

The History of International Organizations—What is New?

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MacKenzie, David (2010). *A World Beyond Borders: An Introduction to the History of International Organizations*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, ISBN-10:1442601825

A history of international organizations (IOs) entitled *A World Beyond Borders* seems both long due and promising. To be clear from the start, this is a helpful book that nevertheless is based more on conventional narratives and will not truly satisfy historians aiming at a global history of international organizations.

Other authors tried to tackle the history of international organizations with the classic focus on the nineteenth and twentieth century, most prominently Akira Iriye (2002), Madeleine Herren (2009), and Bob Reinalda (2009). While Iriye delivers a general overview and the narrative of an evolving “global community,” Herren provides a very empirical introduction that is of utmost value to study IOs from a perspective of entangled history. Reinalda offers an encyclopedic overview with enriching insights but does not present a new narrative of IOs. So what is MacKenzie’s contribution in this context?

The book starts with an introduction to international organizations, covering the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, followed by Chapter 2 that deals with the League of Nations. The third chapter tackles the interesting period during World War II. Chapter 4 analyzes the UN in the Cold War years. The next two chapters cover regional and other organizations (5) and “the world of international NGOs” (6). The book concludes with the seventh chapter on the UN in the modern era, which deals with the UN’s role after 1990. It seems obvious the focus of this book lies on the twentieth century as the period of international organization until the League of Nations (established in 1919–20) is dealt with only in the introduction. The implicit periodization can be described as mainstream since it focuses on 1) everything before the League, 2) the League, 3) the UN until 1989, 4) the UN after 1989–90 and today.

In the first introductory part, MacKenzie offers a definition of international organizations:

States created international organizations to do things that they could not do on their own or to prevent from happening things that were not in the state’s interests. International intergovernmental organizations did not create themselves or exist on their own; they were designed, supported, and operated by the countries that created them (p. 1).

This definition appears somewhat normative and rather uncritical; furthermore, it also only includes IGOs and NGOs and not other forms of international organization such as epistemic communities and transnational networks, for instance. Later, the book provides another definition according to which IOs are cooperative ventures between, among others, governments, peoples, businesses, scientists, organized labor, and professionals; they are involved in virtually all aspects of human life from politics, culture, and business to the environment, human

rights, and disarmament; and they are found almost everywhere; in the developed and the developing world among the rich and the poor, and across the political and ideological spectrum. And they can act, make a difference and change states', people's, and institutions' behavior (pp. 1–2). Here, by reference to Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) constructivist interpretations of IOs as active bureaucracies, MacKenzie turns from a functionalist explanation of the rise of IOs to a constructivist norm-generating role of IOs. Then he briefly mentions realist and liberal takes on IOs—without referring explicitly to these theories of international relations.

Despite mentioning the peculiarities of individual institutions, MacKenzie identified some common features of IOs: 1) their actions relate to a purpose, although these goals can change; 2) IOs serve as an arena (machinery for negotiations, norms of behaviour-generator), 3) IOs function as a clearing house for information (p. 3). Although he provides quite differentiated views on the origins and nature of IOs, MacKenzie shows also a tendency to idealize these: “International organizations arose from the shared concerns and interests of governments and people's interests that transcended national borders and the concerns of a single state” (p. 3). This is again a rather functionalist and idealist vision of IOs that should be confronted with newer, critical interpretations.

For MacKenzie the League of Nations “was to wear many hats: keeper of the Treaty, handmaiden of the great powers, provider of collective security, colonial overseer, social activist, and the voice of peace for humankind” (p. 14). The author follows the narrative of a partially successful league in various areas (except collective security) and states even in “failure” sections like disarmament, economic affairs or minority rights, the league contributed to generate international norms, procedures, and information that proved to be helpful for the UN (p. 28). The main problem of the league was the “great powers” did not full-heartedly support it, and the U.S. remained a nonmember: “It was never a truly global organization; for most of its existence it resembled a Eurocentric collection of the victors of the First World War” (p. 29).

MacKenzie regards the UN as “wholly new, but in many ways it was based on the example of the League” (p. 53). The UN appeared more attractive to the “great powers,” which somehow guaranteed the relative stability of the organization and contributed, in MacKenzie's words, to its becoming a “truly global organization with a greater emphasis on social and economic issues and a much more diverse membership than ever found in the League” (p. 54). The book acknowledges different perspectives on the UN and its institutions and policies. “From the hope for the future of humankind to the handmaiden of the Western imperial powers, from a bastion of collective security to an impotent debating society, the UN has meant different things to different people at different times” (p. 140). While the UN failed in disarmament, MacKenzie makes out some successes in banning nuclear weapons in areas where these were not existent yet (pp. 63–64). In his view, the UN was not a decisive player in the decolonization process (p. 72)—an assessment that may be questioned. In the part on the UN development policy (pp. 73–6), the author rather draws a positive picture, which may also be contested: “The UN made a positive impact on development in the Cold War era, but there were limitations to its success” (p. 76). He explains the “uneven but effective efforts” of the UN as a result of the lack of money (p. 74). One may ask whether this and not the wrong programs were the reasons for the mixed development record of the UN.

In the quite interesting chapter on regional organizations, MacKenzie presents an overview on the regional institutions in the Western Hemisphere (mostly the Organization of American States), in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Furthermore, the post-imperial organization of the Commonwealth, the Francophonie, Ibero-Americanism, and the community of Portuguese-speaking countries is mentioned. Although there is a hint at the thought that the Commonwealth would be better suited than the League of Nations to deal with world problems, a broader discussion on the relationship between empires and the emergence of international organizations would have been desirable (see Mazower, 2009, Chapters 1–2).

In the chapter on nongovernmental organizations, MacKenzie provides a categorization on the views, which can be held toward NGOs with reference to Volker Heins:

NGOs have been around a long time, although there were not very many of them until the late nineteenth century. Some professional associations, women's groups, intellectual societies, workers' unions, charities, and religions, as well as organizations that worked to ban prostitution and the opium trade, could loosely be described as NGOs (pp. 110–11).

Generally, the author offers a good overview on the changing role the increasing number of NGOs played.

After a modest appraisal of the UN, MacKenzie turns again in his conclusions to the general role of international organizations: IOs facilitate spaces for debate, expose issues affecting millions, give aid, assistance and information.

International organizations focus attention on problems, offer potential solutions, and take action in places and areas ignored by others. And today, more than ever, global problems in the environment—international trade and economic development, human rights, health, agriculture and food, criminal activity, and so on—will require global solutions, and international organizations will help to fill this void (p. 141).

In international relations theory terms, MacKenzie displays realist, functionalist, and idealist explanations but rather neglects more critical studies or global history analysis. Beyond that, unfortunately, no true narrative or overall question is identifiable, for example: Can we speak more of continuities or changes if we compare the nineteenth and the twentieth century, the league and the UN, twentieth-century NGOs and public unions of the nineteenth century? Admittedly, it is indeed difficult to present an overarching narrative on a phenomenon of 150 to 200 years that has not been satisfactorily inquired by historians yet, but a provocative thesis (can we actually speak of a “global community”?) would have stimulated the debate.

While the lack of an innovative narrative (what I would have expected from the book's title) is to a certain extent common and thus excusable, it is rather surprising this study does not specifically discuss the state of the art. MacKenzie rather referred to some major introductory works (Clive Archer, Margaret Karns/Karen Mingst, Thomas Weiss, Craig Murphy) but not to ongoing historical research endeavors, for example, efforts to come to a new history of the League of Nations¹ or Madeleine Herren's global history introduction to IOs.

MacKenzie provides a nice reading but too often refers to rather established narratives

1. Historians from the universities in Geneva, Oxford, St. Gallen and Heidelberg launched a new approach to achieve new history of the League of Nations. They organised a conference in Geneva on newer archive-based historical research on the League in August 2011.

of IOs that do not always reflect the respective state of the art. In sum, it is an overview that can be used for introductory courses but clearly suffers from a strong focus on the second half of the twentieth century, a rather uncontested common periodization and a narrative that also remains too conventional as it rather not bases on newer historical research.

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