

# Knowledge, Practice, and Power: Rethinking the New Agenda of International Organization Studies

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**“Rediscovering Global Bureaucracies—From Weber to Where?”** Young Researchers’ Workshop (YRW), Stockholm, Sweden, 7–8 September 2010; sponsored by the YRW scheme of the Standing of International Relations (SGIR) of the European Consortium of Political Research—ECPR.

The academic study of international organizations (IO) started out in the 1950s as a classificatory exercise of the mandates and structures of various IOs. Back then, it was dominated by international lawyers. In what entered the annals of international theory as “the regime debate,” emphasis shifted to the grand pictures of studying the “organization of the international.” The regime debate became a major battleground for international theory’s different paradigms (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Rochester, 1986). Today the lenses of international theorists are, once again, focused on the particulars of single IOs, yet, with different aspirations. Rather than interpreting IOs as technical structures of state interactions, they are now theorized as agents and components of global structures. Interest has shifted toward the question of how IOs condition the behavior of states and other global actors. Scholars increasingly reject an understanding of IOs as an apolitical infrastructure and study them as political actors instead.

The reason for this substantial shift in theoretical perspective is multifaceted. There are external ones, that is, developments in the political world, as well as internal, disciplinary ones. Externally speaking, reasons are certainly to be seen in the growing concerns about the performance and (lack of) legitimacy of IOs. Failures in the maintenance and enhancement of peace and security or in the provision of development encountered the high hopes put into IOs after the end of the Cold War. Several scandals, such as the UN’s corruption scandal, shattered doubt on the transparency and accountability of IOs. Moreover, fears prevail that IOs have become too powerful and increasingly limit sovereign decision making, for instance, through standard setting or practices such as benchmarking. Similarly, concerns abound that the practices of IOs are dominated by a range of powerful states, while the interests of the less powerful populations and minorities are marginalized.

There are also crucial intra-disciplinary developments that have triggered the new focus of IO research. Among those developments are the growing interest for the underperformance of IOs, the increasing contemplation of reform proposals for IOs, and ideas of steering IOs toward cosmopolitan modes of governance. For the current theoretical agenda, two develop-

ments prove to be critical. That is, first, the successful import of delegation theory's principal-agent models. Conceiving of IOs as entities with interests that often differ from those of their principals provided a refreshing perspective on the behavior of IOs (e.g., Pollack, 1997; Nielson and Tierney, 2003). Second, constructivist scholars made a successful case for the power of IOs as norm entrepreneurs (e.g., Finnemore, 1993). Following this line of reasoning Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (1999, 2004) proposed a framework, which today presents the most elaborate framework for understanding the behavior, pathologies, and powers of IOs. Integrating insights of anthropological studies of organizational culture, Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy and legitimacy, and work in international theory providing extended understandings of power, Barnett and Finnemore's framework goes significantly beyond principal agent models. Indeed, delegation theory lacks the capacity of developing a theoretical advanced understanding of IO rationales and interests (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004, p. 4).

In this report, we present the results of a workshop titled "Rediscovering Global Bureaucracies—From Weber to Where?" The contributions to the workshop relied on Barnett and Finnemore's framework as a discursive starting point and asked how it can be empirically applied, extended, adjusted, and from time-to-time challenged. The research findings and work in progress discussed in the workshop were joined up in their interest to better understanding the autonomy and behavior of IOs without taking the conceptual (and empirical) shortcuts of economic modeling. The two-day workshop funded by the recently founded Young Researchers Workshop program (YRW) of the Standing Group of International Relations (SGIR) of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) took place in September 2010 at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm, Sweden.

The contributions to the workshop relied on cases studies of IOs from the field of security, peace, and development, with a focus on the UN family. While we discuss the specificities of the contributions below, at least three major results of significant interest for the general debate on theorizing IOs can be summed up.

First, it became immediately clear the debate on how to theorize IOs is badly projected as a discourse in which rational and constructivist theorizing oppose each other. Indeed, rationalist expectations are often a revealing starting point for research. Yet, the contributions joined in their claim that rationalist ideas on their own seldom cover the full story and, hence, need to be combined if not replaced by wider ontological frameworks, notably by a focus on collective patterns of action and the practical background knowledge IO staffers and other actors rely on. However, IO studies are best understood as a pragmatist and pluralist, problem-driven enterprise interested in understanding the behavior of IOs and their structural effects.

Second, sociological "organization theory" has been an important source for recent thinking about IOs. As the contributions clarified, it is important to acknowledge organization theory is much more pluralistic and rich in theoretical traditions than often presented in an IR context. Moreover, organization theory is far from the only source from which useful concepts and frameworks can be developed. The workshop contributions relied on works from anthropology, political sociology, international legal studies, or interpretative policy analysis to gather insights for understanding IOs. Recognizing and using such a wider repertoire of thoughts will be of increasing importance for understanding IOs. This is notably

the case given that today IOs do a lot of different things. They engage in “law application, expert advice, service provision, support building, resource mobilization” (Olsen, 2004, p. 18), etc. Sometimes they appear as rule-driven bureaucrats and also as managers calculating expected utility (Olsen, 2004). Sometimes they are problem-solving servants, sometimes they are powerful masters. To understand and cope with this wide variety, researchers are required to embrace theoretical and analytical plurality and to choose frameworks pragmatically. In sum, studies of IOs should not be reduced to a dialogue between IR and organization theory (however broadly defined).

Third, while it is important to embrace plurality in concepts and analytical vocabulary, it is equally decisive to focus and concentrate on distinct research puzzles and controversies. Plurality is not a virtue in itself but a tool of gathering multiperspectival knowledge on distinct problems. As the contributions to the workshop revealed, a range of distinct “problem sets” or “critical junctures” of the recent IO agenda may be identified. First, the problem of structure, namely of how to conceive of the relationship between IOs and the social structures they are embedded in; second, the question of how IOs successfully produce authoritative knowledge and become powerful thereby; third, the question of how one copes with the complexity of IOs and balances ideal types and real types. Below we introduce the debates of the workshop in further expanding the three problem sets and in using them as a device for sorting the discussion. We proceed in three sections each devoted to a distinct problem set, followed by a concluding section.

### **Environments, Fields, and Structures**

IOs are components of and actors within international structures. Traditional research often presumed a dualism between states on the one hand and the IO to be studied on the other. This simplification of the environment of IOs as states, however, does not cover very well what the environment of IOs is comprised of and how it may have an impact upon IO behavior. Indeed, an IO is embedded in a thickening normative structure and interacts with different entities not limited to nongovernmental organizations, private corporations, expert communities, celebrities, or other IOs. In other words, the relation between an IO and the structure it is embedded in is complex and requires to be apprehended as such. At least two major challenges arise in this regard: First, how to conceptualize the environment of an IO and its impact on the organization; second, the question of how to draw a boundary between an organization and its environment, and how to conduct research in the face of the fuzzy internal/external boundaries of IOs.

Antje Vetterlein, who presented a paper co-authored with Manuela Moschella, introduced the notion of “organizational fields” to grasp the social structure in which IOs are embedded. Identifying an “organizational field” as comprised of these organizations that constitute a recognized area of institutional life, they demonstrated how an IO’s relation to and position in such a field can be a powerful explanatory variable to understand different types of change within an IO. Studying the IMF, Vetterlein and Moschella compared two processes of change in the organization and demonstrated the different character of these processes can only be understood in reference to the field.

Christian Bueger argued in drawing on the case of the UN that the conventional inside-outside-distinction of an IO is difficult to sustain. Rightfully, the UN can be understood as only having fluid boundaries with participants joining and leaving the organizations. To cope with this problem, he proposed to study how participants construct boundaries in everyday performances.

Both contributions highlighted the intricacy of relating an IO to its structure or environment. Indeed it remains a crucial challenge for IO studies on how to settle this relation. Often these questions may be approached as one of empirical scale. Statements that can be produced on the IO-structure relations depend on whether one studies IOs from above, e.g., in studying several IOs, and approaching an IO as an essentialist category, or whether one aims at studying an IO from within, that is, in unraveling how the actors inside an IO use and rely on structures. It is the latter strategy the majority of workshop contributions pursued.

### **The “Apolitical,” Expertise and the Production of Knowledge**

As extensively explored by Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 2004), IOs derive their authority through the expertise they provide. Expertise may be understood as a form of knowledge that is specialized and presented as objective, technical, and apolitical. Such knowledge may impact policy formulation by several mechanisms. It may inform policymaking, for instance when an IO presents facts about developments, gathered through a fact-finding mission or monitoring device. The outputs of an IO might prescribe the spectrum of available policy options, and, hence, considerably narrow down policy discourse; for instance, when a report of the UN Secretary General argues that only a limited number of policy options are viable while others are not. Moreover, often IOs join and actively participate in transnational communities of experts and advocate for policy options or aim to put distinct problems on the international agenda. IOs might also develop knowledge that constitutes the background knowledge upon which decisions are made. This is the case when, for instance, an IO delivers an authoritative definition of what is to be understood by a core concept. The concepts of human security or of peacebuilding are paradigmatic in this regard. Contemporary IOs are moreover increasingly active in evaluation, monitoring, and benchmarking states. Such activities might lead to blaming and shaming distinct states and as such condition the behavior of them. Also expert knowledge might assist in settling controversies, for instance, when a certain affair is depoliticized and it is argued it is a problem of knowledge and not of politics.

These mechanisms, already scrutinized in the literature, were addressed by several contributions that focussed on problems of knowledge. As the discussions revealed notably the question of how expert knowledge becomes constructed in practice, how it is diffused and how the knowledge function relates to other functions of IOs were identified as core challenges of research. For instance, Elodie Covergne’s paper provided an investigation of the knowledge practices of UN special envoys. She argues that the envoy is a figure that translates knowledge from one context to the other. As such the special envoy is a boundary-spanning figure crucial in establishing authoritative knowledge. The discussion around Covergne’s contribution revealed the lack of contributions in the existing literature that investigate the micro processes by which knowledge is constructed in IOs.

Antoine Vandemoortele's paper was driven by the puzzle of why certain concepts are widely diffused and others are not. Drawing on examples of concepts from the field of peacebuilding he explained the success and failure of concepts by the normative structure of the field of peacebuilding, the framing of the concept and the relation between headquarters and field offices. Bueger argued in relying on the case of the UN Peacebuilding Commission for the importance of seeing knowledge construction practices in relation to other practices and to scrutinize the controversies that arise if such practices clash with each other.

All three contributions illustrated how contemporary sociological approaches, notably from the sociology of science, can illuminate the practices by which knowledge is produced in IOs, a fact that was highlighted by Karen West in her contributions as discussant. As she argued it is important to treat knowledge not as an essentialist category and seek understandings of (expert) knowledge by means of discourse-theoretical or practice-theoretical inquiries. Such investigations are even more important given the political character of the knowledge production of IOs increasingly come to the fore, as was forcefully scrutinized by the contribution of Julian Junk and Frederik Trettin.

### **Bureaucracy, Practice, and Complexity**

Much of current research on IOs is in one way or the other driven by Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy. While it remains contested how far and under which adjustments Weberian theory is applicable to the international level at all, the ideal type of bureaucracy as the institutionalization of instrumental rationality underpins much of IO research. For instance, a diagnosis of a politicization of IOs only becomes plausible from such a starting point.

Moreover, the criteria Weber identified for the ideal typical efficient and normatively positive rational legal authority (stenographically: division of labor, hierarchy, written documents, staff of trained experts, full working capacity of the official, and the presence of general rules under which it operates) are strong for understanding the sources of authority of IOs and the reasons of why their expert knowledge becomes accepted, a fact that was developed by Sebastian Gerhart as well as Julia Sattelberger and Leonie Vierck. In relying on Weber, they demonstrated how the power of IOs is derived from their authority as legal rational bureaucracies.

While, it remains surprising that no one has used Weber's ideal type so far to investigate the real type of today's international bureaucracies, it is important, first, to stress the potential of alternative understandings of bureaucracy; and second, to emphasize IOs are hybrid entities comprised of other organizational forms than bureaucracies. To start with the former, Hegel (to follow Shaw, 1992), developed an account of bureaucracy, which shared Weber's core assumptions concerning the organizational form of bureaucracy and its constitutive conditions but argued that bureaucratic activity is not technical but practical (Shaw, 1992, p. 381). For Hegel, bureaucratic practice was practical reasoning, *phronesis* to use the Aristotelian expression. Such a perspective foregrounds practices and emphasizes the creativity of bureaucrats in judging between the universal and the particular, the norms and the concrete circumstances. In the process of the concretization, bureaucrats modify the norms.

Such a line of reasoning is, for instance, crucial in the works of anthropologists on bureaucratic culture that emphasize the creativity of bureaucrats (e.g., Wagenaar, 2004). As high-

lighted during the workshop by Vincent Pouliot, Patrick Jackson, and others, the Weberian ideal type can provide interesting conceptual insights, but it will remain the challenge of IO studies to explore the everyday practices of IO bureaucrats. It is notably a perspective that anchors in detailed studies of practices (Pouliot, 2008; Bueger and Gadinger, 2008) by which we can learn how IO staffers produce what makes them autonomous and powerful.

Second, IOs are bureaucracies but only to some degree. One should not forget contemporary IOs are comprised of other organizational forms. For instance, an understanding of IOs as complex networks is increasingly proposed. As argued by Johan P. Olsen (2004), within today's administrations several organizational forms coexist, sometimes they are organized on the basis of (bureaucratic) authority as well as (market) competition and (network) cooperation. It remains a crucial challenge for IO research to explore how the bureaucratic component of IOs currently emphasized in IO studies relates to other (competitive or cooperative) components, as they are for grounded in global governance studies or political economy.

As highlighted by Michael Lipson and several other participants, it is important to apprehend the complex character of contemporary IOs and to understand why they are often ambiguous and multifaceted in character. As we suggest in concluding below, it is pragmatist-constructivist research strategies embracing interdisciplinary, pluralism, and a focus on practice that can be helpful in this regard.

### **Pragmatic Constructivism and the Challenges Ahead**

Since the publication of Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) path-breaking book, research on the behavior and powers of IOs has progressed. The contributions to this workshop stress how lively, creative, and vivid the field has become. The extensive empirical material presented and the plurality of theoretical perspectives employed highlight the productivity of research that neither falls in the pitfalls of economic reasoning, nor reduces the discussion of IOs to the normative, and often very abstract, debate over the better vision of a global order. Barnett and Finnemore have provided a primer for a pragmatist-constructivist research agenda interested in knowledge, practice, and power. IO research is the most productive when it refrains from paradigmatism and, instead, takes advantage of pluralism and focuses on practice.

The contributions to this workshop have emphasized the importance of continuing research in the footsteps of Barnett and Finnemore, and they have unraveled that several conceptual and empirical puzzles for IO studies exist. The problem of how IOs interact with their environments and are embedded in social structures, how to draw the boundary between the inside and the outside of an IO, how IOs construct the knowledge their powers rely on and disseminate it, and how the complexity of IOs as rule followers and creative agents and as a blend of bureaucratic, network and market type of organization can be captured are crucial challenges for future research.

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