The Technocratic Legacies of International Organisations

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Global governance today is fundamentally organised around the mobilisation and utilisation of technical expertise. After all, international organisations can only tackle the challenges of a deeply complex, interdependent world with the help of technical specialists. From the World Health Organisation to the International Monetary Fund, all international organisations in some capacity or another rely on the recruitment of experts—whether as part of their in-house staff or as temporary third-party advisors.

At the same time, expertise is often in the line of fire. Public and governmental pushback against international organisations regularly, and generically, targets "the experts": their elitism and supposed disconnect from popular concerns, critics argue, make them part of the problem. Their technocratic demeanour, language, and outputs turn them into unelected defenders of an unequal status quo. As UK politician and Brexiteer Michael Gove infamously declared in 2017, people "have had enough of experts with organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong."

In other words, expertise is a double-edged sword: international organisations need it to understand the problems they face, but recourse to experts can also undermine their legitimacy when organisations appear to deflect from the political tensions underpinning those problems that are not merely technical. International Relations (IR) scholars have approached the topic largely by focusing on what makes experts experts, how organisations mobilise them and harness their knowledge, and how expert knowledge is produced. But instead of reiterating the familiar literature on epistemic communities, science and technology studies, and knowledge production, I want to unpack the topic further by zooming in on recent efforts in IR and history which understand the centrality of expertise in international organisations as the product of historically specific ideological preferences.

The modern intellectual history of *technocratic internationalism* has of late come to the fore as a particularly fruitful entry point in this regard. Studying technocratic internationalism puts the intellectual legacies of present-day international organisations into needed perspective—with exciting results. But gaps remain: what is the relationship between technocratic internationalism and imperialism? How can we decentre the study of technocratic internationalism from its thus far heavily Eurocentric focus? To open up this conversation, this article sketches out its historiography; three major technocratic internationalist currents; and remaining problems in the study of technocratic internationalism.

Approaches to Technocratic Internationalism

While in IR we have a fairly good understanding of the role of democratic procedural and institutional features in international organisations, we still lack a solid understanding of what the latter's technocratic foundations and legacies might entail exactly. In this context IR can benefit from the excellent work historians of international organisations have done over the past few decades. Revisionist studies of the League of Nations and of internationalism have innovated our historical understanding of how internationalist thought and practice relate to modern international institutions, practices, and hierarchies: from Jeanne Morefield's *Covenants without Swords* (2005) to Susan Pedersen's *The Guardians* (2015); from Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin's edited

collection *Internationalisms* (2017) to Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking After Empire* (2019) and Jamie Martin's *The Meddlers* (2022).

Against this backdrop, and in this intellectual context, some historians have turned to the technocratic legacies of international organisations in particular. Mark Mazower's *Governing the World* (2012) stands out in this regard as it includes relatively marginal nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers and practitioners such as the technocratic thinker Henri de Saint-Simon, the Suez Canal entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps, or the international lawyer Paul Otlet. "[T]he international lawyers", Mazower (2012, 179) wrote, "were a special instance of a larger phenomenon": a kind of internationalism that promised "the possibility of carving out a politics-free zone where men of science could meet".

In their study of the technocratic making of European integration, *Writing the Rules for Europe* (2014), historians Johan Schot and Wolfram Kaiser called this phenomenon "technocratic internationalism". Technocratic internationalists, Schot and Kaiser argued, could variously be international thinkers with a technocratic bent, individuals who sought to use technocratic arguments to advance their economic or political goals, or technical experts themselves who tried to carve out a space in which to pursue their scientific and technical projects across borders. These people "usually preferred a transnational institutional setting" and "believed that they had a natural inclination and ability to bring people together through building material links. These links would bring not only economic prosperity, but also peace to the nations of the world." This was the essence of technocratic internationalism.

Technocratic internationalism is not, then, a programmatic tradition whose adherents would have identified with it, or used that label themselves, nor is it a perennial way of thinking about international order. We should thus be wary of overstating the extent to which technocratic internationalism is separate from liberal internationalism, socialist internationalism, fascist internationalism, or internationalist imperialism—all of the other "isms", in other words, play a role in and might even overlap with the history of technocratic internationalism. Still, the notion is useful insofar as it allows scholars and students to point to and examine a set of principles and arguments, and a set of thinkers and practitioners, with an intellectual history of their own.

Jens Steffek has most recently brought the concept into the spotlight of IR, making it the central focus of his ambitious intellectual history *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* (2021). Steffek defines technocratic internationalism loosely as an intellectual and political project that aims at bridging national, imperial, and cultural divides by means of moving attention away from the politics of international order to its technical aspects. Steffek examines the traces of technocratic arguments across the work of various pioneers, particularly in the early to mid-twentieth century, of modern international organisations. Lahore-based historian Waqar H. Zaidi's *Technological Internationalism* (2021), in turn, tells the story of British and American internationalists who between 1920 and 1950 pushed for aviation and atomic energy to be handed over from states to international agencies. Though Zaidi does not use that label, this too shows technocratic internationalism in action.

Other scholars have begun to unearth the imperial subtext intertwined with the history of technocratic internationalism. In fact, building on French Saint-Simonian and British utilitarian thought reverberating across France and Europe around the middle of the century, and galvanised by a Europe-wide industrialist consensus, nineteenth-century technocratic internationalism proffered a supposedly impartial, pacifist, and egalitarian idiom that turned out to serve as a powerful legitimation of imperialism (see e.g. Eijking 2022). Scientific and technical experts were understood, on this vision, to lead the way in bringing nations together and superseding existing divisions by virtue of the unifying, borderless, apolitical power of science and technology. So what did historical currents of technocratic internationalist thought and practice look like?

Three currents of technocratic internationalism

After having sketched the contours of the growing literature on the technocratic legacies of internationalism and international organisations, I now turn to the historical development of technocratic internationalism itself. But rather than focus on individual thinkers, which often risks overemphasising the contributions of "great canonical figures", I

want to draw out three social contexts in which thinkers and practitioners made sense of and acted upon global order through a discernibly technocratic frame. The remainder of this section thus identifies, for illustrative purposes, three important historical currents of technocratic internationalist thought and practice: the Saint-Simonians, the interwar bureaucrats, and the functionalists. I do not want to suggest that technocratic internationalism can be reduced to these three currents, but rather want to illustrate the phenomenon as an entry point for its historical study. The subsequent section discusses the limitations of my selection, emphasising the problem of reifying a Eurocentric approach to international relations.

The Saint-Simonians

First let us consider the Saint-Simonians, a prolific and influential group of technocratic international thinkers and practitioners. Most of them were intellectually socialised at the École Polytechnique, then still a relatively new elite engineering school in Paris. Many went on to play major roles in French and European international affairs throughout the nineteenth century. And yet the man who inspired this notable movement, Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), is one of the technocratic thinkers least familiar to students and scholars of IR (Eijking 2022; also see my piece here). Saint-Simon was a French social and political theorist who lived during an incredibly turbulent time in modern French, European, and indeed world history. His biography contains clear traces of much of the political and industrial transformations that defined the time, from his military experience fighting under Lafayette in the 1780s American Revolution to his early proposals for a Panama Canal. Saint-Simon was a quirky figure with a rather scattered and disorganised written output.

His extensive writings on Anglo-French political union, world peace, and a vanguard world council spearheaded by technicians and scientists inspired a fanatical following around the École Polytechnique in Paris. At public and private gatherings and eventually in their own periodicals and journals, Saint-Simon's followers—under the leadership of Amand Bazard, Prosper Enfantin, Olinde Rodrigues, and Michel Chevalier—read and exegetically took apart Saint-Simon's texts, treating his writings from *Lettres d'un habitant de Geneve* (1803) to *Du système industriel* (1822) like scripture. Their veritable Bible was, however, the *Nouveau Christianisme* (1825), Saint-Simon's last book and his most mythical. Here Saint-Simon emphasised, as he had done throughout his life, the need for a spiritual union to replace the clerical authority that the French Revolution had undermined. In contrast with earlier writings, this time spirituality took on a much more central significance: a new religion was needed—a New Christianity—that would allow for social and cultural cohesion and order. This would, or so Saint-Simon thought, bring the kind of stability that the papal order of the Middle Ages had been able to maintain. Saint-Simon prioritised social order and stability; but while technocratic leadership was the key to turning these principles into principles of political rule, only a spiritual frame could guarantee the cultural maintenance of such an order.

For most Saint-Simonians, technocracy and spirituality were deeply complementary forces. Increasingly the Saint-Simonians adopted a sectarian lifestyle, complete with their own dress, rituals, songs, poetry, and their own gathering-house at Ménilmontant in Paris (documented in fascinating detail in Pamela Pilbeam's book *From Free Love to Algeria*). In the 1830s, Prosper Enfantin travelled to Egypt seeking to unify "Occidental man" with "Oriental woman", an excursion that culminated in crucial surveying works later appropriated by Ferdinand de Lesseps to dig out the Suez Canal. Michel Chevalier—signatory of the 1861 Cobden-Chevalier treaty, the free trade agreement between England and France—later developed plans for "universal association" by way of creating a "Mediterranean system" of canals and railroads spanning Europe and North Africa likewise rested upon spiritual foundations.

The Saint-Simonian current of technocratic internationalism is a fascinating corrective, yet to be fully explored in its ramifications for the history of international thought, to overly one-dimensional conceptions of technocracy as stone-cold rationalist rule by experts. It is an important current not least given the fact that many Saint-Simonians turned out to be notable figures in European politics at the time and became involved in pioneering internationalist projects. The Saint-Simonians Michel Chevalier and François Barthélemy Arlès-Dufour, and sympathisers Gustave d'Eichthal and Frédéric Passy were all involved in the creation of the *Ligue Internationale et Permanente de la Paix*, later joined and co-funded by John Stuart Mill—a major project of the peace movement, and over the long run an inspiration for what would become the League of Nations.

The Interwar Bureaucrats

A second notable current in the history of technocratic internationalism is that of the League of Nations bureaucrats of the interwar period. The public international unions of the nineteenth century—the International Telegraph Union founded in 1865, and the Universal Postal Union of 1874, familiar to readers of Craig Murphy's seminal 1994 *International Organization and Industrial Change*—had largely been created by technocratic internationalists (including some Saint-Simonians themselves) as well as industrialist, liberal, but importantly also aristocratic elites across Europe. These institutions were pioneering in that they formalised membership criteria, voting procedures, and a permanent secretariat. Their design served as blueprint for the many new international organisations that were created around the turn of the twentieth century.

The public unions were also special in that many small states were able to join them. Participating in setting the technical terms of global order, smaller states had found an entry point into the world of modern international cooperation, which they would later use as a way into the League of Nations. Technocratic internationalism in this shape could also, perhaps counterintuitively, open up participation in international ordering to a wider range of actors—if on very narrow terms.

By the early twentieth century, an emerging self-understanding and solidifying professional identity of the international civil servant had assumed a distinctly technocratic shape. Cultivating a distinctive "international mind", in the words of the conservative internationalist (and incidentally, later fascist sympathiser) Nicholas Murray Butler, was connected to the virtues of impartiality and absolute objectivity. It also entailed the pursuit of fact-gathering, data accumulation, and an anti-political sense for evidence instead of argument (Butler 1917).

This was in part the expectable outcome of decades of professionalisation as well as an institutional design feature of the original public international unions. But the technocratic identity of the international civil servant had been consciously promoted, laid out, and circulated by the architects of the international organisations that were bundled up under the League of Nations. In 1919, the American lawyer Raymond B. Fosdick, later undersecretary of the provisional League prior to US withdrawal from the project, explicitly embraced the technocratic style when stressing that the League's "duties will inevitably be more non-political than political".

As documented by Steffek (2021, 65), internationalists built expert-centred institutions such as the 1917 Allied Maritime Transport Council to address diminished shipping capacities faced by Western nations in the aftermath of German submarine warfare. People including Arthur Salter, head of the League's economic and financial section that administered monetary stabilisation policies in post-imperial Austria and Hungary, the Swedish economist Per Jacobsson who later went on to work for the Bank of International Settlements and subsequently the International Monetary Fund, or the Polish bacteriologist and later founder of UNICEF Ludwik Rajchman approached the League as an expert-centred institution that would facilitate, as Mazower (2012, 269-70) puts it, "European reconstruction after the First World War" but also cement "the connection between internationalism and technical expertise".

The Functionalists

Out of this context, but especially during the early years of the new United Nations system, the so-called functionalist conception of politics (see this previous E-IR article) gained traction. Its origins going back to early sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, functionalism starts from the premise that "all aspects of a society—institutions, roles, norms, etc.—serve a purpose and that all are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society". Society has certain basic needs which are, on this view, met by the institutions, interactions, and expectations we develop. In the political science and IR context, it refers more specifically to the idea that the shape of political institutions is principally (not exclusively) determined by the functions they serve. IR functionalists—most of them liberal institutionalists—focus on shared interests and needs in an interdependent world, and how these can be coordinated through functional, i.e. technical, integration. International organisations in this context act as expert-centric service providers.

The French European integrationist Jean Monnet is today known as former commissioner of the French national planning board and one of the founders of the European Coal and Steel Community, predecessor of the European

Union. He also was an influential proponent of an understanding of political integration based on rational cooperation on technical, smallest-common-denominator types of issues. Monnet famously believed in functional "spill-over", that is the idea that technical integration across borders in one given issue area, such as steel or coal markets, would generate new forms of interdependency that would lead to technical integration over adjacent issue areas. This would in the long run yield wide-ranging political integration.

The scholar typically credited as a pioneer of IR functionalism is the post-war political scientist David Mitrany. Central to Mitrany's vision was "technical self-determination" whereby "needs-satisfaction" delivered by functionally disaggregated agencies would ultimately supersede political differences (Theiler 2022, 316; Mitrany 1948). In the 1950s, his contemporary Ernst B. Haas (1958) developed a neofunctionalist alternative. Skeptical about Mitrany's preference for governance *by* experts as the endpoint of functional integration, Haas (1964) instead favoured governance *with* experts. But if the neofunctionalists "abandoned Mitrany's structurally transformative ambitions" (Theiler 2022, 318), they did share "the same political end": a central mandate for experts, whether as decision-makers or advisors (Steffek 2021, 139).

Overall, the three currents of technocratic internationalism outlined above are merely illustrative of a range of arguments for international cooperation and indeed integration that share two main aspects in common: a technocratic style of argument, placing a premium on evidence-based governance over political contestation; and a preference for technocratic forms of institution-building, giving technical and scientific experts pride of place in the various proposals, blueprints, but also real institutional experiments. Notably however, technocratic internationalism—not unlike many other strands of internationalism—not only shaped international organisations of the present day in terms of institutional design, but also as a form of global ordering. Putting into perspective which interests technocratic internationalists promoted, and whose voices the technocrats silenced in the course, is an important next step in how we approach the history of technocratic legacies in IR.

Problems and Ways Forward

As Mazower (2012, 301) put it, "[i]nternationalism was not the antithesis to empire but its civilizer". Historically this was true of the deeply Eurocentric internationalism of the Saint-Simonians, furnishing pursuits such as Michel Chevalier's ambitions for a "Europeanization of the globe", as much as of the League of Nations mandates system ostensibly "internationalising" empire while in fact majorly aiding its continuation (cf. Morefield 2005; Pedersen 2015). At the close of this article, I want to point to two crucial dimensions of technocratic internationalism, and ways forward that would allow for more sustained attention to those dimensions: one, its relationship with global order and hierarchy; and two, the European focus of its extant historiography.

First, technocratic internationalism can be understood as a particular form of global ordering. As outlined above, it has a rich and variegated history that ranges (at least) from early-nineteenth century proposals for global order centred around leadership by a modernist avant-garde of scientists, engineers, and industrialists all the way to the pioneers of the League of Nations and the United Nations system we have today. At each stage, and in each distinctive current of technocratic internationalist thought and practice, the involvement of not only technicians and scientists but also institution-builders and individuals with political ambitions has important consequences for how we approach the phenomenon. As Steffek (2021) puts it, technocratic internationalism spans ideological divides and can be adopted in different ways by essentially any political camp—but it is also ideological itself. Through a technocratic frame, political ambitions can get obfuscated on purpose, unequal interventions presented as technically determined outcomes, hierarchical relations maintained as epistemic divisions of labour. We know this of domestic as much as of international politics. Keeping this in mind is important for research into technocratic internationalism, where it is crucial not to conflate an ideal understanding of substantive expertise with its practical uses for various strategic purposes—crucial, in other words, to maintain the distinction between experts and technocrats.

Second, so far the history of technocratic internationalism has been written from a heavily Eurocentric point of view. This is unsurprising to the extent that it reflects general trends and blind-spots across many academic disciplines including History and International Relations; it is also unsurprising given that much original interest in the phenomenon emerged in the context of European integration studies (such as Schot and Kaiser's volume) or as a

response to functionalism, which itself was dedicated to European regional cooperation in particular. The survey presented in this article has been equally Eurocentric, and whether or not this is justified I leave up to the reader.

On the other hand, this is not just a historiographic problem but also an empirical facet of the phenomenon itself. Part of the reason for a distinctive European character across many technocratic internationalist perspectives and initiatives may well lie in its very relationship with European imperialism. As mentioned, many technocratic internationalists in fact pursued and strengthened what today we would consider forms of informal imperialism, justified from the harder-to-contest technical, scientific point of view. Yet even if technocratic internationalism is a European phenomenon—which may very well not be the case, of course—to fully account for this aspect it will be crucial for future research to bring non-European perspectives into the picture. Only then can we properly contextualise and understand the role of technocratic arguments and justifications for specific European interventions in the colonies, imperial peripheries, and later in the postcolonial world.

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