

International Organizations Studies: Views from the UN and the EU

by Kirsten Haack, Northumbria University

UN Studies. Umrisse eines Lehr- und Forschungsfeldes, Manuel Fröhlich, ed. [UN Studies. Profile of a Field of Teaching and Research] Baden-Baden: Nomos 2008

Palgrave Advances in European Union Studies, Michelle Cini and Angela K. Bourne, eds. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2006

For years, international organizations (IO) scholars have bemoaned the fact that the study of IOs does not answer fundamental questions about IOs:

International organizations regularly receive fierce criticism. Paradoxically understanding of these organizations is often limited. The number of studies that shed light on their inner workings is still relatively small, and a satisfactory theory explaining their behaviour does not yet exist (Dijkzeul and Beigbeder 2006, p. 1).

Dijkzeul and Beigbeder located the reason for this in the existing definition of the unit of analysis—states—while noting a lack of both empirical material and interaction between disciplines. Higgot noted the regime approach may have helped us understand IOs as vehicles for “maximizing information sharing, generating transparency in decision-making, and advancing the institutional ability to generate credible, collective-action problem solving” (Higgot 2006, p. 616) but failed to illuminate the details of IOs’ internal dynamics, including interstate political contests. Similarly, Haack, Harfensteller, and Paepcke (2008) showed the study of an IO (here the UN) tends to be defined through related fields of studies, which do not place the IO at the heart of enquiry:

UN research, and subsequently the UN curriculum, has not assumed a distinct identity as a field of study. Instead, students of the UN have approached the organization from their specific disciplinary angles and focused on individual issues, actors, and thematic fields. In this approach, the UN serves as the backdrop for an analysis of global problems and challenges, not the focus of analysis and theorizing. Thus, UN research is unnecessarily disjointed, in parts too descriptive and under-theorized, [and] in parts marginalized by UN-related studies (Haack, Harfensteller, and Paepcke 2008, p. 31).

This closes off a number of avenues of research beyond the “traditional” state-centric perspective and “grand” theorizing on IOs in international relations. What then is the task and content of a field of studies called international organizations studies?

To establish IO studies as a field of study one is confronted by the issue of the nature, purpose, and boundary of such a subject. First and foremost, IO studies is not—and should not—aim to be a new paradigm or discipline. A discipline differs from a field of study insofar as it not only has a joint body of accomplishments, a shared history, and understanding of

its purpose but also a joint vocabulary, language, and theoretical (and methodological) toolbox. Following Meyer and Land (2005), a discipline could be most usefully defined by its “threshold concepts,” (i.e., core concepts) without which the study of the discipline would be difficult to understand. By contrast, a field of study cuts across different disciplines to study a particular phenomenon from different angles. Occasionally, it integrates other disciplines and sub-disciplines, with diminished relevance for readers of the core discipline (as would be the case for the social science reader of the chapter on communication in Fröhlich’s volume). Thus, instead of defining a new subject of research, IO studies as a field of study should find answers to an existing phenomenon and help fill in the gaps of knowledge about IOs. Haack et al.’s (2008, p. 20–21) analysis of UN studies, for example, calls for the field to accomplish the following goals: to link, synthesize, and provide knowledge about the UN; to critically reflect on UN activities; to form future UN public civil servants; and to give UN practitioners a platform for passing on their knowledge. The two volumes under review here mirror these aspirations; however, they approach the task of creating a field of studies from very different angles. This difference in approach sheds further light on the potential of a field of IO studies.

Fröhlich’s volume on UN studies aims to take stock of “studies related to the UN” by defining the contents, purposes, and goals of a field of UN studies. The book’s focus on Germany, or German-language teaching and research, somewhat limits a full scoping of the field as significant differences in emphasis between German-language research and the much broader Anglo-American research community, namely a stronger emphasis on liberal internationalist values and constructivist approaches over realist and rational-behavioural approaches, as well as the idiosyncratic inclusion of global governance as a discipline continue to exist. Nevertheless, the volume offers interesting disciplinary insights into what UN studies is or could be as it brings together the range of social sciences disciplines, as well as history and communication studies. The volume highlights the main research questions asked within each discipline, yet does not introduce the reader to the controversies of UN research, past or present. Thus, by covering the breadth of the field, the book remains at times a little too superficial in its treatment of studies related to the UN.

In addition to outlining the research approach of each discipline, the authors were asked to answer the question of whether a degree program in UN studies would be worthwhile. While most authors describe at length existing programs as well as wish lists for future programs, some make only general statements on their discipline’s potential to enhance learning about the UN. None of the authors consider an undergraduate program as appropriate, but all agree on the value of a master’s program in UN studies. Such a program would aim to prepare students to either work at the UN (or other IOs) or help them gain a deep understanding of global policy-making through an interdisciplinary perspective. The value in bringing together different disciplines in a master’s program is to better understand the organization, not issues of global governance.

Von Schorlemmer writes on law, noting that interest in the UN is (and has been) primarily driven by UN consultancies and the interest of individual academics as international law does not form part of the core curriculum. International criminal law, peacekeeping issues, and human rights are predominant and yet most areas of law are taught without reference to the pro-

cess of their institutionalisation. Economists, for example, Hüfner, are concerned with the economic goals of the UN, the distribution of finance and questions of efficiency and effectiveness, i.e., with systems-theoretical or organizational explanations of resources and their distribution. Historians appear mostly concerned with the creation of the UN, as Dülffer has to refer to more recent American research on the secretary-general and the UN intellectual history project, despite the German research strength in histories of ideas. Sociologist, Pries, notes not much has changed from an organizational research perspective since Ness and Brechin's 1988 analysis—the focus on sovereign actors continues to prevent a consideration of IOs as corporate actors embedded in a complex network of relationships with their environment. Analyzing the contribution of public administration, Junk notes the UN deviates from the Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy and its hierarchy through the existence of multiple principals, multiculturalism, and a high degree of organizational complexity, all of which poses a problem for public administration, consequently leaving the UN underexplored. Finally, Lehmann discusses a barely visible discipline in relation to UN studies: communication studies. According to Lehmann, the UN is rarely analyzed in terms of its communication, although there has been growing interest following the development of ICT, especially the Internet, focusing on public relations, opinion polls, and media reception as methodology.

In contrast to Fröhlich's volume, Cini and Bourne's book does not emphasize the breadth of EU studies through an analysis of different disciplinary approaches; in fact, the editors wryly note EU studies tend to be associated with the political sciences. Instead, the editors aim to shift the focus of EU studies from processes of European integration toward an analysis of the EU's political system. This shift is, according to Wiener, a clear evolution—as integration studies moved away from the politics of integration toward policies of adaptation, it required greater understanding of the polity. This also required a disciplinary refocusing away from IR theory to something more specifically EU-focused. Citing Hix (1994), Warleigh notes:

International relations theory have little or no value in explaining the day-to-day process of internal policy-making in the EU. . . . This is the case no matter how useful international relations theories have been in their account of why the EU was established, the foreign policies of member states, or the EU's own ability to be an actor in world politics (Warleigh, 90).

While Tonra highlights that “for both realists and liberals then, the EU posed a fundamental paradox—it was not a state, yet was ‘state-like’ in so much of its relations with states and the interstate system” (Tonra, p. 121).

With this volume, the editors intend to “signal” what they consider to be the “primary substantive focus of the field.” This focus is narrower than European studies, (i.e., the study of culture, politics, and society in Europe), focused on the institution, emphasizing interdisciplinarity. The editors note theorisation and conceptualisation in EU studies highlights differentiation and competition among alternative approaches, from theoretical debates between neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalists in the 1950–60s, to mid-range theories in the 1980s, and the rationalist-constructivist divide in the 1990s.

The volume consequently covers a range of issues, highlighting the contribution of grand theories and (methodological) approaches, as well as a variety of issues and cases. The au-

thors' goal is not to provide a full overview of existing literature and past debates but to take stock of the explanatory value and scope of research for today's EU, often outlining future directions. This approach makes this volume particularly relevant for the non-EU scholar as it provides an excellent snap-shot of the challenges and opportunities of the EU and EU studies without requiring detailed, theoretical background knowledge. In Chapter 2 Scully assesses the contribution of rational institutionalism and notes liberal intergovernmentalism has played an important role in explaining European integration through a chain of decisions taken by politicians. Despite its explanatory power, Scully notes liberal intergovernmentalism is challenged on the question of self-sustaining integration and, therefore, remains on the backfoot in explaining the goals of EU studies as described here. This is more easily achieved by sociological institutionalism and constructivism, which Wiener considers in Chapter 3. Wiener highlights processes of constitutionalisation in terms of an aggregation of institutions and the political community, i.e., the process of becoming European. This is then also raised by Gillespie and Laffan and Føllesdal, who analyze European identity, legitimacy, and the normative turn in EU research. Føllesdal's chapter in particular shows how intertwined normative questions (legitimacy, identity) and the analysis of the evolving complexity of the EU structure are. This is not only demonstrated by vetos to the Maastricht treaty, which put into question the direction and speed of the European integration process at the time, but by ongoing attempts to address the legitimacy deficit on both input and output side. Radaelli and Warleigh shed further light on governance in the EU, with "Europeanization" defined as a complex interactive process of bringing together the national and the European, in terms of both national adaptation processes and discourses, with multilevel governance and policy networks serving as metaphors to help understand horizontal and vertical shifts in the exercise of public power in the EU.

The EU's interaction with the world (through foreign policy) and its immediate neighborhood (through enlargement) is addressed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier and Tonra, while Verdun and Kaiser turn to the contribution of international political economy and historiography respectively; Chapters 12 (Jupille) and 13 (Wessels) then address broader questions of metatheory, methodology, and the landscape of EU studies. Recognizing the incredible variety of metatheory and methodology, and the fact that conflicts over methodologies were fought within, not between theories, Jupille calls for a "fishscale model of omniscience," that relies on individual specialisms of EU research overlapping with several others, rather than bounded smaller groups that lack interaction with others. Following this tour de force through EU studies, Wessels concludes that "trends in the 'state of the art' are defined less by paradigm change . . . than by differentiation and pluralistic coexistence" (Wessels, p. 236). EU studies develop through a "pull" from the EU, i.e., political developments, while the discipline exerts a "push" to explain more aspects of its daily life.

What then can the two volumes tell us about the development of IO studies? How do they address the requirements of a field of studies? If the field of IO studies is to have any content, it not only needs to have a deep understanding of existing international organizations, it also needs to have a comparative dimension. A field of study that cannot make connections or draw conclusions across its units of study exists in name only. To be sure, the existing body

of research on IOs features a broad range of classifications and typologies of international organizations (Jordan et al. 2001, Rittberger 2006), which is joined by questions about the relevance and autonomy of international organizations, the way in which they achieve and support cooperation, as well as recent research on the design of international organizations and integration. While this research does provide us with causal statements about international organizations and their actions, it remains general and abstract at a level of grand theorizing, rarely drawing into its ambit the study of existing international organizations. Where it does so, it is applied to one IO, not several. For example, while integration theory may form a natural foundation for IO studies as one of its grand theories, its general explanatory range remains limited to Mitrany's functionalism as integration theory became increasingly appropriated by and thus molded to EU integration studies. In contrast to the EU, the UN appears institutionally, relatively static even where an increasing institutionalisation of norms and rules has taken place. This is because of the considerable dynamism of the EU toward supranationalism, not because of a lack of evolution on the part of the UN.

The volumes by Fröhlich and Cine and Bourne demonstrate the first requirement for IO studies is met, that is to bring together different disciplines to enhance their understanding of each other, as well as a move away from contextual issues (e.g., integration) to the organization itself raises the bar for IO study, allowing for a better understanding of IOs in and of themselves. Unfortunately, the second requirement—comparability—is not met and indeed barely considered by any of the authors or editors. Both groups of scholars recognize the need for a “field of studies,” or an interdisciplinary system of enquiry, to explain different dimensions of their IO and yet, where other IOs are concerned, authors generally emphasize the uniqueness of their own organization, be that the UN or the EU, which appears to disallow any comparison to other IOs. The fact the UN is the only universal IO, while the EU is the most deeply integrated, indeed supranational IO, leads all authors to invoke “uniqueness” as a reason not to draw conclusions beyond their respective IO. Mirroring this problem within EU studies, Wessels recognizes the need for a better understanding of integration processes across IOs but also raises the problem of creating a disjointed body of research and, thus, a lack of understanding of the organization itself. Discussing the choice between cross-IO study of integration and the EU as a *sui generis* system, he concludes that:

While identifying EU-related topics for testing against particular cross-sectional theses is not to be discouraged in principle, my plea is, rather, that we should not lose sight of a dynamic macroperspective in our research efforts. Even if the EU is to emerge as an $n=1$ case study, it would, for academic as well as normative reasons, be problematic *not* to continue to discuss the overall evolution of the *sui generis* system (Wessels, 2006, p. 239).

Thus, Wessels recognizes the need for both horizontal and vertical research approaches (of the EU). These are also essential to an effective field of IO studies but need to start with the phenomenon of IO as the central axis from which to analyze both processes and systems.

In Fröhlich's volume, Rittberger confounds the problem of comparability by noting the UN is not important in and of itself, and the study of the UN beyond intergovernmental processes is irrelevant. Following this “traditional” state-centric agenda, the field of IO studies beyond international relations would indeed be irrelevant. However, the development of EU

studies shows the potential for addressing evolving issues of organizational autonomy, design, and integration. The contributions to Cini and Bourne's volume very clearly draws out the turning point that Simon Hix's 1994 article in *West European Politics* marked in EU studies. Hix questioned the relevance of international relations in explaining the EU as the organization increasingly developed supranational dimensions. It is in the wake of this debate that the move away from the process of integration towards the organization, indeed the political system of the EU, was made. To be sure, the different forms and speeds of organizational evolution have led to very different research needs. While EU studies discusses the EU as a political system, UN studies shows an increasing interest in the organization and organizational research.

In conclusion, what the field of IO studies needs is some form of bridge-building between organizations that represent the same phenomenon but may develop in different ways. This field needs to move beyond the grand theorizing of IR theory to include mid-range theories that explain organizational behavior, design, and development with specific reference to two or more existing international organizations. The *Journal of International Organizations Studies* was established precisely to encourage the development of IO studies, with the aim of providing a platform for theorizing and explaining international organizations.

REFERENCES

- Dijkzeul, Dennis and Yves Beigbeder (2006) "Introduction: rethinking international organizations," in *Ibid.*, eds. *Rethinking International Organizations. Pathology & Promise*, New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Haack, Kirsten, Julia Harfensteller and Henrike Paepcke (2008) *UN Studies: Foundations of an Emerging Field of Study*, UNSA Discussion Papers 1, Berlin: UN Studies Association.
- Higgott, Richard (2006) "International political institutions," in R.A.W. Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder and Bert a. Rockman, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hix, Simon (1994) "The Study of the European Community: The challenge to Comparative Politics," *West European Politics* 17 (1): 1–30.
- Meyer, Jan H.F., and Ray Land (2005) "Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning," *Higher Education* 49 (5): 373–88.
- Ness, Gayl D. and Steven R. Brechin (1988) "Bridging the gap: international organizations as organizations," *International Organization* 42 (2): 245–73.
- Rittberger, Volker and Bernhard Zangl (2006) *International Organization: Polity, Politics and Policies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Jordan, Robert S., Clive Archer, Gregory P. Granger and Kerry Ordes (2001) *International Organizations: A Comparative Approach to the Management of Cooperation*, fourth edition, Praeger.
- Rochester, Martin J. (1986) "The rise and fall of international organization as a field of study," *International Organization* 40 (4): 777–813.