

Assembling International Organizations¹

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Typical scholarship on international organizations (IOs) focuses on the effects that IOs have on international relations. As Ian Hurd clarifies, such effects inform an IO's ontology as actor, forum, or resource. This paper looks at and beyond such contributions by more closely aligning outcome to process for a relational conceptualization of IOs. In addition to analyzing what they explain about international politics, sociological approaches to IOs should also treat IOs as entities to be explained. I argue that IOs are assemblages of diverse actors projecting coherence in order to authorize particular identities, knowledge, and actions. Power flows through the construction process of IOs as their roles of actor, forum, or resource are constitutive with their socially mediated processes of assembly. Introducing the vocabulary of IOs as assemblage opens up space for understanding IOs as contingent settlements of varied organizational politics and competing tensions. The negotiation of these settlements deserves as much attention as the effects on international politics they make possible.

Introduction

This article offers a sociological approach to the study of international organizations (IOs) through the vocabulary of assemblages. Treating IOs as assemblages gives us new and interesting insights about IOs' process and dynamics. Specifically, introducing assemblage as a particular type of social construction makes possible the ordering of IOs as recognizable unitary actors in international politics. Such a move looks at and beyond the typical scholarship on IOs that focuses on the effects IOs have on international relations. As Ian Hurd (2011) clarifies, these effects inform an IO's ontology as actor, forum, or resource. However, a relational conceptualization of IOs makes clear that in addition to analyzing what IOs explain about international politics, we should also treat IOs as entities to be explained. By regarding IOs as an accomplishment needing continued maintenance and attention the focus shifts from what IOs construct to how IOs are constructed. In other words, existing research on the effects of IO should be supplanted with research on IOs as effects.²

1. I thank Ian Hurd and Stephen Nelson, two anonymous reviewers, the editors of this special issue, participants at the 2012 International Studies Association-Northeast in Baltimore, and the IR Student Working Group at Northwestern University for helpful comments.

2. Some research does this already, for example the literature on negotiation of IO treaties (on the UN charter see Russell 1958; Schlesinger 2003) and neo-Gramscian studies on IOs as a result of hegemony (Cox 1983, 1987). The difference with the approach presented here is that I treat IO process as always in progress. In IOs as assemblages, there are only efforts toward a fully formed entity and never an actually completed project.

Assemblage is typically defined as “a bringing or coming together; a meeting or gathering; the state of being gathered or collected” (Oxford English Dictionary). This definition identifies assemblage both as an activity and a state of being, which captures the simultaneous processes of assemblage as practice and representation. In other words, assemblage is the practice of bringing together a diverse range of materials while also representing a particular state of achievement in that process. I am interested in the dual framework involving specific practices of assembling assemblages and their representation as assembled assemblages. Agentic efforts continually contest and reify assemblages to reflect the simultaneous eroding and enduring qualities of social structures.

As such, an attention to assemblage underscores that IOs are not only actors that define the operating space for others but are also the resulting structures that emerge from processes of social control. This does not imply that IOs can be reduced to power politics and have no distinct identity of their own. Rather, an IO’s distinctiveness as a being in global politics is painstakingly accomplished. The presence of structures projecting coherence, unity, and stability out of incoherent, divided, and unstable relations gestures to the active production and reproduction of social life. Such assembly is constant, pervasive, and global so that the resulting order may be constant, pervasive, and global. It is not enough to claim that international structures like IOs are socially constructed. International theory must specify how exactly the social construction takes place while acknowledging different versions of sociality and construction involved in this assembly.

In seeing IOs as assemblages, IOs do not appear as fully formed entities but as perpetual works in progress. The signing of a treaty or hiring of an administrative staff does not signal the birth of an organization ready for the world as much as it ushers in the beginning of a developmental process. Assemblages help account for the active problem-solving efforts to build something with durable effects. To assemble a team involves the recognition of strengths and comparative advantages given particular challenges. To assemble an IO is a similar endeavor necessitating amalgamation of different elements each with their own unique abilities to contribute to something greater in order to solve problems. A turn to IOs as assemblages generates research questions that open the processes in constructing stable/unstable, visible/invisible, and ephemeral/enduring IOs as problem-solving arrangements. The value added of assemblage is its ability to capture power in international relations wielded by a diverse set of actors participating in the continual production of heterogeneous practice and homogenous representation of global governance.

Moving from the effects of IOs to IOs as effects pairs with a renewed sociological attention to thinking about the international organization of international organizations. This opens up questions of scale and scope in global governance to evaluate the ways in which an IO is organized internationally. As scholars in organizational sociology argue, IOs are “created to solve problems that require collaborative action; they are not just mechanical tools doing what their founders envisioned . . . but are open systems that are continually responding to the environment, developing and changing goals through negotiations among the dominant coalitions and utilizing various technologies” (Karns and Mingst 2004:56). Sociological perspectives to IOs take seriously the contingency and openness of IOs by tracing

the negotiations that make an IO possible. Examples of such approaches abound in scholarship on organizational culture (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), organizational learning (Haas 1990), interorganizational relations (Mingst 1987), organizational practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011), and network analysis (Keck and Sikkink 1998).³

By proclaiming IOs as assemblages, this article follows and opens further possibilities for such sociological inquiry. I conceptualize and illustrate how to think about assemblages as well as emphasize the analytical payoffs for inquiring about IOs as assemblages. The first section unpacks the concept of assemblage to gain analytical clarity on what it is before moving to the second section on how it is useful for the study of IOs. Understanding IOs as contingent settlements of varied organizational politics and competing tensions is important for capturing the negotiation of these settlements in addition to the effects on international politics they make possible.

Theory of Assemblages

I conceptualize an assemblage as: 1) the product of myriad social interactions within and across levels of analysis that 2) through projection of sustained coherence and stability 3) authorizes particular practices and discourses 4) while necessitating multiple play and reconstruction. Let me go through each in turn.

The first characteristic of assemblage includes a broad range of participants as well as assembly across different levels of analysis to reflect that assemblages are nested and networked entities. Globally dense and multilayered social relations may represent localized practices. In keeping with the plurality of relations that count as social, assemblages also regard objects as active participants through a “material semiotics” approach. Treating material objects and social facts symmetrically in their contribution to an assemblage means there is subjectivity in an object much like there is materiality in subjects. Instead of treating materialism and subjectivism as oppositional, an assemblage approach highlights their interaction in making certain social actions possible. In global politics, states are as much of an assemblage as a transnational network or an IO. The United Kingdom, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), are a product of particular social interactions that cohere to create for each the effect of an assembled unitary entity. But, states also form assemblages with transnational networks and IOs, when for instance the U.K., the ICBL, and the UNGA collaborate to form an assemblage that supports the Mine Ban Treaty. The U.K. being a part of both the ICBL and UNGA also shows the redundancy in assemblages. Furthermore, as objects of concern, landmines activate and maintain the UK–ICBL–UNGA assemblage much like the other actors.

The second characteristic claims assemblages are represented as stable and coherent instead of fleeting and disjointed. The “structuring structures” quality of assemblages directs our attention to the durability of particular arrangements given the high degrees of contingency surrounding social life. An assemblage is much like Charles Taylor’s concept of a social imaginary as “that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor 2007:172). Hence, one of the main accomplishments of assemblages is to try and smooth over the multiple and

3. Here I rely on Karns and Mingst’s very useful overview on theories of organizations (2004:56–59).

multilayered contradictions to reflect a singular whole devoid of such competing tensions. The techniques of unitary representation are present in discourses on collectivity and practices of bureaucratic centralization and depersonalization. For instance, circulating particular policies of standardization and protocols throughout assemblages enable a projection of uniformity. Timothy Mitchell (1991) identifies a “will to cohere” in the structural effect of the state, which “should be examined not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist” (Mitchell 1991:94). This state effect can be extended to assemblages more broadly in talking about the need for robust representation to give coherence to heterogeneous entities. For instance, the assemblage of the U.S. is represented through the federal government’s bureaucratic apparatus, the ideological construction of shared commitments—such as American exceptionalism, as well as discourses on the American national interest. Needless to say, a diversity of opinions undergirds these constructions, and so a representation of *the* U.S. must be actively assembled for a coherent and effective social imaginary.

The third characteristic follows from the preceding discussion as assemblages projecting consistent singularity then authorizing particular identities, knowledge, and actions to take shape. Assemblages are deeply involved in “conducting conduct” by serving as provisional problem-solving arrangements. However, assemblages do not just respond to some crisis “out there” but are implicated in the very construction of what is considered a crisis. Assemblages help define problems and also inform the space of possibilities for any resolution. IOs as assemblages are as much about the collective definition and appropriation of problems as they are about creating solutions. Again, assemblages are social imaginaries in the sense that by creating a map of social space they allow subjects to imagine and perform particular social constructions they could not have otherwise. This guidance is integral to how people imagine themselves (identity), what they value as true or real (knowledge), and what they do (action). Tracing an assemblage means to follow the arrangements of identities, knowledge, and action that are produced in efforts to make what Michel Foucault (2007) terms certain knowable and hence governable subjects. For instance, the assemblage of the global war on terror enables governments to label rebels as “domestic terrorists” and so recalibrate the legal and military recourse available in combat. However, the way such an assemblage defines terrorism and what a war on terrorism means is linked with the kinds of activated social relations and the actors who have access to the assemblage.

Finally, the fourth characteristic refers to the play and reconstruction that are always a part of assemblage. Moving beyond the structuralist tendency for unidirectional impositions dropped on top of actors, assemblages involve interpretation and assessment of given social mappings. Indeed, there are multiple ways to interact within an assemblage, and such multiplicity gives rise to alternative and new connections. Using Wittgensteinian rules finitism, or that rules do not contain instructions for their interpretation, assemblages make room for rules to be followed in many different ways. This could be read as “assemblage is what you make of it,” but also that the very relationality of assemblage builds an intersubjective coproduction of meaning tempering structural domination. Of course, this does not mean anything is possible and assemblages are perennially changeable. Instead, possibilities for

creative action emerge when assemblages break down and need fixing. As social relations are contingent the opportunity for a crisis is present every time the assemblage is performed. For instance, a particular assemblage constituting nation-states may authorize a territorial integrity norm that obligates nation-states to respect each other's sovereignty. How integrity is interpreted is variable as evident by covert military actions or overt economic sanctions that may affect a nation-state's ability to have and hold on to territory. The assemblage also reorganizes itself to better accommodate the incursions against territorial integrity given certain human rights violations.

As a preliminary illustration, let me take the example of the United Nations (UN) as an assemblage. To help make this point, Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas Weiss (2009) extend Inis Claude's insight about "two UNs" to "three UNs" in that, "there have been at most times and for most issues three distinct UNs in operation: the UN of governments, the UN of staff members, and the UN of closely associated NGOs, experts, and consultants" (Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009: 32–33). The three UNs involve myriad social interactions with different types of actors—government officials, staff members, NGOs, experts—across local, domestic, and international levels of analysis. While we can disaggregate the UN into three components, they nonetheless project coherence that allows for a shared performance of identity, knowledge, and action. In particular, the assemblage authorizes "eight distinct and ideational roles played collectively by the three UNs, sometimes in isolation and sometimes together or in parallel. These roles are providing a forum for debate; generating ideas; giving ideas international legitimacy; promoting the adoption of such ideas for policy; implementing or testing ideas and policies at the country level; generating resources to pursue new policies; monitoring progress; and let us admit, occasionally acting to bury ideas that seem inconvenient or excessively controversial" (Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:34–35). The parts of the UN as an assemblage—the three UNs—are arranged and combined in numerous ways that enable the UN to perform alternatively as actor, forum, or resource. Of course, the three UNs themselves are assemblages in that they each represent processes of assembly as they "are anything but monoliths, and as each component is subject to variations and various power positions" (Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss 2009:35). The UN as an assemblage also points to the interpretive possibilities of the social imaginary in the performance of authorized identity, knowledge, and action. To this end, "significantly, differences in the ways that various members of the three United Nations play their roles or in the tactics they pursue often provide an element of creative tension that leads to boldness and innovation, creating positions that governments alone might not otherwise adopt or might even avoid" (*Ibid.*). Innovation emerges from difference among the three UNs in the process of the UN as an assemblage.

My conceptualization of assemblage relies on a couple of approaches in social theory. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) introduce assemblage in *A Thousand Plateaus* and highlight three crosscutting connections between material content and discourse, space and time, and presence and absence. Flowing relations between people and things are spatially and temporally fixed in the assemblage through accelerating or braking, segmenting or dislocating, and amplifying or muting the fluidity. For Deleuze and Guattari, undergirding the assemblages is the rhizome—interconnected roots—breaking the linearity as it "ceaselessly

establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relevant to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:7). Rhizomes can be linked to anything, work in multiplicity, overcome rupture, are a stranger to deep structure, construct the unconscious, are in *medias res*, and represent a desire to connect. The particular rhizomatically informed assemblage does not just manifest spontaneously but is a product of the power relations that try and tamp down flows to a specific time, space, and presence. From Deleuze and Guattari I extend that assemblages may take seriously non-hierarchy, multiplicity, and temporality but forces that attempt to impose hierarchy, singularity, and permanence always constitute them.⁴

Bruno Latour (2005) also advances an assemblage approach in *Reassembling the Social*, which upends the conventional “connecting pipes” characterization of a network to deploy network as an adjective rather than a noun. In other words, network describes instead of being described. If the flows of interactions from one actor to another create networked relations, then it is through tracing these linkages that the origins of “social construction” emerge. In other words, Latour claims that networked interactions *are* what we mean when we say “the social” instead of such interactions being *embedded in* social context. Another essential component of Latour’s analysis is his reconceptualization of “social” being used as a noun instead of as an adjective. The reversal of networks as adjective and social as noun leads Latour to use networks to explain and assemble the social instead of using the social to explain networks. There is no social apart from interaction, and assemblages assist in figuring out the composition of social construction. Contra social constructivists, Latour’s “constructionist” approach argues that social relations are not an independent variable, or something that explains by existing exogenously, but rather a dependent variable, or something that needs explaining and active assembly.⁵

The assemblage vocabulary is gradually making its way in the international relations (IR) literature. For instance, Saskia Sassen’s (2006) globalization narrative looks at national and global entities which “across time and space, territory, authority, and rights have been assembled into distinct formations within which they have had variable levels of performance” (Sassen 2006:5). Sassen relies on assemblage as a tool to capture the constellation of territory, authority, and rights that appear throughout history, thereby taking the social construction of the nation-state as an accomplishment. The “produced project” showing that past social arrangements “took making” is exactly the work of showing something as an assemblage. In addition, Jennifer Mitzen (2010) proposes a collective intentionality framework that shares some affinities with assemblage. The focus on social product and purposiveness refers to the building efforts in assemblage. Mitzen relies on speech act theory to treat collective intentionality as performing governance acts such that international coordination wills assemblages into existence. Mitzen also identifies an “ontic requirement to govern” for stable identities of actors (who are mostly states), which is met in interstate forums like IOs.

Assemblage theory is also gaining traction in other disciplines where variants of network analysis have been in use for some time to map social relations (for a good review, see Marcus

4. Scholars who push Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization to organize a more formal assemblage theory include Paul Rabinow (2003), and Manuel DeLanda (2006).

5. Jane Bennett (2005, 2009) advances the ANTian approach to assemblage in her formulation of a new materialism.

and Saka, 2006). In sociology, Karin Knorr Cetina (2005) diagrams financial markets and terrorist networks using the assemblage-inspired “global microstructure.” In particular, Knorr Cetina draws on complex global microstructures as “forms of connectivity and coordination that combine global reach with microstructural mechanisms that instantiate self-organizing principles and patterns” to mimic the array of assemblages required in global imagination (Knorr Cetina 2005:214). In anthropology, taking heed from Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2005), Tania Murray Li employs assemblage as that which “flags agency, the hard work required to draw heterogeneous elements together, forge connections between them and sustain these connections in the face of tension. It invites analysis of how the elements of an assemblage might—or might not—be made to cohere” (Li 2007:264). The notion of flagging agency is useful as an assemblage approach aspires to make visible the multitude of agentic efforts in reproducing structures. Furthermore, both Knorr Cetina and Li are attentive to the potentials of doing situated (field) research with assemblage serving as an organizing tool without being totalizing. The allure of assemblage is the relatively little disciplinary strings attached that encourage more interdisciplinary (as opposed to multidisciplinary) use.

It may be useful to briefly distinguish assemblage from other sociological terms such as institutions, fields, and regimes that may at first glance offer similar conceptual leverage for the study of IOs.⁶ Compared to institutions, assemblage better captures IOs as contingent social arrangements rather than settled products (either formal or informal) that have difficulty accommodating change. Unlike fields, assemblage bounds IOs as hierarchical entities with horizontal and vertical dimensions to maintain a focus on power relations. Assemblage also differs from regimes by shifting the focus from cooperation under anarchy to governance beyond anarchy. In addition, unlike other analytical heuristics, assemblage combines theories on practice and discourse to talk about IOs. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot define practice as “competent performances” (Adler and Pouliot 2011:6). Practice builds on action and behavior by adding meaning and serving as “patterned action that are embedded in particular organizational contexts and, as such, are articulated into specific types of action and are socially developed through learning and training” (*Ibid.*).

In this articulation, practice is one of the social activities that occur in an assemblage and serve as an IO’s building blocks made visible by repetition. Recalling the initial framing of assemblage, I am interested in both practice and representation as structuring IOs as assemblages. In this vein, assemblage also works through discourse, which Charlotte Epstein defines as “a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and, therefore, delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it” (Epstein 2008:2). An assemblage is represented through particular ideas, concepts, and categorizations in addition to making particular ideas, concepts, and categorizations possible. In other words, if we see discourse as “sense-making practices” then an assemblage is both activated by and activates discourse (Epstein 2008:4). Tracing an assemblage amounts to tracking the different practices of an IO as well as following the many discourses involved in representing the IO.

Usefulness for IOs

The field of IO studies is diverse and increasingly complex. However, at least three practices

6. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to make this clarification.

appear, often in tandem, to dominate the study of IOs: first, a commitment to describing and/or explaining particular IOs; second, attempts to theorize about all IOs more generally; and third, linking IOs to other transnational, domestic, and local institutions. A large portion of IO scholarship falls under the first practice of describing and/or explaining particular IOs. Focusing on IO effects, this scholarship is concerned with demonstrating how an IO “matters” in international politics (for example, on the World Bank see Nielson, Tierney, and Weaver 2006; on the UNSC see Hurd 2007; on the WTO see Goldstein, Rivers, and Tomz 2007; on the IMF see Weaver 2010). Typically, IOs exert influence on national governments and the central question becomes: How did the IO change state behavior?

The second practice theorizes about IOs more generally as actors in international politics and continues with the framing of IO effects on state behavior. Realist approaches treat IOs as instruments to express power relations among states. Scholars working within this tradition generally attribute no independent effect to IOs in affecting state behavior (Mearsheimer 1994/1995) or may use state concerns for power to account for institutional genesis (Ikenberry 2001).⁷ Neoliberal institutionalist approaches agree with the realist characterization of IOs except in two important assumptions on uncertainty and states as unitary actors. Unlike realists, neoliberal institutionalists perceive information scarcity as variable rather than constant. IOs act to reduce information scarcity, thereby mitigating uncertainty and improving the likelihood of interstate cooperation (Keohane 1984; Keohane and Martin 2003). In addition, neoliberal institutionalists move away from one of realism’s core tenets of the unitary actor assumption to unpack state preferences (Moravcsik 2003) as well as show cases where state power is endogenous yet epiphenomenal to IOs (Fortna 2003). Constructivist approaches treat IOs as norm diffusers, perhaps reflecting a world society/culture (Meyer 2009; Finnemore 1996), and as black boxes to open and reveal institutional and/or cultural logics (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). While constructivist approaches disregard the source of power to lie only in material capabilities of states, the constitutive narrative of rules changing actor identity still relies on states as the primary actor (Wendt 1999).

The third practice situates IOs within other transnational, domestic, and local institutions by traversing multiple levels of analysis in order to reveal the networked connections of IOs with transnational movements (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), domestic politics (Simmons 2009), and local systems (Carpenter 2003). Furthermore, principal-agent (PA) approaches to IOs import insights from comparative politics and branch off into two segments. Principal-centered approaches are similar to neoliberal institutionalism where the concern is when and why states delegate authority to IOs (Hawkins et al. 2006; Milner 2006). Agent-centered approaches regard IOs (agents) as having independent effects on state (principal) preferences by treating any agency slack as intentional and strategic (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006; Gould 2006). The agent-centered PA approach is part of a larger reorientation to provide more agency to IOs in constructing rules for the world. While this group of scholars is most likely to include IO process in their accounts, the end goal typically remains to show the myriad ways in which IOs matter for state action.

7. With full understanding that Ikenberry would not self-identify as a realist, his argument still bears similarity with realism’s core claims.

Despite their differences, all three practices in IO literature share their focus on the effects of IOs and on analyzing degrees of independence in the state-IO relationship. How do assemblages help inquire differently about IOs?

First, assemblages allow us to hook on to and transcend the traditional state/nonstate and human/nonhuman boundaries in identifying relevant political actors in IR. Assemblages displace the privilege afforded to state actors as the exclusive purveyors of IOs and opens space for representing nonhuman objects that help plug human interactions to each other. The interchangeability bias of IO and international governmental organization (IGO) is prevalent in the field of IO studies and draws from the state-centrism in IR theory more broadly. Contra this prevailing view, the assemblage approach does not give *a priori* agentic status to any actor, as iterated by the first characteristic of assemblages; instead, in following the practices and representations that constitute a particular assemblage, it focuses on the players without whom the game could not be played. For instance, when examining the World Trade Organization (WTO) as an assemblage, we would pay attention to nongovernmental organizations such as the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and their role in setting the conditions for liberalizing international trade through institutionalized networking of exporters worldwide. Whereas the WTO formally exists as a governmental organization, other actors confer robustness on the broader international trade regime from which the WTO derives its discursive leverage. Also, in documenting international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), an assemblage view would piece together the different arrangements of government officials, economists, and their financial instruments that make possible the surveillance of exchange rates and other financial risk indicators for borrower profiles. These latter technologies are an integral part of the functioning apparatus that help the IMF cohere and project itself as a unitary actor in international finance.

Second, assemblages refashion the structure/agency debate in the relationship between states and IOs to conceive of assembled instead of delegated authority. States are not external to the IOs constraining and enabling action but are one of the key assemblers (along with nongovernmental actors, civic society, etc.) always in the process of relational recomposition. Strands of IR theory differently emphasize the agency of IOs vis-à-vis states, such as by positing that IOs are no more than puppets of state power (realism), IOs are independent of state actors (neoliberal internationalism), or that states delegate authority to IOs with space for agency slack (principal-agent approaches). The ontology of IO as actor, forum, or resource seems to map on a structure-agency continuum. In this narrative, it matters whether or not IOs have an identity distinct from their creators (usually governments, although this gets more complicated in nongovernmental organizations) so that IOs may influence state behavior. Such traditional framing emphasizes the effects of IOs as a claim to relevance in international politics.

Alternatively, an assemblage view takes IOs as effects and portrays boundaries in the IO–state relationship as manufactured instead of given. This means reorganizing the relationship of states and other political actors to IOs such that the question is not how much independence the latter has from the former but how the process of assembly results in such boundary-making in the first place. Referring back to the second characteristic of assemblages, the

puzzle is how coherence and distinctiveness emerges in IO self-identity. For instance, thinking about the UN Security Council as an assemblage may lead us to ask how the council organizes authoritative relations not only among its members but also with other UN bodies. In some conventional wisdom, the council may appear to be a tool in the hands of states—for example when failing to put together tougher sanctions on Iran or not intervening in Syria—or as an independent actor—for example in its ability to set the terms of debate on international peace and security as compared to other forums. However, an assemblage view would see the variation in agency as not very compelling, and the attempt to measure influence either as a change in state behavior or in guiding the discourse on legitimacy may miss the broader point that the council serves as a projection of how states relate to themselves. IO as assemblage’s relational focus does not just highlight the space between structure and agency but also portrays assemblage as a particular representation of space that exists in structure and agency.

Third, IOs as assemblages focuses as much on the specificities of an IO coming into existence as it does on how its existence matters for international politics. An assemblage approach makes connections between these two seemingly distinct operations of IO as an effect and the effects of an IO through inquiring: How do the processes of constructing IOs inform their efforts in constructing politics? How do the “inner workings” of IOs help explain their ontology as actor, forum, or resource? Alternatively, as specified in the third characteristic of assemblage, how do the authorization of particular identities, knowledge, and action occur over others? An assemblage approach might privilege a historical analysis of how IOs come to be the way they are but assemblage tracing can also work in highlighting contemporary associations. For example, the European Union (EU) has assumed many shapes over the last few decades. One analytical result of seeing the EU as an assemblage is to follow the historical development of the different components of the EU from its inception as the European Coal and Steel Community till the present. Another may be to parse out the various links currently constituting the EU in an attempt to map out the interactions that keep the engines running everyday. Both of these moves may be conducted as traditional network analyzes—either emphasizing temporal breadth or current depth—that already persist in organization studies but with two exceptions. First, the added language of assemblage focuses the research question on how the shape of an assemblage may affect its capacity to shape others. Second, assemblages use network analysis not as the outcome of what is being described but as a method of describing. In other words, the EU as an assemblage may not really look like a network, conventionally conceived, but it is traced by following networks in the assemblage.

Fourth, and perhaps most fundamentally, simply invoking the terminology of assemblage directs inquiry on action and process given the accompanying images of building and composition. While the attention to IO process is not unique to assemblages, there is a stronger emphasis in the assemblage story on interpretation alongside intentionality. For example, the conventional perspective on institutional design uses state intentionality as the scope conditions for the possibilities of IO actions (the foremost example being Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001). By contrast, in an assemblage approach, IO design is never complete such that what may initially serve as the impetus for an IO’s entry into the world does not result in a finished product as much as the start of a process. One crucial part of this

process is the interpretation—referred to in the fourth characteristic of assemblage as play—associated with assembly. Assemblages are reproduced on the basis of redesign and changing intentionality along with interpretation and performance. There is some institutional flexibility in responding to the authoritative practices and discourses allowing slight modifications and “off-performances” that lead to gradual change in the assemblage. Despite the conditions for ephemerality, IOs endure. Interpretations may be deviant but are not always subversive. For instance, UN peacekeeping operations confront many opportunities to interpret UNSC mandates in the field. Different field commanders across various peacekeeping missions contextually define the meaning of “robust force” and “self-defense.” As an assemblage, UN peacekeeping is held together by a vast array of practices and representations that do not always make sense to practitioners. Some of these relations are reified and so endure; others are contested and so discarded. IOs as assemblages place the process of this discovery at the forefront of any analysis.

Conclusion

In this paper, I offer an alternative framework of how to think about IOs. I argue that seeing IOs as assemblages opens them up to novel forms of inquiry that help us better understand social structures. Focusing on the practices and representation of assembling IOs means we have access to a fuller picture of how international relations are organized. IOs are assemblages of problem-solving deliberative arrangements that frame discourses and experiment with creative action. Power flows through the assembly process as IO ontology of actor, forum, or resource is constitutive with socially mediated local and global interactions.

While beyond the scope of this paper, important questions remain about how assemblages hold on to their coherence and robustness. The next step would be to empirically flesh out IOs as assemblages in future studies. Foreseeing a research agenda, there are four avenues that may be productive in moving the IOs as assemblage approach forward.

First, IOs are situated in a larger landscape of global governance that is often portrayed as increasingly networked and flattened (Slaughter 2004). Considerations of power take a back seat in this vision of horizontal fluidity. Using assemblages to map IOs involved with global governance introduces the hierarchical relations and blockages that are so frequent in how international politics is conducted.

Second, as organizational politics between IOs becomes more acute for IR scholars, assemblages help frame the discussion by drawing together different sets of IOs. Examining inter-institutional relations is a fertile ground for the assemblage approach as it speaks to the interactive and interpretive attributes of diverse IO practices.

Third, the empirical proliferation of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) is matched by a dearth of scholarship examining possible theoretical implications on how we study IR. Research on IOs as assemblages would better help accommodate INGOs into state-dominant narratives on governance, authority, and sovereignty.

Finally, it is becoming less clear what exactly counts as international and how it is made. Assemblages work to produce the effect of something that we can recognize as international within which we have relations.

Looking ahead, then, a new approach in the study of IOs seems ready to be assembled.

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