

EDITORIAL

Sociological Perspectives on International Organizations and the Construction of Global Political Order—An Introduction

by Martin Koch, Bielefeld University and Stephan Stetter, Universität der Bundeswehr München

Some twenty-five years ago, Gayl Ness and Steven Brechin stated in an article, which turned out to be seminal for the research field of organizational studies, that the “gap between the study of international organization and sociology is deep and persistent” (1988:245). Although the discipline of International Relations (IR) has achieved some progress and arguably does no longer share “an essentially naïve view of organizations as simple mechanical tools that act directly and precisely at the bidding of their creators” (Ness and Brechin 1988:269), there is still an unfortunate gap between how IR and sociology understand international organizations. We argue in this special issue that this gap negatively affects the way international (governmental) organizations (IOs) are often studied. Thus, in many IR approaches they are still considered as somewhat incapacitated actors, coming close to what Ness and Brechin refer to as a “naïve view of organizations.” By bridging the proverbial gap through contributions drawing from both organizational theories in sociology and research on IOs relevant to IR, this special issue on “Sociological Perspectives on International Organizations and the construction of global political order” aims to offer alternative and potentially enriching theoretical and empirical perspectives on what is bound to be a key feature of global politics in the twenty-first century, namely a deep and persistent (but also ambivalent) impact of IOs—understood as organizations in their own right embedded in their social environment (see Brechin and Ness in this issue)—on structures, actor constellations, and issues of contemporary global politics.

While research on IOs emerged in the 1950s, e.g., with Ernst Haas’ functionalist studies of European integration and Karl Deutsch’s work on security communities (Deutsch 1969; Haas 1958), the issue pervaded mainstream IR in a more persistent manner only during the 1970s as a result of an increasing interest of liberal-institutionalist theories of how interstate vulnerabilities result in the creation of more and more IOs and international regimes (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986). This trend has consolidated over the last two decades, during which IOs have increasingly been identified as important actors in world politics, both by practitioners and academics. In that context, (liberal-institutionalist) Global Governance research on the one hand and social constructivist research on IOs as norm entrepreneurs on the other have dominated the field. Once established as means to facilitate interstate

cooperation IOs are actually playing roles and carrying out crucial tasks ranging from generating norms and rules to norm diffusion, monitoring, dispute settlement, and sometimes even sanctioning nonconforming behavior in diverse policy areas. Both aforementioned research streams have undoubtedly added new and fresh perspectives on IOs, albeit with the tendency to conceptualize IOs in a more or less explicit manner with a view to their relations with states, rather than seeing them as organizations in their own right. Although this IO-state-relationship certainly is an important aspect, e.g., for understanding the setup of and power-struggles within IOs, the state-centric focus obstructs in our view a more coherent approach to IOs. Conceptualizing IOs instead as organizations in their own right is, however, not only an imperative arising as soon as key insights of organizational theories in sociology are taken seriously—it also corresponds with sociologically inspired conceptual developments in IR which underline that while states are key actors in world politics they should neither from a historical nor a contemporary perspective be considered as the ontological starting point to analyze the deeper structures of world politics, and this includes analyses of IOs (see only Stetter 2012; Aalberts 2010; Albert and Buzan 2010).

Based on this understanding, the contributions in this special issue share the conceptual assumption that IOs are organizations that can be fruitfully analyzed from sociological perspectives, which primarily highlight their organizational characteristics and their environmental embeddedness (rather than their interrelations with states), and put this in relation to sociologically inspired perspectives on world politics. Guided by this shared viewpoint, the contributions nevertheless do not aim to offer a unified theory of IOs. Both theoretically and empirically they offer *alternative* sociological perspectives on IOs. Rather than settling the debate at this stage, we thus aim—to paraphrase Ness and Brechin once more—to offer several bridges between sociology and IR leaving it to future debates deciding which of these bridges are better suited to carry the weight IOs undoubtedly have in contemporary global politics. Having said this, the contributions in this volume thus shed light on 1) alternative sociologically inspired conceptualizations of IOs and their role in world politics; thereby they focus in particular on 2) the internal operating dynamics of IOs; and 3) relations between IOs and their environment that consists, alongside states, of IOs, NGOs, transnational and multinational corporations, epistemic communities, world publics etc. It brings together different sociological perspectives on IOs—from the theory of meta-organizations to modern system theory, pragmatism, post-structuralism, complexity theory, world society, and globalization theories as well as inter-organizational relations theory—and provides manifold empirical illustrations underlining the benefits of such approaches. Before briefly outlining the setup of this special issue, a short overview on how this special issue aims to contribute to current debates on sociological approaches to IR in general and the analysis of IOs in particular is, however, at place.

IOs—Instruments, Arenas, Actors, and Bureaucracies

In the context of their emergence in world politics in the nineteenth century, the main function of IOs has been to facilitate and coordinate interstate cooperation. They were established at interfaces between states in order to organize peaceful interactions and problem solving between them. Definitions of IOs in international law correspond with this founding principle and IOs

are therefore seen as “an association of States, established by agreement among its members and possessing a permanent system or set of organs, whose task it is to pursue objectives of common interest by means of co-operation among its members” (Virally 1977:59). Accordingly, states were seen as the only members of IOs—in the words of James Lorimer who invented the term “international organisation has thus no substantive value. It is not an end in itself. It is sought for the sake of national organisation alone” (1884:190). It is important to notice that Lorimer refers here to both the overall organization of the international (aka: world politics) as well as international organizations as an institutionalized form. More recent definitions further specify but nevertheless are often still based on this state-centered definition regarding the basic character of IOs by highlighting that IOs 1) are based on a formal instrument of agreement between the governments of nation states; 2) include three or more nation states as parties to the agreement; and 3) possess a permanent secretariat performing ongoing tasks (UIA 2009).

Such definitions concentrate, on their most basic level, on the relations between states on the one hand and on quite formal, often equally state-centered features of IOs themselves on the other (such as the minimum number of member states). In general, they do define the international aspects of IOs but neglect their *organizational characteristics*. The organizational character is accordingly conceived of in a rather trivial sense, namely that states *organize* their actions and interactions (Koch 2008). This lack of an independent organizational theory of IOs themselves underpins the perception that ultimately merely the member states decide in IOs—and that, if they do not decide, they have decided to do so. In that sense, international organization is from an ontological perspective nothing more than the accumulation of member states interest; “[p]ut simply, states create legal rules through international organizations; states break these rules in spite of their commitments” (Joyner 2005:104).

Having these broader definitions and descriptions of IOs in mind, we can now glance at how IR has dealt with IOs. Yet, instead of introducing different theories and approaches in detail, we take a different road by focusing on the key metaphors used to describe IOs in IR. These metaphors grasp a broader spectrum of theories. In other words, although IR theories differ in many ways, they often use the same metaphors when analyzing IOs. We see four metaphors central to the study of IOs in IR, namely viewing IOs as instruments, arenas and actors (Hurd 2011) and, as a rather recent trend, as bureaucracies (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004). In the following we offer a short overview on these four metaphors and discuss their merits as well as some of their blind spots.

Seen as *instruments* IOs are mere vehicles for states in carrying out certain tasks. An instrumental perspective dominates in realism and neo-realism. That is why these theories ultimately do not pay much attention to what IOs themselves do and say. States are conceptualized as being the one and only actors in the international realm and if IOs act, they do so mediated and guided by states. IOs are thus important only insofar as they offer opportunities for states to enforce their interests in the international realm. To take one example, IOs such as the UN, the EU, NATO and others are conceived by (neo)realists as operative tools for states, these “institutions largely mirror the distribution of power in the system” (Mearsheimer 1994–1995:13). That means that ultimately IOs do not have any influence on international politics; quite to the contrary “the most powerful states in the system create and

shape institutions so that they can maintain their share of world power, or even increase it” (Mearsheimer 1994–1995:13).¹

When viewed as *arenas*, IOs offer a forum for states to reach agreements. They are providing an administrative umbrella for negotiations (i.e., venue, organizational procedures, agenda-setting etc.,) that facilitates an achievement of agreements between states. IOs are regarded as “permanent institutions of conference diplomacy in which states may exchange information, condemn or justify certain actions and coordinate their national political strategies” (Rittberger, Zangl, and Staisch 2006:6). This perception is shared by neo-institutional approaches. Although the relations between states are anarchic IOs have a stabilizing effect on interstate cooperation. They are somewhat of an actor, but rather in an administrative and not a political sense. They can thus be useful vehicles to coordinate interstate collaboration and help states to solve common problems leading to better results when compared with a situation in which states act and cooperate in an ad hoc manner. Although neo-institutional approaches thus assume that IOs operate as actors in the international system, e.g., by monitoring states’ behavior (Keohane and Nye 1972; Krasner 1995), they do not accredit IOs with a similar quality of autonomy as they attribute to states. In this sense, IOs are not much more than referees in a game played primarily by states.

In comparison to these first two metaphors, IOs are imputed a more active role in approaches conceiving IOs as *actors* on the international stage—although they differ with regard to what “acting” precisely implies. Some approaches view IOs as supporting actors, while others perceive them as *protagonists* (Rittberger, Zangl, and Staisch 2006:6). The role of IOs as *supporting actors* is emphasized in functionalist theories and principal-agent-models (Mitrany 1948, 1975; Nielson and Tierney 2003; Lake and McCubbins 2006; Da Conceição-Heldt 2010). While functionalists argue that IOs could and should fulfill certain tasks for their member states—in particular in rather technical issue areas traditionally referred to as “low politics”—principal-agent approaches deal with the question of how states (as principals) can use IOs (as agents) to deal with interstate problems. “In this framework, member governments establish the goals that IOs will pursue and then allow the IO to pursue those goals with little interference most of the time” (Nielson and Tierney 2003:245). Often drawing from the principal-agent-ontology, global governance approaches conceive IOs as *protagonists* on the international stage. They are based on the assumption that, because of a growing number of interstate linkages, it becomes necessary to develop, maintain, and implement accepted norms and standards on a global scale. In this respect, IOs are at least implicitly seen as signals of a changing world order in which an ever-increasing number of global problems can no longer be addressed solely by states (Commission for Global Governance 1995:370). This interdependency between states and non-state actors such as IOs (but also NGOs and transnational firms) is most widely studied at the interface between economy and politics. The density of institutional arrangements on that level is comprehensive—i.e., IOs like the IMF, World Bank, WTO—and the contributions of these organizations to global political order is significant (Slaughter 2003, Rosenau 2009, Peet 2009). When looking at different issue areas, the character of IOs in Global Governance varies (e.g., when comparing financial

1. Similar conceptions can be found in Marxist approaches that see enterprises as the actors using IOs for their own ends (Berki 1971).

governance and security governance) and is often linked to the notion of norms.² On that level, constructivist approaches come in. They emphasize a two-dimensional role of IOs. On the one hand, IOs (as *arenas*) institutionalize and maintain norms. On the other hand, IOs (as *actors*) act—often in a quite independent manner—and also contribute to the enforcement and creation of norms that subsequently shape behavioral patterns of states and individuals. In addition, constructivist theories and global governance approaches have underlined how and under what circumstances IOs act as (legitimizing) experts claiming a distinct problem-solving capacity and how they are involved in dispute settlement (Hurd 2011, Pelc 2010).

In sum, it can be concluded that the traditional metaphors on the basis of which IR constructs the role of IOs in world politics, concentrate heavily on the relationship between states and IOs. They analyze to what extent the one exerts influence on the behavior of the other and vice versa, but usually they attribute “real” agency to states. This focus on states and state-IO relations respectively obstructs, however, the ability of IR to view IOs as purposeful actors which not only act but which are not exclusively bound to states and autonomously engage in relations to other actors in world politics too, such as in their interactions with other IOs, states (both member states and third states), NGOs, or epistemic communities. This ontology is often rather implicit, resulting from the deep-seated state-centered imaginary underpinning most IR theorizing (Ferguson and Mansbach 2004). Consequently, many IR approaches lack a theoretical and conceptual vocabulary to study IOs as research objects in their own right.

This already points to the usefulness of adopting sociological perspectives focusing on IOs as organizations rather than on state-IO relations. Of course, using insights from sociology (in particular organization studies) is not entirely new to IR. Ness and Brechin laid the groundwork in the late 1980s when they carved out how IR can be enriched by the study of organizations. They demonstrated the relevance of organization studies by analyzing “sensitizing concepts” (organizational environments, technology, structures, and goals) that underline the character of IOs as *organizations* (Ness and Brechin 1988:248). Against this background, IOs are “live collectivities interacting with their environments, and they contain members who seek to use the organization for their own ends, often struggling with others over the organizational character” (Ness and Brechin 1988:247). Whereas Ness and Brechin have advocated a rather broad conceptual turn to organization studies, other authors use a more narrow organizational approach when conceptualizing IOs. Robert Keohane was of paramount importance on that level, since he used concepts from institutional economy drawn from Coase (1960) and Williamson (1965) and on that basis showed how IOs contribute to reduce transaction costs in interstate cooperations (Keohane 1984:85–109). While drawing from principal-agent-theories, Nielson and Tierney, to mention another example, made use of theories of the firm (Williamson 1975) in order to explain delegation from states to IOs (Nielson and Tierney 2003).

Probably the most elaborated theoretical concept for analyzing IOs as organization in their own right was developed by Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (1999, 2004). With

2. Norms are defined as “shared expectations about appropriate behavior held by a community of actors. Unlike ideas which may be held privately, norms are shared and social; they are not just subjective but intersubjective” (Finnemore 1996:22). This does not require that norms are legally binding or can be sanctioned.

a strong conceptual emphasis on the power and pathologies of IOs, Barnett and Finnemore focus on a theoretical level on IOs as bureaucracies in a Weberian tradition. They show how IOs gain authority and how they use their power (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004). Barnett and Finnemore highlight four forms of an IO's authority (rational-legal, delegated, moral, and expertise), and they illustrate the usefulness of their concept by empirical studies of the IMF,³ the UNHCR,⁴ and the UN.⁵ They argue that the power of IOs derives from their authority, their knowledge, and the rules to regulate international relations, thereby constituting a global regulation structure. Barnett and Finnemore (2004) identify three related mechanisms: "IOs (1) classify the world, creating categories of problems, actors, and action; (2) fix meanings in the social world; and (3) articulate and diffuse new norms and rules" (Barnett and Finnemore 2004:31). These mechanisms can have regulative and constitutive effects for international relations, thereby linking organization theories with broader theories of order in world politics (see Stetter 2012). Barnett and Finnemore offer an innovative approach of a bureaucracy's authority, and they explain how IOs as bureaucracies affect states and policy outputs. Yet, they do not conceptualize IOs as organizations. Quite to the contrary, they focus on the administration in and of IOs. That is why their theoretical model is only applicable for the study of some IOs and cannot easily be applied to study other important IOs such as the WTO, NATO, or the UN Security Council. Furthermore, they pay great attention to how IOs maintain their authority and autonomy vis-à-vis states. By doing so, they certainly modify but ultimately do not overcome the state-centric ontology of classical IR approaches.

Overview on this Special Issue

We can now summarize our short reflections on the four dominating metaphors on the basis of which IOs are studied in IR. Thus, although there are today nuanced and insightful approaches that occasionally resort to sociological concepts (such as in particular the bureaucracy-approach referred to above), the gap between IR and organizational theory is still evident insofar as IOs are usually not studied explicitly as organizations in their own right—with the partial exception of the metaphor of "bureaucracy" that represents a particular understanding of IOs as organizations (see above). The contributions in this special issue address this gap, thereby following a more recent (sociologically inspired) research strand in which IOs are studied as organizations all the way down (Dingwerth, Kerwer, and Nölke 2009; Ellis 2010). Our aim here is of course not to offer a single organizational theory on IOs or argue that the approaches presented in this special

3. They show how the IMF has risen to the status of a powerful organization (Barnett and Finnemore 2004:45–72). It was originally designed to serve the interests of member states but instead developed into a gradually more and more independent organization as a result of the authority of its expertise, e.g., its technical advices, knowledge in economic affairs and conditional programs (Barnett and Finnemore 2004:45–72).

4. The UNHCR, established in 1951 with an expected life span of three years, evolved from an entirely dependent organization to an organization being able "to capitalize on world events and use its authority to greatly expand both the groups of people it assisted and the kinds of assistance it could give" (Barnett and Finnemore 2004:73). The UNHCR's authority consists of delegated authority, e.g. by helping states to carry out specific tasks of coordinating state-obligations under the Refugee Convention., Its moral authority derived from the mission to help and protect refugees (Barnett and Finnemore 2004:73–120). The delegated and moral authority of the UNHCR can also be seen in its ability to shape the hegemonic definition of a "refugee." This definition has become a common accepted notion across nation states that is used internationally and shapes national law (Barnett and Finnemore 1999).

5. The UN's authority derives from its impartiality and neutrality to act as a broker in conflicts. The UN and its peacekeeping culture are used as examples of pathologies in IOs. Barnett and Finnemore show how specific organizational cultures that favor nonintervention and the cooperation with conflicting parties impeded an intervention of UN peacekeeping forces trying to stop the genocide. In Rwanda, the UN defined the violence as a civil war in the sense that one could observe reciprocal clashes between the two ethnic groups. Because of the characterization as a civil war, the UN had no basis for involvement under peacekeeping rules. As a consequence, the UN rejected intervention even when facing organized mass killings (Barnett and Finnemore 2004:121–55; Barnett 1997).

issue are the only ones worth following. The goal is more specific and modest at the same time, namely to discuss as a first step how *some* selected organization theories from sociology can contribute to the study of IOs in IR.

In the opening article, *Steven Brechin* and *Gayl Ness* look back at the gap—twenty-five years after their seminar article on that topic. They continue and detail their former discussion by reviewing why the gap became an issue in IR and sociology. They explain how various approaches both in IR and sociology attempted to fill this gap by dealing, both theoretically and empirically, with IOs from a particular sociological perspective. Referring to Scott (2004), Brechin and Ness identify three developments in organizational sociology: changing boundaries and strategies, changing power and processes, and changing concepts of organizations as entities to processes. These developments and the literature they have reflected upon point to four opportunities for further research: 1) differentiating IOs environments that consist of different organizations raising various expectations; 2) exploring how IOs—in particular IOs’ leadership—navigates environmental pressures and dependencies; 3) better understanding the (social) legitimacy of IOs; and 4) better conceiving the organizational networks in global governance. They conclude that the gap has been narrowed in the last twenty-five years; however, as we live in an (internationally) organized world there is still something to analyze in the next quarter of a century.

Dieter Kerwer then follows that line by showing how a sociological approach deals with key blank spots of dominant IR approaches to the study of IOs. By showing that IOs can well be understood on the basis of theories of meta-organizations (MO), he discusses the limits of both principal-agent approaches and social constructivist theories. While the former are problematic insofar as many IOs actually do not have a clear-cut separation but rather a fuzzy overlap between alleged principals and agents, the latter tend to be too overly optimistic about the normative power of IOs, underestimating the impediments on action all MOs (i.e., IOs) face. Kerwer then applies this theoretical framework informed by theories on MOs to the case of the EU.

In the subsequent article, *Stephan Stetter* also discusses the EU from an organization theoretical perspective, focusing on the role of the EU as a foreign policy actor and drawing primarily from sociological institutionalism. He shows the EU can be understood as an organization due to its capacity to make decisions, a prerequisite for the operative closure shared by all organizations. At the same time, however, the EU—and other IOs—are institutions-within-an-environment, and Stetter then analyzes how stimuli and expectations from this environment (the world political system) construct the actorhood and power of the EU as an organization in its own right.

Swati Srivastava further elaborates what this “relational conceptualization” of IOs as actors embedded in an environment entails. Srivastava highlights in particular the status of IOs (but also of states) as assemblages, thereby drawing from various theories of assemblage and assembled networks in sociology and social theory (from Deleuze/Guattari and Latour to Sassen and Knorr-Cetina). Seen from that perspective, IOs occupy a field—a rhizome in the wording of Deleuze and Guattari—characterized by the assemblage of diverse actors aiming to project (rather than to ontologically have) coherence in order to authorize distinct identities.

She also highlights the dynamics of exerting power and control mediated through such structures of assemblage. Her analysis underlines that IOs can be understood as contingent settlements of varied organizational politics and competing (power-related) tensions in short of assembled rather than delegated authority.

While Srivastava discusses assemblages from a mainly conceptual perspective, the subsequent article by *Ulrich Franke* and *Martin Koch* analyzes, as it were, assemblages in practice as they focus on interorganizational relations among different types of organizations, such as states, IOs, NGOs, informal groups or any other institutionalized collective action. Informed by classical pragmatism they propose a model to conceive interorganizational relations as structures of corporate practice and how these relations contribute to global order. They illustrate the potential of their conceptual model by analyzing relations between the UN and the G20 and their role in world politics. Franke and Koch show that the role of the G20 in world politics—even though it is operating in a quite informal manner—can be better understood when focusing on their structural capacities to explore options and prepare decisions, which are later formalized in an IO setting (here in the UN).

The special issue concludes with the contribution by *Robert M. Cutler*. While Franke and Koch have highlighted the practice-dimension of relations between informal groups of states and IOs, Cutler discusses in some greater detail the conditions affecting the emergence and coherence of IOs. Empirically, he draws from the example of inter-parliamentary institutions (IPIs). The article has two main conceptual purposes. First, to show that contrary to mainstream studies, IPIs can indeed be understood as IOs. Second, that when studied as organizations, thereby drawing from theories of evolution developed in complexity theories, the analysis of various IPIs sheds light on the variance in organizational performance of different IPIs and points to key parameters shaping this variance.

To conclude, the sociologically inspired theories on organizations discussed in this special issue offer alternative perspectives on the status of IOs in world politics, arguably in a manner that allows us to theorize in a more stringent manner than traditional IR metaphors do. They show us how IOs operate as organizations in their own right, embedded in their social environment and thereby contributing to global political order. None of the individual approaches discussed in this volume claims to offer the complete picture, so in order to continue in the permanent project of closing gaps between IR and organization theory future research should reflect on how the approaches presented in this volume and other relevant sociological approaches not discussed here could, even if not unified in a single theoretical framework, guide the way towards a more densely integrated conceptual approach allowing to understand IOs as organizations in their own right. We thus agree with Brechin and Ness that while this special issue aims to make its contribution to further narrow the gap, there remains still something to do for the next twenty-five years in order to understand how our organized world unfolds on a global level *inter alia* through what IOs do and not do.

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