuine expert approval to his project—the Suez Canal was scientifically sanctified, as it were, and the chosen route objectively optimal; and that the project was not imperial, not commercial, not partisan, but *international* in kind.

This observation generates insights of interest for scholars of international relations (IR) more broadly. Today, the assumption persists that technical international cooperation successfully escapes politics: A complex, globalized world, this intuition goes, needs specialists to tackle transnational challenges—experts facilitate international cooperation on technical issues. Even critics rarely question this when they point to accountability deficits or excess power in the hands of technocrats, but suggest this could be mitigated by, say, more reliable selection procedures and methods (for an overview of the literature, see Bueger 2014). A widespread view within and beyond IR assumes that expert status directly derives from specialist knowledge (Haas 1992; Tallberg et al. 2018), although in recent years, critiques of this view have proliferated (Sending 2015; Kennedy 2016; Leander and Wæver 2019; Littoz-Monnet 2020; Louis and Maertens 2021). This article builds on those critiques by putting legitimation through third-party experts into historical perspective.

Doing so allows us to advance a new, historically grounded understanding of how legitimation works through claims to the international: expertise and claims to the international, it is argued below, are co-constituted in arrangements that can temporarily produce legitimacy. They attempt to do so by narrowing the terms of contestation in self-serving ways. In the case study at hand, a *technocratic* claim to the international was tightly linked to the mobilization and making of the Suez Canal experts—on two fronts. One, canal expertise and canal internationality were repeatedly articulated in conjunction such that they would signify each other. Two, the article empirically shows that expert involvement was driven by legitimation concerns rather than epistemic optimization goals. Even though engineering expertise was evidently crucial in this case, biographical analysis of commission membership shows that non-epistemic factors—social networks, political loyalties, financial investment, imperial credential—significantly affected their selection. It was not their specialist knowledge alone, but their ability to bolster an expert-centered claim to the international that qualified commissioners. Rarely studied archival material further shows that the commission's findings had already been determined prior to its inquiries, and that all

commissioners were offered a percentage of future canal profits.

This speaks to existing work in IR and international law on the links between internationality and expertise (Orford 2011; Sending 2015; Kennedy 2016). Thus far, however, this literature does not tell us how exactly certain claims to the international relate to deference to experts, particularly with regards to ad-hoc advisors rather than the historically more recent, institutionalized phenomenon of international expert staff. This article therefore interrogates the historical specificity of the internationality-expertise linkage and its attachment to political purposes. Legitimation avenues that tied internationality to expertise matter because of their powerful implications: they could, as in the case of the Suez Canal, increase the transnational action capacity of globalizing capitalism and indeed informal empire. Below I sketch the contours of my argument by spelling out its theoretical premises; second, I examine the case of the 1855 commission; and third, I conclude by discussing the added value of my analysis for IR more generally.

Internationality as a Legitimation Resource

The central argument of this article is that under particular circumstances, expertise, and claims to the international are co-constituted so as to temporarily produce legitimacy. They do so by narrowing the terms of contestation in self-serving ways. The basic assumption on which this argument depends is the rather uncontroversial, indeed widely accepted view that in its capacity as a social abstraction, the international may be treated as such but *is not in fact* a real, unchanging, and autonomous domain (e.g., Sending 2015; Allan 2018). If this assumption generally holds, we should expect a considerable degree of variation across time and across space of different articulations of this domain—by particular actors, at particular moments, to particular ends. This variety of claims should be accompanied by contestation.

If this, in turn, is the case, we should be able to examine this variation in terms of articulations made, publicly or privately, as well as purposes served, successfully or unsuccessfully. Now this all means that in the present context, we may start from two specific assumptions: one, there is no one “international”—internationality gets invoked as a legitimation resource on registers that vary with the project in question. Two, if involvement of technical or scientific judgement is in demand, expertise can get attached to internationality by being performed as inherently universal, loyal to no nation, mobile by scientific necessity, acting on behalf of human progress, and so on. In other words, claims to the international work through performatively conjoining the social abstraction “the international” to a particular practitioner-type that would advance a given purpose. Again, in their capacity as instances of legitimation, claims to the international are inherently contestable and thus inchoate: their success is far from guaranteed, and indeed we should rather expect any such claim to be only temporarily effective, and only for so long as it is actively being articulated.

Expert advice, as the case study below is going to illustrate, helped claim the internationality of the Suez Canal by limiting contestation to technical aspects. For this to work, it had to be made clear that, in a co-constitutive relationship, *expertise could imply internationality* and inversely *internationality could be claimed with the help of experts*. Actors looking to legitimize their goals may draw on these resources for more than one reason: they need specialist advice to make the project work, but given that the legitimacy of

border-crossing projects is inherently fragile, they also have an interest in making their enterprise *look* impartial, non-political, and so on. Below I explain in more detail how I arrive at these propositions, before outlining how I examine them empirically.

Legitimation by Experts

Expertise is a topic of special and increasing interest among IR scholars. At the risk of oversimplification, we may characterize this literature as ranging on a spectrum from functionalist to interpretive varieties: the former take expert knowledge at face-value as the source of expert authority in politics, whereas the latter tend to stress the political character of expertise at all stages. It should be stressed that the below characterizations are not in all respects mutually exclusive, and that I do not wish to suggest that, for example, functionalist frameworks ignore the dimensions more strongly emphasized by interpretive alternatives.

Functionalist treatments of the topic, building on the classic work by political scientists David Mitrany (1975) and the neofunctionalism of Ernst B. Haas (e.g., 1990), today largely gravitate around the well-known epistemic communities framework developed by Peter Haas and others (Haas 1992; Cross 2013). These contributions share the assumption that expertise confers either authority on particular actors or legitimacy on particular endeavors in virtue of epistemic superiority. Epistemic communities possess “recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge” (Haas 1992, 3). Unpacking how “recognition” and “authority” are achieved has not been the core aim of epistemic communities scholarship. Its baseline assumption is that expertise is best understood in terms of the delivery of knowledge resources. A recent framework for the study of legitimacy in global governance, in a comparable vein, includes expertise as a technocratic source of institutional legitimacy and argues that this can “emanate from ... expertise in institutional processes” and that “expertise could involve basing policy decisions on the best knowledge and skills” (Tallberg et al. 2018, 63). It is left unexplained under such premises, however, whether and to what extent expertise in politics differs from, say, expertise in the laboratory—functionalists imply that in both cases, expertise has self-evident power that needs little further explanation. Using experts in politics, on this view, does not affect the substance of expertise itself.

On the interpretive end of the spectrum, a range of sociological studies instead teases out the distinct logics of political uses of expertise. These studies are concerned with topics as diverse as expert benchmarking at the World Bank (Broome, Homolar and Kranke 2018); the role of international lawyers as experts (Kennedy 2016); or the production of bioethical standards (Littoz-Monnet 2017b). They converge on a conception of expertise as a political practice: given institutional and ideological constraints, these scholars suggest, we should approach experts in politics as something other than ideal experts. Using experts in politics consequently *does* affect the substance of expertise—on this view, expertise is a means to compete for political authority (Sending 2015; Kennedy 2016; Leander and Wæver 2019; Littoz-Monnet 2020; Louis and Maertens 2021). Historically oriented scholars of this bent have brought into sharp relief the technocratic intellectual and institutional legacies, largely imperial in kind, that have promoted a central place for experts in modern international organizations (Mitchell 2002; Hodge 2007; Mazower 2012; Steffek 2021; Eijking 2022). Others have developed broader theoretical

frameworks to study the political strategies undergirding the involvement of experts (Sending 2015; Allan 2018; Louis and Maertens 2021).

The interpretive challenge to functionalism relies on two principal claims: first, individuals can have a non-epistemic interest in appearing and being selected as experts (again, this is a matter of emphasis: functionalists are not unaware of this). According to Kennedy, experts “are people with projects, projects of affiliation and disaffiliation, commitment and aversion, and with wills to power and to submission” (2016: 111). Second, those choosing the experts can have political goals that expert approval can help achieve. Littoz-Monnet distinguishes between “expert-shaped policy” and “policy-shaped expertise”: international organizations can control the way expertise works by using expert groups to legitimize a policy intervention, or by selecting a particular expert group and not another to look at a given issue from one angle only (Littoz-Monnet 2017a, 15). Think of immigration committees composed of national security advisors, or public health reports sponsored by big tobacco: in these cases, experts do not simply deliver information but help an institution save face, deflect, or ignore (cf. Boswell 2009; McGoey 2019).

The present article adopts the latter interpretive approach, with a few modifications. Much of this exciting literature has (a) made the point that expertise is political, chiefly because of its uses and the reasons for involvement that experts and the actors that mobilize them have (e.g., Leander and Wæver 2019). Yet we know less about the *co-constitution* of expertise and the international—as I elaborate below, a historical perspective on the construction of the international is a promising avenue for approaching this question. The extant literature also (b) focuses on the authority of experts involved in governing processes themselves, i.e., their power over decisions taken at the international level (e.g., Seabrooke 2014; Best 2014; Pouliot 2021). The present article complements this with a focus on *legitimation* by experts recruited as advisors, a historically more salient actor type in non-institutionalized contexts where no permanent expert staff is involved. Expert advice on a particular project poses different questions of legitimacy than expert governance, and this difference deserves closer empirical attention than it has received thus far.

Claims to the International

So far, I have made the case for building on interpretive scholarship on expertise in IR in two ways: (a) by focusing on the *co-constitution* of expertise and the international; and (b) by focusing on *legitimation* by recourse to expert advice, rather than on the governing authority of experts themselves. Corresponding to the interpretive premises outlined above, I assume that expertise in politics never just gets plugged into the policy process to optimize the availability of evidence. The fact that expert involvement in politics gets performed *on the public stage* already hints at its non-epistemic purposes: in politics, we let it be publicly known when a decision is based on expert advice. If experts are involved in struggles for legitimacy, then having their approval of a project in question recognized by a relevant audience is crucial.

Identifying and targeting the appropriate audience is thus an important factor for the temporary success or failure of a given attempt at legitimation. Now, we can think of the delimitation of an audience in at least two distinct ways. On one hand, we might think of it in terms of audience *membership* and construe legitimation as a form

of gerrymandering, as it were, drawing the line around the most optimal constituency to improve our prospects of electoral (or other forms of) success. On the other hand, we might think of audience delimitation at the level of contestation: the question being less who we address ourselves to, but what are the *terms* of address? If cleverly chosen, these terms of contestation will have a serious impact on the vocabulary of legitimation and its flip side, contestation. If an actor manages to legitimize military intervention on humanitarian grounds, contestation will first have to disprove the humanitarian merit of the intervention before opposing it on non-humanitarian grounds. Legitimation in this second sense, in other words, *shifts the burden of proof* to the audience by starting out from terms that are chosen for being more accessible, more convenient, or in some other way advantageous to the legitimizing party.

This has consequences for claims about the characteristics and scope of internationality, advanced by different actors/institutions with different aims at different times. If, for example, international cooperation gets expressed as a moral high-ground, free from prejudice, but with a common normative mission to combat, say, fascism, then internationality and democracy may be twinned such that democratic politicians and lawyers with a declared commitment to fight the evils of fascism are authorized as central purveyors of internationality. If instead, among the civil servants, lawyers, and bureaucrats, who work for international organizations, internationality gets equated with an expertise-based sort of impartiality, then technical-scientific experts turn out to be central purveyors of internationality. Examples of such technocratic internationalism, the loose ideology underpinning this conception, abound (see Steffek 2021). As a member of the League of Nations' Committee of Thirteen put it, its ideal type was the "international man ... committed to the strictest and most scrupulous impartiality in examining and solving all problems" (cited in Sending 2015, 43). Many scholars have noted this linkage: for sending, expert governance "is the result of a successful claim to authority that was initially rooted in a claim to represent the international in an impartial and neutral way" (2015, 5; cf. Orford 2011, 192–205); Allan holds that governance objects "could not be seen with the naked eye and so they had to be created and rendered legible by expert knowledge" (2018, 164); and Leira points out that historically foreign policy "was construed as a separate sphere ... where special knowledge reigned" (2019, 194). To this day, "impartiality" is a fundamental principle of the International Committee of the Red Cross (along with neutrality, independence, and universality), of the code of ethics for International Telecommunication Union staff, and of the International Labour Organization's global partnerships agenda, to name just a few.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized once more that claims to the international vary by time period, substance, purpose, and in terms of the types of actors they involve. A *technocratic* claim that co-constitutes the international and expertise is far from the only one, but simply in the focus of this article. Such a focus speaks to conceptions of expertise in international politics as advanced by Sending (2015), Littoz-Monnet (2017a), or Louis and Maertens (2021). Sending argues that what is distinctive about expert politics in international contexts is a special invocation of internationality that attaches the notion to values such as objectivity and impartiality, which experts have special access to. They can persuasively convey "the 'international' as a social space distinct from the sum total of states' interests' because experts lay claim to being independent from those interests (Sending 2015, 33). If experts are easily perceived as em-

bodying disinterestedness and the universal advancement of scientific progress, they turn into attractive purveyors of internationality. I build on this and make the co-constitution of a category (a claim to the international) and a practice (the use of expert advisors) central to my analysis.

This lends itself to historical perspective. If the long nineteenth century, the setting of my case study, was a time of "global transformation" (Buzan and Lawson 2015), it also was a time of great innovation in the practices and vocabularies of international cooperation. An important dimension of this innovation was technical in kind, given the rapid industrial and scientific advances that characterized most of the period. This had well-established ideological consequences, such as the influence of technology on the imperial political imagination (e.g., Bell 2005) or the proliferation of schemes for world government on a scientific register (e.g., Mazower 2012; Eijking 2022). But innovation also implies fragility and contestation, and so legitimation was crucial. Throughout the nineteenth century, where technical projects across borders were concerned, legitimacy stakes were high: as soon as an actor or institution would act outside of their original jurisdiction, their activities would have raised legal, economic, political, even cultural questions that would otherwise not have arisen. A case in point is that throughout this time period, international law underwent a great deal of professionalization and codification (e.g., Koskeniemi 2006). But more broadly, this was an important time period for various kinds of experiments with bringing in the experts in various contexts more and more often labeled "international." To make sense of this simultaneity—between the recourse to expertise and articulations of internationality—I connect the above general conception of legitimation-by-experts to the phenomenon of historically identifiable claims to the international.

Methodologically, we can then study the articulation of such claims in combination with the individual practitioners brought into the legitimation process as experts. I propose two empirical starting points for doing so. First, while historical expert selection strategies will prove difficult or even impossible to fully recover, we can make some inferences based on characteristics of the actor selecting the experts, and of the experts that ended up being chosen. I therefore start from biographical information, including institutional trajectories and socialization, on each member of the 1855–56 international commission for the Suez Canal. Second, if audience delimitation matters, we need to establish criteria for relevant audiences. For present purposes—in the context of claims to the international—I define "relevant audience" in broad terms as the group of stakeholders that has some power to decide over the success or failure of the project. These could be financiers, government officials, or lawyers, but also—e.g., in the case of international exhibitions—a public audience of spectators.

Rather than elaborate these theoretical suggestions further, the remainder of this article focuses on the interpretive contribution that a historical approach brings to the study of claims to the international. My aim is to capture a particular kind of expert involvement constituting a particular understanding of internationality, each reinforcing the other, in the context of a large infrastructure project in the mid-nineteenth century. Inchoate legitimation processes by definition imply multiple different modes of legitimation that vary by actor positionality, political intent, place, but also time. This represents an exciting opportunity for dialogue between sociological-interpretive IR and history. The case study below contributes to such a dialogue for the nineteenth-century context. Since Murphy's seminal study

of international organizations as regulators of industrial change (1994), IR work on the period has grown considerably (Howland 2015; Yao 2019; Ravndal 2020; Schenk 2020; Yao 2022). As a contribution to this burgeoning agenda, the next section explores the above theoretical propositions in the case of the 1855–56 International Commission on the Isthmus of Suez.

The Suez Canal Commission

To examine the propositions developed in the previous section, I turn to the mid-nineteenth century legitimization of the Suez Canal. This is a hard case for my argument. From a functionalist face-value conception, but also in light of the scientifically demanding nature of the project, we have ample reason to expect expert advice to be informed by strictly epistemic criteria, and not to be tainted by non-epistemic considerations.

Against the backdrop of globalization, the professionalization of scientific inquiry, and proliferating “ideologies of progress” (Buzan and Lawson 2015), as noted above this period witnessed an intensifying confluence of industrial-technical expertise and international affairs (Mazower 2012). Around the 1850s, many new elite actors—credentialed lawyers, economists, and engineers—mobilized their technical expert status to get involved in border-crossing projects. At the same time, the entrepreneurs heading such projects—transnational railways, canals, telegraph cables—in turn, increasingly sought non-political approval from these experts. The Suez Canal is a case in point. In IR so far, references to Suez are for the most part limited to the Suez crisis in the 1950s (Richardson 1992) or, from a more critical angle, the role of the canal as a conduit of capitalist infrastructural power (Khalili 2020). Neither refers to the canal’s legitimization prior to its completion or construction. Where the making of the canal does feature, one interpretation is that the canal “put Egypt at the center of global trade” (Jupille, Mattli and Snidal 2013, 106). In the extant literature, in other words, the Suez Canal either features as already-made artefact, or its making is assumed to have been the rational solution to a technical problem.

In this section, I argue that once we turn to the legitimization of the canal, we not only obtain a more complete picture of this particular historical case, but also more broadly of the relationship between legitimization-by-experts and claims to the international. To follow this trajectory, I draw from global history, where Valeska Huber’s fascinating history of the Suez Canal characterizes the project as an exemplar of an era of “differentiation, regulation and bureaucratization of different kinds of movement” (Huber 2013, 3). The central role that expertise played in the canal’s legitimization aligns with Huber’s emphasis on differentiation and regulation. To “internationalize” was to legitimize, and experts were key to achieving this through a technocratic claim to the international that relied on experts. Zooming in on how this claim was made helps us put the legitimization of the Suez Canal into perspective. On my reading, expert advice here was fundamentally shaped by canal entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps’ double interest in *functionality*, securing solid expert advice, and *legitimacy*, obfuscating imperial, commercial, and other partial motives. A technocratic claim to the international conflated the two. Limiting our analysis to either one therefore paints an incomplete picture.

The case study comes with some necessary limitations: my empirical analysis is confined to mostly French and British archival sources, based on material from the early Suez

Canal enterprise itself as well as supplementary archives for biographical information on individual commissioners. Egyptian sources were not included for reasons of focus—on the entirely non-Egyptian members of the 1855 commission—and language limitations. To fully contextualize the commission’s perspective with contemporary counterpoints and debates, a reading of Egyptian sources will be the essential next step beyond the scope of the present article. Below I chronologically analyze three stages of contested legitimacy: the 1840s’ *initiative* for a Suez Canal enterprise; the 1850s’ *selection* of members of the 1855 commission; and the contested *reception* of the commission’s report.

Initiative

An exhaustive history of the Suez Canal goes beyond the scope of this article, but let me offer a brief sketch of the context in which the 1855 commission was formed. This context has both political and technical dimensions. After Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1798 campaign to Egypt, a canal on the Suez peninsula was initially dismissed as an impossible undertaking. The idea nevertheless fueled hopes for a boost to the economic and military efficiency of Europe’s empires, particularly at a time of rapid growth in British and French imperial reach. From 1835, British correspondence and bills to India had moved shipping routes from the Cape to the Red Sea (Huber 2013, 23). The French, in turn, were aggressively expanding their colonial possessions not just in Algeria but also in Southeast Asia. French conquest of large parts of the region would pick up pace under the Second Empire from the 1860s, but pressure by gunboat diplomacy had already been building up and in 1847 escalated into French bombardment of the Vietnamese fleet at Da Nang (Todd 2021).

Under these conditions, a Suez Canal was a politically attractive idea to the imperial mind. At the same time, this complicated matter: To be successful, a canal-digging enterprise would face the challenge of making sure it did not appear as a British or French imperial ploy, likely undercutting financial backing by non-British or non-French investors. An attempt under the leadership of the Saint-Simonian sectarian leader Prosper Enfantin failed but renewed excitement: Its surveyors had discovered that the levels of the Red Sea and Mediterranean were actually close to equal (Karabell 2003, 67). After the turmoil of the February Revolution, the former French vice-consul to Egypt Ferdinand de Lesseps took over (Taboulet 1968, 96). The replacement of the isolationist Wāli Abbas with Saïd opened a window of opportunity as Lesseps knew Saïd personally from his time as a diplomat in Egypt. Moreover, the 1850 Clayton–Bulwer Treaty set a precedent for internationality as a legitimization resource for a transnational canal.

In Egypt, Lesseps was well received, helped by rekindled diplomatic connections but also by the fact that his cousin Eugénie de Montijo had recently become Empress of France. On 30 November 1854, Saïd granted Lesseps a land concession that would allow the former to set up a company for the construction of a canal, granting the right to operate for 99 years (Huber 2013, 27; Boutros Ghali and Chlala 1958, 1–9). Egypt was to receive 15 percent of the eventual canal’s annual net profits, with another 10 percent going to the founders of the company (including, preemptively, Enfantin and other potential competitors), and 75 percent to shareholders. The concession also granted the right to import all necessary equipment and building materials free from Egyptian taxation. Despite the concession, opinions were divided as to whether a Suez Canal

would be feasible. Debate ensued over the choice between a direct route through the isthmus, which could compete with Robert Stephenson's Alexandria–Cairo railroad; or an indirect route via the Nile, benefitting Alexandrian trade. Mounting pressure from the Alexandrian merchant lobby favoring the indirect route notwithstanding, the Wāli Saïd preferred the former to keep the canal at a distance from Egypt's urban power centers, hoping this would keep European meddling with Egyptian affairs to a minimum.

Lesseps' enterprise was bound to raise suspicions about French imperial reach. Could it be genuinely "international"? With foresight, Lesseps took pains to publicly foreground the canal's benefits for humanity and civilization. Drawing from his diplomatic experience, he wrote individual letters to potential political and financial supporters on a weekly basis (Lesseps 1875–81). As periodicals and newspapers joined the public debate about the merits of building a canal to connect the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, Lesseps closely followed any and all canal-related commentary across news outlets and journals in Britain, Germany, The Netherlands, and France. In an 1854 diary entry, he observed that "the great European powers, for their fear of seeing one of them claim it [the canal] one day, will regard as a vital question *the need to guarantee its neutrality*" (Lesseps 1875, 42; emphasis added). Whenever public commentary sustained reservations about the project's prospects, he immediately sent counter-arguments to editors and politicians in the respective country. In the case of particularly strong criticism, he individually approached the French Emperor, the French ambassador in Constantinople, the French ambassador in Cairo, and the Wāli of Egypt.

For each audience, technical and political objections were inseparable. One aim of Lesseps' campaign was therefore to narrow the terms of contestation to the former dimension. An 1855 meeting of Lesseps with Lord Palmerston illustrates this. Palmerston did not think, as Lesseps would later recall, "that the canal was technically viable" but also pointed out that "even if the engineering challenges would somehow be overcome, he felt that the opening of a new route to the East would undermine England's position as the dominant power in world trade." Palmerston did not strictly separate technical from political merit. Lesseps' response was to distinguish between the two and confine his legitimization strategy to the technical level. Lesseps gave Palmerston his word that "an international commission of engineers would shortly be dispatched in order to prove once and for all that the canal and the jetties planned for Port Saïd were feasible" (Lesseps 1875, 221–27). Already he was narrowing the terms of contestation, with consequences for expert selection.

Selection

We have seen that Lesseps devoted a great deal of energy to persuading his international audience of potential supporters of one central claim: that the Suez Canal would favor no nation but all of humanity. As he put it, "I want to do a great thing, without ulterior motive, without personal interest in *money*" (Lesseps 1875, 94; emphasis original). If my argument fits the case, this legitimization interest should be seen to affect expert selection. To find out, in this subsection, I make inferences about the relevant selection criteria based on characteristics of selector and selectees. Empirically, I do this through biographical analysis. In the next subsection, I relate my findings to audience reception to find out whether the terms of Lesseps' legitimization strategy—based upon a claim to the international—were reflected and adopted among stakeholders.

The canal campaign initially consisted of commissions, geological surveys, and lobbying across Europe's capitals, with as its pinnacle the 1855 *International Commission for the Piercing of the Isthmus of Suez*. While not novel (international commissions had already featured widely at the Congress of Vienna), this was a remarkable institutional choice by a private company, predating the first permanent modern international organization (the 1865 International Telegraph Union) by a decade. Ferdinand de Lesseps selected thirteen experts from seven countries—excluding Egypt—to examine existing plans and determine the optimal course of action (see Table 1). The commission's purpose was to evaluate the accuracy of French and Egyptian precursory schemes, respectively, and settle the quest for the optimal route. It was "charged with the duty of examining the preparatory surveys of the preliminary scheme, of solving all the problems in science, art, and execution presented by the operation" (Lesseps 1876, 183–84). To select commissioners, Lesseps had asked ministers of each country—Austria, Italy, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, England, France—"to name the engineer who is the most capable." Note how this treated pre-unification Italy and Germany as units. A commission "composed of such men," Lesseps stressed in a letter to the editor of the anti-canal *Times*, surely "ought to remove all doubts, all mistrust, all anxiety, all timidity" among investors and the general public (Lesseps 1876, 183–84). Who were these experts, and what criteria informed their selection?

A close reading of Lesseps' letters to policy-makers, government officials, diplomats, and engineers suggest that his legitimization strategy was to consistently link up internationality with expertise by stressing that the canal would benefit *humanity* and *civilization*, that it was strictly following the *science*, and that it was going to be approved by an *international commission*. In an 1854 letter, he preempted the objection that the Ottoman Empire might not be convinced of the impartial nature of the project as follows:

The objection has been raised that the Turkish government might be worried about the canal project; but—as with any question, where the principle is just, the foreseen consequences are infallible—from whatever side one considers the enterprise of the Suez canal, one finds only advantages for everyone. ... Turkey can only emerge from its present state of languor by borrowing capital and intelligence from Europe. The prosperity of the East today is connected with the interests of civilisation in general, and the best means of working towards its well-being at the same time as for that of humanity, is to break down the barriers which still separate men, races, and nations. (Lesseps 1875–81, 241)

The consequence of the view expressed in this passage was that it not only characterized the Suez Canal project as merely acting in the name of "the interests of civilization in general"—it also introduced a non-epistemic reason for expert involvement: if "intelligence from Europe" was essential for the future "prosperity of the East" then expert approval would signal the universal merit of the project. Lesseps laid out, in other words, the stakes of expert judgement: if passed, not only would the project be scientifically sound, but its civilizational worth would have been affirmed. To make this point, Lesseps deployed the frame of internationality—the breaking down of "barriers which still separate men, races, and nations."

The practical conclusions Lesseps drew from this view shed additional light on what motives he brought to the

Table 1. Members of the 1855 International Commission on the Isthmus of Suez.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Experience</i>	<i>Key qualification</i>
Alois Negrelli, 1799–1858	Italian	University of Padua, University of Innsbruck (1817 graduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief engineer <i>Schweizerische Nordbahn</i> 1836–46 • Railways to Prague, Poland, German states • 1850 President of the International Shipping Commission of Austria • 1852 Austrian Delegate to International Commission for the Central Italian Rail • Member of Enfantin's <i>Société d'Études</i> 	Transnational engineer of large-scale public works; prior surveys in Egypt with Enfantin
Charles Jaurès, 1808–1870	French	French Naval College, Angoulême (1825 graduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1830 marine admiral on French expedition to Algeria • 1844 Morocco • 1852 Egypt • 1855 China 	Military career, imperial distinction
Charles Manby, 1804–1884	British	Engineering apprentice at his father's Staffordshire <i>Horseley Ironworks</i> from 1817	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1823 move to France to install hydrogen gas pipes across Paris for his father's company • 1820s employment by French government to build state-owned tobacco factories • 1838 back in England joined Sir John Ross's <i>India Steamship Company</i> • Helped Samuel Colt build firearms factory • 1853 named Fellow of the Royal Society • 1856 named London Representative of <i>Robert Stephenson & Co.</i> 	Factory builder and Fellow of the Royal Society
Charles Rigault de Grenouilly, 1807–1873	French	École Polytechnique (1825 graduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1830 French expedition to Algeria • 1831 participated in forcing of the Tagus • 1843 commanded corvette on China and India Seas station • 1854 served as flag captain during Odessa bombardment in Crimean War • 1857 Second Opium War • 1857 punitive expedition Vietnam 	Military career, imperial distinction
Cipriano Segundo Montesino Estrada, 1817–1901	Spanish	London; École Centrale des Arts et Manufactures, Paris (1837 graduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involved in establishing industrial engineering as a profession in Spain, and creation of the Royal Industrial Institute modelled on French Engineering schools • 1841/43 Public Works Officer for Spanish government • 1847 founding member and elected scholar at the <i>Real de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas y Naturales</i> • 1854–56 Director-General Public Works for Spanish government 	Key role in emerging Spanish engineering profession; Director-General of Public Works at time of commission
Edward Alfred John Harris, 1808–1888	British	Royal Naval College 1821–23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard career with Royal Navy: midshipman 1823 to South America, there until 1827, made Lieutenant in 1828 • 1839–41 commander North America and West Indies • 1872 Knight Commander of the Order of Bath 	Naval commander of imperial credential, diplomat and MP
Frederik Willem Conrad, 1800–1870	Dutch	Delft School of Artillery and Engineering (1817 graduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1817 engineer in Dutch canal projects • 1825 Provincial Engineer for North Brabant • 1829 engineer for South Holland in Rotterdam • 1847 co-founder <i>Koninklijk Instituut van Ingenieurs</i> (KIVI) • 1839–55 Director-Engineer <i>Hollandsche IJzeren Spoorweg-Maatschappij</i> (HIJSM) • 1858–65 represents Egyptian viceroy at the Suez Canal Company 	Known Dutch canal and railway pioneer
James Meadows Rendel, 1799–1856	British	None; worked as surveyor from an early age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1822 road construction works across Devon • 1827 builds bridge across Plym estuary, earning medal of Institution of Civil Engineers • 1831 invented the chain ferry • 1852–53 designed docks in Genoa • 1853–55 reported on harbor at Rio de Janeiro • 1854–55 reported on river Elbe for Hamburg senate • directed construction of East Indian and Madras railways • 1855 Medal of Honour at Paris World's Fair 	Dock design, chain ferry invention, Medal of Honour

Table 1. Continued

Name	Nationality	Education	Experience	Key qualification
Jean-Pierre H. Aristide Lieussou, 1815–1858	French	École Polytechnique (1834 graduate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1843 Secretary Nautical Commission in Algeria • 1846–53 Cartographic Evaluation of Algeria at the Marine Repository of Maps 	Book on the ports of Algeria
John Robinson McClean, 1813–1873	British	Belfast Academical Institution, University of Glasgow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-founder engineering consultancy <i>McClellan & Stileman</i> • Advisor on Suez Canal to British government • Chairman, Anglo-American Telegraph Company • 1864–65 President of the Institution of Civil Engineers • 1868–73 MP for East Staffordshire 	Eminent engineer; high status in both engineering and politics
Karl Lentze, 1801–1883	Prussian	Prussian Surveying Examination 1823	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1823 enters Prussian civil service as land surveyor • Experience building bridges, canals, dykes • 1850 Head of Royal Commission for Bridges • 1859 title of <i>Geheimer Oberbaurat</i> • Delegate for Prussia and <i>Norddeutscher Bund</i> on Suez commission 	Chief engineer of civil engineering credential in Prussia, experience building bridges and canals
Louis M. A. Linant de Bellefonds, 1799–1883	French	None; traveled as mapping novice to Greece, Syria, Palestine, Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1818–30 surveying work in the service of Viceroy of Egypt Muhammad Ali • 1822 first visit Isthmus of Suez • 1831 Chief Engineer Public Works, Upper Egypt • 1837 earned title of Bey • 1854 chief engineer of Lesseps' Suez project 	Life in Egypt; stakes in Suez project as its chief engineer
Pietro Paleocapa, 1788–1869	Italian	University of Padua, Military Academy of Modena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1817 Venetian Engineers of Water and Streets • 1813 prisoner of war during Napoleonic Wars • 1825 commissioner for Vienna census • 1857 Fréjus Rail Tunnel works 	Alpine tunnel engineer of acclaim, political favor as pro-unification activist

Sources: Alba 2017; Algardi 1988; Anonymous 1874; Anonymous 1883; Bailey 2008; Conrad 1859; Gottardi 2014; Lieussou 1850; Manby et al 1857; McClellan 1864; Montesino Estrada 1857; Noblemaire 1905; O'Byrne 1849; Paleocapa 1857; Ramaer 1912; Schützenhofer 1949; Skempton 2002; Taillemite 2004.

selection of commissioners. In an 1854 letter, it becomes clear that prior to appointing commissioners, Lesseps already had offers for financial support. In other words, while persuading a well-off audience to buy shares in a joint-stock company certainly mattered, he first wanted to dispel all remaining doubt:

All the foreign ministers answered favorably to my request to designate the foremost engineers of their country to be part of the international scientific commission. I have proposals from capitalists and entrepreneurs who offered to underwrite the business with a lump sum, to make advances and to receive shares in payment, for a good commission, of course. The time has not yet come to enter into negotiations. (Lesseps 1875–81, 258)

To this, Lesseps added that he wanted to make sure not to give the eventual company any “political color” (Lesseps 1875–81, 258). Strikingly, his agent and co-founder of the later Suez Canal company Chancel explained to commissioner Antonio Negrelli that the goal was to “irreversibly destroy, by the decision of a commission composed of eminent engineers, whose opinion will be law, the uncertainties that the publications of your French [engineering] colleagues may have left in the public mind” (Lesseps 1875–81, 264).

At this point, we can infer a number of priorities that likely affected expert selection: (1) the goal to persuade stakeholders, the general public, and the Ottoman government that any reservations about a Suez Canal were un-

founded; (2) the intent to prove the universally beneficial, non-political nature of the project; and (3) the aim to obtain scientific support of foregone conclusions. As we shall see, contrary to the stated aim of the commission to “investigate” and “find out” about the ideal route, Lesseps had already made up his mind and wanted to get the right kinds of experts to give his preference the green light.

These non-epistemic intentions are particularly visible in how Lesseps approached the experts themselves. While the official criterion was to appoint “independent and enlightened men who would sincerely and without any ulterior motives rally to the cause” (Lesseps 1875–81, 266), Lesseps followed not only such epistemic criteria of *functionality*, but also non-epistemic criteria of *legitimacy*. Take the case of the selection of English commissioner James Meadows Rendel. First, Lesseps noted that “M. Rendel is a both capable and modest man and of widely known honesty. His opinion will have the greatest weight in England.” Rendel, however, also promised to be a commissioner with a friendly inclination: “he considers the enterprise [following Lesseps' preferred route] to be easily executed” (Lesseps 1875–81, 243–44). Next, he let it be known that not just fame but fortune was to be had:

I propose that M. Rendel be part of the superior commission of engineers selected in Europe, to the effect of examining the prior survey of the engineers of the vice-roy of Egypt relative to the piercing of the isthmus of Suez and for the construction of a direct maritime

canal appropriate for the passage of great naval vessels, with two entrances on the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. These engineers shall be inscribed as founding members of the canal of the Two Seas; they shall receive a title which will assure them, during the 99 years of the concession, a right to proportional repatriation of 10 per cent of the net profits of the enterprise, conforming to the decree of 30 November last year. (Lesseps 1875–81, 246)

In a letter to English “members of parliament, merchants, shipowners for the Indies, etc., etc., etc.” three days later (8 August 1855), he announced that Rendel was “known for remarkable works carried out on the ports of England” and thus “shall be part of this commission” (Lesseps 1875–81, 247). Two observations follow from this: on one hand, though there is insufficient evidence to generalize this to all commissioners, Lesseps clearly followed non-epistemic reasons to select commissioners. He wanted not just any experts, but those inclined to approve of his plans; to sweeten the deal he offered them 10 percent of the profits should the project be successful. This would have given commissioners a great incentive to make sure the enterprise would be “scientifically approved.” On the other hand, to foreground the impartial, universally beneficial nature of the whole undertaking, he made it seem as though not he himself but “foreign ministers” had answered his request to “designate the foremost engineers in their country” (Lesseps 1875–81, 258). Epistemic criteria, in other words, played a performative role to persuade audiences—not simply an internal role to epistemically optimize the project. This is surprising for a project that evidently presented demanding engineering challenges.

Yet, while these non-epistemic factors thus played an important role, another part of the logic of legitimization-by-experts was to rhetorically segregate technical from political questions. Lesseps’ agent Chancel made this much clear in his pitch to commissioners: “The political question will be resolved only after solving the technical question and the financial question.” This directly translated into expert selection: “M. de Lesseps is to leave next month, and he expects you to be part of the commission of engineers called upon to resolve the technical question” (Lesseps 1875–81, 265).

To further contextualize the evidence, the table provides an overview of all 13 members of the 1855 commission. Three features stand out. First, the noteworthy if unexceptional exclusion of women aside, expert credential was far from homogeneous. Experts did not share a common type of education or degree: some were formally trained at engineering schools, others through apprenticeships, others had little knowledge of engineering altogether. Even more strikingly, while the technical sophistication of the project was undeniable and engineering expertise thus clearly essential to its success, this was not a commission composed solely of Europe’s top engineers. Non-epistemic factors, including language skill and military experience, affected their selection. Another factor was a partial reunion of the previous Saint-Simonian Suez Canal research group whose attempt had failed, but some of whose former members were still interested. Their social network, from the *École Polytechnique* to friendships to a shared Saint-Simonian past, affected the composition of the French portion of the international commission. These members had become eligible as experts not only for their epistemic reputation, but more pragmatically because they had been involved previously.

Second, the common criterion was instead a sort of international portfolio, tied to a mindset committed to the

spread of progress through either military or technical preponderance. Though designated “international,” the commission was French-dominated. The *aspiration* to internationality in spite of this is notable. In sum, the project did not build on a straightforward scientific seal of approval. It was instead legitimized based on a conception of internationality that relied on experts. No cohesive epistemic community was available: the commission was composed of a wide array of figures, some with technical credential, many without—the label mattered more than the practice. The internationality of the 1855 commission, in other words, was configured through a performance of expert approval, while in reality it was based on the universalism of white European men favored by their nations’ political elites and with some vaguely international credential—which practically meant language skill and imperial/military experience, yet publicly was supposed to denote universality and impartiality.

Reception

In this subsection, I contextualize my findings by turning to the relevant audience of legitimation. To do so I ask: to what extent were the terms of expert advice adopted by Ferdinand de Lesseps reflected in the reception and contestation of the commission’s findings? I already noted that Lesseps had narrowed the terms of contestation by confining his campaign to the technical aspects of concerns raised. The commission served to further undergird this categorical exclusion of politics. By 1856, it had finished its report, complete with a detailed description of the canal; a summary of its key findings were translated and published in English and Italian in the same year (Lesseps 1856a; Lesseps 1856b). The report became a centerpiece of the pro-canal campaign. It also placed emphasis on the expert-based superiority of the commission over the Egyptian government’s own engineers. The widely circulated English-language edition of “facts and figures” noted, for example:

The scheme of His Highness the Viceroy’s engineers, includes a channel 100 *mètres* [sic] wide, preceded by a vast flushing basin and protected by an insulated breakwater 500 *mètres* in length. The International Commissioners cannot approve of these propositions. The establishment of a vast water-tight basin in the sea would be very difficult and very expensive. The necessity of flushings is not proved, and their efficacy is doubtful. (Lesseps 1876, 144)

The publication’s opening “Statement of Facts” further stressed that the members of the Commission “have drawn ... conclusions, which the scientific world may henceforth look upon as ascertained facts.” Their report “suffices for the present to answer the expectations of the public, and to remove all doubts which, on grounds of prudence or policy might still be entertained as to the practicability of this vast undertaking. The question from an engineering point of view” had been “fully solved.” Note the power relations at play here: the international commission, in 1856, “scientifically settled” a question the answer to which Lesseps had already provided in 1854 and 1855, before and during the selection of commissioners—an answer, moreover, that was directly opposed to Egyptian preferences.

Lesseps wrote to Napoleon III that “European science, through the organ of its most celebrated engineers, has declared that the piercing of the isthmus of Suez shall be an easy work, of guaranteed success” (1890, 113). A legitimation lens allows us to look past this surface assertion

and avoid taking the claim—that “European science” acted in unison to pass objective judgement—at face value. To functionalists, international projects are complex problems; experts provide the knowledge needed to solve them. Yet again, this is only logical if we think it natural that international relations is about solving technical problems, rather than about the unequally distributed authority to define what is and what is not a problem (Allan 2018). Lesseps had strategic motives to *use* the approval of those the commission *elevated* to expert status. Persuaded by the commission report, the Wāli Saïd issued a second concession, this time explicitly for the direct route. Article 3 of the 1856 *Charter of Concession for a Suez Maritime Canal* explicitly read:

The Canal, navigable by large vessels, shall be constructed of the depth and width fixed by the scheme of the International Scientific Commission. Conformably with this scheme, it will commence at the Port of Suez; it will pass through the basin of the Amer Lakes and Lake Timsah, and will debouch into the Mediterranean at whatever point in the Gulf of Pelusium may be determined in the final plans to be prepared by the engineers of the Company. (in Price 1873, 42)

The concession reaffirmed, in an official context, that the canal was to follow the route favored by the international commission. And yet contestation continued. Enfantin launched another vengeful campaign, lobbying the French imperial court to discredit Lesseps and enlisting Robert Stephenson, who he knew was opposed to a Suez Canal since his prior defection from surveying works with the Saint-Simonians. Stephenson was now a Member of Parliament and unafraid to declare his grudge against Lesseps in public. Between 1856 and 1857, he emerged as a chief anti-canal expert. In response, Lesseps created a company periodical that would at regular intervals reinforce his legitimization strategy to a general readership: “The organ of the universal Company” shall be “directed with intelligence and spirit of consistency, with moderation and absence of any exclusive nationalism” (Lesseps 1875, 111).

In 1857, the British parliament convened to discuss the merits of the Suez project and whether or not Britain should give Lesseps the support he so yearned for. This was prime-time for expert politics. The meeting of parliament took place at a time of heated debate in the wake of the Indian Rebellion. A Suez Canal “would make it possible to send reinforcements to India in half the time” in case of future unrests—Palmerston’s opposition began to waver. Stephenson, in turn, one observer noted, “would not venture to enter upon the political bearings of the subject ... but would confine himself to the engineering capabilities of the scheme” (Lesseps 1875, 87–113; Hansard 1857). A British journalist explained in an 1873 retrospective on resistance to “our high road to India” that:

while Lord Palmerston gladly welcomed Robert Stephenson’s condemnation of the project from the engineer’s point of view, his own opposition, though he was naturally glad of such distinguished professional support, was based entirely on political grounds. With members of Parliament, however, who failed to share the political terrors of the Foreign Secretary, the verdict of the great engineer was a fatal stumbling-block. (Price 1873, 9)

This was precisely how expertise could be used to narrow the terms of contestation: like the commission, the parliamentary debates too deflected an intensely political ques-

tion to the realm of technicalities. Denying politics bore the promise of presenting an objective answer—only actually to a different question. The terms of contestation and reception, in other words, resembled those of Lesseps’ own legitimization strategy. To this extent, at least for the moment, the strategy was a success.

The controversy would remain unresolved, and British reluctance to back the Suez project continued for another while. On the other side of the Channel, in the meantime, enthusiasm had surged. Undeterred by British opposition, Lesseps wrote to a friend: “If every great improvement had to be suspended until it was sanctioned by some official authority, the world would be stopped in its tracks, or it would move backward” (in Edgar-Bonnet 1951, 301). In October 1858, Lesseps announced the floating of 400,000 shares at 500 Francs each. Though he had hoped for eager acquisitions across Europe, only 23,000 people ended up buying—21,000 of whom were French. There was one caveat: the Wāli of Egypt had promised Lesseps to buy any outstanding shares, and so, honouring his word, he indeed acquired the remaining 177,000 shares (Karabell 2003, 151–55). Finally in 1859, the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez* was established in both Paris and Alexandria. Excavation and building works would commence the same year.

By 1859, the purpose of the commission had been met: Expert auditing had justified the project to the public scrutiny of both British naysayers and hesitant potential investors across Europe, highlighting its technical feasibility and therefore, it appeared, its legitimacy. And yet neither did political (mostly inter-imperial) disagreements disappear, nor did expert depoliticization actually render the project merely technical (see Montel 1998). As one historian has noted, digging the canal in fact amounted to “a vast of French colonisation, including the organisation of a sort territory, the isthmus of Suez, and the settlement of European populations” (Piquet 2002, 39; see Huber 2012; Jakes 2020).

Conclusion

Intuitively, we might view the history of the 1855 *International Commission on the Isthmus of Suez* as a case of the straightforward application of technical expert knowledge to an international cooperation challenge. Neofunctionalist perspectives on expertise in IR would assume that the problem at hand required input from the relevant epistemic community—engineering experts—which was then identified and drawn in. This article thus examined the 1855 commission as a hard case: the evidently technical-scientific challenge posed by the project of excavating an interoceanic canal would suggest that expert advice would follow strict criteria of epistemic optimization. The archival evidence suggests a different picture: legitimization better accounts for the composition the commission ended up with. By advancing a technocratic claim to the international, Suez Canal entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps first discursively attached these two in his responses to public criticism; then selected commissioners for their agreeableness *and* specialist knowledge. The selection was then, however, presented as based only on the latter criterion. This was crucial for the legitimization of the canal as expert approved.

My analysis demands a political conceptualization of expertise—one that neither depends on expert group cohesion, nor on purely epistemic factors. If the legitimization of the Suez Canal is representative of how international technical projects weave expertise into the fabric of governance

arrangements, then the existing literature needs a conceptual reorientation to be more sensitive to historical variation. The 1855 case shows that in the nineteenth century, it was not knowledge itself nor the cohesiveness of epistemic groups that made experts central to emerging international practices, but the fact that internationality itself could be constructed in particular ways to serve particular ends and elevate the authority of particular types of actor. Internationality was in high demand to improve the action capacity of globalizing capitalism and informal empire. This should be of interest to historical IR scholarship on the topic (Murphy 1994; Howland 2015; Ravndal 2020; Yao 2022), but also to the wider IR literature on expertise (Sending 2015; Kennedy 2016; Leander and Wæver 2019; Littoz-Monnet 2020; Louis and Maertens 2021).

This form of legitimation helped obfuscate partial—commercial, imperial—motives. Ferdinand de Lesseps was able to forge and deploy a notion of expert approval in his campaign to legitimize the Suez Canal enterprise vis-à-vis international shareholders, engineers, and politicians. Because experts could simultaneously offer technical knowledge and substitute judgement about technical feasibility for judgement about normative legitimacy, expert selection was driven by not only epistemic concerns with functionality, but also non-epistemic concerns with legitimacy. Legitimation, here aimed for through the co-constitution of internationality and expertise, conflates the distinction. The result is the deflection of controversial normative questions of whether the canal should be built at all, who should build it, and who should own, control, and profit from it.

The 1855 case also suggests that political favor and the selection or visibility of experts depend on criteria that always reflect historical context, whether based on empire, race, or gender. It is in this way that expertise is able to generate a claim to the international that masks its own necessarily partial basis. Yet that partiality is not intrinsic to expertise but derives from its inextricability from politics: there can be no “clean” expertise that matters to political choices. Depoliticization tends, after all, itself to be a politically intended appearance (Louis and Maertens 2021). And while this article lends further empirical support to the by now, if not uncontroversial across the board, nevertheless well-rehearsed position that expertise is political, the interpretive lens of historical claims to the international has added new perspective to this literature, in two main respects: first, the article has shown how a particular performance of expertise was mobilized to constitute a particular, technocratic kind of *internationality* to legitimize a large infrastructure project. Further research following such an approach will be the judge of whether internationality can more broadly be construed as a legitimation claim, but this case and a variety of examples that might come to mind—from labeling wealthy immigrants “internationals” and others “foreigners,” to “sportswashing” by hosting the World Cup—certainly point in this direction.

Second, the article has shed new light on what the often vaguely invoked “politics of expertise” empirically looks like. Whilst mobilizing the Suez Canal experts was indeed about epistemic optimization, the composition of the 1855 commission tells us that political loyalties and financial stakes played a significant role. Characterizing this as an epistemic community would miss this part of the story. The Suez Canal experts were brought in through social ties acquired in elite and imperial contexts, combined with a common interest in pursuing a canal project under exclusion of the Egyptians. The commission’s 1856 report ultimately suggested that the European option—the direct route—ought to be

chosen over the Egyptian one, for scientific reasons. This, in the general tenor of Ferdinand de Lesseps’ campaign for the canal, set the *terms of contestation* such that to delegitimize the canal one would have to target its technical merit first. Yet crucially, most contestation was not actually about technical merit but about ownership and normative, legal, moral questions: yet through a technocratic claim to the international, expertise put a lid on even those questions.

This is part of a dilemma that plagues international organizations, whether formal intergovernmental institutions or informal non-governmental expert panels, to this day: wanting to base decisions on the best available scientific and technical advice, on one hand, whilst maintaining a kind of international legitimacy, on the other. The former brings improved action capacity, yet always at the risk of putting the latter into question. Its strongest defendants may well disagree, but the historical record suggests that bringing in the experts in international politics is a risky enterprise.

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