Patrick Weller and Xu Yi-chong (eds.)


The study of international organizations resembles something between Schrödinger’s box and the whack-a-mole game. The cat in the box is simultaneously political and legal (or maybe there is more than one cat), and the box is really a maze of boxes with tunnels and holes. Nobody really knows what the cat really is, or where it is, or what the box looks like from the inside, but academics still try to whack whatever pokes its nose or limb out of one of the holes: an activity otherwise known as international organizations research. What would make sense would be to take the cat out of the box, learn to communicate with it, and ask it about itself (and maybe the other cats) and what the box is like on the inside. And this is precisely what two Australian academics have attempted to do in their new work *The Politics of International Organizations: Views from Insiders*, they have initiated a dialogue between the theory and real world of global institutions. The two editors, Patrick Weller and Xu Yi-chong, work at the Centre for Governance and Public Policy and the School of Government and International Relations of Griffith University. The structure of the book methodologically reflects the communication between researchers and ‘insiders’, by alternating articles by practitioners and commentaries by theoreticians.

Both the first piece by Stuart Harbison on the World Trade Organization, and the commentary by John Ravenhill discuss the repercussions of the expansion of the WTO membership and the historical legacy of the GATT as an informal institution. Harbison summarizes the dynamics of balancing between the different players in terms of decision-making, and offers an interesting insight into the different management styles of Directors General and the role of informal meetings, like the infamous ‘green room’ negotiations. His argument is that there is too much focus on the judicial arm of the organization, which leaves the decision-making structures to stagnate, as is obvious in the Doha stalemate. In the commentary, Ravenhill stresses the need to differentiate between the actions of the secretariat—which possess very limited autonomy—and the member states.

The author of the second article, James W. Adams, tells the history of the World Bank from the time he entered in 1974. At that point, and despite President McNamara's reforms, it was “still a Western, Cold War institution” with little transparency: all the documentation was confidential, and speaking to the press was off-limits. Adams describes the changes in the Bank during the
1980s and 1990s—the opening up that was very strongly influenced by NGOs—and the resistance put up by the Bank staff. As with the WTO, the role of the leadership is key in large-scale changes, as is obvious in Adams’ anecdotes about Wolfensohn’s insistence on the hiring of personnel to liaise with NGOs, and Zoellick’s policy of eliminating the access fees for Bank data. The main part of his story is the Bank’s adjustment lending that demonstrates it is not only a lending institution, but has a political twist. Christiaan Poortman, who worked at the World Bank for 30 years and is now with Transparency International, wrote a short comment that describes the push-pull between the pressures for change from the outside versus the conservatism on the inside of the organization. In the second commentary, Susan Park discusses issues of accountability, effectiveness, autonomy, as well as conditionality in lending.

The third chapter, by Luc Hubloue and Orasa Vongthieres, discusses the International Monetary Fund’s continuous governance reform and “quest for increased legitimacy”, with a special focus on the role of the members of the Executive Board. Some interesting points include the role of informal interactions, the IMF-G20 dynamics, the legal effect of a Summing Up of a board meeting, and the history of reform of quotas relative to voting power. Some of Hubloue and Vongthieres’ diplomatic expressions hint at a very tumultuous process: “[s]ome major emerging market economies felt that ...”. The commentary by Mike Callaghan discusses issues of member obligations, accountability, legitimacy, reform efforts, the involvement of G20 and ministers and the role of directors. The second commentary on the IMF is by André Broome and Leonard Seabrooke, and it examines the concepts of the IMF’s strict hierarchy, its cognitive authority as a source of ‘ideational power’, and its bureaucratic expertise. They conclude with suggestions for future research on international organizations, mainly on the cooperation between institutions.

Naresh Prasad’s essay on the World Intellectual Property Organization summarizes the mandate, the administrative, financial and management structure, and the role of and interaction between internal and external stakeholders, including the significance of the informal (regional) groups of countries, and NGOs. He layers the dynamics between actors into three levels—norm-setting, strategic and operational—and discusses the role of the bureaucracy on each plain. Prasad’s conclusion is that the involvement of the director general in the legislative actions at WIPO is a critical ingredient of (what he deems) the organization’s success. The first commentary is by Geoffrey Yu, who worked at WIPO for 25 years, including as deputy director general, and focuses on the human factor and the developed-developing divide. He underlines how intra-country conflict on IP policy, the practice of forum-shopping, and the personal agendas of delegates can affect the formalized process of decision-making.