Reinalda on Grigorescu, 'The Ebb and Flow of Global Governance: Intergovernmentalism versus Nongovernmentalism in World Politics'

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A clear distinction between intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) is common in the field of international relations and easily identified, as IGOs are set up by governments and INGOs by private actors. Alexandru Grigorescu, however, questions the value of this rigid distinction in what is generally referred to as global governance and offers three intriguing histories of a dozen international organizations (IOs) in the fields of health, labor, and technical standards during the years 1850-2015, as well as an attention-grabbing analytical framework. Grigorescu, professor of political science at Loyola University Chicago, discerns an intergovernmental-nongovernmental continuum, with more, or less, government control over IGO decision-making, financing, and deliberations, and more private influence in cases of less government control. He also finds numerous shifts in the intergovernmental or nongovernmental nature of global governance in the three fields. The League of Nations’ Health Organization, for instance, had an intergovernmental setup but depended on external private funding through the Rockefeller Foundation, which, however, developed only a lukewarm relationship after World War II with the intergovernmental World Health Organization (WHO). The continuum and the almost one hundred shifts he found provide a broader view of the evolution of world politics over a long time period, as the three fields all experienced considerable alterations to their nature (and this is also true for education, a field dealt with in the introduction and the theoretical chapter). Grigorescu does not see greater roles for private actors over time, as often suggested by some, such as Jonas Tallberg, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito, and Christer Jönsson in *The Opening Up of International Organizations: Transnational Access in Global Governance* (2013), but rather a continuous ebb and flow in world politics. Hence, existing forms should not be taken for granted, as these forms may change. In practical terms this may even help to solve global problems, if we understand the degree to which governments or private actors can best be involved in solving them.

To explain the variation across the intergovernmental-nongovernmental continuum Grigorescu links the domestic and global preferences of the most powerful states, as these states play by far the greatest role in shaping the nature of world politics. The shifts across the continuum result to a large extent from changes in great power ideologies and related domestic institutions. Grigorescu holds that the ideological leanings of the elites in power and the emergence and empowerment of domestic institutions are likely to have a strong effect on a country’s support for, or its opposition to, changes...
in the intergovernmental or nongovernmental nature of individual IOs and, more broadly, on world politics. When ideologies of domestic governmental activism become stronger in the most powerful states, or when domestic governmental institutions in a specific realm are established or enhanced, global governance is likely to shift toward intergovernmentalism. As with domestic politics, where organizations are rarely, if ever, purely governmental or nongovernmental, IOs are not purely intergovernmental (controlled entirely by governments) or nongovernmental (without any government influence) but rather the outcome of interactions between intergovernmental and nongovernmental actors. Linking domestic politics to IGOs is in line with Grigorescu’s previous book *Democratic Intergovernmental Organizations? Normative Pressures and Decision-Making Rules* (2015), in which he explored how democratic norms have spread from domestic politics to IOs by shaping decision-making rules with regard to voting, access to information, and the role of private actors. IOs thus incorporated domestic democratic norms into their own rules, even if this happened only slowly over a long period of time. The theoretical elaboration in his new book adds to our understanding of these domestic-international connections. That the author focuses on foreign policy decisions of the United States may result in a somewhat American bias, given that the United Kingdom as hegemon since the nineteenth century influenced the early process of international organization. As Mark Mazower argues in his *Governing the World* (2012), the United Kingdom used the League of Nations to prop up the British Empire, while the United Nations (UN) did not become a useful extension of US power until 1945. These differences may matter more than the sharing of similar views by these great powers as stressed by Grigorescu.

The three chapters that describe the events and shifts in the fields of health, labor, and technical standards are methodologically similar in the sense that they deal with the same time periods (pre-World War I, during and immediately after the war, the interwar period, during and immediately after World War II, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War era) and answer the same five questions (about changes in global governance, governmental activism, ideological leanings, domestic institutions, and other explanations). At the end of each chapter the preliminary conclusions are assessed, supported by two figures that show, respectively, the intergovernmental-nongovernmental continuum and the shifts that were found. A helpful table summarizes both successful shifts and failed attempts chronologically. Table 4.1 on the global labor realm, for instance, deals with twenty-two moments between the 1830s and 2006-15: with fourteen cases of change in decision-making, six in financial arrangements and eleven in deliberative aspects (together the three segments of the first question); eleven cases of major states supporting or opposing change and their ideologies (the second question); eight cases of evidence of the ideology-based mechanism (the third question); nine cases of evidence of the institutional mechanism (the fourth question); and nine cases of other explanations (the fifth question). The descriptions are based on literature and primary documents (mentioned in the bibliography under organizations).

The idea behind this book was sparked by the author’s archival research for his previous book and his reading of developments in IOs over almost two centuries. He noticed cyclical patterns and global trends that seemed to repeat themselves across time, which he then captured in his ebb-and-flow idea and the continuum. This resulted in more archival research about IOs in the three fields. Although most IOs in the health sphere are obvious health organizations (such as the WHO), one could call into question whether this remains true for the International Committee of the Red Cross (and other Red Cross organizations), given their mainly humanitarian work. The technical standard realm focuses on “technical” standards, such as those handled by the International Organization for
Standardization, but broadens out to also include less technical standards with the inclusion of social standards. It remains fascinating that Grigorescu has identified fifty moments of change in the three fields and ninety-four shifts on the intergovernmental-nongovernmental continuum. Any student of these fields, or the relationship between IGOs and INGOs more generally, needs to look at them, with the tables here available as practical starting points.

The relevance of Grigorescu’s empirical findings for his theoretical assumptions is discussed in the concluding chapter. The role of IGO officials deserves more debate, as it seems underestimated. National officials play natural roles in Grigorescu’s model, because they establish connections between domestic and international preferences, but what about the reverse movement? Do executive heads of IGOs, or more broadly senior staff members, play roles during the moments of change or in shifting the balance between intergovernmentalism and nongovernmentalism? It can be argued that IGOs have succeeded in developing policies of their own, much stronger than assumed in realist theory, and in creating such ideas as “sustainability” and “good governance,” as revealed by the United Nations Intellectual History Project. Both policies and ideas can be seen as inputs for governments generated by IGOs. Grigorescu recognizes the relative independence of IGO staff but stresses that they are “rarely directly part of the decision-making process,” although they affect decisions through the information they generate, the way they frame such information, and what they leave out of official reports (p. 16). This view may be correct, but it is also limited as it does not take leadership by executive heads or staff creativity into account.

Although Grigorescu mentions a few executive heads in the empirical chapters, his description of their roles remains limited. The dismissal of the active director of the League of Nation’s Health Organization in 1938 suggests to him that “even in cases where top IO administrators appear to influence the intergovernmental or nongovernmental nature of the organization (perhaps even as a result of their own ideological leanings), powerful states eventually gain the upper hand and shift the character of the IO closer to those that match their preferences” (p. 77). This may be true generally, but in this case, it happened after a long period of the director’s activism (from 1921), supported by the private funding he found. Since Grigorescu mentions this activism, it shows that his focus is mainly on the end result. This is also true for the instances discussed in the final chapter, where IGO officials used windows of opportunities and “acted to push global governance toward greater intergovernmentalism or nongovernmentalism.” These instances remind Grigorescu “that IO bureaucracies often have the interests and resources to play important roles in shaping the nature of global governance, whether alone or together with governmental and nongovernmental domestic and international actors,” but also that they are “relatively short lived” (p. 217). If he would focus less on the end result, the picture may have more dimensions in the variety of international actors. Grigorescu sees IGOs too much as passive entities, rather than as actors with potential roles based on leadership qualities and staff support with regard to strategies and ideas. Leadership is not an index entry, but if leadership of IGO senior staff were added to his model, the picture would be enriched. I was surprised that in the description of the International Telegraph Union of 1865 the name of its bureau director, Louis Curchod, was not mentioned, as he created the bureau (a secretariat was not foreseen when the union was set up) and soon made it a more self-directing bureaucracy than the participating states had had in mind.

Despite these critical comments on the role of executive heads, Grigorescu’s The Ebb and Flow of Global Governance is an innovative contribution to our understanding of the mix of private and...
governmental actors and their influence in world politics.

Notes


[2]. See Gabriele Balbi with Simone Fari, Giuseppe Richeri, and Spartaco Calvo, Network Neutrality: Switzerland’s Role in the Genesis of the Telegraph Union, 1855-1875 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), chap. 6 about the “bureaucratization“ of the union.

Bob Reinalda has published about the history of international organizations and their secretariats since 1815 and is an editor of IO BIO, the Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations (see www.ru.nl/fm/iobio).


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