

The Enduring Relevance of International Regimes

Written by Peter M. Haas

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PETER M. HAAS, JAN 22 2013

Theorizing about international regimes has provided enduring valuable insights into world politics and the origins and effects of international cooperation. Regime analysis and discussion has become commonplace in the academy and the policy world. The key concepts and driving forces inform our understanding of international institutions (Keohane 1989) multilateralism (Keohane 1990; Cox 1992; Ruggie 1993) and global governance.

Of course, as M. J. Peterson (2012) notes, there is no such thing as regime “theory.” Rather, there are multiple “theories of regimes” (Haggard and Simmons 1987; Hasenclever, Mayer et al. 1997). Robert Keohane applied economics to understand the demand for regimes in IPE. John Ruggie applied a structural ideational concept of embedded liberalism to account for notable continuities in post-World War II regimes. Oran Young applied systems theory and public choice theory to explain the dynamics of regime creation. Donald Puchala and Ray Hopkins applied a liberal view of regimes as a whole. However, as Ruggie and Kratochwil noted, liberal and rationalist approaches to regimes are incapable of accounting for the full transformative effects of regimes (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986).

The original 1982 *International Organization (IO)* special issues on regimes[1] and the research programs they generated are important for a number of reasons. As Peterson notes, they brought international institutions back into the fold of legitimate scholarly inquiry. They showcased the early chops of a number of rising mid-career scholars and more senior figures. It supplemented the old style IR focus on power to explain collective outcomes and international law with a focus on institutional design, norms, and causal beliefs. With hindsight we can see how it anticipated meta-theoretical moves in the field as well, while still being bound by the paradigms frame of the third debate in IR. Beyond the paradigmatic perspectives expressed by Susan Strange in her *IO* special issue role as the iconoclastic not so loyal opposition, Krasner and Ernst Haas foreshadowed some pragmatism (Haas and Haas 2002; Bauer and Brighi 2009; Ansell 2011) and analytic eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Sil and Katzenstein 2010) in their efforts to find mid-level interparadigmatic findings.

The *IO* issue provided a common empirical focus for IR scholars, although John Ruggie and Ernst Haas had, typically, anticipated the concept (Ruggie 1975; Haas 1980). Still, the 1982 *IO* issue developed a common definition involving persistent negotiated agreements that are made up of “implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations” (Krasner 1983). The definition opened doors for the study of IR. The dual focus on ideas – norms and principles – and on more material aspects of regimes – rules and decision making procedures – enabled the study of ideas’ influence on collective outcomes as well as the role of material capabilities and formal institutional arrangements.

Empirical work on regimes flourished, leading to applications across the substantive fields of IR including such areas as IPE, security studies, the environment, human rights, arms control, nuclear proliferation, shipping, air transport, telecommunications, postal services, trade, money and finance, development, labor, drugs, and food. Norms proved to be important independent variables for the study of human rights, foreign aid (Lumsdaine 1993), and such arms control regimes as the land-mine ban. Causal ideas were important independent variables as well for explaining regime creation and regime persistence.

Regimes were also found to have transformative effects, challenging Strange’s contention that regimes are merely

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epiphenomenal. As Krasner claimed, the power shifts engendered through the operation of regime rules may lead to a realigned balance of power, and to new power based explanations of cooperation and behavior. Regimes also contributed to the involvement of new groups of non-state actors with their own causal beliefs and norms (Haas 1989; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

By the 1990s, work had moved on to the comparative study of international regimes, finding a powerful role for causal ideas and epistemic communities in a number of substantive areas including but not limited to the environment (Braithwaite and Drahos 2000; Miles, Underdal et al. 2002), while some more recent work has picked up on the interactive effects between regimes and highlighted the nature of regime complexity (Aggarwal 1998; Alter and Meunier 2009; Keohane and Victor 2011).

Regime study also provided a vehicle for more fruitful theoretical fermentation. The common referent offered the promise of mid-level theorizing across research traditions. Ernst Haas wrote in the *IO* issue, in a singularly neglected piece, that a common focus on regimes could provide an opportunity for developing interparadigm consensus – and also presumably an understanding of differences – by focusing on a clear empirical referent of interest to all and establishing the domains in which particular factors (or independent variables) or even social mechanisms played a significant role, and in what combinations.

Regime analysis still promises fruitful insights into IR. While much of the work has focused on descriptive and institutional based accounts, which are ultimately incapable of asking the more fundamental questions regarding the transformative potential unlocked by regimes, further lines of inquiry are still available through studies of the reflexive dynamics within regimes, and of the interparadigmatic lessons gleaned from the large array of research to date. Reflexive dynamics can be fruitfully studied through panel studies (qualitative or quantitative) that link ideational and normative change to changes in state practices, as mediated by formal regimes. In particular attention should be paid to the types of states and countries that are subject to various regime informed dynamics.

In turn, cumulative knowledge that cuts across theoretical approaches to regime analysis is possible as well based on such studies. For instance, power based analyses expect regimes to have greater impacts on weaker parties, whereas institutional analysis with its emphasis on resolving transaction costs and structural impediments to cooperation would be more likely to expect more uniform effects. In turn, constructivists expect to see more normative change and learning; the variation in target states and parties is a fruitful avenue for further regime based analysis. Thus, common studies of a shared empirical referent can provide for reconciling theoretical differences regarding the principal political dynamics of world politics, and the substantive, historical, geographic and analytic domains in which they operate.

Regime analysis is truly part of a long term research program that analyzes the impact of ideas and material factors on international cooperation, and their interplay. Ultimately, regime analysis promises a form of emancipatory politics. By better understanding the specific influences in world politics, their domains, and their interactions, we can finally appreciate the full array of forces that shape world politics.

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[1] Stephen Krasner's published volume actually contained pieces published in two issues of *IO*. His intro and conclusion appeared in 36:2, which is why that issue usually gets cited. Additional articles appeared in 35:4.

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The Enduring Relevance of International Regimes

Written by Peter M. Haas

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The Enduring Relevance of International Regimes

Written by Peter M. Haas

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