

# THEORIZING INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

## The Organizational Turn in International Organization Theory

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*International Organization (IO) theory and Organization Theory (OT) both study the phenomena of organizations but with starkly different assumptions about their agency and autonomy. This article suggests that a corporate ontology of organizations derived from OT, which assumes organizations possess agency and autonomy, will better serve the IO subfield than its current state-centric ontology, which causes IO scholars to debate IO agency and autonomy in epistemological and methodological terms. The article first compares and contrasts the conception of organizations according to OT and IO. It then reviews the trends in IO scholarship, which indicate a movement toward a corporate ontology of IOs. Finally, the article relates how existing IO methodologies are utilized across the levels of analysis in OT and suggests how some OT methods could inform future IO scholarship.*

Organizations themselves are important units of analysis, precisely because they take on a life and character of their own. And those lives and characters, emerging from the process of organized action, should receive direct and critical observation. International relations will be enhanced if we pay greater attention to how modern international organizations emerge and what they do in action – in short, if we pay greater attention to organizational performance. (Ness & Brechin, 1988, p. 270)

International Organizations are corporations and, as such, possess inherent agency and autonomy. Approached from the perspective of OT, this statement is uncontroversial and mundane. To IO scholars, the statement requires substantial justification and even then meets with skepticism. Why is it that two academic fields that concentrate on essentially the same subject have such starkly different interpretations of the subject's abilities and capacities? It is contended in this article that the reason lies in ontology and that the corporate ontology of organizations underlying OT is in many cases more useful for IO scholars than their own state-centric ontology.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it appears in the literature that IO scholars are slowly coming to this recognition themselves, leading to an impending organizational turn in International Organization theory.

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1. Certainly many Liberal and Constructivist IO scholars could be prone to dismissing the argument herein as misrepresenting their research by applying the designation "state-centric" to them, yet I would beg their indulgence since a corporate paradigm of IOs stands to put their research on firmer ground.

Adopting a corporate ontology of IOs offers a number of benefits for the IO subfield. First, it removes the debate about IO agency, autonomy, and independence from the realm of epistemology and methodology. Scholars would be absolved of having to capture the totality or “reality” of IOs through the assumptions of theory and would be free instead to explore important, though partial, aspects of them. Second, it further helps resolve an intellectual inconsistency in International Relations (IR) scholarship that views states, but not IOs, as unitary actors when both are, in fact, corporate entities. Reconciling this inconsistency requires that the bureaucratic politics of IOs become just as theoretically interesting to IR scholars as states’ politics. Third, it consequently requires that IOs be presumed to have agency, interest, and autonomy and, therefore, the desire to enact policies that affect their environments. States—as the constituent units of IOs—might purposefully limit their corporate resources and mandates, but the tremendous variability in IO design and adaptability necessitates that IO scholars examine their actual capabilities rather than predetermine them based on assumptions dictated by a particular methodology or even broader epistemological or theoretical constraints. Finally, and as a result, it subordinates epistemology and methodology to the research question posed since the corporate ontology asserts the principle that IOs are both structures and agents with different effects at different levels of abstraction. The methods for determining the degree to which IOs act as independent or dependent variables become means rather than ends of theory and can be complemented or supplemented by others, even those rooted in competing epistemologies.

In making this case, I do not propose to render any existing research methodology or theoretical approach obsolete; rather, I show how adopting a corporate ontology of IOs places each in a more analytically appropriate context than the subfield’s current state-centric ontology of IOs. By explicitly linking OT and IO theory, IO scholars will more profitably and smoothly make the transition to a corporate ontology of IOs.

The article begins with an explanation of the concepts of corporate and state-centric ontology, how these concepts inform disciplinary paradigms, and why the state-centric paradigm impedes IO scholarship. Next, the trends in IO scholarship are reviewed indicating a movement toward a corporate ontology of organizations and a willingness to import lessons learned by IO scholars from OT. Finally, building upon the lessons from OT, it is demonstrated how the different research approaches common in IO scholarship relate to one another within a corporate paradigm and how they complement one another according to OT.

### **The Corporate and State-Centric Paradigms of IOs**

The term “paradigm” here refers to the foundational reality ascribed to a phenomenon of study, which then informs the practice of normal science.<sup>2</sup> For example, just as Kuhn notes that light has throughout time been conceived by physicists as material corpuscles, transverse wave motion, and now photons (Kuhn, 1996, p. 12), IO and OT scholars have established their own foundational realities about the nature of organizations that have directed their respective theoretical and empirical research programs. In some areas, similar observations about organizations have resulted, but for the most part, substantial variations about the characteristics

2. The term “paradigm” is adopted cautiously here, because it tends to be an over-utilized concept, but I believe it to be properly employed in this case. Moreover, I self-consciously assigned the descriptors “corporate” and “state-centric” to the terms “ontology” and “paradigm” knowing of no other adequate alternatives.

and capacities of organizations have persisted. My claim that IO and OT scholars approach organizations from different ontologies arises from the differences in the foundational realities by which they study them. Since ontological commitments come prior to the development of a research program, differences between the realities and, therefore, paradigms must by necessity emanate from differences in ontology.

To be clear, I do not consider competing epistemological or methodological approaches to constitute paradigms. Scholars familiar with OT might note the fact that OT scholars talk about “paradigm wars” themselves. While this is true, OT’s “wars” are being fought over epistemology and methodology rather than the general ontology of organizations as a phenomenon (Moldoveanu & Baum, 2005); some even assert that the various perspectives are complementary due to “dense interconnections and substantial overlaps among them” (Baum & Rowley, 2005, p. 21). OT scholars might explore different aspects of the larger foundational reality, what Kuhn terms the “disciplinary matrix” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 184), but they all basically attempt to measure or capture the essence of the shared foundational reality. Indeed, it appears IO scholars are now entering a cycle of ontological debate that mirrors the one OT scholars have recently begun to resolve, so IO scholars may learn much from importing from OT the corporate paradigm of organizations.

Perhaps the best means of determining the foundational realities of IO and OT scholars is by comparing and contrasting their definitions of “organization.” From these definitions it is possible to decipher and label the general paradigmatic frameworks. I start with the OT definition, because it is somewhat less problematic than the IO definition. From OT’s perspective, organizations “are goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, activity systems” (Aldrich, 1979, p. 4). They simultaneously link human beings together for a common purpose while separating themselves from their members in order to act as autonomous entities (Ahrne, 1994, p. 3; Pfeffer, 1997, p. 6). OT presumes organizations to be agentive and autonomous actors despite their dependence on their constituent units for resources and personnel. Moreover, they assert that, as collectivities, organizations are stronger and more durable than the individuals comprising them, and they can transcend time and space in ways human beings cannot (Ahrne, 1994, p. 2). The fact that organizations are collectivities presents some theoretical difficulties for OT as well as IO. As legal fictions, organizations require the cooperation of individuals to achieve their goals, but beyond contributing to organizational survival for self-interested purposes, the question of employee commitment to the goals remains problematic; nevertheless, studies indicate employees do at the very least share some common interest in organizational survival (Pfeffer, 1997, pp. 6–7).

While this instrumental definition of organizations defines well what they *are* in generic terms, OT scholars conceptualize the complexity of organizations at numerous levels requiring a broader definition of what they do. W. Richard Scott, consequently, provides three definitions of organizations:

Rational system: Organizations are collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibiting [*sic*] relatively highly formalized social structures.

Natural system: Organizations are collectivities whose participants share a common interest in the survival of the system and who engage in collective activities, informally structured, to secure this end.

Open system: Organizations are systems of interdependent activities linking shifting coalitions of participants; the systems are embedded in—dependent on continuing exchanges with and constituted by—the environment in which they operate (in Baum & Rowley, 2005, pp. 2–3).

Scott's rational system definition relates to the original vision of organizations in OT, and also describes the basic orientation of early IO scholarship which assumed that international organizations act as their formal structures mandate (Rochester, 1986, p. 783). Scott's natural system definition relates to the concerns emanating from the empirical-theoretical gaps evident in the rational approach. Over time, it became apparent that organizations did not necessarily act in accordance with their legal-institutional mandates; a similar observation occurred in IO scholarship in the early 1970s with Cox and Jacobsen's research on the sources of influence within IOs (Cox & Jacobson, 1973). Recently, the open system definition of organizations has become prominent in OT to the point that Baum and Rowley argue the rational and natural system approaches have been subsumed by it (2005, p. 3). Indeed, he writes:

the rise of open systems approaches has . . . increasingly focused researchers' attention away from behavior *within* organizations, which had been the primary focus of rational and natural systems approaches, and toward the behavior *of* organizations as entities in and of themselves (2005, p. 3).

This quote is intriguing since it almost exactly mirrors what I perceive to be the direction of IO theory from the 1970s to the late 1990s. While many OT scholars desire a single, parsimonious definition of organizations, some doubt it is possible or worthwhile given that the different definitions also relate, respectively, to the technical, managerial, and institutional aspects of organizations (Baum & Rowley, 2005, p. 3; Pfeffer, 1997). This issue is worth pondering given recent attempts to establish a unified definition of international institutions for IO scholars (Duffield, 2007).

Regardless of the variations in definition, OT scholars do fundamentally hold that organizations are agentive and autonomous actors. As a basic ontological construct, organizations' "actorness" is taken for granted. What I designate the "corporate paradigm" of OT relates to the fact that organizations are conceived as inherently unitary entities (though problematic) with innate interests, goals, and abilities to act and recursively adapt. The paradigm does not mandate that organizations direct these characteristics only to desired ends, nor does it suggest they are immune from environmental or internal conflicts. In other words, pathological traits may develop in organizations. Instead, the corporate paradigm simply directs OT scholars to assume organizations approximate the qualities of a unitary actor with interests and behavior, and the disciplinary matrix seeks to explain their interests and activities at multiple levels and from different perspectives.

One of the interesting changes occurring in OT is a relative acceptance of the multiplicity of perspectives pervasive in the field. OT scholars recognize an organization is both a process and an outcome and, thus, requires examination from both perspectives (Baum & Rowley, 2005, p. 2). As a process, organizations structure relationships and networks (Baker & Faulkner, 2005; Elsbach, 2005; Pfeffer, 1997, pp. 55–65; Raider & Krackhardt, 2005), seek to improve practices and decision-making (Argyris, 1999; Argyris & Schön, 1996; Stacey,

2001), and build cultural practices (Fraser, Kick, & Barber, 2002; Hofstede, 1997; Knapp & Yu, 1999), all of which not only influence the individuals working within them but also the opportunities of the organizations themselves. As an outcome, organizations produce services, bureaucracies, policies, bargaining games, and politics (Brass, 2005; Ocasio, 2005). Unsurprisingly, OT draws upon insights from sociology, business, engineering, economics, psychology, and anthropology; incidentally, the link with political science has all but vanished (Pfeffer, 1997, pp. 9–18) and it has not had much relationship with IR specifically (Dijkzeul & Beigbeder, 2003, p. 5; Jönsson, 1986, p. 39). The important point to take from this discussion is that organizations are highly complex with myriad effects not easily captured by a parsimonious theory, yet OT is coming to accept the utility of conceptualizing and researching organizations at multiple levels and studying them with a variety of methodologies.

Locating a definition of IOs proves to be a more difficult task. International organization is a muddled concept, because it suffers from two intrinsic meanings and IO scholars have since the 1970s been more interested in the governance aspects of international institutions than their internal characteristics (Mansfield, 1994, p. 1; Martin & Simmons, 1998, p. 737). Defining the differences between the two meanings, McNeely writes:

On the one hand . . . it refers to the actual organization, or structure and institutional order, of the international system itself. The term “structure” here refers to a complex of rules and resources shaping actors and action . . . the second, more obvious, usage of the term . . . refer[s] here to organizations, or agencies, that operate cross-nationally (McNeely, 1995, p. 5).

Another aspect confusing the issue is that IO theory has altered its focus a number of times, which has required re-conceptualizing and redefining the object of study (Barkin, 2006; Rochester, 1986). Whereas IO theory practiced from the mid-1940s to the late-1960s explored the functioning of IOs as their legal-constitutional documents mandated and then as arenas of politics, IO theory thereafter became soured by the reality of state influence over organizational outcomes (Rochester, 1986, pp. 784–87). As previously noted, Cox and Jacobson tried to account for this conception in the early 1970s by defining IO as “a [political] system of interaction including all of those who directly participate in decisions taken within the framework of the organization, and, in addition, all officials and individuals who in various ways actively determine the positions of the direct participants” (Cox & Jacobson, 1973, pp. 15–16). The term “political system” was introduced at the time to specifically account for the influence of states in IOs because it had been previously under-represented in the subfield.

The allure of regime analysis in the 1970s and the primacy of structural realism in the 1980s prompted scholars to turn away from researching the formal legal aspects of organizations in order to capture the structural effects of international institutions (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986, pp. 757–58; Rochester, 1986, p. 783). Definitions of international organization thereafter began to focus on the regime aspects of the concept or attempted to integrate them both. Keohane and Nye, for instance, defined international organization as “these multilevel linkages [between governments], norms, and institutions. International organization in this sense is another type of world political structure” (2001, p. 47). As the distribution and cooperative functions of IO became prominent in the 1980s, scholars turned to defining “in-

international institutions” instead of international organizations (Keohane, 1984; Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001; Krasner, 1983b; Mearsheimer, 1994/95; Snidal, 1985; Yarbrough & Yarbrough, 1990). When Keohane, for example, did specifically discuss IOs in *After Hegemony*, he labeled them as a subset of international institutions with purpose and “capable of monitoring activity and reacting to it . . . deliberately set up and designed by states” (1989, pp. 3–4). Thus, IO scholars learned early the lessons of IOs operating in the OT “open systems” framework, and it has been predominantly approached this way ever since.

By 1986, a need to reintegrate the concepts of regime analysis with formal IOs was recognized (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986). Some years later, Kratochwil built on this and made a distinction between the role of institutions and formal organizations, where the latter “possess formal hierarchies of decision making and that are palpable entities, such as bureaucracies with headquarters that issues directives and might administer certain programs or activities” (1994, p. xii). Even scholars who continued to concentrate on international organizations prioritized their dependence on states and merely mentioned their bureaucracies as an afterthought. For example, Shanks, Jacobson, and Kaplan defined intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) as:

those associations established by governments or their representatives that are sufficiently institutionalized to require regular meetings, rules governing decision making, a permanent staff, and a headquarters (1996, p. 593).

Russett, Oneal, and Davis defined IOs as:

formal continuous institutions established by treaty or other agreement between governments, long-range in nature, multilateral, . . . with a secretariat and more-or-less regular meetings, and an ‘international legal personality’ with legal standing (1998, p. 445).

Such definitions may describe some aspects of the elements that lead to agency and autonomy in an organization, but the lack of explicit recognition of bureaucratic power makes the role of states more pertinent.

What these definitions by and large share in common is a deference to the influence and power of states over international organizations. While some at best might acknowledge the role of IO bureaucracy, nowhere are the inherent capabilities of the bureaucracies discussed. States are considered actors with agency, but IOs are not. Ontologically, this infers that IOs are controlled by states as a result of the sovereignty principle. Within this foundational reality of IOs, the novel condition to explain, the variance from the norm, if you will, is the result of IOs actually demonstrating agency, autonomy, or even interest. As research from the late-1980s onward started to explore how IOs themselves matter in international politics and global governance, a renewed interest in the internal workings of IOs became apparent. Much of the interest flowed from perceived “pathologies” of international bureaucracy (Barnett, 2002; Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; Gallarotti, 1991). As the 1990s closed, evidence mounted that IOs do not always act as their member states mandate, which both opened the path of exploring why and how this is the case and prompted a challenge to the state-centric ontology of IOs in IO theory.

By the early 2000s, some change in the conception of IO was perceptible. In their preface to the *International Institutions* (2001) reader, Martin and Simmons delineate international institutions from IO, defining the latter as:

the formal embodiment of institutions and regimes. They are housed in buildings, employ civil servants and bureaucrats, and have budgets. They have varying degrees of agency, sometimes able to take influential actions without explicit authorization from their member states (2001, p. 2).

Contributing to this trend of analyzing the impact and power of IO bureaucracies has been a number of excellent books examining the autonomy and internal processes of IOs, such as Bhatta (2000), Dijkzeul and Gordenker (2003), Reinalda and Verbeek (1998), and Barnett and Finnemore (2004). Similarly, a variety of books have recently surfaced exploring the internal politics and historical agency of IOs, including Wood's *the Globalizers* (2006), Smith's *Politics and Process at the United Nations* (2005), Chesterman's *Secretary or General?* (2007), Toye and Toye's *the UN and Global Political Economy* (2004), Weiss et al's *UN Voices* (2005), and Mathiason's *Invisible Governance* (2007). A number of IO scholars have also imported principal-agent theory from microeconomic analysis and OT in order to explain the effects and conditions of IO autonomy from their member states (Bearce, 2003; Elgie, 2002; Goldstein & Lenway, 1989; Nielson & Tierney, 2003). What distinguishes these scholars from mainstream IO theory is that they are coming to see IOs in ontologically similar terms as OT. They start their research with the foundational reality that IOs as organizations have the capacity to evince autonomy and perhaps agency, though it is incomplete and problematic on many levels. Most of these scholars still feel the need to account for states' influence in the first instance, which has meant measuring the degree of state influence over IOs (or, conversely, IO independence).

In an effort to synthesize both the regime and formal legal attributes of IO, Duffield in 2007 offered the definition of international institutions as:

relatively stable sets of related constitutive, regulative, and procedural norms and rules that pertain to the international system, the actors in the system (including states as well as nonstate entities), and their activities (2007, pp. 7–8).

While this definition was designed to respond to the ontological concerns of constructivists and rationalists relative to, respectively, the importance of norms and rules (Duffield, 2007, pp. 8–12), it says nothing about the internal capacities of IOs since it entirely subsumes their bureaucracies under the term “rules” (Duffield, 2007, p. 15). Duffield does note, however, that IOs demonstrate elements of both institutions and, importantly, actors, though he does not clearly delineate the distinction. Hence, the internal bureaucratic powers are again packaged and left unaddressed. Clearly, the issue of scientifically accounting for IO agency and autonomy becomes one of epistemology and methodology rather than ontology. In other words, the legacy of the state-centric ontology of IOs automatically puts arguments in favor of IO corporate capacity on the defensive linguistically and, therefore, scientifically.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Barnett and Finnemore's *Rules for the World* (2004). They appropriately adopt the insights of OT and conceive of “international organizations as ontologically independent actors . . .”, and argue that “[b]y thinking about international organizations as social creatures, we could better understand their authority, their powers, their goals, and their behavior” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, p. viii). Yet, their analysis suffers from a key weakness, which is that it still accedes to the state-centric ontology pervasive in the discipline

in that they purport to conclusively show that IOs are *capable* of exhibiting behavior through the processes of bureaucracy as opposed to simply being decision-making structures (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, pp. 2–3). To do so, they “develop a constructivist approach to understanding IO behavior that provides a theoretical basis for treating IOs as autonomous actors and helps explain the power they exercise in world politics. . . .” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, p. 2). Again, what would otherwise constitute a foundational reality in OT is approached through epistemology and theory in IR.

Barnett and Finnemore would argue that their analysis stands in opposition to statist approaches (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, p. 10). By approaching IO behavior through a constructivist methodology, they continue to address the issue of IO agency and interest on epistemological terms rather than on ontological terms with the unintended consequence of reifying a state-centric ontology of IOs due to its paradigmatic predominance in IR; in other words, they still feel the need to substantiate their position against the idea that IOs are essentially state-dominated decision structures. In the end, even the most eloquently-produced analysis demonstrating the power of bureaucracy and the independence of IOs could be discounted and ignored on the basis of an epistemological objection that qualitative case studies do not represent the most appropriate means of conducting “social science.” Hence Barnett and Finnemore’s main purpose for writing the book, changing the disciplinary foundational reality about IOs, could be lost in the mundane, and in many ways unproductive, debate over what constitutes science in the discipline. On the other hand, an ontological commitment to Barnett and Finnemore’s position would establish the foundational reality of the discipline and make IO behavior unproblematic. Debates over epistemology would then have no bearing on whether IOs evince agency and autonomy as OT would assume. Constructivist methods could be dismissed in favor of more quantitative science, but the fact that IOs are capable of evincing behavior would persist. For the subfield of International Organization to be liberated from its largely misdirected epistemological debate, a new corporate ontology of IOs should be adopted.

It would also subsume one other important element arising from Barnett and Finnemore’s treatment of IO behavior in theoretical terms. Their theory requires perceiving IOs as bureaucracies, which is both essential but limiting. IOs are, in fact, bureaucracies with all their attendant attributes, but they are also structures, networks, amalgamations of individuals, and subjects of the environment with a variety of internal and external effects that can be measured and addressed through a wide range of methodologies. A bureaucratic perspective can provide insight to some of these aspects but not all. The corporate ontology of IOs would instead incorporate bureaucracy as both a structural and agentive component in the analysis with effects across levels of analysis, but bureaucracy itself would only be relevant if the research question made it so.

### **The Contribution to International Organization Research**

What is the advantage of adopting a corporate paradigm of IOs that assumes IOs to be interested actors over the subfield’s current state-centric paradigm that views them as subservient to governments? The utility of a discipline’s foundational reality relies upon how useful it is in explaining the object of study. From such a perspective, it is incumbent to show the approach

being offered appreciably improves upon the existing one. In what follows I demonstrate the utility of a paradigm of IOs that assumes them to be interested and agentive actors in international politics.

### *Opening All the Boxes*

International organizations are generally viewed by predominant IO theories as arenas for state interaction or receptacles of their intent. Certain lag or structural effects might alter the outputs of the political process, but the internal workings are not taken to be overtly political in many theoretical constructs (for example Krasner, 1983a). This differs dramatically from the literature on the politics of the state. First and Second Image theories abound to make sense of the actions taken in the name of the state. Because IOs have been predetermined by theory to evince no interest or inherent agency, the insights of these frameworks have not been systematically applied to international organizations. The need to open the black box of the state is well recognized. Why should there not be some opening of the black box of international organizations?<sup>3</sup>

It is intellectually inconsistent for international relations scholars to suggest the internal workings of states are important while saying IOs' internal workings are not. The literatures on foreign policy, public opinion, and bureaucratic politics are all designed to elucidate the complexes of influence in the workings of corporate entities known as states. To deny that the internal workings of IOs are relevant then requires International Organization scholars to say the very characteristics that empower states somehow fail to empower IOs (see Ness & Brechin, 1988, pp. 264–66). This position is ontologically unsustainable since both states and IOs are nothing more than corporate fictions. A fairer question could be asked as to whether it matters. Indeed it does.

### *Problems with IR Literature and IO Agency without Interest*

Given the discipline's debate on the importance of power relationships, it is not surprising that the agency of international organizations has overshadowed their interests. However, realism and neoliberalism are guilty of an epistemological inconsistency. These paradigms are only tenable as theoretical frameworks if they assume the state to be a unitary actor with interest and agency. Krasner (1978) and Wendt (1999) have shown convincingly that states are not just unitary actors but corporate entities with "national interests." International organizations are themselves corporate entities with the difference that states form the constituency of the organizations instead of individuals. The implication is that realism and neoliberalism are sustained by the very logic at the state level they seek to deny at the international level. Scholars cannot "black box" the bureaucratic workings and interests of state actors and reject the same assumption for international organizations just because international organizations are created with weak legal-institutional structures that deprive them of total state-like power (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, p. 700; Dijkzeul & Beigbeder, 2003, p. 15). Privileging legal-institutional structure over all else misses the point. There is "life" beyond physical capability.

3. While there are a significant number of IR scholars who explore the internal workings of IOs, a strong argument resolving the inconsistency is still useful for the field as a whole.

Liberal institutionalist scholars must contend with their own paradox. They have concentrated their efforts on proving international organizations can facilitate cooperation between states by virtue of their power to act on or reshape bargaining positions. Thus, past liberal scholarship regarding whether the relationship between international organizations and states resembles contestation or cooperation have overlooked the intent of international organizations in favor of their bargaining and structural-procedural impacts. Liberal scholars have disregarded the notion that interest underlies the very actions they ascribe to international organizations to prove they are important actors in international politics.

What is missing from the literature on the agency of international organization is the clear ontological assumption that something is guiding the agency. Realists and neoliberals have dismissed international organizations' agency because their ontological assumptions privilege, respectively, the power of and the economic gains of organizations alone. But the corpus of liberal institutionalist and constructivist scholarship has illustrated ably that international organizations are more complex and interesting than realists and neoliberals suggest. For officials and elites in international organizations to assert their leadership, there must be interest to advocate (Haas, 2000; Young, 1991). To favor certain agendas over others, to purposefully link two or more issues together, to have bureaucratic infighting and inefficiency, there must be interest (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; Gallarotti, 1991; Keohane & Nye, 2001). And to use the agency of international organizations to socialize states to adopt certain norms over others, there must be interest (Finnemore, 1996; Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986; McNeely, 1995). By combining IO agency with interest, we must assume that international organizations exhibit behavior, and this is theoretically interesting in and of itself.

### *Resolving Epistemological and Methodological Disputes*

Making the ontological leap that IOs enjoy corporate interests eliminates the problematic of IO autonomy and agency and it accounts for much of the variance for which higher level or more abstract theories fail to account. This is not to say that it is inappropriate to develop more abstract theories of state-IO relationships. Rather, it places them in proper perspective in the same way that Third Image analysis of the state is delineated from Second Image analysis. Structural theories have their place as models and explain effects Second Image models cannot. Similarly, Second Image models are important for explaining the power struggles within a state that lead to the policy positions taken by states as unitary actors in international relations. In other words, Third Image analysis does well in explaining the structural boundaries guiding decision-making while Second Image analysis provides more thorough explanation about the decisions taken within the bounded range. Indeed, even First Image analysis on leaders may be applied to Secretaries-General and their deputies to demonstrate the impact their belief systems and leadership styles have on their respective IOs (Chesterman, 2007; Finger & Magarinos-Ruchat, 2003; Megens, 1998).

In the process, the epistemological debate over how to account for IO behavior in international politics is resolved by determining the level of analysis and level of abstraction desired since there now exists an ontology that allows for the different theoretical and methodological frameworks. Game theory or rational choice models may work well at the structural level and

provide reasonable, parsimonious models of intra-bureaucratic politics within an IO. On the other hand, a constructivist approach might be better suited for describing the evolution of an IO's corporate identity and the values and norms it has attempted to teach states through its structural processes. Still in other cases, perhaps a traditional behavioral model of political science could be employed in regard to determining the ontological or political disposition of an IO's personnel, the substance of voting behavior in a given IO deliberative body, or the correlates of IO activism in international politics versus survival behavior. The point here is that the epistemological approach responds to the research question rather than research question conforming to the demands of epistemology. This is tremendously liberating for the subfield and could help reshape research projects in significant ways since it unambiguously establishes from the outset that there exist important elements of IOs to study outside the investigative purview of certain epistemological and methodological approaches. It could also widen the universe of questions to be investigated, since it re-conceptualizes the nature of agency and power within IOs and with their constituent units.

Furthermore, understanding international organizations' interests improves the research conditions for certain methodologies, like rational choice. For example, rational choice and game theoretic models may work well when assumptions about an international organization's endogenous politics are known and fairly static. In such a scenario the politics of the organization itself are not problematic and the value of theoretical parsimony may encourage such a methodology. However, complex bureaucracies with multiple sources of influence and power could mandate a different methodological approach or demand a more circumspect research conclusion (Ness & Brechin, 1988, p. 253).

The paradigm offered here does not threaten any particular research approach. Instead, it simply adds to the subfield's understanding of IOs, and it accounts for the "problem" of IO autonomy and agency. There is no reason why the Levels of Analysis so richly applied to states cannot be applied to international organizations as well; after all, OT has been doing so for decades. Whether recognized explicitly or not, this is already happening thanks to recent research. A corporate rather than a state-centric paradigm of IOs improves International Organization scholars' understanding of them and opens up new and interesting lines of research as well.

### **Integrating Existing Theories within a Corporate IO Paradigm**

Does a corporate paradigm of IOs encompass the breadth of knowledge and theoretical approaches already established in the discipline? I believe it does and, at a minimum, improves upon the current state-centric paradigm of international organizations. Instead of segmenting IO scholars into fairly rigid approaches with mutually irreconcilable differences, the corporate paradigm directs the assumptions, observations, and critiques of each approach toward appropriate institutional and structural characteristics of international organizations.

Realist skepticism about the impact and utility of IOs in international politics is certainly justified to an extent. Simply put, power does matter. International organizations are purposefully designed with weak or constrained institutional structures and dependent secretariats, which protect the sovereignty of their creators. The content of realist assumption and critique

is directed toward the legal-institutional powers of IOs, which they argue are too weak to affect international politics. As a result, realists argue that none of the internal bureaucratic politics of IOs is meaningful to political outcomes. From a state-centric paradigm, international organizations' inability to produce traditional forms of overt power in large measure substantiates the realist perspective. However, from a corporate paradigm of IOs, the realist approach fails to take account of the power of bureaucracy in organizations, particularly their informal influence over process (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). The critical test in the case of realists is whether the secretariat of an IO can manage sufficient control over the legal-institutional structure to influence the process. If the IO can do so, the next issue becomes the degree to which the influence affects political outcomes. In this regard, realists could very well have a point with some international organizations. Clearly a corporate paradigm of IOs can accommodate the realist perspective, especially in regard to the OT literature on environmental constraints, inter-bureaucratic discord, and resource deprivation. This should not be a tremendous leap for realists, though, since they already acknowledge these issues relative to states, which, again, are mere corporate entities.

However, it is certainly the case that in many international organizations the bureaucratic process is important both to the organizations' internal politics and the political outcomes achieved through their processes. When this is the case, state-like power will not be the only relevant concept deserving research and theoretical treatment. Like Organization Theory, the liberal research project concentrates on international organizations' effects on the very internal bureaucratic and negotiation processes that realism dismisses. Since liberals have acknowledged the legal-institutional limitations placed on IOs by states, their approach is already disposed to a synergistic relationship with OT and a corporate paradigm of IOs. In effect, they have been arguing for or from within this paradigm for years without explicitly acknowledging it.

Neorealism, neoliberalism, and other rationalist or game theoretic approaches to IOs may also be fruitfully practiced from within a corporate paradigm of IOs. Since international organizations have the same generic properties as states, they too may be black boxed in order to model their effects. Such structural models are inherently instructive for international relations scholars since they describe and explain elements of international politics that cannot be accounted for by lower level theories or models. Like all structural models, there will be a degree of variance built into them, since the actual internal and procedural politics of IOs will vary significantly. As mentioned before, when these elements are simple and uncomplicated, rationalist models may work effectively for researchers. As the processes and politics become more open and complex, they will lose their applicability and utility. On the other hand, game theory might be a reasonable approach to modeling the inter-bureaucratic politics of multi-agency international organizations, like the UN. A corporate paradigm of IOs suggests rational models do not offer fully formed theories of IOs, but the methodology, of course, enjoys an abundance of opportunity for meaningful research within it.

The corporate paradigm of IOs also resolves the structure-agent problem for International Organization theorists. Corporations by their very nature, according to OT, are generated by human agency, but the institutional mechanisms of corporations are specifically designed to shape human activity. Thus, the corporate paradigm of IOs resolves the dilemma concerning

whether IOs act as independent or dependent variables, as is exemplified by an organization like the European Union (Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001, p. 768). In short, it depends on the research question since all corporations act as structures and are affected by human agency. What has been difficult for international relations scholars to reconcile is the ability of international organizations to determine their own paths by using their own legal-institutional abilities to achieve their own interests. The corporate paradigm eliminates this tension. It also suggests that a constructivist approach is most appropriate for explaining the interaction effects of the structure-agent phenomenon.

Figure 1 suggests how IO scholars could look for insights from OT based on the level of analysis desired. Baum and Rowley describe the OT levels of analysis as follows:

Hierarchy of IO/OT Levels of Analysis	Relevance to IO	Methodology	OT Equivalent
IO - First Image OT - Intraorganizational Analysis	Secretariats	Interpretive/Statistics Rational Choice/ Game Theory	Intraorganization Ecology
	Councils of Ambassadors Agenda Powers Epistemic Communities		Agent-based Computer Simulation/Modeling Network Analysis intraorganizational Power and Dependence
IO - Second Image Ot - Organizational Analysis	Bureaucratic Reform Intra-System Bargaining	Interpretive Rational Choice/Game Theory	Organizational Learning
	IO-State Interaction IO-NGO Interaction NGO-State Interaction	Statistics/Rational Choice/Constructivism	Task-Technical Environment & Principal-Agent Analysis
	Funding Patterns Voting Rules	Statistics Statistics/Rational Choice	Organizational Power & Dependence
IO - Third Image OT - Interorganizational Analysis	Structure of the International System	Rational Choice/ Constructivism	Industrial Organization Modeling
	IO/NGO Networks IO Networks IO Networks	ION/Interlocking Markets	Network Analysis
	Change Agents International Norms	Interpretive Interpretive/Statistics	Leadership Theory Institutional Environment & Ecology Interorganizational Power and Dependence

**Figure 1. IO and OT Equivalent Levels of Analysis and Suggested Research Methodology**

At the intraorganizational level, the focus is on understanding the people, groups, knowledge, tools, and tasks that make up organizations. At the organizational level, the focus is on understanding organizational processes, boundaries, activity-systems, and strategies. At the interorganizational level, the focus is on understanding the relationships and interactions within and among aggregates of organizations. (2005, p. 7)

What is evident from Figure 1 is the natural alignment between OT’s and IR’s levels of analysis. Moreover, Figure 1 demonstrates that OT has arrived at a point where epistemology and

methodology do not drive the foundational reality of aspects of organizations; rather, they are subordinate to research questions and can coexist in order to address different though often related functions, behaviors, processes, and effects.

OT's intraorganizational level of analysis could provide some interesting research ideas for IO scholars. For example, intraorganizational network analysis examines the impact social networks have on individual and organizational outcomes (Raider & Krackhardt, 2005). IO scholars could utilize this body of research to examine the likely effect of new secretariat initiatives, advocacy of and adherence to reform efforts, or the influence of competing groups within organizations. Intraorganizational ecology views organizations as biological systems, analyzing how routines, like genes, are passed on or mutated by organizational evolution and environmental pressure (Galunic & Weeks, 2005). This perspective could inform research on the behavior and attitudes of UN secretariat personnel following international system changes or perhaps look at how the IMF and World Bank staff adapt their norms and routines as globalization alters the international financial architecture. Still others could incorporate many insights from the OT literature on intraorganizational power and dependence to examine how leaders within IOs maneuver to acquire greater influence over resources and policies (Brass, 2005). Indeed, the more IOs come to be viewed as exhibiting behavior resulting from bureaucracy, the more relevant this line of research stands to become, and OT could provide IO scholars with a number of highly adaptable insights to draw upon.

OT's organizational level of analysis seems to be the most natural fit with IO scholars' traditional interests. IO scholars have for decades explored the outcomes of IO processes, such as voting patterns, and IOs as process inputs as with decision rules. Moreover, principal-agent analysis has recently become a fairly popular approach to analyzing IOs in the subfield. However, OT could enhance the range of topics covered at this level with other techniques. If treated as possessing agency and autonomy, IO adaptation could be researched from the lenses of organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Similarly, OT could provide useful hypotheses regarding how changes in institutional norms and structures could impact both the personnel who work within IOs and the states that comprise them. For instance, OT scholars note three sources of change for domestic organizations, state regulation, the socialization of professional norms, and the dissemination of best practices (Palmer & Biggart, 2005, pp. 266–67). It would not be difficult to adapt these assumptions and practices for testing them to the world of international organizations. Network analysis also would produce some interesting research for IO scholars in that OT views organizations as inherently living in and constituting networks of interdependency, which over time may produce interaction types, such as organizations that act as bridges to others or organizations that cohere others' activities (Gulati, Dialdin, & Wang, 2005). Moreover, the organizational power and dependence literature could, as indicated before, prove invaluable for IO scholars seeking to investigate the politics of bureaucracy in IOs given its growing relevance in the literature.

Finally, interorganizational analysis imported from OT could prove insightful for IO scholars in two areas in particular. First, interorganizational network (ION) analysis could open a whole new line of research in the IO subfield due to its focus on activity systems and interlocking domains. ION analysis views organizational networks along three dimensions,

producers, suppliers, and buyers, which can then be evaluated for interaction characteristics, such as efficiency, partnership, or distribution of effort (Baker & Faulkner, 2005, pp. 521–26). Another way to view interorganizational networks is in terms of “interlocking markets,” where service providers operate in distinct or multiple markets. Markets may be deduced by examining the character and extent of organizations’ involvement in particular areas and organizational interests can be hypothesized based on the types of markets and the composition of organizations observed (Baker & Faulkner, 2005, pp. 532–35). This could lead to the identification of IO and NGO “markets” where organizational design could be correlated with activity or it could identify underserved markets in need of additional IO or NGO assistance. Second, interorganizational ecology explores how group populations within a community generate symbiotic and both competitive and cooperative interaction patterns (Rao, 2005). This line of research could be illuminating particularly in reference to the relationships between the IO-NGO and NGO-NGO communities. As the number of IOs and NGOs continues to rise, there will likely be much room for theorizing about how the communities of organizations shape themselves, their constituents, and their activities at the macro level. Interorganizational ecology could provide some theoretical foundation for starting this line of research.

In sum, adopting a corporate paradigm asserts that IOs are interested and agentive actors in international politics, though their legal-institutional structures may be weak as compared to states. It helps to conceptualize issues that have been problematic for international relations scholars since it subordinates theoretical assumptions driven by epistemology and methodology to the disciplinary foundational reality about IOs. Thus, elements that could not be accounted for due to the constraints of theory are prevented from becoming divorced from the disciplinary research matrix. The corporate paradigm of IOs is, therefore, a more productive perspective on the object of the subfield than the state-centric paradigm that has dominated it for so long. Moreover, the corporate paradigm does not threaten any of the existing lines of research that have developed in that time. Rather, it simply directs their research questions, observations, and assumptions to the appropriate level of analysis. The reason why each approach has so many proponents is precisely because each plausibly explains different aspects of international organizations. But debating these aspects from within a state-centric paradigm has misplaced the applicability of the research. Instead of competing theories, they are essentially responding to different attributes of international organizations. A corporate paradigm of international organizations integrates the corpus of IO research into a more coherent whole.

## **Conclusion**

International Organization as a subfield stands ready to make a fundamental shift in its approach. An ontological debate has for decades been carried out in epistemological terms to great empirical benefit, but at the expense of grasping the true nature and political ability of IOs. IO scholars may be brought together by adopting a corporate paradigm of international organizations instead of a state-centric paradigm of international organizations. Moreover, IO scholars do not need to start from scratch in this endeavor. They may turn to Organization Theory for great insight into the internal workings of IOs. Although OT is confronted by its own episte-

mological difficulties, its ontology of organizations is superior to that adopted by IO scholars, and its levels of analysis are analogous to that of IO scholars. By adopting a corporate ontology of IOs, IO scholars may conceptualize IO agency and autonomy in more meaningful ways so that greater detail and insight comes from their research. With this movement, the decades-long return to interest in the internal working of IOs will lead to an appropriate and necessary organizational turn in International Organization.

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