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Reflections on the Role of International Public Administrations in the Anthropocene

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10.1 Introduction

John Bolton, former US ambassador to the United Nations and Donald Trump's national security advisor, once quipped, "There's no such thing as the United Nations. ... If the U.N. secretary building in New York lost 10 stories, it wouldn't make a bit of difference" (Bolton 1994). This sentiment is widely shared in conservative circles around the world, even if rarely articulated as bluntly. Yet also in academia and the study of international relations, disregard of an autonomous political influence of intergovernmental organizations and the United Nations is widely spread. In many study programs, world politics is still defined as a system shaped by states, with only a marginal role for international organizations as independent agents in global policy processes.

This volume joins the growing chorus of those who break with this traditional approach and who argue for more serious academic engagement with international organizations and the public administrations at their core. Within the larger debate on international public administrations, this volume makes a crucial intervention in its theoretical focus on bureaucratic autonomy and agency by strengthening and further developing the research program on international bureaucracies that has started many years ago. In this concluding chapter I reflect on the key contributions of this book, considering both earlier work and the new challenges for international public administrations in the Anthropocene.

10.2 *Managers of Global Change: A Reassessment*

My own interest in the study of international public administrations dates back to the late 1990s, when I began to study the deficiencies of the UN system in global environmental governance. In 2000 I developed with Bernd Siebenhüner a major research program on international environmental bureaucracies, which concluded with the publication of *Managers of Global Change: The Influence of International Environmental Bureaucracies* (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009).

This project contributed to a broader theoretical turn toward the study of international organizations in international relations research. When we conceptualized *Managers of Global Change*, international relations research was dominated by neoinstitutionalist and neorealist theoretical strands along with the emergent critique of constructivism and international political economy (see overview by Bauer et al. 2009). None of these approaches, at that time, gave much prominence to international bureaucracies and to the civil servants working in these organizations. After 2000, however, several research projects had begun to address this gap, and international bureaucracies became a more widely studied phenomenon (e.g., Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Hawkins et al. 2006; Johnson and Urpelainen 2014). *Managers of Global Change* has been a part of this conceptual turn, with a focus on global environmental politics.

Managers of Global Change tried to make several conceptual contributions. One was our differentiation between normative and administrative structures within an international organization. We argued for a distinction between two types of agency in an international organization: first, the agency of governments as part of the norm-setting mechanisms of the organization, such as general assemblies and committees, and second, the distinct agency of the bureaucracy, or public administration, within the organization (Biermann et al. 2009: 39–40). We thus opened the black box of international organizations and focused on the internal bureaucracies and administrative bodies of intergovernmental organizations, with the aim to better identify and systematically study the autonomous agency of civil servants as *political agents* and as *policy entrepreneurs*.

Managers of Global Change also expanded the research focus from traditional international organizations, such as the World Bank or the International Maritime Organization, to the secretariats of international treaties. Especially in the field of global environmental politics, the number of treaties has tremendously grown over the last three decades, numbering now over 1,300. Most of these treaties have their own secretariat, and each secretariat has the potential to play an independent political role in the area that it covers. While some secretariats are tiny or integrated with existing UN organizations, others have grown into huge international bureaucracies, with hundreds of staff in new centers of global sustainability diplomacy, such as the former German capital of Bonn, which hosts around twenty secretariats. The secretariat to the UN climate convention, for instance, has evolved into a large international bureaucracy with around 500 employees and an annual budget of USD 90 million (Chapter 3).

The new focus on international public administrations, and its expansion to secretariats, did not only allow for a more nuanced understanding of international relations and for a more sophisticated empirical research program. It also helped to develop a new understanding of the political role and power of ordinary civil servants in often rather mundane technical agencies.

For example, our research has shown the discursive power of the secretariat of the UN desertification convention in preserving the concept of “desertification,” which would have been less prominent if it were not for the discursive interventions of the secretariat’s staff (Bauer 2009a). Our research also showed the discursive power of the economists in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Busch 2009b) and the powerful role of the civil servants in the tiny secretariat of the ozone treaties (Bauer 2009b). Our approach shed new light on the inner workings of international bureaucracies. For instance, we studied the professional backgrounds of civil servants in the International Maritime Organization (Campe 2009), dissecting their strong background in shipping, and in the World Bank with their unique culture shaped by traditional understandings of economics (Marschinski and Behrle 2009).

10.3 The New Contributions of *International Public Administrations* in *Environmental Governance*

These early studies of the 2000s, including *Managers of Global Change*, left many questions unanswered. The new ground charted in this earlier work needed more theoretical refinement, conceptual detail, and empirical data. This present volume is a milestone in driving this research agenda forward.

The Concept of “International Public Administrations”

To start with, the conceptualization of “international public administrations” used in this book (Chapter 1) might be preferable to the term “international bureaucracies” used in *Managers of Global Change*. Both terms emphasize the important distinction between normative and administrative structures in international organizations, and the overlap between both terms is substantial (see, e.g., Wit et al. 2020). The term “international public administrations” might better link the study of national and international public administrations and more systematically merge national and international research into one fruitful research program (see also Bauer et al. 2017). The term “public administration” might also help shed earlier connotations of Weberian and more passive bureaucracies and open space for the more entrepreneurial and activist teams of international civil servants often seen in international political settings (e.g., Bauer 2009a; Siebenhüner 2009).

Conceptual Refinement

Second, this volume offers more sophistication regarding the role of individual civil servants and the factors that determine their behavior. While *Managers of Global Change* had offered a set of variables under the heading of “people and

procedures,” the current volume goes a step further by adding more detailed conceptualizations of potential bureaucratic influence. An important innovation is the differentiation of administrative styles as informal behavioral routines of civil servants (Chapter 2; see also Bauer and Ege 2016). This focus on administrative styles, combined with a conceptualization of bureaucratic autonomy, allows for novel insights in the influence of international public administrations in global governance.

Similarly, Well et al. (Chapter 4) develop a convincing argument on a particular strategy that international public administrations use to increase their influence – “attention-seeking.” This argument follows earlier claims that international public administrations reduce the information asymmetries in international negotiations by providing authoritative and more neutral insights on the issues at hand, especially for smaller countries with limited government capacities. However, as Well et al. show, to assume this position as a knowledge broker in negotiations, international bureaucracies first have to win the attention of negotiators. Attention-seeking thus becomes a central part of their strategic toolbox. Only by actively providing information to state representatives in international organizations can international bureaucracies insert their policy definitions and preferences in negotiations (Chapter 4; see also Jörgens et al. 2017).

In addition, this volume offers important insights on the role of the leadership of international public administrations, an issue that is notoriously difficult to analyze given the multiplicity of variables and the difficulties in designing comparative research designs. Hall (Chapter 5) takes on this challenge by carefully analyzing the role of the executive heads of the United Nations Development Programme, showing their vital impact on the expansion of the mandate of their organizations in times of shifting context conditions (see also Hall 2016).

In the end, however, this volume also shows that it is not free reign for international civil servants. One important constraint, as shown by Wagner and Chasek (Chapter 6), is still the budgetary control through governments, although even here international civil servants manage to keep some autonomy from powerful governments that tighten the purse strings. The financial control of governments illustrates the complex situation of international public administrations with universal membership but limited financial support: It is only the governments of the Global North that have the power to raise or cut funding and to use this influence over the policies of international bureaucracies, which increases the role of the major economies of the Global North and gives outsized powers to the citizens and voters in North America and Europe. This problem is well known for larger international organizations that suffered by the unilateral withholding of funding from some Global North countries, such as the United States. But Wagner and Chasek also highlight the smaller bureaucracies that are rarely seen in light of

international financial dependencies. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for example, depends for 95 percent of its income on only seventeen countries, with the United States alone contributing 39 percent (until 2017). The secretariat of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services depends for 77 percent of its income on only four countries, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Chapter 6). While these funds are not conditioned on the outcome of these science assessments, one wonders what would happen if these assessments were to strongly counter the interest of those countries that pay for their secretariat. In the end, the “power of the purse,” as Wagner and Chasek call it, stays the power of the Global North, counteracting the universal legislative assemblies of international organizations.

New Developments in Global Governance Theory

Third, this volume connects theoretical insights on international public administrations with recent developments in global governance research. For example, new theoretical insights from orchestration research, developed over the last decade (Abbott and Snidal 2010; Abbott, Bernstein, and Janzwood 2020; Abbott et al. 2015), now help improve our understanding of the role of treaty secretariats, conceptualized by Hickmann et al. (Chapter 3) as “orchestrators” in global environmental governance. Through their orchestrating work, secretariats operate outside the traditional ground of intergovernmental diplomacy and the realm of foreign ministers and ambassadors in striped suits. As global orchestrators, international public administrations have become novel actors in multilevel governance settings, bringing in, and relying on, the energy and enthusiasm of civil society and local movements outside traditional state-led policymaking. Orchestration thus involves novel functions – such as citizen mobilization and partnership-building – that had not yet been part of the research design when we wrote *Managers of Global Change*.

This volume also brings in new normative considerations that had not been prominent in the early 2000s and in the *Managers of Global Change* program. One important question is the democratic legitimacy and accountability of international public administrations, which stands at the center of Bäckstrand and Kuyper’s arguments (Chapter 8). Once international public administrations gain autonomous power and independent agency – and this book offers many examples for that – we need to interrogate the democratic quality of such bureaucracies, their leadership, and their internal decision-making. Given the unique context of global governance, however, we cannot simply transfer normative standards from national politics. Instead, as convincingly shown by Bäckstrand and Kuyper, we need to have different standards to hold international public administrations accountable. Participation, accountability and transparency, and deliberation are

key elements for assessing the democratic legitimacy of acts of international public administrations and the degree to which those affected by such administrations have a say over these impacts on their lives (see Chapter 8).

Another normative standard, not prominent in this volume although present in many chapters, is the question of global equity and planetary justice (Biermann and Kalfagianni 2020). As with democratic legitimacy, also for global equity we need to ask how the autonomy and agency of international public administrations affect who gets what in global governance. A central concern is global distributive conflicts between the Global South and Global North, and especially the tension between the member assemblies of many organizations – often dominated by majorities of Global South countries – and the underlying funding structures that rely on a few “donor countries” from the Global North and that often draw only on voluntary contributions fluctuating year by year. The justice implications of the increasing autonomy and agency of international public administrations are an important research frontier still insufficiently covered by existing study programs.

Methodological Advancement

Fourth, this volume provides ample evidence of the usefulness of new methods now available in the toolbox of the analyst. One approach, prominently represented in this book by Saerbeck et al. (Chapter 9), is social network analysis, building on a broader strand of work (e.g., Kolleck et al., 2017). Social network analysis allows us to gain a deeper understanding into the interdependencies and cooperative links among large numbers of international organizations and bureaucracies, in a way that grants new insights beyond what has been possible with the earlier case studies on small-*n* interlinkages. Social network analysis also allows to bring in large data-collection tools, such as Twitter analysis and, in this volume (Chapter 9), the generation of large datasets through surveys. Such approaches also allow for new theoretical understanding and conceptualization – for instance, the notion of an international or transnational administrative space that can be studied through such large-*n* approaches.

New Empirical Developments

Finally, in addition to conceptual advancement and refinement, the studies in this volume present a vast array of fascinating new empirical developments. One example is Hickmann et al.’s study (Chapter 3) on the secretariat of the climate convention, directly relating to the earlier study by Busch (2009a) on the same topic. While Busch concluded in 2009 that the climate secretariat would “live in a straitjacket,” not being able to develop its own policy agenda given strong pressures of governments in a

highly conflictual policy field, Hickmann et al. now show that times have changed. In the wake of the 2009 Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen, widely seen as a disaster, the climate secretariat has worked itself out of their straitjacket, with the permission of governments that had lost collective leadership.

Michaelowa and Michaelowa (Chapter 7) add another perspective on the changing role of the climate secretariat, drawing on a large dataset that shows how the Clean Development Mechanism has influenced, and been influenced by, the climate secretariat. Their study might also give a glimpse of a future role of international public administrations in other domains with large financial transactions, for example, when it comes to global programs on carbon removal. The empirical example of the climate secretariat illustrates that in the realm of international public administrations, change in administrative policies, styles, and approaches is not only possible, it might even be more ubiquitous than expected. The example again shows the strong autonomous role of entrepreneurial staff of such international bureaucracies, which often is still neglected in more structural approaches to the study of international politics.

10.4 New Challenges: International Bureaucracies in the Anthropocene

Fifteen years after *Managers of Global Change*, it is time to reflect on the many changes that we have seen since then – conceptual changes that require a fresh look at global environmental politics but also broader political transitions that reshape our understanding of international organizations and bureaucracies.

International Public Administrations in the Anthropocene

When *Managers of Global Change* was conceived as a research program around the turn of the millennium, the debates in the social sciences were still entrenched in the “environmental policy” paradigm. When writing *Managers of Global Change*, we did not hesitate to describe our unit of analysis as international “environmental” bureaucracies.

Today, such a perspective seems outdated, and many study programs have shown the deep interconnectivities between sectors that were earlier viewed as being distinctly environmental, economic, or social. The integration, or “nexus,” between such sectors has become the focus of attention, along with a new understanding of coupled socioecological systems from local to planetary levels. Key challenges of our time, such as global heating or the massive loss of biodiversity, cannot be analyzed as environmental problems. Conversely, issues that were earlier defined as economic or social – such as poverty or inequality – are as much related to the exploitation of nature as to the exploitation of people.

The unique and novel planetary entanglement of people and nature is often described as the emergence of the *Anthropocene*, the geological age of humankind. Even though this term has been criticized because of apolitical “we-are-all-one-humankind” connotations (Biermann and Lövbrand 2019), all alternatives, such as “Capitalocene” (Moore 2017), have failed to catch on in the wider debate, and the neologism *Anthropocene* prevails. This new context of the Anthropocene invites us to adopt a new perspective on politics – and hence a new perspective on international public administrations. The traditional “environmental policy” paradigm has lost its luster (Biermann 2021), and today’s “managers of global change” must bring a more complex and system-oriented perspective that goes beyond the “environmental managers” of the 1990s.

A World Environment Organization in the Post-environmental Age?

This conceptual turn also raises the question of whether the long-standing call for the creation of a “world environment organization” still fits the needs of our time. This debate dates to the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, when first observers argued for the creation of an international agency for environmental protection (Bauer and Biermann 2005). In 1972, governments responded by establishing not a world environment organization but a less transformative UN program, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is based since then in Nairobi, Kenya.

UNEP was never meant to be big and powerful. Its function was to serve as a catalysator and environmental conscience among the other agencies. Consequently, the secretariat of UNEP was designed to be small. Many elements typical for strong international organizations were withheld from UNEP: It lacks an operational mandate; its funding is voluntary and not based on assessed fixed contributions by governments; and the program has no formal right to initiate new international legal norms. Given these shortcomings, the debate for an “upgrade” of UNEP is as old as the program itself. Many scholars have called for the establishment of a full-fledged international organization on environmental protection, such as a United Nations Environment Organization or World Environment Organization. When I analyzed this debate over twenty years ago, I identified different ideal-types of such a world environment organization, from a hierarchical model with far-reaching powers to a less demanding cooperative model, and added an own proposal for a hybrid form of a world environment organization that I believed would significantly strengthen global environmental politics (Biermann 2000).

This lively policy debate found its culmination at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. While the European Union and the African Union with a few other countries called for

an “upgrade” of UNEP, other countries objected, not the least the United States (Biermann 2013). In the end, no new agency was agreed, even though incremental reforms continued to strengthen UNEP over time. For example, a new United Nations Environment Assembly replaced the former governing council of UNEP and assumed some of the functions that proponents had envisaged for a world environment organization. New international regimes are now initiated by the United Nations Environment Assembly, mimicking the legislative functions of the International Labour Organization or the International Maritime Organization. And yet, the financial means of UNEP remain small and its financial base uncertain. Important debates and policy processes continue to develop outside the purview of UNEP, which has not much increased its standing as a global voice for the protection of key earth system processes.

In short, the incremental strengthening of UNEP, ongoing since the 1990s, remains important, and further steps in that direction are needed. In addition, however, the question arises whether other types of functional differentiation are needed to account for the complex interlinkages and nexus areas in global sustainability governance and the raising global inequalities between the North and the South. Here lies a major area for further research on international organizations and on the functioning of international public administrations in “earth system” governance (Biermann 2014).

Global Power Conflicts and Structural Injustice

Regarding global power relations and conflicts, *Managers of Global Change* merely touched upon one key function of international bureaucracies that requires more systematic research and debate: the unique role of some international bureaucracies in supporting the interests of countries of the Global South in complex and often highly technical areas. Despite the autonomous agency of international bureaucracies, these bodies are still governed by intergovernmental assemblies, and most of these assemblies have voting majorities of developing countries that outnumber traditional powers in North America and Europe. Most UN organizations follow the principle of sovereign equality that grants each country one vote, regardless of its population size – and regardless of its economic or military might.

And yet, the power of developing countries in these assemblies is still limited. Most organizations depend on financial contributions of rich industrialized countries, prioritizing the “power of the purse” (Chapter 6); some organizations, such as the World Bank, even have special decision-making systems that prioritize industrialized countries. There is also a growing emphasis on alternative settings more open to Global North interests, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development, the Group of 7 major economies, public–private partnerships and alliances, or informal settings such as the World Economic Forum.

In this situation, the often-large bureaucracies of international organizations, with their technical skills and expertise, can become important allies of smaller developing countries in helping them to raise their voice on complex issues. This grants – as we noted in *Managers of Global Change* – civil servants in such organizations new sources of authority. As one bureaucrat of the secretariat of the biodiversity convention noted, “As a national delegate it was my highest ambition to change at least one word in the text of the decision, as part of the secretariat I can influence the entire text” (cited in Siebenhüner 2009: 272).

New Anthropocene Challenges

Finally, the Anthropocene has brought entirely new challenges for global governance and international cooperation. We need to ask whether today’s international organizations and their bureaucracies are still apt to serve as “managers of global change” in increasingly dynamic, complex, and challenging policy environments.

One prominent example is global climate governance, which cuts across most traditional policies. Keeping global heating to less than 1.5°C will require huge investments in technology development and technology transfer, with a strong role for international public administrations to ease such knowledge and technology exchange. Global adaptation to a warmer world calls for international cooperation at unprecedented levels as well. International bureaucracies will need to engage more and in novel ways, for instance, when it comes to climate-related migration or the global provision of food. Moreover, most pathways that see the world staying within the 1.5°C warming scenario assume large-scale programs for carbon removal in the future, with techniques ranging from bioenergy with carbon sequestration and storage to the deployment of novel industrial processes for direct air capture. All these speculative approaches would require, if ever implemented, not only novel technologies but also new global governance mechanisms, from accounting systems for carbon removal to mechanisms that ensure global justice, food security, and global technology transfer. International organizations with strong bureaucracies would need to manage these novel types of global cooperation. International governance must also address the many other areas affected by climate change, for example, water shortages, sea level rise, or pressures on fertile land and food security caused by plant-based replacements of fossil fuels. And climate change is not the only area with such unique novel challenges for international organizations and bureaucracies. The Covid-19 pandemic, notably, has put new emphasis on the global health interdependencies and the importance of the World Health Organization in managing such crises; and

there are many other global governance domains of growing global complexity and interconnectedness.

In short, while global interdependence is growing rapidly, the system of international organizations is still fixated on a model of diplomacy and cooperation that has not changed much since the twentieth century. The Charter of the United Nations was signed in 1945, and most international organizations have been created around that time. This volume makes an important contribution to a more nuanced understanding of the autonomous functioning of international public administrations; it lays vital groundwork for a renewed debate on how to transform international public administrations to more effectively address the multiple complex challenges of our century. And yet the book also shows how urgently we need novel, transformative models for effective and just international public administrations to cope with the pressing challenges of the twenty-first century.

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