Anchoring International Organizations in Organizational Sociology

Ancrer les organisations internationales dans la sociologie des organisations

Die Verortung internationaler Organisationen in der Organisationssoziologie

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1 Where We Begin: Studying International Organizations Through Organizational Sociology

Scholars have studied International Organizations (IOs) in various disciplines such as political science, history, law, economics, and anthropology approaching them through a variety of theoretical lenses. The present special issue focuses on the study of IOs and sociology, in particular the sociology of organizations. We are not the first in this endeavor. As early as 1988, Ness and Brechin (1988) made the case to bridge the gap between the study of IOs and the sociology of organizations. They provided us with a stimulating research agenda for the study of IOs around key sociological concepts: environment, technology, organizational goals, and structure. Ten years ago, Brechin and Ness (2013) re-assessed the gap between organizational sociology and the study of IOs and found that "both sides have moved closer to one another and have enriched their perspectives" (Brechin and Ness 2013, 14). However, they observed that this welcomed development is mainly due to the fact that IOs are now seen both more as organizations autonomous vis-à-vis states and as actors in their own right in international relations.

Following the footsteps of scholars such as Ness and Brechin (1988), Brechin and Ness (2013), Schemeil (2013) and Bourrier (2017; 2020), the main objective of this special issue is to show how both IO studies and organizational sociology can benefit from more cross-fertilization. While sociology has already been used to study international relations (Devin 2015), and IOs in particular (Lagrange et al. 2021), we argue that an approach through the sociology of organizations can also help study IOs as organizations in their own right within which various actors compete, develop strategies, and perform routines and practices. In turn they produce norms and values with the inherent target to have impact on a global scale. Organizational sociology conceives IOs as autonomous actors (Reinalda and Verbeek 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Ellis 2010; Koch and Stetter 2013). On a theoretical level, it allows to go beyond rigid categories such as governmental / non-governmental (Nay

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2021), understand how IOs adapt using multiple strategies (Schemeil 2013), conceive IOs as non-unitary actors (Brun and Parthenay 2020), and perceive IOs not only as bureaucracies but "as structures, networks, amalgamations of individuals, and subjects of the environment with a variety of internal and external effects that can be measured and addressed through a wide range of methodologies" (Ellis 2010, 18). In a nutshell, organizational sociology provides a fascinating basis to study IOs not only from within, but also as organizations interacting with their environment.

Yet contemporary organizational sociologists argue that the discipline is declining (Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020) or even disappearing (King 2017; Besio et al. 2020). Organizational sociologists have allegedly done a poor job in tackling the big social issues of our time (Barley 2010). More conceptual work is needed to understand the dynamics of new organizational forms, especially regarding their unique constellation of formal and informal structures, power relations and sources of legitimation, and identity because they permeate all aspects of social life and remain powerful instruments for coordinating human activity (Besio et al. 2020). The potential for significant theoretical developments remains strong. Hence, focusing on IOs can reinvigorate the discipline. While so far international relations (IR) scholars – best known for their contribution to understanding how IOs contribute to global governance – appear to have been successful in integrating organizational theory into the study of IOs, sociologists have failed to "more fully develop a sociology of these transnational actors" (Brechin and Ness 2013, 16).[1]

The introduction is structured along two main parts. First, we continue from where Brechin and Ness (2013) left off and provide an updated literature review of studies using an organizational perspective on IOs since 2013. Second, we present the articles of this special issue and show how they contribute both to IO studies and to the sociology of organizations. We conclude with some thoughts related to methodology and avenues for future research.

2   What We Take Stock Of: What Organizational Sociology Has Provided IO Research

Looking back in 2013, Brechin and Ness (2013) noted Barnett and Finnemore's key contribution to IO scholarship with their book *Rules for the World* (2004). With the concept of bureaucracy developed by Weber, often considered as the forefather of organizational sociology, they theorized the power and pathologies of international bureaucracies. In this section, we do not provide a systematic review of the studies on IOs that use an organizational approach. Rather, as a sociologist and a political scientist, we share our observations regarding the evolution of this body of research. In our view three main research trends in organizational sociology have been mobi-

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1   For an exception see for instance March and Olsen (1998).

lized for IO research since 2013: first, the study of IOs and / in their environment; second, the analysis of IOs and their need for legitimacy; third, IOs as actors to be examined through their practices, routines, interactions, and everyday doings.

2.1   IOs in / and Their Environment: Seizing the Complexity and Changing Structures of IOs and Global Governance

The study of IOs in their environment remains a prominent research strand in IR research, as it is the case in organizational sociology. More specifically building on the work of organizational sociologists such as Hannan and Freeman (1989), IR scholars have mainly used the concept of organizational ecology to study changes in the types of global governance institutions. The added value of the concept is to have population(s) of organizations as the units of analysis rather than the individual organizations. This perspective provides a framework to analyze the interactions among and between a given population in a specific environment.

For instance, scholars have used this concept to capture the proliferation of new organizational forms in global governance such as private governance organizations (Lake 2021) and private transnational regulatory organizations in global environment governance (Abbott et al. 2016). The ecological approach has recently also been used to understand why some IOs die, and others survive (Gray 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020). These authors emphasize competition within a policy area as the principal form of interactions between organizations which hence explains the emergence or disappearance of organizations (Morin 2020). Building on the latest advancements in organizational ecological theory, recent studies have demonstrated that organizations do not only compete for resources but are also able to co-exist and cooperate under certain conditions (Block-Lieb and Halliday 2017). For instance, Green and Hadden (2021) show that, in global environment governance, IOs and NGOs have a mutual relationship based on their complementarity. Downie (2022) shows that IOs cooperate in the energy policy area because of the existence of shared goals (i. e., Sustainable Development Goals).

With the concept of ecology, IR scholars have been successful in conceptualizing the environment of IOs as made up of a multitude of actors beyond simply states (i. e. NGOs, private organizations, etc.). They have hence shown how organizational sociology allows to grasp the complexity and changing structure of global governance.

2.2   IOs as Organizations in Need of Legitimacy: Self-Legitimation and Identity

The abovementioned scholarship conceives the adaptation (or lack of) of IOs to their environment as the result of rational calculations in terms of effectiveness and interests. However, institutionalist theory tells us that it is not always the case: organizations also change to conform to the dominant rules of their environment. Structure does hence not result from the need to perform but from the need to

maintain legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Institutionalist theory emphasizes the normative and ideational sources of change in organizational structure (March and Olsen 1983; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). As noted by Brechin and Ness (2013), new institutionalism has greatly been applied to the study of IOs. This is still the case nowadays. More so, IO scholars have recently used institutionalist theories as their point of departure to study both the legitimacy and the identity of IOs.

IOs are no different from other organizations as they need legitimacy to survive (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 581). This is all the more true for IOs since they rely (almost) exclusively on their member states for resources. This observation has led to a growing research agenda on IO legitimacy and legitimation in the past decade. One of the main advancements has been the shift from a normative to a sociological approach of legitimacy that focuses on the beliefs of constituencies and that understands legitimacy as embedded in social contexts (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Tallberg et al. 2018). The literature has developed in two main directions. On the one hand, scholars have theorized the sources of perceived legitimacy building on political and sociological theory (for an overview see, Dellmuth et al. 2019). On the other hand, scholars have examined the "social practice of legitimation" (Zaum 2013, 10) or put differently, the management of legitimacy (Suchman 1995; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016). These studies show that IOs employ various strategies for self-legitimization.

Related to legitimacy is the study of how IOs build and sustain their identity. In an institutionalist perspective, the identity of an organization and its members is crucial for its perceived legitimacy: a clear identity that conforms to the environment's dominant norms is needed to be perceived as legitimate (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975 for a groundbreaking article). For instance with the concept of sensemaking in organizational sociology, von Billerbeck (2017; 2020) shows how IO staff members need to self-legitimize themselves to navigate their multifaceted – and sometimes conflicting – identities. Oelsner (2013) demonstrates that the institutional identity of The Southern Common Market, commonly known by the Spanish abbreviation MERCOSUR is composed of a political dimension (democracy), an economic dimension (the idea of a common market), and an external dimension (the need to form a bloc to matter in international affairs).

2.3   IOs as Processes at Play: Grasping the "Making" of IOs

In the 1990s, a fundamental shake occurred in organizational sociology: rather than a structure or an entity, organizational sociologists analyzed organizations as a process (Weick 1993). They since use verbs such as "organizing" for they suggest changing environments at various levels, for all actors, from individuals to all organizations, including nation-states (Brechin and Ness 2013). In the past 10 years, IO scholars have begun studying processes within IOs through practices and routines building on Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour's contributions. More recently they started analyzing interactions drawing on Erving Goffman's seminal works of the first half

of the 20th century known for the interactionist theory in sociology. In doing so IO scholars manage to grasp both macro-phenomena such as order, institutions, and norms, as well as micro-processes such as rational calculations and meaning (Pouliot and Cornut 2015).

Formally inscribed in the "practice turn" in IR scholarship, the concept of practice is commonly referred to "socially organized and meaningful patterns of activities that tend to recur over time" (Pouliot and Thérien 2018, 163). The literature on practice theory and IOs have made important advancements to understand IOs "in the making" by shedding light on the micro foundations of how decisions are made and institutionalized. For instance we note the process leading up to Antonio Guterres as Secretary-General at the UN (Pouliot 2020). Such scholars typically analyze the way ideas, norms, and identities evolve through the lens of practices (Holthaus 2021) and take seriously the dimensions of social space and historical time (Bruneau 2022).

With "interaction" "as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence" (Goffman 1983, 2), recent studies have highlighted the micro dynamics that forge multilateralism. The outcomes of the processes mentioned hereafter are the result of interactions that occurred among individuals. Albaret and Brun (2022) for example provided an understanding of Venezuelan contestations at the UN (2015–16). Nair (2020) tackled the art of face-saving in international institutions like diplomacy as a way to avoid embarrassment. Kimber and Maertens (2021) shed light on the power dynamics enacted in time and space to show how civil society is relegated to the margins.

This brief overview shows that sociological theories and concepts have been mobilized by scholars to analyze the ways in which people do things, in practice and in interaction, and how organizations sustain in their environment by adapting their structure and by maintaining legitimacy.

3   What This Special Issue Offers: Contributions to the Sociology of Organizations Through the Study of IOs

The articles in this special section contribute to IO studies by adopting concepts and theories borrowed from organizational sociology. However, instead of *simply* instrumentalizing concepts and theory from an over century old discipline, they also have the merit to contribute to the sociology of organizations.

Christian (this issue) provides an analysis of UN Secretariat staff behaviors and attitudes using the concept of organizational cynicism. He explains why IOs provide a fertile ground for the development of cynical attitudes among its staff. However, his analysis shows that cynicism has ambivalent consequences. At the individual

level, being cynical is a coping strategy for IO staff members that helps them face ambivalences and failure in their daily work. At the organizational level, cynicism can be dysfunctional as it may hamper change and reform. Christian therefore introduces the concept of "cynicism trap" in IOs and in doing so contributes both to the study of IO staff and the research in sociology on organizational cynicism.

Dairon (this issue) introduces the concept of "bureaucratic competence", drawing from the sociological concept of functional competence developed by Michel Crozier who built on Max Weber's – at the time novel – theory. In a climate of incertitude due to the characteristics of IO career systems, she shows that IO staff needs to develop a "bureaucratic competence" which consists in behavioral, relational, and cognitive capacities with the goal of navigating (and remaining in) the bureaucratic system. Her study provides a micro-sociological analysis of IO staff and contributes to the study of competence in bureaucratic organizations.

Kimber (this issue) understands civil society in intergovernmental negotiations at the United Nations as a "temporary organization". It allows her to make a claim towards practices of exclusion exerted by the First and Second UN, respectively member states and UN staff. Weaving in the concept of exclusion with that of "temporary organization" offers a relational perspective whereby civil society's temporariness induces mechanisms of exclusion and vice-versa. Yet by holding on to its autonomy enacted in its inherent temporariness she also nuances the relationship civil society maintains with the more permanent structure, namely the First and Second UN, than so far revealed in the literature. With the same token the theoretical framework combined with "temporary organizing" provides the sociology of organizations with a conceptual tool to rethink and reconsider the very nature of temporary organizations.

Guilbaud (this issue) also addresses the relationship between civil society actors and IOs, this time from the perspective of the international bureaucracy. She uses the concepts of "boundary organizations" and "boundary work" to show how IO staff classifies non-state actors which in itself redefines IO boundaries. With the concept of due diligence and risk evaluation applied to cases stemming from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), she demonstrates how IO staff performs tasks of classification and hierarchization. By combining various concepts in organizational sociology, her article provides an illustration of how IO staff relate to their environment.

Hošman (this issue) examines organizational transformation in IOs. He provides a micro-sociological analysis of IO staff during the development of the Economics Department at the World Bank in the mid-1960s. In addition, he argues for the need to broaden the analytical perspective on organizational change to account for larger organizational ecosystems. By showing that the strategies and choices of IO insiders are linked to their immediate organizational environment, he contributes to IO studies by emphasizing the role of this environment in understanding change

within IOs. His case study of the World Bank updates the issue of organizational change in the field of organizational sociology.

In conclusion, the articles in this special issue are well embedded in the current trends described above, with the trends even overlapping in some theoretical frameworks. Guilbaud (this issue) and Kimber (this issue) contribute to understanding how IO staff make sense of and interact with actors in their environment (i. e. civil society organizations). Hošman (this issue) provides an analysis of how the environment can be a source of structural change in IOs. Christian (this issue) and Dairon (this issue) zoom-in the daily practices of IO staff.

4   Where We See the Research Heading: Toward Greater Cross-Fertilization Between IO Studies and (Organizational) Sociology

The introduction to this special issue along with the five articles it hosts can be considered as a witness to the growing scholarly interest to analyze IOs through the prism of organizational sociology. Yet we make two observations. First, while IO scholars – typically embedded in IR departments and IR scholarship – increasingly use organizational sociology theories and concepts, rare (if ever) are the spaces where such contributions are discussed outside the field of international relations and global governance. Sites of knowledge production and diffusion (academic journals, conferences) still evolve in silos.[2] Second, in spite of the growing focus on IOs' organizational processes (i. e. practices, power dynamics, their functioning and relations) rare – too – are the contributions stemming from organizational sociologists who tackle IOs per se.

Nonetheless building on concepts and theories from organizational sociology, the contributions to this special issue make convincing claims that allow us to envisage further research to better seize the pressing issues of IOs in the 21st century. In particular, we see two research avenues for a deeper cross-fertilization between IO studies and organizational sociology. First, we believe that more work should be done on the link between IOs and the consulting industry (Seabrooke and Sending 2020). What kind of relations do they develop with one another? What are the consequences on their respective daily work? Second, zooming-in on IO staff, further attention should be given to new ways of working and their impact on both the organizations and the employees (Renard et al. 2021). Yet going forward such research avenues call for an openness to other sub-fields of sociology such as the sociology of professions and sociology of work which to a certain extent relate to organizational sociology.

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2   For exceptions see journals such as *International Political Sociology* and *Journal of International Organizations Studies.*

IR scholars can likewise use organizational sociology to answer other research questions pertaining to IOs. However, IR scholars should remember that an organizational perspective on IOs goes far beyond the mere study of international bureaucracies, which is often what they do when claiming to use organizational sociology (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

This scientific endeavor will however only be attainable if researchers are admitted as such in IOs because access is *simply* not a given. Bourrier (2017) stands out and more so denounces the politics of these safeguarded organizations. She argues that by analyzing the way sociologists are "taken in" or rejected by IOs provides cues to grasp the ways in which IOs – paradoxically with worldwide impact – work with ebb and flow around welcoming and rejecting researchers. IO actions and reactions say a lot about what they want to portray to the world taking on the role at times as experts, at others as diplomats, and others as coordinators (Kamradt-Scott 2010; Bourrier 2020). And *in fine* their unpredictable behavior towards academics has immediate consequences on the type of research scholars will carry out, and the kind of knowledge they can produce and disseminate in the long haul.

To conclude, as IO scholars who adopt an organizational sociology stance, we take the opportunity of this special issue – hosted by the *Swiss Journal of Sociology* – to call organizational sociologists to study IOs to not only contribute to the study of global governance and multilateral scholarship, but also to set a momentum for scholars to develop new theories and hence contribute to the future development of organizational sociology.

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