Constructing World Culture
International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875

Edited by John Boli and George M. Thomas

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CONTRIBUTORS

Deborah Barrett is a postdoctoral fellow at the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Nitza Berkovitch is Assistant Professor in the Behavioral Sciences Department and Co-director of the Women's Studies Program at Ben Gurion University, Beer-Sheva, Israel.

John Boli is Associate Professor of Sociology at Emory University.

Colette Chabbott is Assistant Professor (acting) in the School of Education and Director of the Master's Program in International and Comparative Education at Stanford University.

Martha Finnemore is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University.

David John Frank is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Harvard University.

Ann Hironaka is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Stanford University.

Young Soo Kim is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Soonchungyang University, Asan, Korea.

Teresa Loftin is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Emory University.

Thomas A. Loya is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Emory University.

John W. Meyer is Professor of Sociology at Stanford University.

Evan Schofer is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Stanford University.
George M. Thomas is Professor of Sociology at Arizona State University.

Nancy Brandon Tuma is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology at Stanford University.
INTRODUCTION

JOHN BOLI AND GEORGE M THOMAS

Like other scholars in comparative-historical sociology and international relations, we have devoted much effort to understanding the workings of nation-state authority and citizenship, the formation and development of civil-society institutions, the operations of the interstate system, and the dynamics of global and international processes. Like others, we have been struck by the intense pace of change in the twentieth century, especially since World War II. Such developments as the apparent decline of nation-state sovereignty and citizenship, the rise of both transnational authority and intranational regionalism, the collapse of Communism and decline of Western hegemony, and the increasingly multipolar structure of the world have been so broad and were so poorly anticipated that we cannot but be awed.

These seemingly profound changes lose much of their dramatic force, however, when considered in larger historical and theoretical contexts. Shifts in world polarity are certainly not new; neither is the rise or fall of states, empires, or political economies. The most striking recent changes, if we are to believe the literature, are the "challenges to state sovereignty" and the "fragmentation" of nation-states. But these, too, are hardly unprecedented. Tensions in the symbiotic relationship between the nation-state and transnational cultural and organizational forces have characterized the modern world throughout most of this millennium. Much of the work we and our colleagues have undertaken in the past two decades has shown that the world-polity context that envelops the competitive state system has led to a mutual strengthening of states and transnational structures, very much con-
trary to the zero-sum imagery that often prevails in contemporary scholarship. Even more, these tensions have led to a remarkable degree of isomorphism among states and national societies.

In more general terms, in any relationship between actors and their environments mutually generative tensions commonly lead to similar actors pursuing similar goals. The fullest sketch of this line of argument as an explanation of state structure and national development is the 1987 work *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual*, of which the editors were coauthors along with John Meyer and Francisco Ramirez of Stanford University. That book has rightly been criticized for its lack of theoretical precision and empirical specificity in its analysis of the contextual effects of global institutions. We were acutely aware of these failings at the time and realized that our analysis could not move forward unless we could identify some of the "missing links" between global social construction and lower-level organization, policy, and mobilization.

One important missing link, we began to suspect, might be international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). We had become aware of this burgeoning population of transnational associations through occasional use of the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, published by the Union of International Associations in Brussels, and we were puzzled by the paucity of scholarly studies of INGOs. They were treated as marginal, even epiphenomenal. The only types of INGOs that received much attention were those that had become prominent in the global public realms such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, the World Wildlife Fund, and the International Red Cross.

In the spring of 1988 the first editor of this volume systematically perused the *Yearbook* to explore the contours of the INGO population, confirming his suspicion that organizations like Greenpeace and Amnesty International were hardly typical INGOs. We soon recognized the enormous variety of these bodies, the richness of the information available about them, and the information's suitability for global historical analysis. In 1989 we began coding data from *Yearbook* volumes. As the contours of the data began to emerge, we became ever more convinced that INGOs had a powerful story to tell about the nature and operations of the world polity. Our endeavors eventually sparked a number of studies of different sectors of INGO activity, most of which are represented in this book.
As we tried to interpret the massive growth of INGOs, the range of activities they undertake, and the types of goals they pursue, we found that existing theories of global structures and systems left much to be desired. INGOs, and the world-cultural principles and models they embody, have
very little presence in the dominant social-scientific approaches to international and global analysis. In international relations theory, the only objects worthy of study are states; this view characterizes functionalist, international-regime, and neoliberal institutionalist theories as much as it does the conventional realism and neorealism that have held the center of the field for so long. In sociology, state-competition and world-system theory similarly ignore INGOs, seeing states as central actors in networks of economic, political, and military power, but also, in the latter perspective, making much of the power and influence of transnational corporations. By contrast, the perspective developed in Institutional Structure, now often referred to as world-polity institutionalist theory, was already well primed to incorporate INGOs into its explanatory framework; indeed, the more we pursued our interest in INGOs, the more powerful this perspective seemed to become.

In adopting world-polity institutionalism in this book, we and our collaborators make two conceptual forays opening the way, we believe, to comprehensive analyses of global development that are well grounded in empirical reality and more satisfactory, in many respects, than other perspectives. The first is a Durkheimian leap of the sort that Mary Douglas articulates so well in her writings on the operations of cultural institutions. Our starting point is the universalistic (transnational, global) level of cultural and organizational formation that operates as a constitutive and directive environment for states, business enterprises, groups, and individuals. Arising out of Western Christendom and propagated via the processes and mechanisms analyzed so well in world-system and neorealist research, this transcendent level of social reality began to crystallize organizationally in the second half of the nineteenth century. After the vicissitudes of the two world wars, it has played an astonishingly authoritative role in shaping global development for the past fifty years.

Our second conceptual foray, best seen as the obverse of the first, is an insistence on problematizing the social units (states, corporations, groups, individuals) that other perspectives generally take for granted as the primary actors in global development. In this we find common ground with such growing movements among international relations scholars as the "constructivist" approach and the analysis of "epistemic communities," hesitant though these movements may be to depart radically from state-centric paradigms. For us, a fundamental question that must be addressed is not only how global actors go about their business but how and why they define their
business as they do. At stake are the identities of these actors, the goals and purposes they adopt, the means they employ, and the causal logic they use to orient means to goals and purposes.
The approach taken here uses a world-polity response to answer the question of how global actors decide what their business is: to an ever increasing degree, all sorts of actors learn to define themselves and their interests from the global cultural and organizational structures in which they are embedded. Contemporary world culture defines actors of all sorts as rational, self-interested, and capable of initiative. These actors (especially corporations and states) are to find meaning and purpose through the pursuit of economic expansion and political power; through high-status consumption and self-development (individuals); through proper care and feeding of their populations (states); through technical progress (corporations, professions); and so on. Because the definitions, principles, purposes, and modes of action that constitute and motivate actors have come to comprise a global level of social reality, far-reaching isomorphism across actors is increasingly likely and observable. For the same reason, forms of conflict and modes for asserting distinctiveness are ever more stylized and standardized, though they may not be any less bloody or conflictual for that.

Conversely, in the familiar sociological dialectic given prominence in the work of Peter Berger, these global structures are maintained and transformed by the actors they constitute. World culture defines modern actors not as cultural dopes but as creative innovators who are the one and only source of change, adaptation, and restructuring in response to situational contingencies. Therefore these actors seek to expand their reach, fashion institutions after their own liking, reach cooperative agreements when their (globally constructed) interests so indicate, and engage in all the other high-adrenaline actions that state-centric, neorealist, neoliberal-institutionalist, and world-system theories put at the center of their analyses. Paradoxically, "agency" is a structurally constituted feature of the world polity, a characteristic that gives the modern world much of its extraordinary dynamism.

This theoretical approach guides all of our authors. In encapsulated form, they use it to address the following topics, with much historical detail and clearly specified bodies of evidence covering the period since 1875:

(1) Organizational dimensions of the world polity, that is, structures that embody, express, transmit, and transform world culture;

(2) World-cultural content, including principles and models that have dominated in specific global sectors and changes in these principles and models over time;
(3) Interactive effects between global cultural structures and actors embedded in those structures; and

(4) The sociology of global effects, with explicit concern for delineating