

REVIEW ESSAY

*Rules for the World:
International Organizations in Global Politics*

by Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore
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REVIEWED BY JONATHAN G.S. KOPPELL

In the last few years, scholars have devoted more attention to the international organizations that play prominent roles in trade, security, economic development, and other international policy areas. Ironically, this increased scholarly attention is occurring at a time when the U.S. government is increasingly shunning such organizations and demonstrating a marked preference for unilateral action. Although international organizations may, in fact, be growing in significance, current events offer a ready supply of ammunition for realists who argue that international relations remain firmly grounded in states and state interests.

With *Rules for the World*, Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore make a noteworthy contribution to the literature on international organizations and directly confront the realist claim of the diminution of such entities. Barnett and Finnemore put the "organization" back in the study of international organizations. They observe that most of the international relations literature that ostensibly analyzes international organizations focuses on fairly ethereal discussions of "regimes" and "institutions" without wading into the bureaucratic troughs. In three case studies of international organizations and discussion of the bureaucratic dynamics associated with their operations, the authors aim to demonstrate that policy outcomes in the international sphere cannot be fully understood without opening up the black box of international organizations.

While Barnett and Finnemore provide a more nuanced understanding of international organization operations and offer several insights into their influence and power, they do not quite succeed in rebutting realist claims about the general irrelevance of international or-

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ganizations. The authors say that they are not suggesting that activities of international organizations are ever divorced from the preferences of states. As they note in the conclusion, their point is that, "A world without international organizations would be a very different world from the one in which we live." Few scholars or policymakers would quarrel with that. Barnett and Finnemore, however, see international organizations as "active agents of global change...[that] develop new policy ideas and programs, manage crises, and set priorities for shared activities that would not exist otherwise." This is a much bigger claim. Obviously, a world without international organizations would be different. But the authors argue that without international organizations, there would be significant differences in substantive outcomes of global politics. On this issue there is room for doubt.

Rules for the World presents three case studies of international organizations that delve into the bureaucratic dynamics that shape policy. Looking at the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Secretariat, the authors explore the nature of international organizations' power, autonomy, and dysfunction. Perhaps their most important insights concern the specific ways in which these organizations exercise power. The typical skeptic points out their lack of enforcement authority, the repeated instances of powerful nations disregarding their warnings, and the general febleness of most international organizations in the face of such resistance.

Barnett and Finnemore compellingly show that these critiques are simplistic and overlook the important ways in which these organizations shape the conditions under which states operate. For example, the IMF developed the dominant frameworks for understanding exchange rate policies and introduced the notion of conditionality, which, the authors argue, would have been anathema to the states that founded the IMF. The authors argue that, through their ability to set the terms for debate, generate schemes of classification and definition, and set norms and standards, international organizations "create social reality." Similarly, the authors provide a welcome corrective for the reductionist conclusion that international organizations must lack autonomy because they cannot do anything without some state influence. Perhaps most importantly, international organizations may have the autonomy to influence state preferences. For instance, an international organization might be following the pre-

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ferences of interested states, but those preferences might have been “planted” by the organization itself. Finally, the authors point out that the premise of many autonomy discussions—that states always prefer limited autonomy for international organizations—is frequently mistaken. There are numerous instances in which states would prefer that these organizations worked things out on their own. Political scientists Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek have pointed out that such delegation is frequently the case in areas of great technical complexity or where states would rather not deal with a thorny matter.¹

According to Barnett and Finnemore’s account, all three organizations discussed in the book demonstrated autonomy at critical junctures. The IMF introduced the practice of conditionality, which led to deep involvement in the domestic economic policies of borrowing nations. The UNHCR expanded its reach and then seemed to turn its back on the bedrock principle of *nonrefoulement* (no forced repatriation of refugees), and the UN secretariat in effect decided not to intervene in an effort to stop the genocide in Rwanda. In each case, the leaders of these international organizations seemed to make decisions on their own rather than follow the preferences of powerful states or coalitions of states.

Proving that the decision makers within each international organization were not acting to please state interests is a nearly impossible task, as is proving any negative. More problematic, however, is that we are left unsatisfied with the authors’ bottom-line claim that policy outcomes were different because of international organizations. In each case it could be convincingly argued that the decisions made by the international organizations produced outcomes very much in line with what might have occurred in their absence. For example, IMF lending policies place borrowing countries at a severe disadvantage relative to powerful lending nations. The adjustments imposed through conditionality create hardships that are not much different from those we might expect in a world without the IMF. Indeed, some argue that borrowing countries would be better off in such a world. The UNHCR’s aggressive repatriation of the Rohingyas people to Burma also seems to match what might have occurred without international organization intervention. The Rohingyas would likely have been pushed back into the arms of the oppressive junta ruling Burma when the Bangladeshi government ran out of patience and resources. Finally, the UN secretariat’s resistance to involvement in the Rwandan civil war—even to stop a genocide—did not seem out of line with the

preferences of individual countries. Would intervention have happened in the *absence* of the UN?

In the case of the Rwandan genocide, the authors emphasize that the Secretariat's decision to withhold peacekeeping troops was a consequence of a bureaucratic pathology. Based on the evidence, this is not so clear, and the authors do not convincingly prove otherwise. Of course, the problem here is defining and identifying pathological bureaucratic behavior. Much of what appears pathological may actually be intentional, a product of a design that was never envisioned to be fully functional. Political scientist Terry Moe has made this argument with respect to the U.S. federal bureaucracy. Given the multiple constituencies concerned with the behavior of international organizations, it is not far-fetched to imagine that many of these organizations are designed to fail.² This begs the question of whether an intentionally ineffective bureaucracy can be categorized as dysfunctional or pathological.

One defect of most international organizations the authors raise in their conclusion is the lack of transparency and accountability. This problem, which Robert Keohane has labeled the "democratic deficit," is more vexing the more these organizations resemble domestic bureaucracies.³ Barnett and Finnemore seem to doubt international organizations will increase their legitimacy anytime soon, in either a substantive or procedural sense. This is ironic because the lens through which these organizations are generally projected casts them in a positive light, as sources of fairness and lawfulness within the under-governed, anarchic international landscape. Barnett and Finnemore aptly label the philosophy of international organizations as "undemocratic liberalism." Observing that these organizations are inherently ill-suited to democratic governance, Robert Dahl concludes that this fact does not, in itself, render them undesirable. Rather, he suggests that we should not try to find the legitimacy of these organizations in their "democraticness," but instead look to their effectiveness, superior knowledge, and concern for all affected parties. Of course, Dahl is very skeptical of delegating authority to entities that substitute "bureaucratic bargaining systems" for a truly democratic process.⁴

Barnett and Finnemore, too, seem uneasy with the growing influence of international organizations. They recognize the ways in which such organizations "reap the fruits of commercial exchange, find nonvio-

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lent dispute mechanisms, and solve their environmental problems," but suggest that in so doing they may exclude the people of the world from participating in the governance process. So the question is whether the trade-off is worthwhile. The cases presented in *Rules for the World* would likely lead one to conclude that it is not. The three international organizations presented in the book arrived at policies that have not served the interests of those targeted by these organizations. This seems more like a bias in case selection than a broad indictment of international organizations. The book also does not examine international organizations that facilitate fluid international transactions, such as the exchange of goods, services, and ideas. Such organizations are the only meaningful response to a world that increasingly transcends political borders. The benefits of such international organizations may force us to stomach more "undemocraticness" than we might be comfortable with. Quite frankly, we may not really have a choice. ■

NOTES

¹ Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek, *Autonomous Policy Making by International Organizations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

² Terry M. Moe, "The politics of bureaucratic structure," *Can the Government Govern?* ed. Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1989).

³ Robert O. Keohane, *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Robert Dahl, "Can International Organizations be Democratic? A Skeptic's View," *Democracy's Edges*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19-36.