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INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

The Evolution of IO Theory

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Describe the main characteristics of the early scholarship on international organizations and the main ways the field evolved through the 1970s.
- 2.2 Contrast the assumptions of classical realism with neorealism.
- 2.3 Describe the similarities and differences between different forms of institutionalism.
- 2.4 Identify some of the major “fault lines” in the scholarly field of international organizations.

Scholars and researchers study organizations from many different disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, history, public administration, and law. Some fields cross disciplinary boundaries, such as the field of organizational studies, which draws from economics, political science, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The range of research on organizations is enormous, which is unsurprising since organizations are ubiquitous, infusing and impacting all aspects of our lives, from the community level to the international level. Academics are interested in why organizations exist, how they are designed, what kinds of influence they have, why they succeed or fail, why and how they change, how they work together and with other partners, and whether they are legitimate. Obviously, these issues are not just important to academics. They are directly relevant to policymakers seeking to create, design, use, and improve organizations for a variety of purposes. They are relevant to the broader public, for example, where there is concern international organizations (IOs) may be tools of powerful states or concern that the work of IOs has caused or encouraged some type of harm. The famous German sociologist Max Weber recognized in the nineteenth century that society was bureaucratized, and that trend has continued to deepen, particularly in the international realm. As Inis Claude Jr., author of a seminal study of international organizations, noted more than fifty years ago, “The growing complexity of international relations has already produced international organizations; the world is engaged in the process of organizing.”¹ More recent debates about the complex effects of globalization on the dominance of the nation-state and its monopoly on governance and how we conceptualize global governance itself has further increased scrutiny of IOs and the roles that they do or should play in the global political and economic system.²

This chapter focuses on the major debates and approaches within the field of international relations (a subfield of political science) that shape our understanding of IOs, but it will also

draw on theories and other approaches found in other fields that have influenced IO theory. The borders between fields are fluid, and many scholars straddle more than one. For example, a number of scholars within the field of comparative politics specialize in regional politics and institutions, such as the European Union, and they regularly contribute to broader theoretical and empirical work on IOs. IO scholars in the field of international relations also commonly borrow and build upon ideas with roots in other disciplines, such as economics and sociology, which explains some of the fault lines running through the IO literature.

Many scholars have pointed out that the field's emphasis is often shaped by events and by their own political orientation.³ It is no surprise that the field is largely populated by scholars who think IOs matter and have an impact on world politics; the vast majority of those who disagree do not choose to devote their scholarly career to studying IOs, but may dip a toe in now and then with a strong argument about why IOs are largely irrelevant. In fact, in the study of IOs, one of the perennial debates is whether IOs have an influence on political and other outcomes as independent actors with some degree of autonomy or whether they are merely stages at the margins of world politics where states, as the "real" and most important actors, meet to pursue their self-interests.

The chapter proceeds with a brief history of the field of IOs, highlighting some of the factors, events, thinkers, and strands of research that have influenced the field over the years. It then turns to the major debates that have shaped the contemporary field, as well as how different ways of organizing theoretical approaches, methodologies, and research programs offer insights about the types of questions scholars ask and the answers they offer. It concludes by discussing several of the cutting-edge issues of today to give readers a sense of some of the directions in which the field is heading. IO scholarship is eclectic, but there are also a handful of key research questions that keep popping up. In addition to whether IOs are actors or stages, these include why states create IOs, whether and how IOs help states to cooperate, why IOs perform poorly, why and how IOs change, whether and how IOs exert power and influence, and what role IOs do or should play in global governance. It is also the case that scholars and practitioners still lack easy or conclusive answers for some of the basic issues. Many of the debates found in this and subsequent chapters are alive, incomplete, and unresolved, leaving plenty of room for future generations of IO scholars and practitioners to contribute to deepening our understanding of what makes these organizations tick.

1930s–1970s

Some of the early scholarship on IOs pre–World War II appeared within the fields of diplomatic history and international law, inspired in part by the Wilsonian idealism embodied in the ill-fated League of Nations. International lawyers analyzed the multilateral treaties underlying the international organizations. Political scientists studying comparative governmental organizations tended to compare institutional structures and procedures with each other and with platonic forms. Generally, these studies were more descriptive than theoretical, and many did not look closely at questions of politics, power, and performance. Claude compared the early studies of IOs to learning about an automobile by looking at the blueprints and under the hood rather than by seeing how the automobile actually works while driven in traffic.⁴

In the 1940s and 1950s, the field of international relations took shape in the post–World War II world, amidst an enormous reconstruction effort and the creation of a handful of major IOs designed to help protect the world from future world wars. These profound changes sparked a flurry of studies examining the new institutions and analyzing the appropriateness of their design, their possible impact, and their ability to influence domestic politics, among other issues.⁵ A new journal, *International Organization*, was founded in 1947 by the World Peace Foundation with these issues in mind and is today the leading journal in the field of IOs.⁶ Many of the major themes about politics, design, behavior, and performance discussed and analyzed in the 1950s are still visible in today’s scholarship. The difference is that the literature today is more explicitly social scientific and theoretical in nature and less descriptive and policy oriented. Some scholars believe that the earlier insights did not resonate over the years because they lacked a “theoretical hook” on which to hang their conclusions.⁷

As *behavioralism* became the dominant approach in American political science by the 1960s, its more explicitly social scientific methodology influenced the study of IOs. Behaviorists tended to focus on the political behavior of actors and institutions, with an emphasis on verifying testable propositions through quantitative methods.⁸ It was a reaction against, as Gabriel Almond and Stephen Genco noted, “a tradition of ideographic, descriptive, noncumulative, and institutional case studies that had dominated much of the discipline.”⁹ A good deal of work on IOs in the 1960s focused on the United Nations, emphasizing topics such as the statistical analysis of voting behavior in the General Assembly and various national attitudes toward the UN.¹⁰ Over time, these issues seemed to border on irrelevance in light of important events and trends in world politics, and scholarly attention turned elsewhere. For example, given that the General Assembly lacks power, sophisticated analysis of its voting behavior was not terribly insightful in explaining the factors shaping world politics. As the Cold War unfolded, the UN itself was revealed to be “usually little more than a sideshow” on the geopolitical stage.¹¹ Meanwhile, the United States grew increasingly disillusioned with the anti-Western bent of a General Assembly that, by the early 1970s, was dominated by newly independent members who held the majority of votes and often voted in ways that conflicted with US interests.¹²

Another active strand of research on IOs between the 1960s and early 1970s was taking place among scholars seeking to make sense of the novel and exciting experiment in economic integration taking place in Europe and understand what impact integration would have on the nation-state. Steps toward European integration posed a challenge to the realist theories that dominated international relations in the 1950s, which could not account for attempts by states to pool sovereignty. Early scholars of *integration theory* were interested in how the political processes of integration helped to shape political actors, their interests, and their strategies. Ernst Haas, for example, argued that once an integration process was underway it would also have unintended consequences that would reinforce the process. This would happen as interest groups realized the benefits of integration in one area and pushed to see it in other areas. Haas called this “spillover.”¹³ Karl Deutsch, in turn, was interested in how shared values, effective communication channels, and other related factors could create “security communities” that were political communities with an ability to eliminate war.¹⁴

Some of the more optimistic assumptions about economic integration in Europe made in the 1950s and 1960s ran into trouble when the process appeared to stagnate given French President Charles de Gaulle's opposition to supranationality and his demand that member states comprising the Council of Ministers have the right to veto European Community (EC) activities. The resulting informal agreement that required member-state unanimity on questions seen as important to national interest dampened the pace of integration.¹⁵ Optimism about Haasian "spillover" effects were replaced by discussion of "spillback," "spillaround," and even "muddle-about."¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, when the pace of European integration picked up in the late 1980s, fresh attention was given to these early theories.

1970s–1990s: REALISM, NEOREALISM

Attention to the study of formal international organizations waned by the early 1970s, as gaps between major international issues and the activities of international organizations seemed to widen. The Vietnam War, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of international exchange rate management, and the 1973 oil crisis are some examples of major events that either took place outside of traditional IOs or showed how impotent IOs were in managing or solving global problems.¹⁷ In the US-based scholarly world, both liberals and realists became more interested in how international institutional structures that were broader than formal organizations interacted with power politics and capabilities.¹⁸ The result was scholarly interest in analyzing *regimes*, or the broad rules, norms, and principles that defined the "rules of the game" helping to shape international politics.¹⁹ Regimes might encompass, but also go beyond, traditional IOs. For example, the international trade regime included the General Agreement of Tariff and Trade (GATT) treaty and the regular meetings of the GATT contracting parties, who negotiated tariff reductions and other measures to encourage free trade. Another example from the 1970s is the international norms and rules regarding how to safeguard nuclear materials.²⁰ Scholars examined how regimes were formed, how they influenced the abilities of states to cooperate, and what their other effects were on power, norms, and specific policy issues.²¹

As with any new academic fashion, there were critics. One of the best-known critics of regime theory was Susan Strange, who famously called the concept "woolly" since it had been used to mean a number of different things, from the very narrow to the overly broad.²² She also felt that existing global structures reflected the United States' position as the system's hegemon and argued that power politics shouldn't disappear in the haze of regime analysis. For example, she argued that the international security regime is not something based on the United Nations Charter, "which remains as unchanged as it is irrelevant," but rather on "the balance of power between superpowers."²³

This critique dovetailed with neorealist Kenneth Waltz's seminal 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*, which had a major impact on the academic field of international relations. Realists, and their more social-scientific descendants *neorealists*, view the state as the main unit of analysis in a world characterized by anarchy (in the sense that there is no power above the state) and assume that states seek power in order to ensure their survival. It is a pessimistic view of world politics that has been around for thousands of years.²⁴ Cooperation between states

may exist, but it is constrained by the larger issues of competition for security and power. For Waltz, the anarchic structure of the international system was its defining feature and had a very important impact on shaping state behavior.²⁵ He was critical of the idea that domestic politics determine a state's behavior at the international level, instead arguing that state decisions are "shaped by the very presence of other states as well as by interactions with them."²⁶ In his view, domestic politics were essentially unimportant.

The contemporary realist and neorealist view of world politics had a significant impact on the study of IOs because it assumed IOs function at the margins of international politics and, as such, were also unimportant. As neorealist John Mearsheimer put it, powerful states may create IOs as a way to "maintain their share of world politics, or even increase it."²⁷ Realist Hans Morgenthau, writing in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II, looked askance at the liberal views heard at the time that organizations like the United Nations could do away with power politics, arguing instead that "the struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience."²⁸ This debate on whether or not IOs matter or have any significance or autonomy in world politics was a central one in the field for many years, usually pitting the realists against everyone else. Many of the most important scholarly contributions to the IO field over the years have been attempts to show that IOs *do* matter and *how* they matter. Today, with renewed pressure on the role of IOs in global governance, the field has moved past many of the "yes/no" answers to whether IOs matter to more nuanced explorations of when and how they do or do not matter in individual issue areas or parts of the world.

FLAVORS OF INSTITUTIONALISM

Beginning in the mid-1980s, academics began a fresh effort to chip away at the pessimistic arguments made by realists. The ideas that hegemony was necessary for cooperation via regimes and that cooperation in a "realist" world was hard to come by were challenged by Robert Keohane, who developed in the mid-1980s a functional theory of regimes.²⁹ The argument was simple but counterintuitive; even in the face of (what appeared to be at the time) a decline in the United States' role as hegemon, regimes remained viable and useful.³⁰ Regimes, according to Keohane, fill a variety of functions, such as providing information, reducing the cost of bargaining, and increasing opportunities for reciprocity. The result is a reduction in uncertainty and more occasions for cooperation. Keohane's views were initially labeled as *modified structural realist*, given the fact that he shared many of the same basic assumptions as realists regarding state as the main unit of analysis in an anarchic world. Over time, this functionalist argument became known as *neoliberal institutionalist*, as Keohane and others argued that IOs were able to exert a much greater impact on state behavior than realists believed to be the case. States are still the most powerful actors in this perspective, and IOs are still stages and not actors, but the formal and informal rules found in formal organizations and regimes help states to define their interests, to make commitments that are credible, and to monitor one another.³¹ IOs enable states to cooperate in the neoliberal institutionalist view, in contrast with the realist assumption that IOs may constrain state behavior.³²

Neoliberal institutionalism was nested in the broader research agenda of rational choice institutionalism, which in turn was one of several strands of *institutionalist* theorizing that took shape in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, each form of institutionalism—*rational choice institutionalism*, *sociological institutionalism*, and *historical institutionalism*—gave rise to rich families of research that continue to resonate through the field of IO. They all shared the view that, in some way or another, institutions mattered in terms of influencing political, economic, and social outcomes. But they all differed in terms of *how* institutions mattered—for instance, whether or not they have any independence and which methodologies and theoretical orientations were most useful for explaining their roles. This scholarship was responding to realist views of IOs, but it also tapped into a deeper reaction to the behavioralist approaches that argued formal institutions defined more broadly as political and economic structures were epiphenomenal.

This renewed attention to institutions, dubbed *new institutionalism*, extended well beyond the field of IO since it was rippling across the social sciences with a lively degree of interdisciplinary interaction between political scientists, economists, sociologists, and organizational theorists.³³ As sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell noted, “There are as many ‘new institutionalisms’ as there are social science disciplines.”³⁴

The branch of new institutionalism known as rational choice institutionalism evolved as an effort by scholars to extend and critique neoclassical economic theories. Rational choice institutionalism is based on the assumption that individuals are self-interested, rational actors who pursue strategies to maximize their well-being. Their preferences are assumed to be stable and “given” (or exogenous). The “new institutionalists” in this strand of scholarship were interested in how institutional features matter—that is, how they provide a “strategic context” that shapes individual choice.³⁵ In the field of American politics, many scholars applied these insights to the study of the US Congress and how its rules and procedures arise, how they influence the behavior of legislators, and how Congress interacts with other regulatory agencies. In the field of IO, some of the assumptions of this work can be found in Keohane’s functionalist theory of regimes (discussed earlier) and other work in the neoliberal institutionalist vein.

One strand of rational choice institutionalism that emerged from the economics field was labeled the *new institutional economics*. It responded to neoclassical theories treating the firm as a black box (or a collection of possible production choices) by developing organizational theories to explain why firms behave in particular ways and how they are organized. One of the roots of this literature was the work of Ronald Coase, who argued that efforts by rational agents to reduce transaction costs, or the costs of doing business, will influence a firm’s size and the type of market or nonmarket arrangement chosen.³⁶ Research in this area modified some of the standard assumptions of microeconomic theory, especially the ways in which individual actors are able to maximize their behavior. The new institutional economists studied issues such as problems of incomplete information, the challenges of enforcement, decision-makers’ cognitive limits, and other factors influencing organizational design and behavior.

Another strand of rational choice institutionalism, also coming out of the economics field, was *agency theory*. Its modern roots grew out of economic studies in the 1970s seeking to explain and improve the performance of firms.³⁷ Agency theory was premised on the assumption that performance problems within firms naturally arise when one actor (the principal) delegates to

another actor (the agent) the authority to act in the former's interest. Economists recognized that inherent in this relationship of delegation is the fact that the two parties have different interests, and this may result in the agent's actions differing from the principal's expectations. Much of the literature assumes the central problem to be solved is how to induce the agent to maximize the principal's welfare, and it also recognizes that there are costs to various control mechanisms. Think of employees who spend part of the day shopping online rather than doing their jobs. What steps should employers take to ensure employees are doing their jobs? One of the key issues that interested agency theorists was how a contract might be structured to provide the sticks and carrots necessary to encourage employees to put in their best performance and therefore do what the principals expected.³⁸ The common solutions include screening and selection mechanisms to help principals avoid selecting an incompetent, corrupt, or otherwise unattractive agent; mechanisms to control agency discretion; financial incentives linked to performance; and different forms of oversight and monitoring mechanisms linked to positive benefits or negative sanctions so that the principal can keep an eye on what the agent is doing.³⁹

Agency theory migrated into political science via studies of the behavior of Congress, with the principal-agent (P-A) relationship generally viewed as a political principal (such as Congress) delegating some degree of policymaking authority to an implementing bureaucratic agent. Scholars applying P-A models to political institutions were well aware of the differences between the behavior of firms and public organizations, but they found that the model itself was a useful way to look at issues arising when delegation takes place. For example, government agencies often have numerous tasks to accomplish that are often difficult to measure, and they are often agents to multiple, competing principals. And real-world politicians, unsurprisingly, often do not make delegation decisions based on notions of efficiency.⁴⁰

In the past few decades or so, agency theory has appeared in the study of IOs. For example, Europeanists have applied P-A models to analyze when and how European Union (EU) institutions may gain autonomy from their member states, why states delegate to supranational institutions, and how EU institutions impact P-A relationships at the member-state level.⁴¹ Development economists, meanwhile, have long used P-A models to study organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to examine why the conditionality attached to their loans is so often ineffective.⁴² Conditionality is, by definition, a P-A issue because it is the primary means that donors (the principals—in this case, the institution) use to induce policy change in recipient countries (the agents) in return for aid.

Public choice theory is a third strand of rational choice institutionalism and is closely related to new institutional economics and agency theory, given that it focuses on how individuals make decisions and interact with one another in different institutional settings.⁴³ It uses tools of neoclassical economic analysis to examine political processes and shares many of the basic assumptions of the other forms of rational choice institutionalism, such as the “rational” individual (in this case, politicians and bureaucrats) as the unit of analysis. Scholars in this area asked questions like why countries join IOs, how international bargaining impacts the benefits from international agreements, and whether and how IOs provide public goods.⁴⁴

In the field of sociology, scholars were interested in how shared systems of rules found in institutions both structured and constrained actors and influenced their interests. The sociological

institutionalists were critical of the rational choice assumptions that institutional design somehow reflected ideas of efficiency or functionality. Instead, they argued that culturally specific practices influenced institutional forms and procedures.⁴⁵ This work defined *institutions* more broadly and somewhat differently than rational choice and historical institutionalists. For sociologists, institutions not only consisted of formal rules, norms, and organizations but also included “symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates.”⁴⁶ Some sociological institutionalists were also more interested in the social features of institutions than the structural features of concern to other institutionalists.⁴⁷ Focusing on a wide range of institutions, including industry, states, markets, and government ministries, sociological institutionalists studied issues such as why institutions take on particular shapes or symbols; how their practices are diffused across time, space, and sectors; and how their behavior is shaped by factors such as external cultural legitimation rather than functional demands.⁴⁸

While most of the work done by sociological institutionalists is not international, many of the ideas overlap with a sociological approach to the study of international organizations that is now commonly labeled *constructivism*.⁴⁹ Constructivist theorists in the field of international relations are interested in the ways that ideas, norms, culture, and other aspects of social life influence politics, issues that had been neglected by liberals and realists. They argue that ideational factors are the key in shaping human interaction, that some of these are widely shared, or *intersubjective*, beliefs, and that these shared beliefs help to shape political actors’ interests and identities.⁵⁰ Identities, norms, and interests are then seen as mutually constitutive. As Finnemore and Sikkink state, “Understanding the constitution of things is essential in explaining how they behave and what causes political outcomes.”⁵¹

Within the field of IO, a number of different research strands within the constructivist approach had developed by the mid-1990s. Some scholars looked at how international norms are created and diffused and were especially interested in the role that transnational advocacy networks played in influencing states’ behavior.⁵² Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore analyzed how IO bureaucracies gain autonomy, exercise power, and often exhibit dysfunctional performance.⁵³ John Ruggie focused more broadly on regime theory by developing the concept of *embedded liberalism* to argue that the post-World War II economic order does not simply reflect power politics but also state-society relations that “express shared social purposes regarding the role of authority vis-à-vis the market.” By this, he meant that the emphasis on open markets that characterized the regime was balanced by a “social bargain,” whereby governments would contain some of the negative costs, such as pollution that such open markets produced.⁵⁴

Historical institutionalism, meanwhile, blossomed in the field of comparative politics, where scholars sought to determine how the institutional setting of a country’s economy or polity influenced political struggles and outcomes. Historical institutionalists defined institutions as including formal organizations and informal rules and procedures that shape how individuals and “units of the polity and economy” interact.⁵⁵ They studied how institutions shaped issues such as health care, organized labor, tax policies, and economic crises.⁵⁶ Rather than accepting preference formation as a given, as rational choice institutionalists tended to do, historical institutionalists shared the sociological institutionalists’ concern with how institutional contexts shape not only strategies but also actor interests and goals. Historical institutionalists,

as their name suggests, were especially interested in the historical processes by which coalitions are formed, policies are packaged, and institutions functioned. These ideas have been applied to the study of international organizations by scholars such as Paul Pierson, who examined how and why EU institutions may evolve in unanticipated ways and exhibit “sticky behavior,” given gaps in member states’ imperfect ability to tightly control the institutions’ day-to-day life and activities.⁵⁷

1990s–PRESENT: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND DEBATES

The three forms of institutionalism played an important role in shaping scholarship in the field of IO, as scholarship continued to evolve and change. The contemporary field of IO within international relations (IR) can be divided by theoretical approaches, methodologies, specific research programs, issue areas, and institutions studied. Individual scholars are likely to work within a specific theoretical tradition and on either a specific IO or broader issues of global governance. The most common approach within the field of international relations for several decades was to divide the IO literature among the main traditions found in the broader IR field. Within the realist/neorealist, liberal/neoliberal, and constructivist perspectives are scholars who focus specifically on IOs.⁵⁸ This division by grand perspective then pitted those who argue IOs are marginal (the realists/neorealists) against those who think IOs may be powerful actors in global politics (constructivists, neoliberal institutionalists, some parts of the principal-agent literature). The previous discussion on realism versus the different types of institutionalism highlighted some of the differences between grand perspectives.

Rationalist versus Rationalist

There are also other ways of lining up debates in the field that go beyond the “division by grand perspective.” Sometimes scholars who share a basic methodological predilection may still dramatically disagree on the role of IOs in global governance. This shows some of the richness even the same approaches to theorizing can produce. An excellent example of this is the debate between neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists who share a rationalist approach to the study of IOs but reach very different conclusions about whether and how IOs influence states and international issues.⁵⁹ To illustrate, Kenneth Waltz’s theory of neorealism is built on micro-economic theory, given his view that international political systems are analogous to economic markets because both are “individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended.”⁶⁰ Waltz’s view that states are the major actors who “set the scene in which the others must act” is also analogous to the way oligopolist sectors work in the economic sphere.⁶¹ IOs do not play an important role in such a self-help perspective, other than as an instrument to help powerful states pursue their interests. Neorealist John Mearsheimer went further in the mid-1990s in an article titled “The False Promise of International Institutions,” arguing that not only do international institutions “have minimal influence on state behavior,” but that liberal institutionalist and other institutionalist theories were logically flawed and lacked “little support in the historical record.”⁶² He argued that liberal institutionalists could not explain cases where state interests

were conflictual to begin with, where states did assume they might gain through cooperation. This, he said, was more characteristic of security issues compared with economic issues.⁶³

Rationalist neoliberal institutionalists fought back. In a direct response to Mearsheimer, Keohane and Martin replied that the realists' narrow account of why states create institutions is "incomplete and logically unsound," for why would states "act rationally" when they create new institutions if they believe that the institutions "will have no impact on patterns of cooperation?"⁶⁴ Mearsheimer's argument that institutionalists divide security and economic issues, they said, is "illusory," given that there is no clear division between the two, and institutionalist theory's focus on the role of institutions in providing information adds to the significance of these institutions in security-related issues.⁶⁵

Economics versus Sociology

Another major fault line in the scholarly field of IO, alluded to already, divides rationalists, who draw from the field of economics, from the constructivists, who draw from sociology. The constructivist research agenda in IR began to take shape in the 1980s and then grew quickly at the end of the Cold War. Its growth reflected scholarly interest in the role that ideas, values, identities, and norms play in influencing world politics. The major IR theories at the time failed to predict the end to the Cold War, one of the most stunning and significant events in the late twentieth century.⁶⁶ Scholars were also grappling to make sense of the phenomenon of globalization and its impact on power and politics.

Constructivists often work in areas that are ignored by rationalists—such as the factors shaping the interests and identity of states and the important roles the social rules and culture play in why IOs are created, as well as what IOs do. As a result, constructivist research has sought to bring the *organization* back into the study of IOs by analyzing IOs as actors and not just stages and, as important, analyzing how IOs behave and what they do. A notable example of this is work by Barnett and Finnemore that called for bringing back an analysis of IOs as bureaucracies that are "social creatures" that have independent sources of power and authority, in part because they make rules, create actors, form new interests, and disseminate advice and practices that may have a profound impact on the world.⁶⁷ Examples included the ways that IOs help define terms like "human rights" and "refugees" and help to transfer political models such as democracy. More importantly, Barnett and Finnemore's analysis also suggested that a focus on IOs as bureaucratic actors can help explain the many instances where IO behavior is dysfunctional. According to Barnett and Finnemore, echoing Max Weber's insights from the nineteenth century, it is often the very same features that give IOs authority that also make them prone to dysfunctional behavior. In other words, "virtues" such as bureaucracies' ability to create and use knowledge to solve problems and their standardized rules of action may create biases and specific processes that in the end create pathological behavior.⁶⁸ One example, they argued, is UN officials emphasizing rules for peacekeeping that espoused neutrality, which ultimately allowed the UN to legitimize standing on the sidelines when 800,000 people were massacred in the Rwandan genocide of 1994.⁶⁹

Rationalists and others critique this constructivist line of thinking for focusing too closely on the bureaucracy and not enough on the interests of an IO's powerful member states that

may influence the organization's actions and performance. For example, much has been written attributing the failure of the international community to stop the genocide in Rwanda to the lack of political will of the United States and other members of the United Nation's Security Council.⁷⁰ Rationalists have also been adapting principal-agent models to explain poor or mixed IO performance in ways that both capture the actions and interests of member states (principals), as well as the bureaucracy (agent). Some have used a P-A model to show how powerful member states rein in the behavior of IO bureaucrats when there is a gap between how the IO is behaving and how its shareholders would like it to behave.⁷¹ Others use a P-A model to show precisely the opposite: that some of the sources of poor IO performance are not due to agency slack, but rather problems on the principal side of the equation, such as antinomic delegation, where principals are delegating conflicting or complex tasks to the IO agent that are extremely difficult to implement. As a result, without more political will and clarity of goals, the usual tools used by principals to shape agents' behavior may not work very well.⁷² Rationalism, then, can be applied to explain dysfunctional IO behavior, as well as to explain why reform efforts may proceed unevenly and with imperfect results.

Ultimately, neither rationalism nor constructivism is actually a substantive theory of world politics or international organizations. They both offer frameworks for thinking about politics and behavior but do not come with content attached. Agency theory, in fact, is misnamed, given that it offers a *model*, not a theory, of delegation. James Fearon and Alexander Wendt have argued that framing rationalism and constructivism as a debate is not terribly useful, given that the philosophical underpinnings and ontological commitments attached to each are “not likely to be settled soon, if ever, and almost certainly not by IR scholars.”⁷³ They also believe that there are areas where the two approaches are in agreement. For example, while the two approaches disagree on *how* ideas matter, they do not disagree that ideas do matter, given their assumptions that actors make choices “based on their beliefs.”⁷⁴

One useful result of this debate is that it has turned more attention to issues such as how to analyze IO behavior and performance, why some ideas get captured by IOs and others do not, and what exactly we mean by the power of IOs. Another useful result is a growing awareness in the field that IO autonomy is not necessarily a black and white issue but rather one seeped in shades of gray that requires more exploration and explanation.

Stages or Actors

A final major fault line that provides a way to understand the IO field divides scholars who are more interested in looking from the outside in at IOs versus those who focus on an inside-out approach. Scholars looking *outside in* are interested in how politics shape state behavior toward organizations, why states create and delegate authority to institutions, and whether institutions have an impact on cooperation among states. This puts the neorealists and liberals back on the same side since both groups are interested in answering these types of questions and assume IOs are stages or instruments of the powerful rather than actors in their own right.

Inside-out approaches, by contrast, are more interested in the IO as actor and what it *does*—that is, how organizational structure, bureaucratic politics and culture, and staff expertise and power may shape the organization's actions, outcomes, and effectiveness. Scholars who see the

IO as an actor tend to be more interested in issues of organizational performance, while those viewing the IO as a stage focus more on member-state behavior. Some seek to combine the two, such as work by Fang and Stone that examines the conditions under which IOs are able to persuade governments to adopt their policy recommendations.⁷⁵ Analysis of the IO as an actor highlights some common interests among constructivists, organizational theorists, sociologists, and historical institutionalists. Agency theorists, who are rationalists, are also aligned with these perspectives because, by definition, the *agent* in the principal-agent relationship is an actor pursuing its own interests. Therefore, while constructivists and agency theorists may disagree about many things, they agree that it is important to bring the IO bureaucracy back in and look at issues such as IO behavior and performance. Scholars studying IO bureaucracy often drill down deeper and examine how the characteristics of individual staff members or leaders inside of the organization can influence how it behaves.⁷⁶ Many of the contemporary theorists already mentioned in this chapter can easily be placed into the actors or stages camp. The view that IOs are *both* actors *and* stages is more common among policy analysts and journalists who write about IOs.⁷⁷

One additional example of the outside-in approach is the argument G. John Ikenberry made in *After Victory*. Ikenberry examined how states build international order after major wars, which are dramatic times of upheaval. Leading states, he argued, have created new IOs in such times not just to solve a specific set of problems or create new opportunities for cooperation but also to allow the leading state to “lock in” a “favorable order.” But in a twist to a traditional realist argument, he also noted that leading states realize that this strategy also restrains their own exercise of power. Yet they choose such self-binding strategies because they create stable institutional structures that will persist and serve their long-term interests. One obvious example is the United States choosing to “institutionalize its power” after World War II by creating an unprecedented number of new IOs to lock in favorable arrangements.

Neorealists, Ikenberry argued, cannot explain why we have not seen more efforts by Europe or Japan to “balance against” American power since the end of the Cold War. And liberal theories are also incomplete, he posited, because they have not addressed why and how powerful states may use IOs to “restrain themselves.”⁷⁸ This argument as to why institutions exist versus how they actually perform has interesting, unexplored implications. For example, if the United States is more interested in the role of IOs like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in locking in a particular order, it may more easily turn a blind eye to their mixed or poor performance. Even IOs that face performance problems may still be successful to the United States if they are serving a larger role.

Some New Directions

As noted in Chapter 1, scholars are thinking conceptually about definitions of global governance and the related issues about who the governing actors are and how they interact in specific issue areas. There are also pockets of research that do not always neatly fit into one of the institutionalist categories mentioned. These scholars explore issues such as the influence of domestic politics on IOs and regime formation,⁷⁹ whether and how IOs are accountable (and to whom),⁸⁰ whether or not power is shifting away from states to IOs and nongovernmental organizations

(NGOs),⁸¹ what the role of NGOs themselves is in influencing IOs and states,⁸² whether and how IOs can “learn,”⁸³ how we may better understand IO performance, and the role of IOs in broader issues of global governance and as global governors.⁸⁴

The strands relating to the changing role of domestic and international NGOs reflect the increased access these organizations have had to IOs. Scholars often use the term “NGOs” interchangeably with *transnational actors*, *transnational advocacy networks*, or *nongovernmental policy networks*. The terms may be defined somewhat differently but generally involve civil society actors who are advocating on issues that may include the environment, corruption, and human rights, among others. These organizations have become involved with IOs in a wide range of ways that include partners, watchdogs, advisors, and service providers. Do these changing roles matter? There seems to be great variation, depending on the type of access, the point of access, and the type of institution. There are examples of where access matters and where it does not. One example of the latter is the case of the World Bank, when civil society actors were involved in an unprecedented review of the bank’s extractive industry policy but the bank rejected many of the recommendations.⁸⁵

One important newer strand in the IO literature looks at institutional overlap and interplay, regime complexity, regime shifting, forum shopping, and/or forum shifting. This work reflects the fact that in many policy issues there are multiple institutions and levels of institutions that may impact how the issue is addressed and potentially solved (or not solved). Institutional overlap, for example, has to do with how institutions interact with one another. After all, institutions hardly ever act in isolation. Quite often, they are overlapping in terms of part of their mandate. Of course, IOs often share members. Regional institutions such as NATO (thirty-two members) and the European Security and Defense Policy (twenty-seven members) share twenty-three of the same members. The overlap between the institutions studied in this book is obviously quite large. Sometimes overlapping issues or mandates can lead to inefficient outcomes because accountability mechanisms are weak or an IO is poorly equipped to contribute to the common issue states ask it to take on.⁸⁶

In recent years, some scholars and practitioners have narrowed their attention to issues of overlap to more fine-grained research on how IOs work together with each other and with other actors. Many actors in global politics share the view that coordinated action is an essential strategy for states, IOs, and others to be able to tackle urgent global and regional problems. IOs have always worked together, but such interactions have grown dramatically as IOs and their member states look for better ways to do more with fixed budgets and more crises. For example, the articles of agreement of the (International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, which were founded together in 1944, even have such language built into their articles of agreement, with this same wording: that each institution “shall cooperate within the terms of this Agreement with any general international organization and with public international organizations having specialized responsibilities in related fields.” Working together is also seen as a good way to create synergy between organizations—so each one brings its expertise to the table—and also as a way to reduce turf tensions and competition. A recent example is the Multilateral Leaders Task Force on COVID-19, an initiative led by the heads of the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) to improve developing country access to COVID-19 vaccines and help

countries to be better set up to address all the steps that happen between receiving a vaccine and getting it into peoples' arms.

However, scholars and practitioners are still trying to better understand what it means for IOs to collaborate since there are so many different forms of engagement and how to evaluate whether these relationships are working well or not. Asking a colleague for advice is quite different from two or more IOs creating a joint team working with a shared work program and budget. IOs form partnerships, they sign Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with one another, and they jointly finance projects and other activities.⁸⁷ They also may work together, sometimes through partnerships. One category of partnership is the transnational public–private partnership, where governments or IOs and non-state actors team up voluntarily to pursue common goals.⁸⁸ One growing activity of partners is the activity of convening, whereby the partners bring together different actors to try to jointly address a specific regional or global problem. The goals of convening may include developing shared understanding of an issue and how to tackle it; coming up with a set of shared recommendations or solutions; and working together to implement any decisions.⁸⁹ An example of this is the Global Infrastructure Connectivity Alliance (2016). In this case, the G20 asked the World Bank Group to act as a secretariat for a group of international organizations and interested countries to promote “cooperation, knowledge exchange, and meaningful progress in the field of global connectivity.”⁹⁰

A branch of the interplay literature has taken a fresh look at the broader category of regimes by examining what it means when a group of IOs are interacting in a common issue area, such as the environment, human rights, or development. Many began to analyze this as a “regime complex,” with a variety of definitions. A useful one was proposed by C. Randall Henning, who defined a regime complex as “a set of international institutions that operate in a common issue area and the (formal and informal) mechanisms that coordinate them.”⁹¹ For some scholars, regime complexity contributed to more fragmentation in global cooperation—the idea of too many cooks spoiling the broth. Too many actors working the same area can create competition. Daniel Drezner, for example, has argued that we still lack clear answers as to how regime complexity may influence the strategies of different types of actors. On one hand, when actors have choices about which governance arrangements or bodies they can use to pursue their interests, the result may be that institutions compete or act strategically to be the more attractive option. But on the other hand, regime complexity does not always result in better outcomes. Drezner found evidence of contradictory outcomes as well as examples where a regime has undermined the role of an individual institution.⁹² Other scholars recognize that some regime complexes work well at fostering cooperation, while others do not. Eugénia Heldt and Henning Schmidtke argued that, to understand why some regime complexes work better at cooperating and others are more conflictive, one must examine the broader institutional architecture surrounding these complexes as well as the timing and sequencing of how they develop.⁹³

Another strand of this newer literature has to do with *shifting* and *shopping*, terms that come out of the legal literature. This is a different approach to the idea that when institutions overlap (or regimes are complex), states can shop around for (or shift to) the one that best suits their interest. If states are unhappy with how an issue is being played out in one institution or set of institutions, they may seek to move the issue elsewhere. An example is when US unhappiness

by WIPO's (World Intellectual Property Organization) "one-state, one-vote rule" prompted it to move the discussion of intellectual property to the GATT during the Uruguay Round of negotiations in the mid-1980s. In the GATT, the more powerful states had more influence.⁹⁴ This is an example of horizontal forum shifting. But states can also shift vertically, from multilateral organizations to bilateral or domestic ones. States may also shift if they think they have a better chance of getting what they want elsewhere. Marc Busch has shown that states have many options about where to address their trade disputes. For example, when Mexico wanted to challenge a US trade rule, it could have filed the case with the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement mechanism, which seemed a better fit given the issues, but instead chose to go through the North American Free Trade Agreement.⁹⁵ As noted in the introduction, it is increasingly clear that policy issues interface with IOs and larger regime complexes in challenging ways. The important underlying questions running through this newer area of research is how the richer institutional fabric of global politics impacts the ability of states and other actors to get what they want and the ability of various groupings of actors and organizations to address global problems.

Another important area of research and interest is informality works with respect to international organizations. Scholars have observed that some global governance institutions are not formal intergovernmental institutions, with legal foundations and bureaucracies. The rise in groups of countries, like the G7 and the G20, do not have secretariats and are seen as "clubs" rather than formal organizations. They deeply engage with states, IOs, and other actors in addressing global governance issues. Informality can also matter inside individual IOs, whose behavior and actions can be shaped by institutional understandings and norms that are not formal procedures or policies. All of these actions help shape how IOs and other actors can respond to shared problems and issues.⁹⁶

Scholars of international organizations are also looking more broadly at issues of global governance and challenges to the liberal international order. There are competing definitions of "international order" and challenges to the view that the current order has actually been liberal, as scholars question whether or not it has successfully promoted a set of rules, institutions, and relationships that prioritize the rule of law, open trade, collective security, democracy, and human rights. Amitav Acharya has argued that the order is built on norms and ideas, and it is time for it to be broadened to better integrate ideas and norms from non-Western countries.⁹⁷ John G. Ikenberry has argued that, while the liberal international order faces crisis, it still has a future. First of it all, it has already evolved over time—for example, from a focus on free trade and international law in the nineteenth century to one shaped by American hegemony after the Cold War. Globalization, he argued, has added a broader group of states to the mix, which may have eroded a sense of shared purpose, but the liberal international order had enough flexibility continue to offer a set of rules on how states should cooperate. He argues that the international order has the flexibility to be "more or less global or regional in scope," "more or less hierarchical in character," and "more or less embodied in formal agreements and governance institutions." "Liberal internationalism," he concluded, "offers a vision of order in which sovereign states—led by liberal democracies—cooperate for mutual gain and protection within a loosely rules-based global space." His optimism about the resilience of this order is also based on the fact that

he doesn't see any viable alternatives. Major authoritarian countries, for example, do not offer a model that would be of interest to most countries in the world.⁹⁸

Other scholars are less optimistic. John Mearsheimer argued in 2019, before the pandemic, that the liberal international order was "in deep trouble" for several reasons. He argued that there are different types of international order, and the type that exists will depend on how global power is distributed. In his view, you can only have a liberal international order when you have one major power (a unipolar system), and this power is a liberal democracy. This is what he thinks existed in the post-Cold War era led by the United States. This era has ended, given the rise of China and a "revival of Russian power." He predicted what is emerging now is a multipolar, realist-based, global order that will address common issues like climate change and where the United States and China will also "lead bounded orders that will compete with each other in both economic and military realms." In his view, a global order and a bounded order can exist together and offer a means for major powers to both compete and cooperate. Common norms like trade openness may not reflect "liberal calculations," but rather more pragmatic agreement that this is the best way for states to pursue economic and military power.⁹⁹

The different forces shaping global politics today, both supporting and undermining the liberal international order, mean this debate will continue for some time. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted many academic and policymakers to lament the end of the liberal international order and worry about whether we are headed to World War III. A month before the invasion, the leaders of Russia and China met at the Beijing Olympics, where they vowed friendship between the two states had "no limits." While the war put this relationship under strain, the two countries have still moved closer. On the other hand, the invasion energized NATO. Russian president Vladimir Putin had invoked NATO aggression as a pretext for invading Ukraine, so a stronger, enlarged NATO was the opposite of what he wanted. For some, an expanded NATO signaled a revitalization of the liberal international order.

The issues of IO legitimacy and performance may be among the most powerful underlying themes in the contemporary literature. After all, what good are IOs if they do not help to solve global problems or if they make matters worse? Can geopolitical tensions or actions, such as China's increasing assertiveness in East Asia, weaken IO legitimacy? The study of performance remains a tricky issue. First, there are many ways to define performance. An IO's annual report may take an overly narrow or broad definition, which may be different from how NGOs, scholars, local communities, or IO staff view performance. IOs face powerful "eye of the beholder" problems.¹⁰⁰ For example, powerful countries may be satisfied when the IO reflects their interests, while the impacted public may be protesting. Leaders of coal power plants may have a different view than environmentalists on IO work relating to climate change. Who defines how we understand an IO's performance? If IOs are perceived to lack transparency in their decision-making or be too removed from individual citizens, their ability to be effective becomes more difficult.¹⁰¹

Efficiency is a concept that ties in with performance. The efficiency of peace operations is very important if a slow response makes it easier for conflict to resurface. One scholar has argued that institutions with more informal institutional cultures typically react more efficiently in providing peace operations than institutions that have more formal institutional cultures. Stated differently, since informality is tied to personal relationships and socialization, one

can say that institutional friendships can ultimately facilitate faster decision-making in times where speedy actions can have life and death repercussions.¹⁰² Individual interactions, not just state interests or interactions, and bureaucratic expertise and authority may matter too. That said, efficiency is not the same as effectiveness since “minimizing input of time to maximize productivity” is not necessarily equal to how well an activity was accomplished.¹⁰³

International organizations themselves regularly engage in monitoring and evaluation exercises at different levels of their work, usually through independent evaluation units. Monitoring is defined as the ongoing collection of data that can be used to track the performance of an activity, such as a program or project. Evaluation is the assessment of performance.¹⁰⁴ IOs want to be able to measure their results so they can learn from success and correct failures and show that they are accountable for their actions. Evaluation can also help IOs recognize new problems, rethink how they handle particular activities, and determine how they use resources. As two World Bank evaluation experts noted, “Evaluation is . . . a key way in which to systematically address and answer the question, ‘so what?’ It is not enough to document that one is busy, it is now a requirement to document that one is (or is not) effective.”¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION

This chapter has laid out some of the main debates and strands of literature addressing IOs and their roles in broader global governance, spanning almost an entire century. While there are some perennial questions, the changing international context and changing directions in scholarship have inspired newer areas of research as well. Scholars have done well in answering some questions but still struggle with other questions and regularly confront new ones. One trend that is likely to continue to deepen is the interaction of the literature in political science with those of other disciplines on questions of the role and effectiveness of international organizations in global governance. Political scientists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, legal scholars, and others certainly have a great deal they can learn from one another. The following chapters will also discuss the literature specific to individual IOs or groups of IOs. Some of those literatures resonate with the broader issues and studies discussed here. Other debates are more narrow and institution specific.

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