

# International Organizations: A Propaedeutic

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**International Organizations: Politics, Law, Practice**, Ian Hurd, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 (paperback or hardback); ISBN 978-0-521-76834-4 (hardback), 978-0-521-14737-8 (paperback); £19.99 / US\$39.99; 282 pages

Ian Hurd's textbook seeks to provide an introduction to international organizations (IOs) with an emphasis on the question of how these bodies that shape international politics are shaped by international relations/member states. The title already suggests the author's transdisciplinary alignment, which is explicitly stated in the introduction: "the book believes that the best pedagogy on IOs begins by looking at *what IOs do* rather than at what others say about them or what we might hope that they do." With this ambition, the author probes into the grey zone between political science and international law literature that is insufficiently covered—at least by textbooks. Textbooks either focus primarily on the (legal) obligations of IOs or overemphasize political (historic, structural, and procedural) aspects. A balanced view on international bodies that takes into account both views is addressed by current research but rarely represented in introductory works. Hence, Hurd's volume promises a timely contribution to IO studies.

The book gives a short but solid overview of the key international governmental organizations, including a brief theoretical and methodological introduction. In this section, the author carves out three criteria for analyzing IOs: The powers and obligations given to an organization by its founding treaties, compliance by its member states, and an IO's enforcement options against law-breakers. After having set out these analytical benchmarks for studying and assessing international bodies, the author portrays the practice of ten IOs including the UN, World Trade Organization, EU, International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court, International Labor Organization, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Each section follows the same procedure, defining key facts and discussing organizational practice along the three parameters of obligations, compliance, and enforcement. The book matches all requirements of an up-to-date textbook, not only because it offers a remarkably systematic view but also because it delivers case studies, sets forth discussion questions, and provides further reading. With this repertoire, it proves to be a well-designed pedagogic work ready for use in any introductory course on IOs.

Moreover, from a learning perspective, the book is a welcome introductory help. It uses catchy language and is reader friendly, eschewing technical scholarly terminology and abbreviations as often employed in political science or international law writings. Hurd's book also resists swamping the reader with too much information by presenting carefully selected background knowledge on IOs. Without a doubt, this aspect is one of the unique accomplishments of the book: Besides highlighting "hard" facts and figures such as legal dispositions of concern

about an IO, it also offers “soft facts” about the IO’s daily performance that often enough look starkly different from the formal normative organizational setting. This “critical account” is evident in sentences like “much of the action around the WTO consists of lawyerly argument about the meaning of the words [clauses of the GATT agreement] . . . behind these vague terms are political battles of enormous consequence.” With this insider’s look at organizational life, the book lives up to its promise to deliver a fresh approach that goes beyond a mere legalistic reading of IOs or any overly detailed (political) account of organizational structures and procedures. While reading the book, one gets the impression that with its “critical account of IOs” it comes much closer to organizational reality than other comparable introductory works. Another outstanding feature of this textbook is Hurd has succeeded in translating latest research such as compliance theory into a comprehensible textbook format. Thus, he has walked a fine line between maintaining a general language that can be followed by a nonscholarly audience and at the same time challenge the more-informed reader.

Regarding the volume’s purpose to assess IOs from two perspectives—how they shape international relations and how they are shaped by these structures—it could be said the book underestimates the first aspect: “How IOs matter.” Although the author comes to the conclusion that an IO’s “power” should be assessed individually, depending on specific cases and situations, he argues “the success of an IO can be judged by the metric of whether their members carry out their obligations.” Nothing is wrong with this argument, but for a balanced assessment that is mindful of an organization’s “power” or impact on its member states, other criteria than only state compliance should be mentioned. Recent research has brought to light important functions of organizations, which can be asserted as authentic “powers,” such as the role of leadership of IOs, or their function as knowledge resources.

Of course, it should not be neglected that Hurd’s book is conceptualized as an introductory volume, thus, it is not appropriate to fault it for omitting certain aspects of IOs. However, it could be expected from an introductory work to at least hint at other perspectives and approaches to assess the impact of IOs. Otherwise, an uninformed reader could easily be misled to think there are only the three options to view an IO as depicted by the author (the IO as an actor, as a forum, and as a resource of a member state’s politics). Similarly, a reductionist grip comes to the fore in the author’s discussion of research methods. Borrowing from the IR theory toolbox, Hurd displays three methodological approaches—contractualism, regime theory, and constructivism—without further explaining why he precisely focuses on this selection or indicating there are other approaches. This methodological foundation has its pitfalls since these approaches are all based on an ontology of international relations that focuses on states as central objects of concern and not on organizations. This crucial difference between states and IOs as research objects is not taken into account by the author—or at least not verbalized. Consequently, the methodological program does not reflect the previously stressed description of the nature of IOs and therefore appears strangely disassociated from the ontological section. In addition to this “ontological and methodological reduction,” the theoretical background outlined in the introductory section has other weaknesses. Certain arguments are presented in a highly reduced manner and are not immediately evident to the reader. For example, the author invokes an “eternal paradox” in which IOs are trapped,

because their “powers and existence are derivative of precisely those actors (i.e., states) that they are supposed to regulate.” This statement might point to problematic constitutive conditions but in itself it does not explicate why this fact should constitute a paradox.

However, these shortcomings do not detract from the book’s quality as introductory volume, which could be complemented by more in-depth literature, if necessary. In sum, the book presents a convincing general portrait of IOs that throws a critical and realistic light on these bodies. With this special account, it contributes a highly valuable orientation to students of IOs.