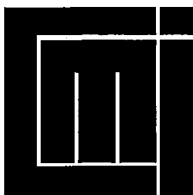


Institutional Approaches to the Study of International Organisation

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Summary:

This paper gives an overview of changes and shifts in the study of international organisation and notes that research has gradually moved away from the study of *de facto* organisations to studies of international cooperation and coordination in a more general sense. Current approaches to the study of international organisation are reviewed and emphasis is given to the interplay of cognitive and normative factors. The paper concludes with a recommendation to use organisation theory more systematically in the study of *de facto* international organisations.

Sammendrag:

Notatet gir en oversikt over forandringer og skiftende synspunkter i studiet av internasjonal organisasjon og finner at forskningen gradvis har beveget seg fra studiet av faktiske organisasjoner til studiet av internasjonalt samarbeid og koordinering i mer generell forstand. Nyere tilnæringsmåter blir gjennomgått og vurdert med vekt på samspillet mellom normative og kognitive faktorer. Notatet konkluderer med en anbefaling å bruke organisasjonsteori mer systematisk i studiet av faktiske internasjonale organisasjoner.

Indexing terms:

Organisation theory
International organisations
International relations
Institutional framework

Stikkord:

Organisasjonsteori
Internasjonale organisasjoner
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Institusjonell ramme

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Introduction

Institutional approaches do not only provide theories and methods for studying domestic politics and policies; they may also supply fruitful means of studying international relations and organisations. The field of international relations has passed through various phases of emphasis wherein institutional approaches at certain times have been dominant and at other times been relegated to the periphery of academic interest. What has counted as an institutional approach at one time may have been overshadowed by other institutional approaches at other times. Institutional approaches have not only competed with other approaches in giving the most adequate account of international relations; internal competition has been as conspicuous for the title of *the* institutional approach.

Considering that the field of international relations is in continuous evolvment, I shall not give any introductory definition of what an institutional approach is, provided that there is one, and I shall be more concerned with usages and changing and evolving usages of that term. As I shall be concerned with evolving usages, I shall first give a historical overview of the field as it has developed in this century, employing some of the periodisations of academic emphasis known from recent literature. This overview will serve the purpose of highlighting the dominant approaches within the field at different points in time and thereby indicating the relative standing of institutional approaches at these different points in time. The review will show that institutionalism as an approach has returned to the foreground after a long period of relative neglect, but also that what defines the approach in recent literature has changed substantially from what defined it at the outset, particularly as regards methodology. However, certain basic assumptions as to the normative role of institutions have remained fairly constant over the period.

After the historical overview I shall review the currently contending institutional approaches and discuss what are the epistemological and normative defining features of these current approaches. Emphasising epistemological features would clearly be in line with the emphasis these approaches themselves put on cognitive matters and with the epistemological and methodological pluralism within the field in recent years. The normative defining features, which do not appear to have changed substantially, would throw light upon what are the desirable states of affairs in international relations and how these normative concerns influence certain basic assumptions of the approach. In fact, I hope to show that these epistemological and normative features tend towards convergence, opening up some interesting lines of research. What these lines of research might be is the topic for the concluding section.

In this paper I do not pretend to speak of the field of international relations per se. What is of interest is the sub-field of international organisation or more broadly,

international cooperation. The institutional approach is not limited to the study of actually existing organisations, which may be a reason for complaint as we shall see, but encompasses the study of any type of international cooperation for which there may not be an existing organisation or an envisaged or planned one. The approach may also favour sectoral studies and thereby be more concerned with interorganisational relations than with any organisation in particular. Finally, the approach may take on an advocacy role, drawing upon principled beliefs, pointing to fields and sectors where co-operation is lacking and organisation is not imminent.

Phases in the study of international organisation

Attempts at periodisation are dependent on what is thought to be the core or the nucleus of the field. If core assumptions vary, so will evaluations of the course the field has been taking. Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986) regard the core of the field as consisting in the study of *international governance*, however it is to be defined, and the development of the field has consisted in a series of progressive analytical shifts around this core. Rochester (1986) sees the core as being the study of *international* organisation in the more narrow sense of formal arrangements transcending national boundaries providing for the establishment of institutional machinery to facilitate cooperation among members in certain specified fields.

Kratochwil and Ruggie's periodisation lists a number of progressive analytical shifts. The "original" perspective was the *formal institutional focus*. The assumption was that international governance was whatever international organisations did and whatever they did was to be found by studying their constitutional mandate, organisational structure and working procedures. The actual functioning of the organisation could be assessed as to how closely they approximated their mandate. However, this focus could not adequately explain why organisational practices might be different from what the constitutional mandate would prescribe, so the first analytical shift was made in the direction of studying actual *institutional processes*, patterns of influence and powers over decision-making, in general, degrees of control over organisational outcomes. Both these approaches treated international organisations as their dependent variable, but they differed in explaining what it was that made them work the way they did. This difference in explanation may be explained by the disciplinary bases of the two approaches. The first approach was dominated by legal scholars who brought their methodologies to bear on the field of study, whereas the second was dominated by scholars trained in the behavioural sciences. The shift was in the methodological sense characterised by a shift from prescriptions for behaviour to predictions of behaviour.

The third phase, or second progressive analytical shift, was, according to Kratochwil and Ruggie, marked by shifting international organisations from being

dependent variables to being independent variables. The focus was now on *organisational roles* or inputs to the process of international governance. These roles might be conceived as organisational contributions to solving substantive problems on the international arena such as peace-making. Organisational roles might also be conceived in slightly different ways, and one conception was the extent to which international organisations provided functional solutions to substantive problems that could not be solved through available institutional means, neither domestically nor through the existing mandated tasks of the international organisations. This neo-functionalist, integrationist approach foresaw a contributory role for the international organisations in creatively adapting to the new functional requirements of international problem-solving. Finally, an organisational role might be conceived of as a forum, arena or even an instrument for members to engage in whatever way is deemed useful for whatever purpose. The role of the organisations would be to lend legitimacy to outcomes that would otherwise have been reached unilaterally or bilaterally at a presumed cost in legitimacy. Uniting these various conceptions of organisational roles is a presumption of their contributing to solving problems of international governance by adapting to the requirements of the problem (and its solution) at hand.

The fourth phase, or the third analytical shift, brings us up to date in the sense that the *international regime* research focus is very much a current preoccupation with researchers. We shall have more to say about that in the next section. Whereas Kratochwil and Ruggie see a progression of shifts in the analysis of a core notion of international governance, Rochester (1986) sees something akin to a regressive distancing from the initial core focus on formal international organisations. The effect of that distancing has resulted in theoretical confusion as well as in practical irrelevance in the sense of loss of ability to influence policy-making nationally and internationally and corresponding loss of interest among policy-makers and media in the outputs of the research community. Loss of relevance has been combined with weak predictive capability as theorists have offered post-event explanations rather than pre-event predictions. While Kratochwil and Ruggie agree with Rochester in observing the widening gap between international organisation as a field of study and as a field of practice, the former do not necessarily see that observation as reflecting a disadvantage as far as research is concerned.¹

For Rochester the field of international organisation as an object of study originated with the establishment of the League of Nations in 1920 and the research focus in the inter-war period was strongly on institution-building with descriptive, narrative accounts wedded to normative proposals for improvements in institution-building. This "idealist" approach was increasingly challenged by

¹ As they note, "today, international organisation as a field of study is an area where the action is; few would so characterise international organisations a field of practice" (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986: 753).

the "realist" approach toward the end of this period, epitomised by the publication in 1939 of E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Even if these scholars' readings of how to achieve the optimal combination of the desirable with the possible differed, they shared a practical concern with the minimisation of conflict and the maximisation of international co-operation in a decentralised state system. They differed in how to achieve this objective with one school stressing international institutional means and the other the traditional means of diplomacy and statecraft.

It is Rochester's contention that this practical concern has steadily evaporated in the post-war period. His periodisation does not differ all that much from that of Kratochwil and Ruggie as he also sees a series of shifts in substantive research focus. Where he does differ, though, is that he does not see these shifts as involving progressions in analytical insight or, as noted, in practical applicability). He divides the post-war period into four sub-periods, each with a dominant research focus. The 1945-60 period was dominated by studies of the United Nations with regional integration an ascendant, but not yet dominant, theme primarily centred on European integration processes.

The next period, 1960-70 sees UN studies waning and regional integration dominating toward the end of the period, shifting attention from global issues and institutions to regional issues and institutions. This shift in attention came in various theoretical guises, some stressing federalist solutions, others neo-functional solutions, by institutions adapting to the new problem definitions, as we noted above, and others yet again stressing transactions, which may involve communications, trade and other transaction flows, thereby downgrading the role of international institutions, but not leaving them out altogether or failing to acknowledge their uses. This period also saw the highpoint of behaviourist methodology with normative theory pushed to the background of social science analysis.

The third period, 1970-80, sees a return to global concerns and a waning of interest in regional integration. This globalist paradigm was not derived or resulting from the cumulative findings of previous research, but again appears to be in response to events in the outside world, in particular to concern with the "limits to growth" and the oil crisis. As these problems and others of a similar nature showed regional solutions to be inadequate to the new problem definition, regional integration theory was no longer profitable as a distinct intellectual pursuit and was in that sense obsolete, according to one of its former proponents, Ernst B. Haas (1976: 174). It did not make the study of regionalism superfluous, but injected a dose of modesty and perhaps, realism, into what could thereby be explained. Given the new problem definition, and assuming it to be valid, the specific institutional solution provided by regional integration theory was now less functional to the problem at hand.

Renewed interest in global issues did not signal a return to the study of international organisations as traditionally conceived. Instead, there is a proliferation of definitions as international organisation now covers entities ranging from multinational corporations to networks of non-governmental organisations. The attention shifted to clusters and networks in which the existing international organisations only form one node or several nodes in different clusters and networks. The globalist paradigm also signified a return to normative concerns, but of a slightly different type than those of the original “idealists”. The international organisations were not automatically seen as an important part of the solution, but rather as a part of the problem, given their implicit acceptance of the prevailing system of states. The globalist paradigm also signalled a dissatisfaction, if not a rejection of behaviourist methodology, as prescriptive analysis again came to the forefront, at least among certain scholars.

As this overview has attempted to show, research attention has progressively (or regressively, depending upon your evaluation) moved away from the study of existing international organisations to the study of less formalised patterns of cooperation. Hence, the institutional approach has shifted from the study of mandates, rules and working procedures characteristic of actually existing organisations to the study of international governance for which there may or may not be an organisational outlet. The 1980s marked the shift to the study of international regimes and to that we now turn.

International regimes: problems of conceptualisation

The study of international regimes represents a diversified attempt to synthesise the dominant trends in the study of international organisation. On the one hand, the approach favoured by international law was relegated to the sidelines, due to the incessant criticism by the realism school of international relations and its assumption of the anarchical nature of international society. On the other hand, realist theory was criticised by scholars working within the field of international political economy as offering an inadequate account of international relations by neglecting the interdependent nature of national economies. Consequently, a balance of sorts was struck in the notion of a regime by looking at types of international cooperation at a less formal level than organisations while keeping a realist perspective by investigating under which conditions international cooperation was advantageous for state actors.

The concept of an international regime has been defined in various ways. One commonly cited definition is the one offered by Krasner (1982: 185), according to which a regime consists of “implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations”. These four defining features are further defined as follows: “Principles are beliefs of fact, causation, and rectitude. Norms

are standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations. Rules are specific prescriptions or proscriptions for action. Decision-making procedures are prevailing practices for making and implementing collective choice" (1982: 186).

A somewhat wider definition of a regime is given by Puchala and Hopkins who argue that "a regime exists in every substantive area in international relations where there is a discernible patterned behaviour. Wherever there is regularity in behaviour, norms or rules must exist to account for it (1982: 247). This definition essentially begs the question of rule-governed behaviour as regularity surely cannot be equated with rules (or even less with norms and principles). For behaviour to be rule-governed, actors would have to be aware of a certain practice as defined by rules and recognise it as so defined and not regard rules merely as descriptions of their actual behaviour.²

A narrower definition is given by Strange, citing Keohane and Nye, in which "regimes are networks of rules, norms and procedures that regularise behaviour and control its effects", taking it to mean "explicit or implicit internationally agreed arrangements, usually executed with the aid of an international organisation" (1982: 485). This definition in contrast to the wider definition cited above would not assume (or derive) norms and rules on the basis of patterned behaviour, but would rather assess behaviour in terms of compliance (or deviation) from explicitly acknowledged rules.

The Krasner definition occupies the middle ground in this respect by stressing converging expectations rather than actual agreements or patterned behaviour. However, occupying the middle ground does not necessarily solve conceptual problems. As pointed out by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 764ff.), the definitional emphasis put on "converging expectations" would seem to hint at a strong intersubjective element. In their phrase, the "ontology" of regimes is founded on "principled and shared understandings of desirable and acceptable forms of behaviour".³ However, the "epistemology" of regimes is not built on a methodology that allows for exploring the intersubjective element of shared meanings. Structuralist theory features actors as determined by objective, systemic forces while the opposite approach associated with game theory takes interests as given prior to interaction and does not provide for the possibility that intersubjective meaning and shared understandings only can come about through (and resulting from) interaction.

Furthermore, the Krasner definition does not solve the problem of the status of principles, norms and rules around which actors' expectations converge. Expectations can be of an empirical or of a normative nature. In the former case

² See Young's (1986: 119) discussion and citation of Rawls' two concepts of rules (1955: 24).

³ Their understanding of ontology is similar to Walzer's (1983) concept of shared understandings as defining spheres of justice, although he is not mentioned in their review.

you would have reasons to believe that the actor would behave in certain ways, based, say, on past performance, and you would therefore be in a position to predict the actor's future behaviour with some confidence. In the latter case, you are not interested in whether your predictions are validated or not; in fact, you expect the actor to behave in certain ways as a matter of prescription (or even demand). Hence, causes of behaviour are of less interest than whether the acts were in compliance with norms or not. Causation may not be the correct term in these instances. It may be more appropriate to speak of reasons and justifications for acting in certain ways and only of causation in the sense of acts resulting in unintended effects. Moreover, as noted by Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 767), explanation in terms of causes can be invalidated by showing that the actor did not act as you predicted, but you would not invalidate a norm if the actor did not act according to it. Norms would only be invalidated if non-compliance were of such a magnitude that the norms can no longer be seen as prescribing behaviour. These elaborations indicate that the status of norms in regime theory are far from settled, and we shall return to this topic in the next section by looking at norms in international relations theory generally.

Regimes would have to be distinguished from institutions and organisations. International institutions are, according to Young, "practices composed of recognised roles coupled with sets of rules or conventions governing relations among the occupants of these roles" whereas organisations are "physical entities possessing offices, personnel, equipment, budgets and so forth" (1986: 108). The latter definition should be fairly straightforward, but as for the former, one may wonder how institutions are to be differentiated from regimes as Young previously has defined an essential feature of institutions to be "the conjunction of convergent expectations" (1979: 17). Under what conditions would such a conjunction produce an institution, regime or organisation? Is it possible to specify which processes result in regimes (and/or institutions) and which processes result in an organisation? These problems are far from resolved in regime theory and Haggard has noted that "recent regimes literature has largely ignored problems of organisational design and operation". Design and operation are in Haggard and Simmons's view a function of the degree of complexity of the task: "Complex cooperative tasks require more elaborate, and potentially autonomous, organisational structures. If cooperation is already highly institutionalised, theories resting on assumptions of anarchy are highly misleading; blackboxing organisational structure and processes will lead to simplistic predictions" (1987: 496ff.). More than that, the predictions will be irrelevant. Organisational design is also, as they note, related to the scope of the regime, meaning the range of issues it is set to handle, and to its mode of allocation, where authoritative allocation would call for more extensive and autonomous organisational structures than would a purely market-oriented regime.

So far, we have been concerned with definitional matters. Haggard and Simmons do also give an overview of theoretical approaches to regimes. Some of these approaches are of interest to questions we would like to pursue in later sections of this paper. The four approaches are grouped as follows: Structural, game-theoretic, functional, and cognitive. The *structural* approach, which is of less concern to us here, has linked regime strength and stability to the presence of a hegemonial power and regimes are accordingly weakened by the weakening of the hegemonial power. Tests of this assumption have found that this is not necessarily the case.⁴ Game-theoretic approaches have the advantage of specifying under which conditions regimes may arise from cooperation, but, as noted above, are disadvantaged in explaining organisational form and scope and the rules and norms guiding organisational operations and organisational change.

Some of the same problems haunt *functionalist* theory as well as it tends to highlight the demand side, seeing regimes as functional solutions to coordination problems, particularly those of transaction costs. But saying that regimes are functionally required given market failure does not imply saying that regimes would thereby be supplied. As Haggard and Simmons point out, "even if we knew that every regime performed some specified set of functions, this knowledge would not explain why regimes emerge in some issue-areas and not in others. Nor would it explain why some regimes develop impressive formal organisations, while others do not". In particular, they would like to see more work that would show "how particular contracting problems may yield particular governance solutions" and for work along these lines to "distinguish clearly between institutions and organisations" (1987: 508). Even though functionalist theory is an advance on game theory in the sense of showing regimes to be functionally required, its conceptual foundation is still too thin to yield determinate predictions.

A conceptually thicker grounding is given by *cognitive* approaches which emphasises ideology, the values and beliefs of the actors and the knowledge needed for them to reach their goals. This approach tends to be strong on the substantive content of regime rules and on the capacity of actors for learning, thus giving a stronger dynamic to this approach than the two former which either adopt determinist positions or take agents' preferences to be given (and thus unaffected by learning). This approach is not without faults, however. By stressing ideas and consensual knowledge and values, it downplays conflicts of interest and power relations and in a sense yields indeterminate predictions by not specifying what governance solutions would result from consensual knowledge and values and what solutions, if any, would result from dissensual knowledge and values. As this approach is stronger on contextual factors, highlighting contingency and path-dependence, its predictive capacity may accordingly be weakened. But as we

⁴ For a recent example, see Crone's (1993) analysis of the Pacific political economy and the APEC regime.

said above with reference to regime ontology and epistemology, that short-coming may not be as disadvantageous as those of the other approaches. However, as this approach makes room for integrating cognitive and normative factors, which is of interest to us here, it may warrant a closer examination. That is the topic of the next section.

Cognitive and normative convergencies

One way to integrate cognitive and normative factors in the study of international relations is to acknowledge that ideas have a role in explaining behaviour and outcomes. Put succinctly by Goldstein and Keohane, "ideas influence policy when the principled or causal beliefs they embody provide road maps that increase actors' clarity about goals or ends-means relationships, when they affect outcomes of strategic situations in which there is no unique equilibrium and when they become embedded in political institutions" (1983: 3). Saying that ideas matter does not mean that interests do not matter, too; both are thought to have causal weight in explaining actions and outcomes.

Ideas have not figured prominently in international relations theory as explanatory devices. Both realist theory and liberal institutionalist theory share a basic assumption of maximisation of utility, though the setting of maximisation differs in the two theories. The liberal institutionalist theory sees utility maximisation in a context of mutual gain whereas realist theory sees utility maximisation in a context of a zero-sum game where one party's gain is the other party's loss. Both theories concur in that interests, defined in terms of wealth or power, are the determining factor in human action and that ideas are best conceived of as belonging to the region of "unexplained variance".

Ideas figure prominently, however, in reflectivist (or constructivist) theory⁵ which tends to focus on interactions that are constitutive of both identities and interests and that also revise and change these identities and interests. Interests (or preferences) are according to this theory endogenous in the sense that they are constituted and revised through various types of interactions. We shall return to this theory below, but suffice it to say here that this approach is not the one advocated by Goldstein and Keohane though they profess to have reaped some insights from it. Theirs is an explanatory enterprise wherein their main hypothesis is how much of the variation in policy is explained by changes in factors other than ideas. By holding ideas constant, variance in terms of policy outcomes can then be explained by interests or other factors thought to exert influence.

Ideas for Goldstein and Keohane come in three categories. Human action is ultimately conditioned by worldviews embedded in cultures, but with the proviso that these *worldviews* are non-fatalistic, i.e. they allow for human beings to be

⁵ The latter term is the one preferred by Wendt (1987, 1992), one theorist within this approach

active agents in the construction of their identities. Secondly, ideas may be characterised as *principled beliefs* which consist of "normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust" and in that capacity "mediate between world views and particular policy conclusions; they translate fundamental doctrines into guidance for human action" (1993: 9). Thirdly, ideas may also be conceived of as *causal beliefs*, which are "beliefs about cause-effect relationships which derive authority from the shared authority of recognised elites" and imply "strategies for the attainment of goals, themselves valued because of shared principled beliefs, and understandable only within the context of broader world views" (1993: 10). It is the conception of ideas as principled and causal beliefs that is of interest to Goldstein and Keohane.

What purposes do ideas serve? There is typically no direct causal relationship between ideas and policy choices, but ideas can in various ways point the way towards a choice. Ideas serve in this sense as road maps by guiding action either on account of principles or beliefs about cause-effect relationships. But they only provide this guidance under conditions of uncertainty about interests and how to maximise them. Causal beliefs may in these circumstances reduce uncertainty and principled beliefs may substitute for uncertainty. A second purpose of ideas is, according to Goldstein and Keohane, specifically related to rational choice situations in which no determinate prediction is possible. Several equilibria are possible, and the theory cannot by its own powers determine which one is to be preferred. Ideas as shared beliefs substitute for the indeterminacy of predictions of rational choice. Thirdly, ideas institutionalised in the shape of rules and norms may come to have a life outlasting their initial purpose and to be seen as immutable and undisputable. Institutionalisation of ideas may produce institutional inertia or at least certain lag effects as in the case of legal doctrines. For research, the study of the contemporary significance of old rules as well as archaeological investigations into how one set of rules was selected instead of another would be required. The institutionalisation of ideas, furthermore, has the implication that reasons would have to be given for selecting one course of action and not another. Institutionalisation does not only reduce uncertainty about choices; ideas also introduce an element of validation as actions would have to be justified by providing reasons.

This latter point is given an interesting sociological twist in the concept of "epistemic communities" introduced by Peter Haas. This approach has a slightly narrower focus than that of Goldstein and Keohane while building on its central tenets. An epistemic community is "a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area". The defining traits of an epistemic community are, according to Haas, "(1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members; (2) shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their

analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain and which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes; (3) shared notions of validity - that is, intersubjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise; and (4) a common policy enterprise - that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional expertise is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence (1992: 3).

The “epistemic community” approach shares the concepts of principled and causal beliefs and the concept of validation with Goldstein and Keohane, but adds the important observation that ideas are not just one variable among others feeding into the decision-making processes of state actors, but may be embodied in expert groups with their own common policy enterprise which then feed into the decision-making process. As with Goldstein and Keohane’s conception of the role of ideas, epistemic communities have a comparative advantage in situations of uncertainty, when interests or power considerations do not give determinate predictions about how to act. These situations obtain in the aftermath of a shock or in the course of a crisis where decision-makers cannot rely on standard assumptions about what their interests are. This is so because the knowledge needed to determine what those interests are (and how power can come to bear on their realisation) is simply not there.

Epistemic communities can fill the void by using their expertise “to elucidate the cause-effect relationships and provide advice about the likely results of alternative courses of action”, to “shed light on the nature of the complex interlinkages between issues and on the chain of events that might proceed either from failure to take action or from instituting a particular policy”. In so doing, “epistemic communities can help define the self-interests of a state or factions within it” and thereby “help formulate policies” (1992: 15). By their intervention in interest- and policy-defining processes, epistemic communities reduce uncertainty and complexity by limiting or narrowing the range of alternatives under consideration. Their expertise is in this sense rooted in their causal beliefs, their claims to expertise about cause-effect relationships.

How do epistemic communities differ from other groups who press claims about substantive matters or claim to have expertise about specified issue-areas? The crucial criterion is, as indicated above, “the combination of having a shared set of causal and principled (analytical and normative) beliefs, a consensual knowledge base, and a common policy enterprise (common interests)”. (1992: 18). On the first two dimensions, *causal and principled beliefs*, epistemic communities are different from disciplines and professions on the grounds of principled beliefs although both groups share causal beliefs. Conversely, epistemic communities are different from interest groups and social movements on the grounds of causal

beliefs although both groups share principled beliefs. Finally, epistemic communities are different from legislators, bureaucratic agencies, and bureaucratic coalitions on both dimensions. The same applies to *validation and interest*, the last two dimensions. Epistemic communities share a consensual knowledge base by methods of internal validation with disciplines and professions, but not interests. Conversely, epistemic communities share interests with interest groups and social movements, but not validation methods. Finally, neither interests nor validation methods are shared with legislators and bureaucrats.

As we noted above, the regimes approach was criticised by resting on a behaviourist epistemology to deal with an object of study that was ontologically intersubjective. Haas attempts to accommodate this criticism by stressing the validation methods of epistemic communities and advocating what he calls a limited constructivist view. It is constructivist in the sense that it recognises that reality is socially constructed, but also limited in the sense that not all constructions are equally plausible but will have to be subjected to validation tests. The view then does not advocate a correspondence theory of truth which assumes that there is a reality "out there" that can be fully comprehended. Instead it advocates a "consensus theory of a finite and temporally bounded notion of truth" which is fallibilistic in that it can be revised and modified by new insights, but also melioristic in that "correct beliefs may evolve over time, as progressively more accurate characterisations of the world are consensually formulated" (1992: 23).⁶

Haas points out that the generation of consensual knowledge is not to be equated with the generation of truth, perhaps not even with approximations of truth. The interesting point for Haas is that given this assumption, the group that is responsible for articulating dimensions of reality thereby wields considerable political and social influence, particularly in issue areas of public concern where there is a great deal of uncertainty. However, this influence is conditioned by the advice given really being consensual; if expertise differs on crucial issues of public concern, their influence as a group is bound to suffer as a result.

The advantage of this approach is that it opens up for the possibility of organisational learning of governments and organisations through the evolution of consensual knowledge. But saying that a possibility exists for learning does not say under what conditions a learning process is set in motion and what are the steps and sequences in this process. Haas sees the main task of epistemic communities as one of international policy coordination and argues that they may play an evolutionary role as a source of policy innovation and as a channel by which these innovations may diffuse internationally. As regards the former role, epistemic communities may frame the range of political controversy regarding an issue and thereby define state interests by setting the agenda within which these

⁶ On the concepts of fallibilism and meliorism, see Skirbekk (1993).

issues are to be considered. Furthermore, they may be involved in the setting of standards by which state performance is to be measured and assessed. By putting bounds on permissible behaviour and narrowing the range for political bargaining, epistemic communities exert influence. Policy innovation can be disseminated through the communities' own channels or by influencing state governments individually or concertedly through transnational network connections. The timing of policy diffusion and policy selection at the state level or internationally is of importance for epistemic communities to exert influence.

As we noted above, uncertainty, crisis and shock afterwaves are all propitious in opening up for expert intervention. In their absence, policy makers are more likely to seek expert confirmation of their (politically motivated) views than to have them challenged or revised. In these instances, epistemic communities are more likely to serve as mediators, but without compromising their causal beliefs. Finally, policy persistence, through the institutionalisation of ideas, is dependent on the persistence of consensus among community members, but dissensus should not be presumed to produce instant institutional adaptation, but only at a lag as institutionalisation produces its own sense of inertia.

In sum, policy innovation, the chief services provided by epistemic communities, signifies the possibility of institutional learning capacity and hence of institutional adaptability to the lessons drawn from such learning capacity. In Adler and Haas' words, "changes in the epistemological assumptions and interpretations that help frame and structure collective understanding and action constitute the most meaningful notion of learning in international relations" (1992: 385). In fact, processes of learning may even be at the basis of rational choice in international relations: "Rationality thus rests on transferred meaning and experience and should be analysed in terms of practical understandings, theories and expectations that reflect the policymakers' current agenda of priorities" (1992: 386). The typical outcome of a learning process would be the adoption of new instrumental ends (new practices) and the adoption of new principled ends (new goals). For this, the causal and principled beliefs of epistemic communities serve as sources of innovations.

An implication of this approach is to draw attention to the "framing conditions" that are of importance to the rational pursuit of goals. In so doing, it also draws attention to the conditions and types of rule-governed behaviour that make up the framing conditions. While the approach focuses very much on the input side by considering what and how epistemic communities can contribute to international policy coordination, it may be warranted again to have a closer look at the output side and we propose to do so by looking at the idea of multilateralism. As we observed at the beginning of this paper, theorising on international organisation has lost in relevance what it may conceivably have gained in theoretical sophistication. By analysing the concept of multilateralism, we may get a better

idea of what multilateral organisations do (and possibly what they should be doing provided they are given the opportunity to do so). The theoretical lessons learnt so far should provide us with some tools to put that question (and hopefully answer it).

The idea and uses of multilateralism

Multilateralism can be defined as a generic institutional form in international relations, "an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of "generalised" principles of conduct - that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence" (Ruggie 1992: 571). The definitional emphasis given to "generalised principles of conduct that specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions" clearly indicates the rule-governed type of behaviour characteristic of this institutional form. In fact, it is the purpose of rules to define what counts as appropriate in a given context. According to March and Olsen, "institutions are concentrated around clusters of appropriate behaviour", and one criterion for describing behaviour as rule following is appropriateness. (1989: 23ff.) What counts for appropriate behaviour in a specific situation may be, as they admit, a non-trivial exercise, but the exercise may be made more manageable by resorting to their second criterion, similarity, typical for legal reasoning wherein judgements in particular cases can be derived from higher-order norms and principles.

Following from the definition of multilateralism, "generalised principles of conduct logically entail an indivisibility among the members of a collectivity with respect to the range of behaviour in question". Indivisibility is here to be understood as socially constructed, i.e. as intersubjectively attained consensus on appropriate behaviour. Secondly, "successful cases of multilateralism in practice appear to generate among members ...expectations of "diffuse reciprocity" (1992: 571), in the sense of aggregate benefits over time. As Ruggie admits; "multilateralism is a highly demanding institutional form" (1992: 572) and its historical incidence should therefore be presumed to be relatively less frequent than the alternatives of bilateralism or unilateralism.

Multilateralism comes in different forms. Ruggie enumerates three: orders, regimes and organisations. For these to be multilateral, they would have to be seen as specifications of "constitutive rules that order relations in given domains of international life", i.e. as open-access and non-exclusionary arrangements. *Orders* would most closely approximate multilateralism as such, whereas *regimes* are functional or sectoral specification of orders and *organisations* are physical, administrative entities. The historical trend has been in the direction of a "move to institutions", particularly to formal organisations in the 20th century. In former

centuries coordination and collaboration among states rarely resulted in formal organisations.

With the advent of formal organisations, coordination and collaboration takes on a new character as organisations now play an active role as champions of coordination and collaboration themselves and put items on the agenda on which there may not a prior normative consensus. With these formal organisations a multilateral political order has emerged capable of handling collective tasks in an ex-ante coordinated manner, but in that process, possibly complicated the lives of individual states as well, at least on some presumptions about state action. And as Ruggie concedes, he has not found any good explanations in the literature for why states would want to have their lives complicated in this manner. Clearly some explanations seem to be called for. Ruggie's own explanation, which primarily draws on US experiences, points in the direction of fairly strong international forces and compatible US domestic arrangements in the cases of post-war economic and security affairs. The bipolarity of the world and the US status as a hegemonial power lends support to this thesis, but loses explanatory force in the current context of multi-polarity and the absence of a hegemonial power. Ruggie finds that there is not much in the theoretical literature to account for this durability and persistence, but as we shall see below, that may be a result of searching for explanations in the wrong literature.

One possible explanation for the persistence of multilateralism in the current state of affairs may be to turn the explanation around, namely that "the very features that make it strategically difficult to establish multilateral arrangements in the first place may enhance the durability and adaptability of these arrangements once they are in place" (1992: 594). These factors have to do with the expectations of diffuse reciprocity which are less dependent on any hegemonial power than was previously assumed. Secondly, "an arrangement based on generalised organising principles should be more elastic than one based on particularistic interests and situational exigencies" and therefore more adaptable to changing circumstances and power shifts. Thirdly, as already mentioned, much of the institutional innovations come from the multilateral arrangements themselves and the EU provides the most ready-made example on this score. And it is Ruggie's basic thesis that it is the fact that international institutions are multilateral in form that explain their durability and ability to adapt to change.

However, this latter point on adaptability should not be taken too literally. As Caporaso argues, "the economic approach to institutions stresses the overall fit of institutions to the environment. The emergence of and changes in organisations are efficient responses to environmental challenges. Institutional arguments often stress the contingent, path-dependent nature of institutional change. These arguments generally assume a narrative form in which timing and sequences matter" (1992: 627). These two approaches suggest two views of history. The

former has a view of history as efficient wherein "institutions may offer some frictional resistance, but in the end they can be incorporated into the general model of allocative efficiency" (1992: 627) and suggests similar institutional outcomes. The functional approach would always presume processes of reequilibration as institutions respond to pressures from the environment. However, as Caporaso notes, the method of comparative statics drives out narrative and rejects the alternative view of history as contingent. This view which is central to "the institutional approach is more attuned to variations in initial conditions and to the sequences in which events occur" (1992: 628) and speaks of timing and path-dependence in the sense of present standard operating procedures being the products of historical choices. To put things in this way is perhaps to say that something occurred the way it did because of x implies that things would have been different in the absence of x. Without wishing to engage in counterfactuals, asking this question would seem to imply that the presence of x is bound to have effects on behaviour that are different from what would result in the absence of x or in the presence of some alternative arrangement.

Institutions do affect behaviour then, but what are they more precisely and what does an institutional approach mean? In the course of this paper we have given some indications of the characteristics of this approach, and, following Caporaso, we may draw some of these threads together. First, the institutional approach has an ontological dimension which has to do with the status of entities, particularly individual agents and institutions. The approach does admit that "the individual may provide the microcomponent of institutional theory, but social relations and institutions are not seen as products of freely choosing individuals; instead, agency is given a structural determination" (1992: 623). That does not mean determinism in the sense that individuals are mindless reproducers of structures nor does it mean that institutions are by-products of individual utility maximisation. Rather, "institutions are treated as a level of organised complexity: they are distinct from the sum of individuals composing them, yet they rest on a basis of human action that are continually contested, are only partly propelled by norms and role expectations, and always reflect a tension between the desires of individuals and the needs of institutions" (1992: 623). That institutions have needs may sound counter-intuitive, but in this notion of need lies an recognition that one important, perhaps the most important, institutional prerogative is its own survival in its relation to pressures from the environment and that this prerogative may not coincide with the desires of individual members of the institution.

Secondly, institutions have a *theoretical* dimension which has to do with the specification of the proper relations between preferences, institutions, norms and ideas or beliefs. The important thing to note is that the institutional approach sees preferences not as exogenously given, but as endogenously malleable. Institutions shape preferences by altering the pay-off matrix and thereby making it easier to punish free-riders and defectors and by providing an environment for socialisation

and learning. This environment of contacts, exchange of information and learning have an impact on both the substantive content of beliefs (principled beliefs) and on how to realise them (causal beliefs). Moreover, it tends to reduce uncertainty about the behaviour of others as the institutional environment provides the stability needed to make reliable predictions about their behaviour (and hence how to respond in turn). Finally, institutions have prescriptive roles by defining what counts as appropriate behaviour. These norms and standards would be outside the preference structure of individuals in the sense of prescribing what ought to be done instead of what would be desirable to do given preferences to that effect. However, prescriptions may condition preferences by delimiting the range of permissible behaviour and they may also conceivably coincide with preferences as individuals may find it desirable to do what one ought to do.

Thirdly, institutions have an *interpretative* dimension which has to do with how to understand cooperation. On the institutionalist view, there are "complex patterns of cooperation already embedded within states and the interstate system" in the shape of diplomatic language, norms and rules and most basically in the recognition of sovereignty and the system of states. In fact, it is an institutionalist argument that to speak of states and state interests, there would have to be an agreement that state sovereignty has to be respected in order for states to pursue their interests vis a vis other states or via international mediaries. For the institutional approach, "the starting point is a social conception of the actors, and the basic questions have to do with how the system of states can reproduce itself, what tensions it incorporates, and what capacity it has for altering its structures and rules to deal with changing environmental pressures" (1992: 626). It follows that these practices are often constitutive of states' identities and interests and they often proceed in a trial-and-error fashion rather than according to a premeditated rational plan. If these assumptions are correct, the methodological emphasis shifts from "strategic interaction with given (and fixed utilities) to a model of debate, communication, persuasion, argument and discursive legitimation" (1992: 626f.) According to Kratochwil: "Most of our arguments concerning policy or rights are not so much about the determination of the likely result, given a certain distribution of 'preferences', as they are debates over which preferences deserve priority over others, which ones ought to be changed, and which judgement deserves out assent. Here the overall persuasive 'weight' of claims rather than their logical necessity or aggregation is at issue" (1988: 12).

None of this is to be construed as leaving no room for rational calculus. The point is rather to indicate the framing conditions for the playing-out of rational calculation and the essentially bounded nature of rationality. What is ruled out, however, is the notion of an anarchical state of nature, domestically as well as internationally, that is often taken to be the basis for social cooperation. While in social contract theory, notions of the state of nature are taken to be hypothetical 'devices of representation', in international relations theory anarchy is often taken

to describe an actual state of affairs, and this assumption cannot be accepted by the institutional approach.

In sum, the above dimensions point in the direction of an approach that has been relatively neglected in theorising about international organisation in recent years, and that is the subject of the concluding section.

International organisation as organisations

At the outset of this paper, it was complained that the study of international organisation has progressively (or should it be regressively?) moved away from the study of actual international organisations. While realist theory has been sceptical about the possibility of cooperation *tout court*, functionalist theory has spoken of the demand for international organisation, but both approaches have been negligent about the conditions of supply of international organisations. It may seem trivial to point out that the starting point for the study of international organisation ought plausibly to be international organisations, but as we have seen, research has tended to concentrate on forms of international cooperation short of actual organisations. The realist and functionalist approaches, despite differences in assumptions, have taken the viewpoint of states and seen organisations as creatures of dominant states with little independent capacity for initiative or effectiveness. The organisation of international relations rather than the organisations of the international system have been the objects of research. The myopic focus on state action has been appropriate for a discipline that sees itself as practising "Staatswissenschaft".

On the other hand, sociologists from Weber onwards have studied complex organisations such as bureaucracies and business corporations either domestically or comparatively across countries, but they have rarely studied complex organisations at the international level and possibly doubted the very existence of an international society. There are exceptions, of course, particularly in the adoption by political scientists of functionalist theory and Immanuel Wallerstein's work on the modern world system (1974). Most of those who see themselves as organisation theorists have tended to study organisations either domestically or comparatively. However, there should be no reason why the insights derived from these studies could not be applied to international organisations. The reason has been, as we have said, that the theories have built on the assumption that cooperation across borders is that much harder to achieve than cooperation within borders. If the assumption is relaxed, then it should not be too difficult to imagine that organisations once established internationally, would function as *organisations* in ways similar to national, domestic organisations. All it requires is to shift the viewpoint from that of the state in the international system to that of the organisation and its institutional environment.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to describe this approach, because as an approach in international relations theory it hardly exists. The preceding section gave some pointers on how it might be worked up, but the working up remains to be done. Here only some of the elements of this potential approach can be elucidated, drawing on an interesting contribution by Ness and Brechin (1988). Their main point is that international organisations cannot be conceived of as mechanical tools of action in the hands of state actors, but only, in Selznick's phrase (1949, 1957), as at the best recalcitrant tools of action. Organisations must rather be seen, in Ness and Brechin's view, as "live collectivities interacting with their environments, and they contain members who seek to use the organisation for their own ends, often struggling with others over the content and allocation of the product" (1988: 247). In addition to being living collectivities with their own agendas, they also differ over time, they perform differently from one another, they achieve their ends with varying degrees of effectiveness and efficiency and they differ in their goals. All these variations must be considered and explained in working up theories of international organisations.

Ness and Brechin lists four factors that may be of importance in explaining organisational performance; organisational environments, technology, structure and goals. First, *environments* have an impact on organisational performance, but environments vary. One insight from organisation theory, from contingency theory associated with Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), is that there is no best way to organise anything as structure and process are contingent upon the environment and technology. Similarly, Meyer and Scott's work (1992, 1993) on the 'institutional environment' points to organisations being shaped, inter alia, by the environment's rule and belief systems. Environments have to do with expectations about organisational performance and these expectations have consequences for organisational structure. In an environment characterised by heterogeneous and unstable expectations, a flat, functional organisational structure is better suited to deal with them than a hierarchical, centralised structure which is better suited to deal with an environment of stable and homogeneous expectations. Moreover, environments for international organisations may not only be states, but also non-governmental organisations and business corporations.

In my own work on the International Labour Organisation, I have singled out what I call three arenas of interaction. They are the governance arenas where the organisation interacts with its member states, but also with employers' and workers' organisations due to its tripartite structure; the secretariat where organisational priorities are made in terms of personnel and budget; and thirdly, the technical assistance arena where the organisation interacts with donors and recipients. States thus act both as members and as donors/recipients in their interactions with the organisation and their expectations as to the performance of the organisation may accordingly differ according to what "hat" they are wearing at any specific time. Moreover, as members and as donors/recipients states may be

represented by different ministries or departments. Heterogeneous expectations can enhance organisational autonomy by providing room to manoeuvre.

Secondly, organisations may be characterised by possessing a *core technology* which should be defined in a broad way as the organisation's repository of material, skills and knowledge. This notion of a core technology is very much present in the concept of functional or sectoral organisation, or within the UN system, of specialised agencies. By being specialised, they enjoy a comparative advantage to other organisations by virtue of that specialisation. However, technologies diffuse and evolve and the competences change as a result. Technologies also impact on organisational structure with complex technology requiring more dependence on professionals and less routinisable technologies disposing for a flatter organisational structure. Moreover, political contestations can erupt over what constitutes the functional domain of an organisation. If the domain is purely a matter of coordination, such as postal and telecommunications, then it is likely to cause less political contestations than if organisations are allowed to autonomously map out their domain, as in labour or education. Both UNESCO and ILO were accused of "politicisation", meaning straying beyond their functional domain. Unclear domains may also signify turf battles as any knowledge observer would know whenever the UN system urges the need for coordination.

Thirdly, organisations have goals which on one reading may be their own survival when they come to be seen as ends in themselves. Members, as noted, may have goals that differ from those of the organisation, and factions may come to define the organisation's goals as in Cyert and March's concept of a dominant coalition (1963, 1992). These readings say that organisations may come to embrace goals that do not have anything in common with those it was created to accomplish. However, those goals justifying its creation may not be compatible. Etzioni (1961, 1975) has argued that organisations are there to deliver goods and services, but also to create (and promote) a new set of values and attitudes. Value change requires a normative compliance structure whereas the delivery of goods and services require a utilitarian compliance structure. As Ness and Brechin argue, "empirical questions about the performance of international organisations can be solved only by careful examination of what they are charged to do, and the extent to which their charges impose conflicting demands on them" (1988: 266). In the case of the ILO, its value goals relate to the promotion of international labour standards, but it also provides technical assistance as a UN development agency. These goals may not only conflict with each other on specific occasions, but they also provide different standards for measuring organisation performance.

Fourthly, organisational *structure* may have a bearing on performance, and UN organisations vary to the degree the UN system tends to impose a tall, hierarchical structure on them. This structure guarantees a high degree of procedural

rationality, but often at the expense of flexibility and rapidity of response to environmental demands. Therefore, decentralisation of functions to the field level has made them more effective in providing goods and services, but this is of course contingent upon whether provisioning is mainly what they are charged to do. An organisation involved in data gathering, processing and global monitoring as well as in conference diplomacy would need to have a strong headquarters presence. Normally, some form of decentralisation is undertaken to respond more rapidly to requests for services. To take the example of the ILO, the organs charged with supervision of the compliance of states with international labour standards are at the headquarters level, but in order to better provide advice to constituents, experts were posted at the regional offices. On the other hand, flexibility and adequate response may be enhanced by organisations entering into networks, as Jonnson (1995) has pointed out, wherein each organisation may complement the others in structure and in technology.

These keywords do not a theory make, but it is the conclusion of this paper that theory-building in international organisation theory adequate to the task would have to look in this direction for the right tools for the job.

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