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## International Organisations and Global Stratification: Rethinking IR's Cooperation Paradigm

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Different strands of recent IR literature that share the common characteristic of seeing international order as societal have highlighted the stratified nature of global relations (notably Keene 2013, 2014; Brems Knudsen and Navari 2019; Buzan and Schouenborg 2018; similarly, talking about hierarchies, Bially-Mattern and Zarakol 2016; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Pouliot 2016; Viola 2020a, b). With these concepts of stratification/hierarchies they echo sociological understandings that refer to the unequal distribution of resources among social groups, pointing to inequalities between state (and other) actors. Building on these strands of theorising and seeking to contribute to their further development, some IR scholars – including ourselves – have recently begun to scrutinise the specific roles that international organisations (IOs) play within stratified global orders. In this article, we explain why this line of inquiry is important, how it can shift our perspective on international institutions and organizations, and how concepts and ideas from sociological inequality research can enrich the study of IOs.

Like the above-cited authors, we take sociological theories of inequality and stratification as a starting point for the analysis of global relations. We are particularly interested in IOs since they have become central actors in world politics due to their involvement in negotiations between states, agenda-setting and various fields of global governance. Through these activities, we argue, IOs contribute to reproducing (or potentially transforming) global social inequalities. By categorising global subjects, distributing unequal social rewards to different categories, and granting unequal access to decisions about these categorisation and distribution schemes, they fulfil essential functions we also encounter in domestic stratification systems. Within a global order marked by multidimensional inequalities, IOs are so central to regulating access to different types of power resources that we can understand them as being themselves constitutive of a key dimension of stratification, *institutional power*.

With these propositions, we seek to systematise and establish the study of inequality-reproducing or inequality-transforming effects as a standard analytical perspective on international institutions and organisations. In the past, (mainstream) IR scholarship dedicated to the study of international institutions and organisations was mainly interested in the output of IOs, assessing their capacities to generate cooperative outcomes, such as norms, treaties, or obligations. Sociologically-inspired perspectives on international organisations came closer to our perspective in acknowledging that IOs are both shaped by, and in turn constitute, a wider social environment in which they are embedded. Yet, while these perspectives avoided the explicitly functionalist arguments advanced by liberal institutionalists (e.g. Koremenos et al. 2001), they too tended to focus on cooperative organisational output, such as socialisation or norm diffusion (e.g. Checkel 2007; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Risse et al. 1999). The question of inequality reproduction/transformation through IOs was thus long ignored or overridden by concerns about the possibility of cooperation and the 'best outcomes' in the IR literature dealing with international institutions and organisations.

More recently, some IR institutionalists have taken a stronger interest in unequal order, yet without fundamentally rethinking the cooperation paradigm. They either frame IOs and regime complexes as being used and manipulated by dominant powers, leading to distortions of their cooperative outputs (Gruber 2004; Stone 2011); or they stress the functionality of institutionalised inequality, for instance in claiming that a hegemon is needed to solve cooperation problems (e.g. Ikenberry 2001; Lake 2009), or that special rights for some states are justified because of their

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responsibilities (Bukovansky et al. 2012: 58).

Aside from a few notable exceptions (Pouliot 2016; Viola 2013), what seems to be missing from institutionalist research in IR is a perspective that – without reducing IOs to mere agents of state power – goes beyond (broadly understood) functionalist reasoning to identify and understand inequality effects of institutional rules and practices at the macro level of global order. The perspective we propose focuses on just this “missing link“, allowing us to see how seemingly functional inequalities in institutional “cooperation” processes are linked to broader, multidimensional hierarchies of power in organisations’ social environment. Our focus here thus is also on the effects of IOs’ actions. Acknowledging a potential conflict between cooperative outcomes and equality goals, in the following, we will make the case for enriching our thinking about IOs’ effects by drawing on the conceptual apparatus of sociological inequality research. We will illustrate our conceptual arguments with a range of empirical examples to reflect on how concepts such as stratification, multidimensionality, capital conversion and social mobility can be translated to International Relations thinking and what roles IOs play with regard to them (also see Fehl and Freistein 2020a, 2020b).

## **Stratification**

As one form of differentiation between subjects (along with segmentation and functional differentiation, e.g. Albert et al. 2013), stratification refers to unequal distributions of socially valued resources among classes and other social groups. These inequalities are socially generated through stratification systems, that is, complexes of social rules that define who gets access to different social positions and reward packages (Crompton 2008; Grusky 2001; Kerbo 2006). Stratification systems can be marked by different degrees of rigidity or social closure. A rigid system is characterised by stratification rules that make it unlikely for individual members of society to experience social mobility by reaching a higher (or lower) social position in their lifetime (Grusky 2001: 6).

Sociologists ranging from Max Weber to Pierre Bourdieu have held that social inequalities can appear in different dimensions. Marxists emphasise the dominance of economic stratification and class differences, which is often also the starting point for many sociological theories. Max Weber’s distinction between class, status and party introduces the idea of multidimensional stratification (Weber 1946), but also acknowledges Marx’s insights. According to Weber, individuals and groups are unequal not only in terms of their class positions but also in having lifestyles with different degrees of social prestige (status) and in their share of political authority qua affiliation with a political party. The three dimensions of stratification, which are all aspects of the distribution of power in society, are distinct but interrelated: class, status, and party positions influence, but do not determine, one another. Adding to Weber, Bourdieu shows how individuals accumulate different forms of capital over their life courses to maintain or improve their position in different, hierarchically structured social fields – generated through struggles over capital, converting some capital forms to others. Cultural (symbolic) capital (manners, taste, lifestyle, etc.) is central to class/status distinctions, but is rarely independent from the possession of economic capital (Bourdieu 1984).

## **Global Stratification Translated in and Through International Organisations**

Translating these sociological assumptions to the global realm, which cannot completely mirror those applied to domestic societies, we argue that international society is marked by multidimensional stratification, that is, by multiple, intersecting yet distinct forms of inequality, which reflect unequal distributions of different internationally valued goods and different dimensions of power in international society (similarly Keene 2014). These multidimensional inequalities are produced, reproduced and (more rarely) changed by rule-based processes of resource allocation that link different reward packages to different social positions and global subjects.

In contemporary world politics, international organisations have come to govern ever more issue-areas at an increasing depth of regulation (Alvarez 2006; Zürn 2018) and are thus central to the distribution of vital material and immaterial goods. It is through global organisations that decisions about the recognition of states and non-state actors or about military and judicial interventions are made, that financial loans, aid or emission rights are distributed, that limitations to the possession and use of strategically important weapons are set, and that states can build a reputation as “responsible” members of international society. All of these material and immaterial rewards are

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relevant in the issue-specific context which individual institutions are designed to govern, but also have a broader significance as sources of power in international society at large.

In the process of institutional rule- and decision-making, international organisations construct explicit or implicit social categories of global subjects that are granted unequal access to these internationally valued goods (Fehl and Freistein 2020a; Müller 2019; Viola 2020a, 2020b). For instance, legal rights (e.g. pollution rights), economic resources (e.g. aid, loans, “stability fund” payments in the EU), access to influential diplomatic networks, or social prestige (e.g. perception as a member of the community of “civilised” states) are allocated differentially to recognised/non-recognised states, public/private actors, great/middle/small powers, developed/developing countries, democracies/autocracies, or to members/non-members of political communities such as the European Union (EU).

These categorisation and allocation schemes, in turn, are shaped by formal and informal procedural rules that determine who gets to influence decision-making in IOs. Procedural influence can thus be seen as a second order good that provides access to primary material and immaterial goods. Like these primary goods, it is often distributed highly unequally across different categories of state and non-state subjects. Beyond the most obvious example of the UN Security Council that froze a post-WWII configuration of material power (Müller 2019), many other international organisations and diplomatic forums are characterised by unequal decision-making structures.

Some organisations, such as the European Union (Peters 2020), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, accord differential voting weight to their members. As the example of the World Bank illustrates, the categories underlying such weighted voting schemes are as important to the effective distribution of institutional influence as the formal weighting of votes. In the World Bank's 2011 voting rights reform, the reform of voting procedures built on a re-appraisal of the underlying categories that sustained divisions, such as the “developing and transition countries” (DTCs). While the “voice reform” gave developing and transition countries roughly 5% more shares of the votes and 5% less to developed countries, this did not – as announced – lessen inequality of voting power. As Vestergaard and Wade (2013: 153) argue: “In reality the shift was much more modest, because the DTC category includes several high-income countries which should not be in the developing country category and do not borrow from the Bank. Including only low- and middle-income countries – the Bank's borrower members – the voting share of developing countries (in the proper sense of the term) increased from 34.67% to only 38.38% while the developed (high-income) countries retained more than 60%”. Furthermore, low income countries – a special group of borrowers in the World Bank context, which often faces harsh conditionality – did not benefit, so that the overall aim of balancing out inequalities in the world economic system was not reached.

Other forums, ranging from the G20 (Viola 2020b) to informal arms export control clubs (Fehl 2014), remain limited to exclusive circles of influential states, although the rules they make have implications far beyond their membership.

In yet other cases, it is the informal decision-making practices adopted by and within international organisations that give rise to charges of inequality. While the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was founded on the principle of vote equality, based on previous experience, the ‘Green Room’ consultations within the WTO or, similarly, the UN Security Council's recent practice of issuing ‘law-making’ resolutions demonstrate that informal inequalities may arise out of formal attempts to equalise relations (Zangl et al. 2016). As protests against the Bretton Woods but also other IOs indicate, inequalities of access and influence are an important subject of current global political debates. Several global institutions such as the International Criminal Court or annual climate summits have faced criticism from states in the Global South and beyond for offering unequal chances of participation and decision-making.

In a multidimensional frame, we can think of IOs as managing different dimensions of power. Through both categorisation and distribution schemes and procedural rules that distribute influence over these schemes, they grant and deny access to goods that stratify the global social system in different respects. Due to this critical role, *institutional power*, understood as the ability to benefit from and to shape IOs' activities, can itself be thought of as an attractive social reward, and as a key dimension of stratification in the contemporary global social order.

While organisational processes taking place in and through IOs may sometimes affect only one dimension of power,

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institutional categorisation and resource allocation schemes often create links between dimensions that allow resourceful members of international society to “convert” one form of capital (e.g. economic wealth) into other forms (e.g. voting weight). The possibility of capital conversion may be regulated by formal rules, as in the above-cited weighted voting schemes, but it may also result from informal norms and practices. For instance, as Thomas Müller shows in the historical case of the League of Nations, nominations for non-permanent seats on the League Council reflected prevailing understandings of great-power-hood (Müller 2020). In a contemporary example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been shown to reward US allies with privileged access to loans (Dreher and Jensen 2007). As we explain in the next section, the possibility of capital conversion across dimensions influences chances for social mobility within the global stratified order.

## Social Mobility and the Institutional Reproduction of Inequalities

Institutional categorisation and resource allocation schemes, including capital conversion rules, may produce social mobility or social closure, depending on the rigidity of the global stratification order. In a rigid order, institutional rules benefit established elites, whereas a more permeable order also rewards the accumulation of capital by “newcomers”. For instance, the rising economies known under the BRICS acronym were long heavily disadvantaged by the distribution of voting rights in the IMF. The Fund's recent quota reform makes the global stratification system somewhat less rigid by ensuring that the BRICS' growing economic power is reflected more clearly (though still not fully) in their share of institutional power. In a less prominent case, Katharina Coleman (2020) shows how both formal and informal rules governing UN Peacekeeping have allowed for a limited degree of social mobility by rewarding top financial and troop contributors with increased influence over peacekeeping decisions.

Importantly, a decrease in rigidity does not imply that the stratification system becomes less unequal on the whole. The question of social mobility is related to, but not identical with, the question of inequality reproduction. As issue-specific international organisations are embedded in a larger social context that is always already structured by socially generated or contested inequalities, this constitutes a “given” status quo at any particular point in time. International institutions produce social outcomes that can confirm or transform these pre-existing inequalities in the issue-specific context in which they operate as well as in international society at large.

In a rigid system with low social mobility, IOs reproduce inequality: outcomes systematically privilege elite members of international society, such as rich, developed countries, nuclear powers or states in general over non-state actors. This privileging may be grounded in explicit capital conversion rules, as in the case of UN Security Council seats being allocated to “great powers” (Hurd 2008; Simpson 2004), but it may also be implicit and indirect. For instance, if democratic status is key to gaining social prestige or top jobs in international institutions, these rewards are not explicitly linked to the possession of any form of power but still benefit developed Western states (among others), whereas those that are disadvantaged overwhelmingly come from the developing world. As this example illustrates, a change in the formal criteria for allocating rewards (e.g. from “great power status” to “democratic status”) does not necessarily imply a change in stratification patterns, but may actually help established elites to stay on top of global hierarchies.

In a less rigid stratification system, the overall degree of inequality is not necessarily lower, but the strata are more permeable, allowing for partial change in existing stratification patterns. New members are permitted into the societal elite, but at the same time, inequalities between them and the rest (e.g. between the BRICS and other developing countries) are reproduced and reinforced. The rise of a few would not necessarily be an indicator of a durable relaxation of the stratification system, since exceptions to the rule are almost always possible, even in a rigid stratification system.

Lastly, IOs may also actively work against the reproduction of existing inequalities by redistributing capital to less powerful members of international society. For instance, the inclusion of civil society groups in negotiations has been a step in this direction; support by IOs like the International Labor Organisation for decolonising the global order would also constitute a measure geared towards a partial transformation of the stratification system (Maul 2012: 227-58). These instances could be seen as at least partial transformation of inequalities. Development aid channelled through international institutions, trade privileges for developing countries, and the principle of Common but

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Differentiated Responsibilities in the UN climate regime are all examples of institutional resource allocation policies that explicitly aim at mitigating existing inequalities. Specifically in the field of global climate governance, other measures by which systematically disadvantaged groups are meant to get a head-start vis-à-vis more privileged groups have been compared to domestic, affirmative action schemes designed to improve social mobility (Pryz-Hansen 2020).

Our argument, as developed thus far, is subject to an important caveat: we do not claim that reproduction and transformation processes of global inequalities take place exclusively in institutional settings. We do not dispute the analysis that an enduring unequal world order has historically evolved in and through colonialism, imperialism and other forms of violent exploitation and domination (Golub 2013; Hobson 2014), nor do we deny that both exploitative global production processes and military exploitation continue to matter in contemporary world affairs. Yet, we argue that because routine processes of decision-making, redistribution and norm-setting take place in institutionalised settings, international organisations are centrally implicated in inequality reproduction and are battle grounds for more equality. While often designed to serve states with privileges, IOs can thus also become important allies of disenfranchised states to further their agendas.

## Conclusion: Rethinking “Cooperation” Through IOs

Building on these insights, we thus propose a shift of perspective on international organisations that is aimed at correcting the (explicit or implicit) functionalist bias of mainstream institutionalist theorising in IR. Theorists from many different theoretical schools have focused on identifying and comparing patterns of cooperation or norm dynamics in individual IOs and policy fields, but have hardly linked these observations to the question of how global politics address unequal outcomes of institutional processes. Yet, cooperative outcomes do not necessarily contribute to equal relations between states; on the contrary, distributive outcomes of institutional negotiation processes can be decidedly unequal and have repercussions on the relations between affected subjects – in ways that are inadequately captured by a realist focus on state power and the instrumentalisation of IOs. Thus, while IR research on international institutions has taken important steps to open the proverbial “black box” of institutionalised cooperation, it has also tended to “blacken out” the space in which the boxes are situated in the unequal global order.

This is not an argument against cooperation, but for analytical perceptiveness vis-à-vis potential trade-offs between inequality and cooperation that arise in processes of international politics. Whereas states or even non-state actors have often criticised the systematic relation between a lower/higher status in the overall global order and the design and practices of specific international organisations, IR institutionalists have rarely accounted for the reproduction of systemic inequalities within and across institutions. Their focus on issue-specific outcomes has made it difficult to see that global stratification and the relative status of subjects in institutionalised processes are inherently connected. If we shift our perspective on IOs from expectations of outcomes in a specific policy-field, e.g. trade, energy security or the global environment, to a perspective that regards outcomes as a general distribution of rewards according to criteria derived both from the IO's environment and intra-organisational processes, the processes that reproduce or transform existing stratification become visible. What is more, we could even assume that global cooperation can be enhanced by creating a more equal order, so that the two perspectives could be aligned to the same end.

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