

Curated Power: The Performative Politics of (Industry) Events

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Since the turn of the millennium, there has been an increased interest in the social performance of power in international political sociology. At the same time, recent years have seen the growing popularity of event ethnographic research approaches. In this article, we develop the concept of “curated power” as a tool to explore the performative enactment of power at and through conferences and events. A focus on curated power, we argue, can orient scholars of performative power toward conferences and events as an analytical entry point, and orient event ethnographic approaches toward the performance of classed, gendered, and racialized hierarchies as a central research concern. To develop these points, and to illustrate the analytical purchase of the concept, we provide a concrete example of its application by analyzing the performative enactment of social hierarchies at industry events in two alternative financial subsectors: FinTech and Islamic finance. In both sectors, we show that curated power can provide a situated and nuanced understanding of why and how corporate efforts to change finance for the better—whether on the basis of religious principles or advanced technological capabilities—often remain complicit in perpetuating classed, gendered, and racialized hierarchies.

Depuis l’an 2000, on observe un intérêt croissant pour la réalisation sociale du pouvoir en sociologie politique internationale. Ces dernières années, nous avons également été les témoins d’une popularité croissante des approches de recherche ethnographique des événements. Dans cet article, nous développons le concept de « curated power [pouvoir soigneusement sélectionné] » comme outil d’analyse de la réalisation performative du pouvoir lors et par le biais de conférences et d’événements. Nous affirmons qu’en se concentrant sur le pouvoir soigneusement sélectionné, les chercheurs qui s’intéressent au pouvoir performatif s’orienteront plus facilement vers les conférences et événements comme points d’entrée analytiques. Les approches ethnographiques des événements se dirigeront aussi plutôt vers la réalisation des hiérarchies de classe, de genre et de race comme préoccupation de recherche centrale. Pour développer ces points et illustrer l’acquisition analytique du concept, nous proposons un exemple concret de son application en analysant la concrétisation performative des hiérarchies sociales lors d’événements de l’industrie dans deux sous-secteurs financiers alternatifs : la fintech et la finance islamique. Dans ces deux secteurs, nous montrons qu’un pouvoir soigneusement sélectionné peut faciliter une compréhension nuancée et resituée de pourquoi et comment les efforts des entreprises pour changer la finance en bien, que ce soit en se fondant sur des principes religieux ou sur des capacités tech-

nologiques avancées, finissent si souvent par contribuer à la perpétuation des hiérarchies de classe, de genre et de race.

Desde el cambio de milenio, ha ido creciendo el interés acerca del rendimiento social del poder dentro de la sociología política internacional. Al mismo tiempo, durante los últimos años se ha podido ir observando la creciente popularidad de los enfoques en materia de investigación etnográfica de eventos. En este artículo desarrollamos el concepto de «poder curado» como una herramienta para explorar la representación performativa del poder tanto en conferencias y eventos como a través de estos. Argumentamos que este enfoque en el poder curado puede orientar a los estudiosos del poder performativo hacia el uso de conferencias y eventos como un punto de entrada analítico. También puede ayudar a orientar los enfoques etnográficos de eventos hacia el desempeño en materia de jerarquías de clase, género y racializadas como una preocupación central de la investigación. Con el fin de desarrollar estos puntos, y para ilustrar la ventaja analítica del concepto, proporcionamos un ejemplo concreto de su aplicación mediante el análisis de la representación performativa de las jerarquías sociales en eventos de la industria dentro de dos subsectores financieros alternativos: fintech y finanzas islámicas. Para ambos sectores, demostramos como el poder curado puede proporcionar una comprensión contextualizada y matizada de por qué y cómo los esfuerzos corporativos para mejorar las finanzas, ya sea sobre la base de principios religiosos o de capacidades tecnológicas avanzadas, siguen siendo, con frecuencia, cómplices de la perpetuación de jerarquías de clase, género y racializadas.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been an increased interest in the social performance of power in international political sociology (IPS) and related subject fields (Campbell 1992; Weber 1998). A growing number of scholars has insisted that studying power not as a pre-given attribute or relation but as a process continuously enacted could provide a fuller and richer understanding of how it assumes force, gains stability, or, indeed, fails over time (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). A now-broad literature, spanning numerous research areas, has done much to analyze the enactment of power through various discursive and material practices, from the diplomatic decorum of high-ranking officials (McConnell 2018; Danielson and Hedling 2021) to the effigial consumption of politically branded beers (Saunders and Holland 2018). One particular set of practices, however, has received only limited attention in this literature so far, namely, those linked to the performance of power at and through industry events—that is, professionally organized (semi-)public gatherings that bring together practitioners, typically from diverse backgrounds.

Recently, a growing number of works have emphasized the significance of industry events—both as political spaces and as a source of empirical insight (Campbell et al. 2014; Leivestad and Nyqvist 2017; Sandler and Thedvall 2017). These works have begun to explore “event ethnographic” approaches to examine various such gatherings, with environmental conferences featuring prominently in this strand of work (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Campbell et al. 2014), but also award ceremonies (Anand and Watson 2004), bureaucratic meetings (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017; Sandler and Thedvall 2017), and trade fairs (Lampel and Meyer 2008; Moeran and Pedersen 2011; Leivestad and Nyqvist 2017). Work in this tradition has often sought to bring to the fore the performative politics of industry events (Aykut et al. 2022). However, what is less clear is how the performative enactment of power at

and through industry events intersects with broader hierarchies of social difference, such as class, gender, and race (Büscher 2014; Hughes et al. 2021).

In this article, we seek to address this gap by developing the concept of “curated power” as an analytical tool to explore the varying and intersecting social hierarchies performed at and through conferences and events. A focus on curated power, we argue, can unlock significant interdisciplinary synergies. It can orient IPS scholars of performative power toward conferences and events as political sites, and orient event ethnographic approaches toward the performance of classed, gendered, and racialized hierarchies as a central research concern.

In line with the literature on performative power, we develop the concept of curated power not as a pre-given relation or capability but as a process, or better, a concatenation of interlinked processes, which are steered, navigated, but never fully controlled by the actors performing their instantiation. Building on the literature on event ethnography, in turn, we develop the concept in order to spotlight the *staging* of power through the physical places, spaces, and locations of industry events, and the *performance* of power through speeches, presentations, and lively interactions at industry events.

In order to develop these arguments, and to illustrate the analytical purchase of the concept of curated power in practice, we provide a concrete example of its application. That is, we use the concept to analyze the performative politics of industry events in two alternative financial subsectors: FinTech and Islamic finance. These sectors are interesting cases because they openly challenge the power of traditional finance: FinTech seeks to create a financial system aligned with the technical realities of the digital age; Islamic finance, in turn, seeks to create a financial system centered on social justice and aligned with Islamic principles derived from Shariah. In these contexts, we show that curated power can offer a nuanced analysis of how the purported challenges of Islamic finance and FinTech to traditional finance affect power relations in several different ways: How they reinforce them, refigure them, and, in some instances, even force them to change.

Taken together, the article makes three contributions. First, it brings into conversation the literatures on performative power and event ethnography and identifies significant synergies between them. Second, it proposes a way of unlocking these synergies by introducing the concept of curated power. Third, it offers an applied approach that illustrates how the concept of curated power can shed light on the social performance of classed, gendered, and racialized power in the specific cases of FinTech and Islamic finance.

The argument unfolds in two parts. In part one, we review the literatures on the social performance of power and event ethnography. The former offers a critical perspective on power, which emphasizes its continuous enactment in practice. However, it offers little in the way of conceptualizing industry events as a site of performative politics. The latter has begun to consider industry events in performative terms. However, there is significant scope to develop the performance of classed, gendered, and racialized power into a central research concern. To address these limitations and unlock interdisciplinary synergies, we introduce the notion of curated power.

In part two, we use the concept of curated power to analyze material collected at conferences and events in the financial sector. We draw on existing approaches to distinguish between two aspects of curated power: staging and performing. A focus on *staging* draws our attention to physical places, spaces, and locations of industry events. We show how the colonial history built into the conference settings of Islamic finance can undermine the industry’s postcolonial aspirations, and how the class privileges built into the coworking spaces of FinTech reinforce the industry’s general lack of diversity. A focus on the *performance* of power draws our attention to the speeches, presentations, and social interactions at industry events. We demonstrate how the conspicuous absence of women speakers at Islamic finance

conferences downplays the significant role of female experts in the development of the industry, and how the deliberate inclusion of female experts at FinTech conferences downplays their significant marginalization in the rest of the industry.

The article concludes by proposing a broader research agenda that uses conferences and events to shed light on the performative power relations in international politics as broadly conceived, and by discussing some of the challenges and opportunities presented by the proliferation of digital and hybrid event formats for future research.

Performative Power, Event Ethnography, and Curated Power

We identify significant synergies between the literatures on performative power and event ethnography. Our review in this section begins by exploring the two literatures in turn before we introduce the concept of “curated power” as one way of unlocking some of these synergies.

Performative Power

There has been a long-standing interest in the social performance of power in IPS and related subject fields (Campbell 1992; Weber 1998). Cynthia Weber’s article titled “Performative States” (1998) marks an early example of this literature, introducing the term “performative” in the sense in which speech act and other performativity theorists used the term: as the quality of a signifying gesture to call into being that which it purports to merely represent. Studying state power in performative terms, Weber argued, offered a way of engaging it in contingent terms as a social construction, continuously brought into being in practice, rather than a prefixed or pre-given entity. Rather than taking state power for granted, or worse, reifying it as an unquestioned background assumption, the critical task, according to Weber, was to interrogate its continuous constitution, which provided a better, more situated, and more nuanced understanding of how power assumed force, gained stability, and failed over time.

A now-broad literature has shed light on a wide range of performative practices that constitute and sustain power in numerous circumstances. Recent works have highlighted, for example, the status signaling and the diplomatic decorum of high-ranking officials (McConnell 2018; Danielson and Hedling 2021), the media appearances of and the media narratives about populist leaders (Aiolfi 2022; Day and Wedderburn 2022) and central bankers (Clarke and Roberts, 2016; Morris 2016), the adoption and cultivation of “refugee identities” by asylum seekers (Häkli, Pascucci, and Kallio 2017), the public distribution of bread during civil war (Martinez and Eng 2017), the singing of revolutionary karaoke music (Brenner 2018), and the drinking of politically branded beers (Saunders and Holland 2018).

Industry events sometimes feature in this literature, although political summits, diplomatic conferences, and other “high politics” events tend to do so most prominently. In both cases, however, the events themselves have received surprisingly little attention. Usually, they merely figure in the background, as an environment, or a location, where performances of power seem to occur, or take place, almost incidentally. Thus, events are neither considered an important part of the performance of power nor have meaningful consequences for it.

There are a number of illuminating exceptions, of course. Shimazu’s (2014) study of the 1955 Bandung Conference, the first public display of independent power by the newly decolonized states of Asia and Africa, places great emphasis on the conference’s venues and discusses in detail the carefully staged as well as the unplanned, accidental enactments of power over the course of the event. Morris’ (2016) study of the Bank of England’s public press conferences highlights their relevance as performative spaces, where central bankers assert their power not only through the

ritualistic and meticulously staged display of institutional authority, but also through all manner of improvised and spontaneous expressions of personal competence, charisma, and expertise. Day and Wedderburn (2022) further analyze the theatrical, staged, and stage-managed dimensions of a series of peace summits between the presidents of the United States and North Korea by drawing several revealing analogies between the world of international diplomacy and the world of professional wrestling.¹

In these works, conferences and events become more than simply an unpolitical background assumption. Instead, they emerge as an intrinsic part of the performance of power and, indeed, as a distinct vantage point for studying global politics in performative terms. Such a conception of (industry) events, however, remains at the fringes of current debates in IPS, while it is one of the central propositions of the literature on “event ethnography,” as we discuss next.

Event Ethnography

The study of industry events boasts a venerable lineage, spanning multiple disciplines and theoretical approaches, and over the past decade, especially the literature on “event ethnography,” has gained significant traction (Campbell et al. 2014; Leivestad and Nyqvist 2017; O’Neill and Haas 2019). This literature has sought to extend the preferred focus of ethnographic fieldwork on “localized field sites” (Brosius and Campbell 2010: 247) to include temporary gatherings of otherwise disparate actors and communities as “not only suitable, but also highly salient sites for ethnographic enquiry” (Leivestad and Nyqvist 2017: 5). A growing number of ethnographic works present findings from a wide range of events, including global political conferences (O’Neill and Haas 2019; Vadrot 2020; Aykut et al. 2022), bureaucratic meetings (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017; Sandler and Thedvall 2017), and industry events (Lampel and Meyer 2008; Moeran and Pedersen 2011; Leivestad and Nyqvist 2017).

A key contribution of these works has been to analyze how conferences and events license and sanction ideas, norms, and knowledge, how they legitimate and institutionalize political preferences, and how they align different actors and alliances in support of broader political goals (Hardy and Maguire 2010; Campbell et al. 2014; Vadrot 2020). In many instances, they have challenged conventional understandings of power around ideas of who has the power to act in global politics. For example, a thriving literature on environmental “agreement-making” (Hughes et al. 2021) has detailed how seemingly peripheral actors, including secretariats and chairs (Bauer 2006; Depledge 2007), indigenous activists (Schroeder 2010; Marion Suiseeya 2014; Marion Suiseeya, and Zanotti 2019), and youth movements (Thew 2018) contribute to shaping environmental negotiations, regulations, and policy-making (Aykut et al. 2022).²

Moreover, and crucially for this article, a number of works have explicitly focused on the dramaturgical and performative politics of industry events. Here, studies emphasize the constitutive role of the physical places, spaces, and locations (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006; Fisher 2017), the procedural organization (MacDonald 2010), and the embodied performance of power, authority, and legitimacy (Moeran 2011; Rethel 2018), so as to provide a more situated understanding of the way power operates and takes shape. Moeran and Pedersen (2011), for example, have emphasized

¹The tradition of drawing “heat” in wrestling, for example, provides a useful concept for thinking about the provocation of media outrage by the leaders in the build-up to the summit (by way of a public exchange concerning the size and the potency of their “nuclear buttons”), and the tradition of “kayfabe” offers a concept to capture the collective pretension of authenticity by diplomats and the press at the summits.

²This literature chimes with a broader interest in the social sciences to redescribe global politics from the perspective of ostensibly marginal actors, including “women” (Enloe 1989), “black people” (Robinson 2000), “sailors, slaves, and commoners” (Linebaugh and Rediker 2012), “Indigenous actors” (Lightfood 2016), “queer actors” (Halberstam 2011), and “everyday actors” (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007).

how trade fairs distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and between the more privileged and the less privileged, through the colors and different kinds of badges worn by participants, as well as the spatial organization, which determines “who is placed where in an exhibition hall, and of who may go where, when and for what purpose” (p. 6). Along similar lines, Aykut et al. (2022) have identified the deliberate separation of three “circles of climate governance” at the CoP26: an inner circle of state-led negotiations, an official circle of representative actors and activities, and an outer circle of self-organized activist and social movements.

But, while these event ethnographic studies have shared an explicit interest in exploring industry events as political spaces where power relations are continuously performed and enacted, the role and significance of broader hierarchies of social difference, such as class, gender, and race, have curiously received only limited attention. Fisher (2017) has studied the classed, gendered, and racialized dynamics at global conferences for managerial women. Zanotti and Suiseeya (2020) have explored intersections of gender and race at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris (CoP21), but such an explicit focus on social hierarchies has remained the exception so far. Thus, there is clear scope for further methodological innovation and interdisciplinary debate.

Curated Power

Our main contention in this article is that the concept of “curated power” offers productive avenues (1) for orienting scholars of performative power toward conferences and events as an analytical entry point; (2) for orienting event ethnographic approaches toward the performance of power as expressed in classed, gendered, and racialized hierarchies as a central research concern; and (3) for examining the performance of power in the financial sector and beyond. But what exactly do we mean by “curated power”?

We define curated power as the varying and intersecting social hierarchies enacted at and through conferences and events. In line with the literature on performative power, we suggest that curated power does not describe a pre-given relation or capability, but an ongoing process, or better, a concatenation of interlinked processes that are steered, navigated, but never fully controlled by the actors enacting their instantiations. So, while the word “curated” alludes to the deliberate choices that go into organizing an event—from conceptualizing the theme or topic to deciding upon the city and venue, marketing the event to specific audiences, choreographing the course of action, etc.—we insist that the effects of these choices are ambiguous, contested, and ultimately unpredictable. They are shaped by a host of activities and interactions between a wide range of actors, including event organizers, security and hospitality staff, speakers, audiences, participants in attendance, the press, and so forth, which are a constant source of unfulfilled expectations and unintended consequences. Indeed, it is precisely this tension between strategic intentions and unintended outcomes, we argue, that the concept of curated power can help to foreground, capture, and interrogate.

The conception of curated power presented here is deliberately broad to invite reflections on the multiple, multi-layered, and multi-faceted enactments of power, and to inspire future pragmatic adoptions of the concept by scholars interested in exploring the intersections of event ethnographic approaches and the social performance of power at industry events. As such, the concept necessarily brackets certain ongoing disagreements between scholars who analyze power in performative terms. For instance, some scholars distinguish between the *linguistic enactment of power*, the *enactment of power in practice*, and the *theatrical, staged, and stage-managed* enactment of power (Day and Wedderburn 2022). Others distinguish between *discursive enactments* of power, *material enactments* of power, and *lively enactments* of power (Morris 2016). There are also disagreements with regards to the degree of intentionality

involved. While some scholars emphasize how performative enactments of power can be part of a strategic repertoire of self-interested actors pursuing their respective goals (Hall 2015; Martínez and Eng 2017), others emphasize how they often contribute to the iterative formation of specific norms, interests, and expectations in the first place (Death 2011).

But as Day and Wedderburn (2022) and Morris (2016) have argued, these different approaches are neither exclusive nor exhaustive, and it may be worth treating them in pragmatic terms as part of an emerging theoretical repertoire. Thus, for example, rather than choosing whether social hierarchies are performed linguistically at a keynote speech, whether they are performed discursively by specific experts, or whether they are performed theatrically during the opening and closing ceremonies, we may instead focus on how any one of these performative aspects yields specific insights, each with specific theoretical and political consequences.

Following these considerations, our aim is to introduce curated power not as another type of performative power, but as a pragmatic and open-ended concept, an umbrella term for exploring the multiple performative “layers” (Morris 2016; see also Clarke, 2012) of industry events and how they are “folded” into each other or “interanimate” each other (Day and Wedderburn 2022)—whether they be linguistic, practical, theatrical, discursive, material, lively, deliberate, semi-conscious, unintentional, or else. This does not resolve persistent conceptual disagreements, of course, but our hope is that it provides a space for and galvanizes interest in engaging and developing these differences productively.

So, while a focus on curated power in principle can steer attention to various different ways in which social hierarchies are performatively enacted at and through industry events, this article begins to explore two of them, which we refer to as *staging* and *performing*. Our focus on *staging* is animated by the event ethnographic works discussed above, which have emphasized the constitutive role of physical places, spaces, and locations of events. These works suggest understanding how classed, gendered, and racial privileges are enacted, including understanding how buildings and environments partake in this process. Just like Callahan (2017: 362) has done with gardens, we are interested here in exploring how conference venues act as spaces “that forge particular relations between the visible, hearable, smellable, and feelable,” and thus, “set the parameters for what can (and cannot) be seen, said, thought, and done.”

Our focus on *performing* adds to this focus a concern with embodied enactments of power. This includes a focus on content and style (what is enacted and how?), as well as on choreographed and improvised performances. Here, we follow, as many before us, Goffman’s (1959: 17–30) popular distinction between “frontstage” performances (e.g., speeches, presentations, keynotes, discussions, shows, and choreographies) and “backstage” performances (e.g., coffee breaks, lunch breaks, dinner, and after parties) to explore how classed, gendered, and racial hierarchies figure in these performances and how they are sustained, reworked, or subverted.

It seems important to emphasize again that our focus on staging and performing is developed heuristically here based on our own research. We do not wish to suggest that curated power necessarily or exclusively spotlights these two aspects. Quite the opposite, we advocate an open-ended approach that allows scholars to adopt, engage, and develop the concept pragmatically within the context of their own research. That is to say, staging and performing are two *possible* ways of discussing curated power, but they do not exhaust all possibilities. Our aim is not to provide a definitive account but an entry point.

Curated Power at Alternative Finance Events

In the previous section, we surveyed the literatures on performative power and event ethnography and introduced the concept of “curated power” as one way of

unlocking some of the synergies between the two. In this section, we use and develop the concept specifically to analyze the performative politics of industry events in two alternative financial subsectors, FinTech and Islamic finance. We begin by discussing our research approach before we explore the curated power of these sectors, with a particular focus on staging and performing.

Research Approach

FinTech and Islamic finance have attracted the attention of investors, policymakers, and academics as examples of alternative finance, offering potential solutions to the problems and challenges of the status quo in the politics of global finance. FinTech seeks to increase the convenience, transparency, and efficiency of traditional finance by offering alternatives based on advanced mobile and digital capabilities. Islamic finance, in turn, seeks to foreground social justice and curb the speculative excesses of traditional finance by offering alternatives based on Shariah (Islamic law), which mandates that the financial sector be oriented toward the protection of faith, life, intellect, progeny, and wealth.

Industry conferences and events play a constitutive role in these two sectors. They connect stakeholders from otherwise disparate professional backgrounds, conjure up investor interest, create market knowledge, forge regulatory consensus, and more. As such, they provide a fruitful research site for following the latest developments in these sectors. However, in this article, we examine specifically what they tell us about the power relations in these sectors and, especially, about the enactment of social hierarchies, such as class, gender, and race. As we will illustrate, such a focus reveals significant contradictions between the articulated intentions of these sectors to challenge entrenched power and knowledge relations in global finance.

While at first sight, Islamic finance and FinTech can appear very different—each with their own histories, contexts, causes, and consequences—they share at least one striking similarity: They both champion critiques that explicitly challenge traditional finance with reference to class, gender, and race. Proponents of FinTech often depict the industry as a departure from the toxic white masculinity of Wall Street investment banks and emphasize diversity and inclusion as a necessary condition for business success.

Proponents of Islamic finance, in turn, like to present the sector as a corporate vanguard offering an escape from the colonial legacies of traditional finance and from the racial inequities that remain hard-wired into financial infrastructures today. The prohibition of interest, for example, is presented as fundamental to achieving greater social justice, to eradicating greed as the “making of money from money,” and to making finance more accessible and inclusive, in particular for marginalized Muslim communities. In this sense, Islamic finance can be understood as a postcolonial critique in that it both presents an alternative way of “doing finance” and in its moral critique (and decentering) of what practitioners refer to as “conventional finance” (see also [Pollard and Samers 2007](#)).

The actual impact of the two sectors remains uncertain, of course. Islamic finance is often hard to distinguish from mainstream finance, replicating existing products and only stripping out some features that are deemed incompatible with Islam, such as *riba* (interest). For some, the industry, therefore, amounts to little more than *hiyal*, legalistic trickery: accommodating Islamic principles on the surface and leaving the deeper colonial structure of global finance intact. In FinTech, female entrepreneurs remain severely underrepresented, underpaid, and underfunded, with numbers significantly worse for women of color. Yet, it is precisely this ambiguity around questions of power relations and social hierarchies and their contingent enactment in the industries that we seek to explore.

To that end, we individually attended thirty conferences, workshops, and events in the FinTech sector and a similar number of events in the Islamic finance

sector. These gatherings took place in London, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, and digitally between 2017 and 2022. Attending such a large number of industry events allows us to detect regularities across organizers, venues, and formats—what remains the same despite the particularities of a given event. Nevertheless, despite such common patterns, each event also gives rise to distinct performances and interactions and might, for the observer, spark unique insights and new lines of thought. We have experienced this ourselves as researchers, but it is an experience that is also shared by the practitioners we observed, as narrated by themselves in conversations at these events.

In the following discussion, we will highlight encounters at five events in particular—both because of their shared regularities but also because of vital insights they provided that speak to the curated power of these events.³ Our research strategy was informed by the methodological pragmatism of political and event ethnography (see [Schatz 2009](#)), and combined short-term participant observation at one-day, multi-day, and overnight events ([Seim 2021](#); [Vindrola-Padros 2021](#)), expert interviews and practitioner conversations during and after the events, and document analysis of marketing materials, as well as industry and media reports. In the process, we created an expansive empirical archive of field notes, recordings, pictures, and promotional materials, which serve as the basis of the analysis below.

Staging

One way in which curated power is enacted is by the physical places, spaces, and locations of industry events. In this section, we offer a critical analysis of the event spaces of FinTech and Islamic finance.

The Curated Power of FinTech Event Spaces

Most FinTech events take place in corporate coworking spaces, innovation labs, and accelerators. One of the most emblematic examples in the context of the United Kingdom is the coworking space Level39 in London (see Figure 1). Located on the thirty-ninth floor of One Canada Square, the architectural landmark of the city's financial district, the space offers “a packed events calendar, and best-in-class facilities to help start-up businesses achieve scale” ([Level39 2022](#)). Level39 shares two typical features with FinTech event spaces across the globe that routinely underwrite the curated power, and especially the performative enactment of *class privileges*, at and through FinTech events.

First, it is located in an area marked by intense urban gentrification. One Canada Square, the building in which Level 39 is placed, was the flagship building of an urban development project that relocated London's financial district away from the city center to its current location on the site of London's historic docklands in the East. Completed in 1991, the tower was one of the first to incorporate North American planning principles in Europe at a time when London transformed into the European center of US-led financial globalization ([Tooze 2018](#): 80–84). It became an early example of London's “third-wave, state-led gentrification” ([Watt 2013](#)): Urban regeneration, financed by a consortium of private investors, transforming a working-class area, marked by high unemployment and England's highest concentration of council homes at the time, into a vibrant middle-class neighborhood.

Since then, coworking spaces and start-up accelerators have become a standard feature of urban development plans. London's post-Olympic development of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, for example, led to the construction of Here East, another popular tech hub and FinTech event space, which markets itself as a place for “innovators, visionaries, and like-minded locals looking to challenge the status

³We attended two of these industry events multiple times as they were held on a recurring basis in London—and digitally during the pandemic.

quo” (Here East 2022). But while organizers and investors like to celebrate places, such as Level39 and Here East, as innovation hubs that are able to unlock the untapped creative potential of hitherto deprived inner-city areas, they have had only modest success in raising the economic and social well-being of local populations and often exacerbated their social exclusion (Watt 2013).

The curation of FinTech event spaces as iconic spearheads of urban regeneration, therefore, necessarily entails the performative enactment of class privileges. On the one hand, FinTech event spaces use all manner of resources to generate a sense of familiarity amongst middle-class visitors, which allows them to “feel local” in poorer neighborhoods in which they are de facto newcomers (Leszczynski and Kong 2022). Some prominent examples here include the provision of bikeshare stations and bike docks, e-scooters, coffee and food trucks, stickers advertising globally recognized food delivery services, stickers indicating acceptance of mobile payments, table football and table tennis, businesses and lifestyle magazines, posters advertising glamorous futures for talented locals, and more. On the other hand, FinTech event spaces contribute to hiding the local, political, and distributional conflicts of gentrification by presenting “urban development” as a benign process with universally beneficial outcomes. As such, they actively encourage participants of FinTech events in these spaces to (temporarily) suspend their recognition of specific class privileges, which allow them to experience the gentrification of surrounding areas not as the displacement of low-income communities, but as a welcome sign of economic development (Baginski and Malcolm, 2019).

This performative politics, further, extends to a second shared characteristic of Level39 and many other FinTech event spaces, namely, their reproduction of a globally recognized start-up aesthetic. Consider again the example of Level39. To attend FinTech events in this space, participants first enter One Canada Square’s large reception hall, an impressive, imposing corporate space with high ceilings and marble floors of the kind conventionally associated with the world’s largest banks. Speed gates, reportedly processing 10,000 people per day, ensure that only authorized individuals can pass. Visitors request temporary access at a reception desk, where security staff wait to guide them to the large elevators at the center of the hall. Then, upon arrival on the thirty-ninth floor, the scenery radically shifts. Visitors enter a large open-plan office in sleek start-up aesthetic: hot desks, fixed desks, drop-in zones, breakout areas, meeting rooms, colorful post-its, graphic murals, printed glass vinyls, and spectacular views on the neighboring bank towers of JPMorgan, Barclays, Citibank, and HSBC.

For outsiders, visiting Level39 for the first time can be an intimidating experience. The building stages both the authority, power, and wealth of the financial sector and the newly gained influence enjoyed by tech workers, coders, and entrepreneurs in the sector. New visitors are continuously reminded that their access is temporary and exclusive. For regulars, however, this sense of exclusion and alienation soon morphs into a sense of familiarity and conformity. The hot desks, the post-its, the murals: this could be anywhere if it was not for the view.

In this sense, the digital start-up aesthetic, again, contributes to staging and enacting class privileges in two overlapping ways. On the one hand, it generates a sense of familiarity amongst middle-class visitors by enacting what Marwick (2018) has called a “global imaginary” of start-up success, which celebrates risk-taking, aspiration, and profit-making as the fullest expression of personal freedom and liberty. On the other hand, it contributes to distracting visitors from their own class privileges by reframing them as an aspiration rather than a shared background. Curated power here finds its expression in a joyful, permissive, and motivating atmosphere that “beams forth in positivity” (Han 2017), and which underwrites the ability of visitors to experience and embrace FinTech not as an exclusive, elitist space, but as a bright, creative, hard-working, and vibrant “community.”



Figure 1. This could be anywhere, if it was not for the view: The event space Level39. Source: <https://propertyjll.co.uk/rent-coworking-space/coworking-space-rent-london-e14-5ab-v-2858>.

The Curated Power of Islamic Finance Conference Venues

If FinTech venues often stage and enact class privilege as an aspiration rather than a shared background, Islamic venues stage and enact the power of the state and of state-linked actors, linked to their postcolonial imaginaries and nation-building aspirations. Islamic finance, to a large extent, is a statist project that developed with significant policy support, especially in hubs such as Malaysia and Dubai. Correspondingly, rituals that perform status and hierarchies play a significant role. This can be seen, for example, in the much more central role of the state—and state-linked companies—as sponsors and actors at these events. It includes both the prominent role of senior officials in opening conferences and delivering keynote speeches and the use of state imagery, including, in some instances, the singing of national anthems.

Despite their explicit commitment to religious traditions, Islamic finance conferences typically take place in secular locations, prominently figuring the business districts of finance capitals: the Golden Triangle in Kuala Lumpur; the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC)—a district within Dubai dedicated to international finance with its own jurisdiction as a special economic zone; or the City in London. Venues can vary from conference centers to hotel ballrooms to corporate auditoria, for example of stock exchanges or accounting and law firms. This proximity in location has contributed to their easy integration into the everyday work of large corporations across the industry. At the same time, these rather spectacular venues elevate Islamic finance industry conferences from mundane work occurrences to special occasions.

However, the integration between finance and the state within Islamic finance's postcolonial, social justice-oriented aspirations is not always smooth. For example, one of the key annual, London-based events in the Islamic finance circuit is held at Mansion House. Mansion House is a very symbolic venue for the UK financial industry. Across from Mansion House is the Bank of England, an institution that has historically been deeply entangled with slavery and the plantation economy (Bank



Figure 2. Islamic finance conference at Mansion House, London. *Source:* authors' photo.

of England 2022). Mansion House is also the venue at which the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer (the United Kingdom equivalent of a finance minister) gives his [*sic* as of late 2023] annual “Mansion House speech” to financial industry practitioners, setting out the government’s plans and aspirations for the financial industry. Mansion House is a venue that caters very much to the elites rather than the marginalized communities whose welfare Islamic finance avowedly seeks to improve.

Moreover, Mansion House is a venue in which state power is very prominent, symbolized, for example, by the central display of the City of London Lord Mayor’s regalia, the Sword and Mace (see [figure 2](#)). Thus, on the one hand, holding Islamic finance industry events at Mansion House is a strong symbolic gesture that Islamic finance has “arrived,” has overcome divides put in place by colonialism, and has become part of the global financial mainstream. On the other hand, however, these symbols of British state power (and specifically that of the City of London Corporation) erase centuries of colonial financial history that caused Islamic finance to start from a structurally subordinate position in the first place (e.g., [Alami et al. 2022](#)).

These dissonances are perhaps most acutely felt by the participants themselves. Take, for example, the musings of one participant a few years ago at this annual event. During the coffee break, he mentioned that—as he had been thinking more about partition (i.e., the partition of India in 1947)—he was also wondering about the appropriateness of the venue, and what it signified for the aspirations of the industry. Such a notion of discomfort is not uncommon at Islamic finance events. Indeed, participants frequently question—individually in private conversations but also openly in panel discussions and over lunch breaks—whether the commercial success of the industry ought to be celebrated as its ambitions in terms of delivering social justice remain largely unfulfilled.⁴

Mansion House is a very distinctive location, and while it is the venue at which this annual flagship event of the UK Islamic finance industry is held, in places such as Dubai or Kuala Lumpur, this is more likely to be high-end conference centers or luxury hotels (typically part of global chains). These are themselves the products

⁴For example, in the United Kingdom, the lack of Islamic student financing is considered by practitioners as a significant harm and a clear instance of where Islamic finance is seen as not (yet) having delivered on its promises. According to one campaign group, it impacts 10,000 students a year, creating a significant barrier to accessing higher education and creating moral ambiguity and anxieties for those who seek to finance their studies via student loans (see also [Equal Access to University, no date](#)).

of the imaginaries of modernity of postcolonial and global elites and thus play an important part in how the staging of Islamic finance industry events manifests hierarchies of class and race that seem at a remove from the industry's more radical aspirations.

Likewise, the migration of Islamic finance industry conferences onto digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic also offers insights into the more structural aspects—and colonial legacies—of global financial markets as they operate today. One of the major implications of the shift to online conferencing was that it made it easier (and less costly) to bring together speakers and participants from different regions of the world. Indeed, this has been an aspect often emphasized by organizers and participants.

However, while this contributed to broadening participation, and possibly more South–South interaction, a surprisingly large number of Islamic finance events, including those held in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, were organized in a way that was compatible with "London time". In this sense, the staging of curated power is in itself subject to the hierarchies of power that exist in global finance. This aspect also illustrates the limitations of Islamic finance as a postcolonial project, decentring the West, pointing to the structural power of ostensibly mundane features of global financial markets such as the time zones in which they operate.

Performing

So far, we have elaborated on the way curated power is enacted by the places, spaces, and locations of alternative finance events. We now turn to analyzing its enactment in the embodied performances of, and interactions between, different actors and participants brought together by these events. Here, we distinguish between frontstage performances, which include speeches, presentations, keynotes, discussions, shows, choreographies, and more, and backstage performances, which include informal conversations during coffee breaks, lunch breaks, dinner, after parties, and so forth, as well as the many work processes behind the scenes that go into organizing and hosting these events.

Performing FinTech Feminism

FinTech events are typically organized around specific topics: They may focus on sectors, such as digital payments, digital banking, digital investments, digital identity, cybersecurity, or cryptocurrency; or they may focus on regulatory issues, such as the Open Banking Regulation, the Digital Services Act, the use of regulatory sandboxes, and more. But they also tend to include items dedicated to social themes and conditions. In recent years, and in direct response to the public mobilizations around #metoo and #blacklivesmatter, there has been especially a proliferation of frontstage performances, i.e., speeches, panels, and even entire events, dedicated to the topic of diversity. These performances provide excellent vantage points for examining the enactment of curated power in practice.

For example, the Fintech Talent Festival 2019, held in Here East, London, kicked off with a keynote speech by the female founder of #techmums, a network for mothers wanting to understand what their children are doing online. It was followed by a panel discussion entitled "Time for Action: Diversity and Inclusion as a Strategy," starring the black male cofounder of Colorintech, a talent network dedicated to increase racial diversity in Europe's tech sectors, and the Asian female cofounder of Girls Can Code, a talent network dedicated to increase gender diversity in the FinTech sector. This diverse cast of topics and speakers was deliberate, according to the event organizer. It was to deliver a strong message to the audience: that diversity is good for business. Or as the founder of #techmums suggested: "The new world of innovation is all about collaboration, and some of the best ideas typically come

from the outliers. So, we must ensure that this [fintech] is a space where a diverse set of people feel they can be part of.”

The celebration of diversity in the frontstage performances curiously—and tellingly—contrasted with the significant lack of diversity in the audience. The overwhelming number of participants were young, white, male, middle-class, many of them working for FinTech companies, and most of them members of the FinTech “entreprenariat” (Lorusso 2019): graduates, coders, designers, entrepreneurs, temporarily working in precarious working conditions, in the hope to get lucky one day, and get rich by changing the world. The backstage, or better, off-stage performances were—perhaps unsurprisingly—characterized by a certain bro-e-y indifference to the core message (more women equal more profits) presented on stage. In conversations, participants recognized the message, almost as an act of homage, but only as a means of forgetting everything about it and getting on with other things—for example, networking.

This contrast between the curated performance of diversity in FinTech on stage and the clear lack of diversity off stage conjured up what Åhäll (2018) has described as an affective dissonance—a representational gap that makes itself felt at the levels of affect and emotion—without, however, sparking a broader feminist curiosity or solidarity. Instead, the dissonance enacted, and reinforced, the broader dilemmas of FinTech’s “transnational business feminism” (Roberts 2015), which addresses diversity in ahistorical and apolitical terms: promoting diversity in the name of business, while ignoring the historical and political factors that created the diversity problem in the first place. So, even though initiatives to promote gender and racial equality in FinTech abound, and although diverse women are ubiquitous across FinTech’s marketing materials, female entrepreneurs remain severely underrepresented, underpaid, and underfunded, with figures significantly worse for women of color in all three categories (Findexable 2020).

Performing Islamic Sustainability, and Inclusion

Just like in FinTech, in Islamic finance, social concerns play an important role. They are a central feature of Islamic financial thought and also feature prominently in discussions at industry conferences, for example, in the context of the use of *zakat* (alms-giving) and *waqf* (charitable endowment) in promoting social justice. Although the integration of the commercial, profit-oriented, and social and charitable dimensions of Islamic finance is not always smooth, with the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, it has gained significant momentum. Thus, industry practitioners have increasingly sought to point to the overlap between the industry’s ethical objectives and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, looking a bit deeper, the Islamic finance industry tends to regard only a somewhat narrow range of issues as being within its remit. It reflects wider social hierarchies of class, gender, and race that can also be observed in how Islamic finance enacts curated power at industry conferences, in both frontstage and backstage performances.

Regarding frontstage performances, as we already highlighted, rituals that perform status and hierarchies play a significant role in the Islamic finance industry. Indeed, there is a marked deference to authority in Islamic finance circles, in particular with regard to a select number of Shariah advisors who judge whether a product or service complies with the religious principles enshrined in Shariah, or Islamic law. Some of them have obtained celebrity status, but here again, important gender (and class) dynamics are at play. Women, while in the minority, have long played an important role in the development of the industry as regulators, market practitioners, and Shariah advisors, in particular in Southeast Asia. However, there is a tendency to marginalize their views, which comes to the fore when observing their participation in industry events.

The silencing and, at times, crass absence of women's voices is very visible, for example, with regard to the significant underrepresentation of women speakers at Islamic finance industry conferences, including events that focus on the overlap of Islamic finance's ethical objectives and the SDGs. One of many such examples we witnessed was the launch event of a widely read industry report where none of the sessions included any women speakers. The irony of this was stark given that the report focused on "an inclusive ethical economy."⁵ Moreover, the report's media partner had just run a series on women entrepreneurs in the Islamic economy, and indeed, women had played a significant role in producing the report, as became clear in subsequent practitioner conversations. Even when women are invited to speak at these events, the attention of the audience is not assured; it is not uncommon for audience participants to talk over the speeches delivered by women speakers.

In so doing, Islamic finance industry events can echo the bro-e-y indifference to gender diversity observed in FinTech events as discussed above. Elder (2017, 179) has drawn attention in particular to Malaysian women's expertise in the making of the industry as well as their marginalization in how their work (i.e., "creating, packaging, marketing, and regulating Islamic financial products") is "explicitly framed as subordinate to their reproductive work in the home". Observing practitioner interactions at industry events allows us to study performances of authority and deference, but it also permits probing further the fabric of these global industries, which is very much constituted by the knowledge work of experts and the blurring of such categories, as well as their frontstage and backstage performances. Indeed, it invites us to critically ask "who is the expert" and what are the frontstage and backstage performances through which such expertise is enacted. It raises concerns about both the substance and the extent of the sector's commitment to equity and justice. The absence of women in the frontstage performances of Islamic finance signifies, to quote Elder (2017, 193) again, "a foreclosing of the productive possibilities of alterities of both gender and Islamic discourse in reshaping financial markets." At the same time, it renders invisible further the gendered processes of labor that take place backstage: the staffing and running of conference secretariats, the drafting of key documents that set out agendas and present the industry as a viable value proposition, or the work of (often racialized) catering and security staff.

Conclusion

Industry events provide a fruitful vantage point for observing and thinking about the performance of power in global politics and the global political economy. The notion of "curated power" that we proposed in this article offers one way to begin and combine the insights from existing literatures on performative power and event ethnography in order to examine how the performative politics of industry events intersects with broader hierarchies of social difference, such as class, gender, and race. As we have shown, curated power is continuously enacted on multiple levels, including by the physical places, spaces, and locations of industry events and by the lively interactions on and off stage. These situated performances, in turn, iteratively shape how social hierarchies intersect with each other and how they assume force, gain stability, or indeed, change.

In the case of the two financial subsectors of FinTech and Islamic finance, a focus on curated power reveals several important contradictions with regards to these sectors' broader ambition to challenge the existing financial order for the better. In FinTech, the self-declared aim to promote financial inclusion and diversity contrasts with the staging of class privileges through FinTech event spaces, and the perfor-

⁵It should also be noted that to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" is one of the SDGs (#5).

mance of diversity in the form of an ahistorical and apolitical business feminism. In Islamic finance, in turn, the explicit focus on social justice and rejection of greed contrasts with the staging of state power in and through exclusionary, elitist, and luxurious conference venues, and the performance of religious authority and expertise as a domain supposedly preserved for men. Yet, at the same time, the notion of curated power allows us to engage and develop these contradictions in contingent terms as performative enactments that remain ambiguous and contested, and thus cultivate a sensitivity to how things could be different.

Thus, by way of a conclusion, we would like to offer two broader observations that are worth keeping in mind for future research on curated power. First, we suggest that curated power is reflexive. As we have demonstrated, event organizers and participants themselves often grapple with class, gendered, or racial injustices, although in limited ways. One important task for future research is therefore to unpack precisely those limitations and the opportunism involved in order to point to those prevailing injustices that otherwise all too easily recede from view.

Second, and following on from this observation, we suggest that curated power is contingent. That is, both the visible presence and the conspicuous absence of hierarchies of social difference, and the classed, gendered, and racialized power relations that they manifest can never be taken for granted. Rather, they must be explored in practice.

Here, the COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. As many of us experienced in our own professional lives, the political responses and restrictions after the outbreak and spread of COVID-19 led to the rapid migration of professionally organized industry events onto digital channels. Indeed, in the financial event industry, it was striking just how quickly organizers adjusted to the new reality, promoting all manner of new online or hybrid event formats. This shift to online conferencing and working from home changed, within a very short time, several of the performative dimensions of curated power discussed above. Rather than attending industry events at spectacular venues, participants suddenly witnessed a very different kind of spectacle: the (guest) bedrooms of financial elites.

In so doing, the pandemic, and the frenzy of online industry events to which it gave rise, offered new insights of a very different kind into the social background of elite financial actors, especially in the early phase, when background screens were less common. Elite finance, often obscured in technical jargon, suddenly became socialized through rather mundane facts such as the availability of guest bedrooms that could be repurposed into home offices, the noise of children in the background, and so on. This dynamic challenged the established frontstage performances of global finance and pointed, for example, to the gendered division of labor that underpins them, also contesting a dichotomous understanding of a public sphere of international financial markets and a private sphere of households/homes (see also Prügl 2021).

Doing event ethnographic research during the pandemic thus not only offered unique insights into the lives of financial practitioners, but it also invited critical reflection on our own positionality as researchers, struggling to combine our own duties of care with conducting participant observation—from the kitchen table or crammed into a cupboard office. Indeed, there is much scope for analyses of how curated power shapes the production and circulation of knowledge through the enactment of hierarchies of social difference in our own “industry.”

Hence, we conclude with the call to invite also greater reflection on our own professional practice, including at academic gatherings such as conferences of professional associations, thematic workshops, research away days, and so on. The concept of curated power that we developed in this article, and operationalized by means of our analysis of FinTech and Islamic finance events, we hope, may provide a useful entry point for doing so.

Funder Information

Leverhulme Trust (RF-2018-452).

Acknowledgments

We thank Chris Clarke, Joe Deville, Liz McFall, and the two anonymous reviewers for their excellent comments on previous versions of this article.

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