




**Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz, and Gary Marks. 2019. *A Theory of International Organization*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press)**

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International organizations (IOs) are among of the central instruments that states rely on to solve cross-border problems. Over the past 200 years—and especially since the end of World War II—they have grown tremendously in number, and, like the problems they are asked to address, they exhibit remarkable diversity. Organizations vary in terms of the number of issues they govern and the number of members they have; their voting rules, their regulatory capabilities, and their independence from states are often different. A wide range of empirical studies has, naturally, aimed to account for this puzzling institutional variation and the determinants of international authority. This is the focus of *A Theory of International Organization* as well. Yet, unlike many past efforts, it advances a unified theory that reveals the hidden interconnections between different elements of design. In doing so, it offers critical insights into some of the most fundamental and enduring questions asked by those studying IOs.

The book is, in fact, the fourth installment in a series of increasingly sophisticated studies that develop systematic measures of authority and institutional design, both above and below the state, and which collectively advance a “postfunctional” theory of governance. The first two books measure (Volume I) and account for (Volume II) different institutional designs *within* states, mainly looking at the growing authority of regional governments. Volume III adapts the concepts and techniques used in Volume I to the international level, measuring the rise of authority beyond the state. Two principal components are conceptualized as being at the core of this phenomenon: delegation (the degree to which a secretariat is empowered to make policies and decisions on the behalf of member states) and pooling (mainly, the degree to which decisions are made through majority rule). The dataset developed by Hooghe, Lenz and Marks reveals that, overall, delegation and pooling have risen steadily between 1950 and 2010, although there is considerable variation across institutions as well.

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In *A Theory of International Organization*, the final book in the series, the postfunctional theory developed in Volume II is extended to make sense of these patterns. The central contention is that the rise of international authority is a product of both functional *and* social drivers. Many IOs, the authors claim, are created for purely functional reasons, as a large literature already suggests. Institutions like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM) help states to do things together that they could not accomplish on their own. This is achieved, usually, through carefully laid out and more or less complete contracts—usually, treaties—specifying how issues will be jointly managed. But IOs are also, at times, expressions of transnational community. This is perhaps most true of regional bodies, like the European Union (EU) and the Organization of American States (OAS). Societies are not strictly atomized; they frequently share languages, histories, identities and ideas that shape international behaviour. Where such communities exist, this can enable less complete contracts that rely more on trust and shared values, and have the potential to evolve over time.

These functional and social drivers profoundly shape the design and dynamics of international governance. They influence, first, what the authors refer to as the “basic set-up” of an IO. Many institutions involve a large number of states yet inevitably, in such instances, the level of community will be quite thin. Where this is so, states fear exploitation, and this leads them to address issues discretely through more detailed contracts that precisely structure the incentives of parties. Where governance is confined to a smaller, less-diverse set of states, community can be much higher. This enables a more open-ended approach to problem-solving. Here, the authors rely on a metaphor of “markets” and “marriages.” In markets, actors know relatively little about their trading partners and may share few common beliefs. They usually want contracts that are carefully balanced, that specify who gets what, and that strictly enforce compliance. This is entirely transactional and sharply contrasts with a marriage—a looser, more aspirational project—where joint action is underpinned by a common outlook.

The level of community, then, shapes the number of issues that IOs deal with and how they evolve over time. Where a high level has enabled incomplete contracting, the policy portfolio of an institution tends to widen over time. As states encounter new challenges, they simply expand the number of problems dealt with by their existing arrangements, as the EU and OAS have done. In this way, a few IOs become particularly elaborate and encompassing. Where community is more limited, states conclude all-new contracts, leading to a proliferation of smaller, issue-specific bodies, like the ITU and BIPM. This dynamic, in turn, shapes the level of authority these bodies possess. When policy portfolios expand, decision-making, compliance monitoring, and the enforcement of rules become more challenging. Delegation and pooling within IOs increase, in response, in order to make the task of governance more manageable. Thus, even when community is high, as in Europe and the Americas, functionalism creeps back in.

The rise of international authority is not inevitable, however. In fact, it has often been resisted; arguably, increasingly so. This is particularly likely to occur, according to the authors, when the activities of an IO become politicized—that is, subject to divisive public debate and outright opposition within the societies of member states. The functional drivers of international authority tend to operate most effectively when they

are not disrupted by such overt political conflict. Since its creation in 1967, limited politicization allowed delegation and pooling to grow within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). By contrast, when politicization increased in the 2000s, delegation and pooling within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) were reduced. So, the right environment is needed for authority to flourish. This final point has broader policy implications in a world—our world—where IOs have been subjected to intense criticism, and where the forces of nationalism, protectionism, and populism are on the rise. Increasingly, this argument suggests, states are likely to oppose further grants of authority, despite widespread evidence that it is needed to resolve global problems effectively.

Overall, *A Theory of International Organization* is well-written and offers readers a wealth of quantitative evidence and many illustrative case studies to support this important argument. The data it relies on have been painstakingly collected, and are based on a set of coherent and carefully thought-out concepts that provide a solid foundation for the empirical analyses that comprise the analytical core of the book. Theoretically, the book makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of IOs by taking the importance of community particularly seriously, exploring the ways this interacts with functional drivers of institutional design, and explaining how this changes the way we look at international institutions. It merges rationalist and constructivist theories in a particularly systematic and productive way—a way, it should be said, that one still seldom finds in leading studies of IOs.

At the same time, important arguments and ideas circulating in field appear to be absent here. Further reflection on them would have been welcome. First and foremost are arguments about the role of power. Hooghe, Marks and Lenz are to be commended for explaining a great deal with a relatively sparse framework. However, the theory is virtually free of all conflict. Coercion, economic or otherwise, makes virtually no appearance in the many case studies. And, while “asymmetric power” is regularly included as a variable in the statistical analyses, the results are suppressed and receive little attention in the text. Ultimately, this leaves the impression that power is something one simply “controls for.” Yet whether one looks at newer, sprawling bodies, like EU, or older, smaller ones, like Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR), power has been a decisive factor, both at the “constitutional moment” when bodies are first created and throughout their subsequent life-cycles. In recognition of this, other theories of international authority and institutional design, such as those advanced by Lake (2010) and Stone (2011), have put power at the centre of their analyses. But these are only fleetingly engaged with, if at all, and the reader is left wondering whether and how the causal dynamics they highlight might play a role here. Can these other theories be accommodated, or do they challenge the argument the authors wish to make?

Another prominent strand of constructivist theorizing focuses on how IOs influence the identities of states. In this book, international organizations are primarily shaped by pre-existing communal ties. But, in fact, once established, they become part of the history of states and help to define the worldviews of citizens through the strategic deployment of symbols and ideas (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; McNamara 2015). On this view, authority is actively constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis. Community not only determines the amount of authority granted to an IO; as international *authorities*, IOs also can influence the evolution of communities once they gain a foothold. A similar

consideration may apply to the idea of “politicization.” In the book, this variable is entirely exogenous; it happens, or it does not. But politicization has itself often been a reaction to authority and the forces of globalization that international institutions have helped to unleash (Hale et al. 2013; Zürn 2018). Together, these observations suggest the need for a more general approach, where the key independent variables explored in the book—community and politicization—are at least partially endogenized.

Finally, while the authors argue that politicization leads states to resist international authority, as defined in the book, it is not clear that this leads to a decline of authority as such. Often, it migrates elsewhere. Naturally, this book focuses on international organizations, but today there are in fact many sites where authority appears: informal IOs, public-private partnerships, transnational institutions, and so on. Further, the forces driving resistance to IO authority often generate the conditions that make these other varieties more likely: polarization within domestic political arenas leads states to establish less-formal organizations; heightened opposition to formal IOs has stimulated entrepreneurship and the creation of hybrid governance arrangements; and, where governance gaps have appeared, private actors have occasionally stepped into the void (Green 2013; Roger and Dauvergne 2013; Andonova 2017; Roger 2020). The concept of authority developed in the book focuses on just one (admittedly important) manifestation, but this comes at some expense: as these alternatives fall from view, the authors overlook connections to some of the most important transformations occurring today.

None of this should lead readers to overlook *A Theory of International Organization*, though. Hooghe, Lenz and Marks have written a first-rate book that sheds new light on classic questions of authority and institutional design, offers fascinating insights into the way IOs operate and evolve, and presents a range of new puzzles for researchers to explore. It deserves to be widely read.

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