Book Review


Open a standard textbook on international organizations, and chances are that in the general chapter (the one often comprising a bit of history and theory) some explanation will be mentioned as to why states form international organizations. Chances are, moreover, that this explanation will speak of “pooling resources” or “solving common problems,” without making too many distinctions as to the sort of organizations concerned or the kind of activities those organizations will be engaged in. Much of this can be traced back to the realist approach to international relations, and finds an echo in the more recent law & economics inspired approaches: both of these have as their starting point the quasi-Hobbesian world of all against all, in which cooperation can only be explained on the basis of state interests, and only on the basis of a certain (fairly limited) conception of state interests at that.¹

That is fine as far as things go, but clearly a more subtle story, with greater eye for detail and based on a more sophisticated understanding of state interests, was waiting to be told. That story now emerges from the excellent recent collection of articles on regional institutions edited by Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston (affiliated with Bristol University and Harvard, respectively) under the title Crafting Cooperation. In six substantive chapters, bookended by insightful introductory and concluding chapters,

¹ See, e.g., Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson and Duncan Snidal (eds), The Rational Design of International Institutions (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
various authors go into detail in the circumstances involved in setting up a number of regional organizations, ranging from ASEAN to NATO and from the EU to the Arab League.

As so often with edited volumes, the strength of the book depends in large measure to the tasks the editors have given to the individual authors and whether the individual authors follow a common approach. In this case Acharya and Johnston have carefully set out a list of things they wanted their authors to include. The main working hypothesis was the expectation that somehow, the way an organization is designed should show some correspondence to what it aims to achieve. The form of the institution, in other words, was expected to owe something to the institution’s tasks, which in turn rests on the assumption that for each task or set of tasks, it might be possible to find – or devise – the optimal institutional design. This clearly owes something to rationalism, but is at the same time sensitive enough not to broaden rationalism to states’ realist security interests. Indeed, telling is that “design” itself is conceptualized as either intentional or “organic” (for want of a better term), which suggests subtlety rather than rigidity. In all, the things authors were asked to take into account (if and when appropriate) would include the number of actors involved, the sort of issues covered, drafting history, interaction with domestic politics in the member states, et cetera.

This has resulted in an altogether excellent volume. All six substantive chapters are worth their while and form useful additions to the existing literature. But perhaps the most lasting insight coming out of the volume is that traditional thinking about institutions as sites where member states pool their resources or aim to solve common problems is subject to modification. In the particular the excellent chapters on African cooperative attempts (by Jeffrey Herbst) and the Arab League (Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen) suggest that there are occasions where cooperation serves to strengthen the position of member states. The Arab League was strongly influenced, as Barnett and Solingen write, by the desire to ensure domestic “regime survival,” while Herbst notes that in Africa, cooperative arrangements often “are not designed to actually do something” (at 137). He ironically – and controversially – observes, moreover, that in Africa, “[t]he colonial period was clearly the high point of regional cooperation” (at 131).

To the extent that institutional design is a matter also of law (the design, after all, must typically be captured in legal rules), the role of law – like in so many works in international relations – remains somewhat under-