International Organizations –
A Field of Research for a Global History

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Having for a long time been an area of research mainly reserved for specialists in international relations and political scientists,[1] the international organizations (IOs) that first emerged in the twentieth century's pre-World War II decades have also attracted renewed interest of historians for the past several years.[2] This development has its place in a movement of 'globalization' within the discipline, evident in both themes and practice.[3] The nation, the region, and the village remain pertinent units for study, but the historian interested in global history approaches them in relation to other spaces, reflecting renewed attention to connections and forms of circulation traditionally neglected in specialized studies. As will be argued below, in their role as observation posts, the IOs and international associations here comprise an especially productive area of research, in effect opening access to work on complexly intermeshing 'circulatory regimes'.

To undertake such research, a heuristic displacement is necessary. The debates opposing various currents of realism and functionalism or institutionalism in the world of Anglo-American political science and international relations have revolved around the possibility of considering these organizations as full-fledged international actors.[4] The viewpoint represented in this short discussion is different, approaching the organizations as open social spaces through which we can observe exchanges and circulation located at the intersection of, and interacting with, international networks, but also specific

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[1] See in this regard the journal *International Organization*, published since 1947.

[2] For a short overview see Madeleine Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865. Eine Globalgeschichte der Internationalen Ordnung*, Darmstadt 2009 – a rare work of this sort by a historian. See also the special issue of the *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011) with three articles on the organizations and an introduction by Glenda Sluga on the 'transnational history of international institutions'; and the special issue of *Critique Internationale* 52 (2011), offering another approach to globalization, centered on the social history of international organizations between 1900 and 1940. For an idea of the range of ongoing research, see the website of the 'History of International Organizations Network' (HION), developed in Geneva (<http://www.apsun.ch/unoacademia/Home/page10149.html>).

[3] In this respect, see the *Journal of Global History*, published since 2006; and the programmatic introduction of Patrick O'Brien, Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History, in: *Journal of Global History* 1 (2006), pp. 3-39. See also the special issue on 'Histoire globale, histoires connectées: un changement d'échelle historiographique' in the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54 (2007).

groups and milieus within different national and local societies.[5] The intersection of these different scenes forms the setting where internationalism was brought into being.

However, studying the mechanics of this internationalism demands a second displacement.[6] Alongside the large plenary meetings, ideal locations for the staging of various national oppositions, it is important to reevaluate the work of the secretariats, commissions, and technical agencies, on the basis of the documents produced by the officials and experts who worked there.[7] Notably, this displacement is tied inherently to the nature of historical work, which is grounded in archival research. Here preferably using single original documents, complemented by official documents published in great numbers by the IOs, offers a double advantage. On the one hand, this original material informs us about the process-driven, often conflict-ridden nature of the formation of an internationalist sphere. On the other hand it allows us (above all in the case of correspondence) to locate the many actors involved in this process, whether in the organizations themselves or on the national stage, and to delineate the nature of the relations formed and unformed within a range of configurations.

Seen through their secretariats and experts' commissions, the IOs thus emerge as spaces structured by relations between both individuals and groups of actors. But these relations only take on meaning when situated in the shifting geographical, institutional, and historical contexts in which they unfolded. In this respect, the personal files of officials and experts stored in the archives of the International Labour Office and the League of Nations – other organizations do not permit archival access – contain precious documents because they reveal the different contexts in which these individuals developed their skills and the networks to which they belonged.[8] By pursuing this work systemati-

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[4] For a survey of the different positions, see the special issue of *International Organization* 52 (1998) 2. For the realist position: ibid., Robert Jervis, Realism in the Study of World Politics (pp. 971-991); for the functionalist position: ibid., Lisa L. Martin/Beth A. Simmons, Theories and Empirical Studies of International Institutions (pp. 729-757), and Martha Finnemore/Kathryn Sikkink, International Norm Dynamics and Political Change (pp. 887-917).

[5] A review of this approach is found in Pierre-Yves Saunier, Circulations, connexions et espaces transnationaux, in: *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire* 57 (2004), pp. 110-126, and Kiran Klaus Patel, Nach der Nationalfixiertheit. Perspektiven einer transnationalen Geschichte, Öffentliche Vorlesungen der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, vol. 128, 2004 (<http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/humboldt-vl/patel-kiran-klaus-2004-01-12/PDF/Patel.pdf>).

[6] Martin H. Geyer/Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism. Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War*, Oxford 2001.

[7] This approach is aligned with that of institutionalists viewing the IOs in the framework of international bureaucracies. See especially Michael Barnett/Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World. International Organizations in Global Politics*, Ithaca 2004. The approach is nonetheless distinct in that the bureaucracies are understood in relation to the national societies where they were developed.

cally, it is possible to establish a solid foundation of prosopographical finding, reconstruct the multiple identities of the officials concerned, and approach the IOs as suitable observation posts from which to observe international circulation and platforms for studying the dynamics of internationalization.

On the other hand the history of the organizations itself holds great potential, especially in respect to their origins; most importantly it allows an exploration of the various earlier networks and international associations to which they owed their existence. A period of international crystallization in the decades preceding and following the Great War here seems pivotal for the institutionalizing of these networks,[9] with the already well researched domain of social reform being highly instructive regarding the processes and actors involved. At the end of the nineteenth century, in various industrialized countries 'complex reformist webs' emerged around high public officials, professors, and both industrial and labour leaders. They formed the basis in 1900 for the foundation of the Association for Labour Legislation, bringing together social reformers and experts in social questions represented in the various national associations. In certain domains such as social security, these experts formed epistemic communities based on shared knowledge[10] – the ground upon which the International Labour Organization (ILO), founded in 1919, would thrive.[11] Cultural and intellectual cooperation would obey the same logic of progressive institutionalization: the European networks of intellectuals produced the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation in Geneva and the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation in Paris; after World War II,

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[8] In this regard see the very interesting data bank produced in Heidelberg: 'LONSEA – Searching the Globe through the Lenses of the League of Nations' (<http://www.lonsea.de>); on the data bank see also the article by Christiane Sibille in this issue.

[9] On 1900 as a key moment, see Anne Rasmussen, Tournant, inflexions, ruptures: le moment internationaliste, in: *Mil Neuf Cent. Cahiers Georges Sorel. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 19 (2001), pp. 27-41.

[10] For a definition of these communities, see Emmanuel Adler/Peter M. Haas, Conclusion: Epistemic Communities, World Order, and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program, in: *International Organization* 46 (1992), pp. 367-390. For a critical analysis: Sandrine Kott, Une 'communauté épistémique' du social?, in: *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire* 71 (2008), pp. 26-46. In respect to a more technological domain: Vincent Lagendijk, *Electrifying Europe. The Power of Europe in the Construction of Electricity Networks*, Amsterdam 2008.

[11] Rainer Gregarek, Le mirage de l'Europe sociale. Associations internationales de politique sociale au tournant du 20ᵉ siècle, in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 48 (1995), pp. 103-118; Jasmien Van Daele, Engineering Social Peace: Networks, Ideas, and the Founding of the International Labour Organization, in: *International Review for Social History* 50 (2005), pp. 435-466; Madeleine Herren, *Internationale Sozialpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Die Anfänge europäischer Kooperation aus der Sicht Frankreichs*, Berlin 1993; Sandrine Kott, From Transnational Reformist Network to International Organization: The International Association for Labour Legislation and the International Labour Organization (1900 – 1930s), in: Davide Rodogno/Bernhard Struck/Jakob Vogel (eds), *Shaping the Transnational Sphere*, New York 2011 (in press).

they would be fused and stabilized as an intergovernmental organization, UNESCO.[12] In this respect, research has been expanding in the areas of European 'construction', refugees, and human rights; many other areas remain basically neglected.

Along networks preexisting the IOs and exercising their influence parallel and in interaction with them, others would be created by them. This was the case with the International Association for Social Security, set up by ILO officials to support its activities in an area deemed essential.[13] Hence in their genesis and functioning, the international organizations served as loci of coalescence for networks they helped develop and expand. This is the sense in which they can be considered elements of a 'global community', or places where such a community emerged, or again as instruments for gaining a deeper understanding of it.[14]

Finally, the IOs are extremely stimulating heuristic objects for historians of globalism in that they represent a true laboratory of the accords and tensions at work between the international, national, and local scenes and frames of reference. The actors – officials and experts in these organizations – were in effect recruited from the core of their national societies, with many having been public officials or closely tied to that world. In their new functions, they mobilized national knowledge and models – but this does not necessarily cast doubt on their internationalist values. It would be useful to examine whether there are groups of specific actors from cultures or spaces open to circulation and accustomed to cultural interchange who have been able to play a specific role in the dynamics unfolding between national and international scenes, and to try to describe the contours and characteristics of these dynamics. In the period between the two world wars, this was especially the case for nationals of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, who through their multicultural tradition and multilingualism appear to have constituted the ideal type of international officials. But smaller states such as Belgium, Switzerland, and Holland were also centers of competence – and saw themselves as 'locomotives' of internationalization.[15] From a broader perspective we can understand the IOs as sources of powerful legitimation for the weakest or youngest states, particularly those emerging from the rubble of conti-

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[12] See also Isabella Löhr, *Die Globalisierung geistiger Eigentumsrechte. Neue Strukturen internationaler Zusammenarbeit, 1886–1952*, Göttingen 2010, and the ongoing work of both Blaise Wilfert at the Centre d'histoire moderne et contemporaine, ENS, Paris, and Iris Schröder at the Humboldt University, Berlin.

[13] Cédric Guinand, The Creation of the ISSA and the ILO, in: *International Social Security Review* 61 (2008), pp. 81-98.

[14] Akira Iriye, *Global Community. The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*, Berkeley 2005.

[15] See for example Madeleine Herren/Sacha Zala, *Netzwerk Aussenpolitik. Internationale Kongresse und Organisationen als Instrumente der schweizerischen Aussenpolitik 1914–1950*, Zurich 2002.

nental empires like Czechoslovakia after World War I or colonial empires like India.[16] This 'national usage' of the IOs did not contradict the mechanics of internationalization but could even support them.[17]

It seems to me this perspective offers a highly promising direction of research, in which we closely scrutinize the forms of international acculturation taken by national officials involved in the international organizations; and also how they used the resources they acquired to promote solutions within national administrations that were developed on an international level.[18] Another important avenue of research would center on the individual national actors and groups who took up international norms and conventions to realize their rights, thus becoming vectors of internationalization. Approached as interfaces between national-local and international scenes, the IOs can become highly relevant areas of study for an empirical and dynamic global history, especially the history of wars undertaken on a worldwide scale, including the Cold War.[19]

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(translation from the French by Joel Golb)

The original French version of this text is available at
<http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Kott-3-2011>.

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[16] On the League of Nations as a locus for the construction of different nationalisms in the colonies, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford 2007; on the UN, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton 2009.

[17] This research path is located in project A 8, 'Representations of Statehood and New States in International Organisations Since World War II: OAU, EEC/EU and UNESCO in Comparative Perspective' of *Sonderforschungsbereich* 640 at the Humboldt University, Berlin; for initial findings see Iris Schröder, Decolonizing the minds: UNESCO – as an agent of cultural decolonization?, to appear in: Katja Naumann/Klaas Dykmann (eds), *Dynamics of Change within International Organisations. Challenges of Western Dominance and Inequalities in International Relations* (2012).

[18] For several aspects of the process in Germany, see Sandrine Kott, Dynamiques de l'internationalisation: l'Allemagne et l'Organisation internationale du travail (1919–1940), in: *Critique Internationale* 52 (2011), pp. 69-84.

[19] Sandrine Kott, Par-delà la guerre froide. Les organisations internationales et les circulations Est-Ouest (1947–1973), in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire* 109 (2011), pp. 142-154. See the work being undertaken in the projects on 'Tensions of Europe/Inventing Europe', <http://www.tensionsofeurope.eu>.– This article was written during a stay at the International Research Centre on 'Work and Human Lifecycle in Global History', Humboldt University, Berlin (<http://rework.hu-berlin.de>).