

## Star wars: voyaging into the unknown

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### Abstract

The mainstream literature with respect to international organizations (IOs) generally concludes that the field suffers from the lack of significant scholarship addressed to the operations, management, and decision making within IOs. I contend that there is a great deal of scholarly work in the literature if one looks in the right places. I suggest that the seeming lack of scholarly literature is a result of misperception on the part of mainstream scholars as to where this literature can be found. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

As we enter the twenty-first century, it would seem that there are two streams of literature with respect to the study of international organizations—the known literature and the unknown. The known literature has, of course, received all the attention; it is the purpose of this article to elucidate the unknown.

Since at least the mid-1980s, the known literature has pursued a single theme—that the study of international organizations (IOs) is deficient in some way. Originally, the accusations were that the study is out of touch with the actual practice of real IOs (Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986), has floundered as a field of study (Rochester, 1986), or lacks a meaningful connection to the study of organizations in general (Ness and Brechin, 1988). Recently, other scholars have added further charges that the study of IO “has paid little attention to how IOs actually behave after they are created” (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999: 699), that “we don’t know much about the decisional dynamics of [IOs]” (Fosdick, 1999: 328), and that, while

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there have been many studies of international institutions, they have lacked “a disciplinary foundation” (Martin and Simmons, 1998: 729). In discussing the unknown literature below, I hope to refute these charges. I claim that there have been many examples during the last two decades of significant research and writing with a disciplinary focus on the operation and management of IOs, but it seems that the international relations (IR) community has not noticed—perhaps because it was searching in the wrong warehouse.

The thesis of Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986: 754) was that “students of international organization have shifted their focus systematically away from international institutions”. However, it seemed that they used data from only one journal, *International Organization* (i.e., see their Fig. 1, p. 761), to derive this conclusion; it had to have been possible that IO scholars were still publishing studies of international institutions, but in other journals, or in another warehouse. However, they did not appear to have investigated this possibility.

Rochester (1986: 802) lamented the fact that IO scholars had not been able to “move the world”. However, it can be concluded that his hidden agenda was to have the study of IOs become a public policy field. His desire was to move the study of IOs away from a focus on regimes and instead “be viewed as the set of instruments for making and implementing ‘transnational policy’ or ‘international public policy’” (p. 812). In turn, this would require “a more focused examination of the structures and processes associated with these institutions” (p. 812). His article reviewed, to that point, the thirty-five years of literature on IOs since the founding of the UN, and concluded that IO scholars “for the most part have behaved more like journalists than scholars, reacting to and reporting on the latest happenings” (p. 803). It appears that IO scholars were to be damned if they did and damned if they didn’t. If they were empirical, they were faddish journalists; if they were not, they were faulted for neglecting to study the structures and processes of real institutions. In any case, Rochester wanted studies to result in ways to improve the world, not just an understanding of what was being done within what constraints, never acknowledging the normative considerations that his goal would have introduced.

Ness and Brechin (1988) also claimed there was a gap in the study of IOs, but in this case the gap occurred because IOs, supposedly, had rarely been studied using the concepts of organizational sociology. Nevertheless, they then cited five studies important to the IO field that they noted have sociological bases (p. 245, fn.2) and one must wonder what else they were looking for. Furthermore, a typical argument of theirs to support their viewpoint and dismiss IO scholarship was as follows:

subsequent functionalist analyses have often implicitly assumed that all international governmental organizations are essentially alike. Few have noted that organizations differ over time, or that they perform differently from one another, or that they achieve their ends with varying effectiveness or efficiency. Nor do these analyses note that organizations differ in their aims. . . . Thus, the International Postal Union [sic] becomes the equivalent of the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the European Economic Community (EEC) (1988: 247).

However, no literature is cited to accompany this argument, so one cannot judge whether the few did or did not do what they were accused of. In fact, from reading the whole article, one has to conclude that the gap may not be between IO and sociology, but between the literature

surveyed in the article and what may actually exist—that is, the known literature and the unknown literature.

Barnett and Finnemore (1999) also stated that there was a gap in the study of IOs, but in this case it arose because the scholarly literature has put all the emphasis on the creation of IOs and has neglected to examine the subsequent behavior within the IOs. Like Ness and Brechin, their approach is drawn from sociology with such arguments as the following: “bureaucratic politics can compromise organizational effectiveness, but these approaches have rarely been applied to IOs” (p. 701). Again, without their citing any literature, how is one to know what has and has not been applied, rarely or otherwise?

Now, Fosdick (1999) has adopted the Barnett and Finnemore argument as her own rationale:

The dearth of knowledge on the functioning of international organizations is the product of two factors: 1) the overwhelming focus by international organization scholars on explaining how such entities come to be established, rather than how they work once established; and 2) the failure of international organization scholars to link their works up with the research programs and multidisciplinary insights of organizational theorists. The result is a deep chasm in our knowledge of how international organizations work, and by extension, in our understanding of the reasons they often fail to work (p. 366).

If IO knowledge is to be cumulative, for example through Fosdick building on the work of Barnett and Finnemore, one must hope that it will be based on what already exists (the unknown literature), not on a study that contends it does not exist (the known literature)!

So what and where is all this uncited literature that I have been claiming exists? For a start, it can be asserted that it does not exist in the journal, *International Organization*. At least since the late 1970s, that journal removed itself from reporting the research concerning international organizations unless the research pursued a particular focus, that of political economy. If scholars are going to look in only one journal for literature, they should not be surprised if they do not find what they are looking for. The corollary of this is that scholarship demands that scholars search all the extant literature, not just a single journal and not just a single journal from their own country.

My suspicion as to why the unknown literature has not become better known is that it has been derived from scholars who have pursued a public administration focus, not a political science perspective. Furthermore, there is within public administration itself a long-standing controversy between those who see public administration as a subfield of political science, focusing on the relationships between the executive and legislative branches, and those who see public administration as a subfield of generic administration where the essence of this perspective is decision making, or how and why decisions are made within the civil services of public organizations (Charlesworth 1968; Henry, 1975; Nigro and Nigro, 1984; Kernaghan and Siegel, 1999). The cumulative effects of these two approaches is the accumulation of a literature unknown to IO scholars who come to the issue area straight from an international relations perspective based on political science.

Accordingly, I will survey the IO public administration literature of the last twenty years or so, citing some works from the generic approach and other works from the political science approach that would appear to belie the above-named scholars. My perspective will

focus on how these works cover the supposed lacunae as noted in the articles by Barnett and Finnemore and by Fosdick, but with references to the other lamenting scholars as well. I apologize at the start for surely overlooking the work of some IO scholars; it seems scarcely possible nowadays for anyone to be totally cognizant of all the literature. Indeed, I have not even tried—I have simply looked to my own bookshelves, confident that in this small library I can still find ample material to refute the lamenting scholars.

Whether the founding discipline is generic administration or political science, public administration scholars are keen to document what actually happens within public organizations, especially the management practices that lead to decision making. This has certainly been the case for public international organizations such as the UN, too. For the most part, theirs has been the approach of social constructivists (Ruggie, 1998). In terms of books, no one has been more prolific in the past two decades in analyzing management problems within the United Nations than Beigbeder (1987; 1988; 1997b). However, his books do not stand alone, but are well accompanied by two volumes of original articles assembled by well-known European IO scholars (Cooker, 1990; Taylor and Groom, 1988). There are fifteen and thirteen articles, respectively, in these two volumes. To not know the works of any or all of these is to start a study of the field at a significant disadvantage.

Furthermore, these works have been well supplemented in terms of shorter articles concerning various management topics, such as: personnel concerns (Bodiguel, 1995; Clark, 1996; McLaren, 1996; Renninger, 1986); functional concerns (Haas, 1997; McLaren, 1987; Mendez, 1997); the framework law (Jordan, 1997); the values of administrators (Beigbeder, 1997a); organizational culture (McLaren, 1994; 1997; Mingst and Warkentin, 1996; Stiles, 1998); decision making in an interorganizational epistemic community (McLaren, 1990); and the role of the executive head (Schechter, 1987). This last topic received treatment as well in a book of fifteen articles (Rivlin and Gordenker, 1993). Studies of individual IOs are present as well. Some deal with regimes (Germain, 1997; Zacher, 1996); some with individual agencies (Doxey, 1989; Imber, 1989; Siddiqi, 1995). On the basis of all of the above-identified literature, it is difficult to agree with the charge that we do not know much about the decisional dynamics of IOs.

Then there are the many studies written by the scholars who take the political science approach to public administration and examine the politics of IOs. Among these are: a volume of fifteen articles (Finkelstein, 1988); individual studies (Ameri, 1996; Coate, 1988; Doxey, 1987; Weiss, Forsythe, and Coate, 1994); and journal articles (Atwood, 1981/82; Donnelly, 1993; Mingst, 1987; Smith, 1999; Stiles, 1996).

But the unknown literature does not stop there. Rochester wanted the field of IO to be used to develop international public policy. He should not be disappointed with a volume of forty-one articles focused on achieving a “Just World Order” (Falk, Kim, and Mendlovitz, 1991). Or, if making the world a better place for democracy is his desire, he should be satisfied with either of two volumes, each containing eleven studies on the role of NGOs in the deliberations of IOs (Weiss and Gordenker, 1996; Weiss, 1998).

Finally, it should be noted that the unknown literature has not left alone that old IO chestnut, the role of functionalism in international organizations. Although the unknown IO scholars have not wasted much space on this topic, perhaps preferring to consign it to the dustbins of history, its potentialities (Imber, 1984) and a denial of same (McLaren, 1985),

should well be considered by such scholars as Ness and Brechin, (1988: 246–7) when they discuss it.

What, then, would an IO scholar have gained from being aware of the unknown literature? I believe that the person:

- would have full knowledge of the bureaucratic elements in the management and operations of IOs;
- would understand what factors enter day-to-day decision making within IOs, and why;
- would be cognizant of all the different stakeholders that are concerned with the operations and management of IOs; and,
- would be able to place IOs in their intergovernmental milieu so as to understand their potentialities and their limitations as a force for improving human conditions in this world.

This literature review omits the texts that have been written for international organization courses. It also omits the work of all those scholars who are deemed to be in the known literature through the citations in the articles of the lamenting scholars—Chad Alger, Inis Claude, Robert Cox, Ernst Haas, Peter Haas, Harold Jacobson, Christer Jonsson, David Kay, Robert Keohane, Stephen Krasner, Craig Murphy, Douglas Williams—even if all their work has not been cited by the lamenting scholars. What this literature review does say is that there is a far larger literature concerning IOs than has been given recognition in the last twenty years. One might evaluate the unknown literature and conclude that it is insufficient in quantity and/or inadequate in quality; however, one should do that explicitly and not simply ignore the literature as if it does not even exist.

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