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Avoiding disciplinary garbage cans: a pledge for a problem-driven approach to researching international public administration

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ABSTRACT
In this article, we distinguish two approaches to studying international public administrations (IPAs). On the one hand, there is a line of research that is grounded in traditional Public Administration (PA) and seeks to understand IPAs through established disciplinary lenses. On the other hand, scholars conceive IPAs as posing new problems and questions and are trying to integrate the standpoints of their respective disciplines into a broader research agenda. We argue that both perspectives have their merits – and limitations. However, the more IPAs are understood as phenomena heralding the emergence of transnationalized political systems, the less traditional PA toolkits appear able to capture the innovative aspects IPAs may hold. This essay thus argues for keeping IPA research as a field of study open, integrative and mixed – to encourage out of the box thinking and innovation, rather than stifle it.

Introduction

International public administrations (IPAs) are attracting increasing attention from the social sciences. While the central objects – IPAs as the secretariats of international governmental organizations (IOs) – are clear, scholars from the various subdisciplines are raising different research questions relying on a broad range of theoretical approaches and analytical heuristics to disentangle how IPAs function and how they shape transnational policymaking.

Two research perspectives stand out. First, IPAs are studied from a disciplinary perspective grounded in Public Administration (PA) and Public Management (Moloney & Rosenbloom, 2020). Given that IPAs are bureaucratic structures, the relative dominance of this approach is hardly surprising. Second, IPAs are studied as constituent elements of IOs, combining insights and approaches from International Relations (IR), but also from comparative politics, public policy and other research fields. While PA theories and concepts play a role here too, they are combined with insights from related disciplines. We refer to the research emerging in these latter branches as Transnational Institutionalism (TI) because it focuses on the emergence, role, agency, and impact of structures of collective action (in a broad sociological meaning) beyond the nation state.

The PA perspective can claim to be more coherent, relying on a disciplinary consensus about what bureaucracy is and why it is important. While this is advantageous in terms of the ability to apply existing toolkits to an emerging class of phenomena, the risk is that by doing *just* that the innovative character of IPAs may get missed out. This major risk stems from the fact that PA theories and explanations are intricately linked to the nation state as the foundation on which PA's epistemological constructions have been developed.

The TI camp, by contrast, is coined by a substantial heterogeneity in research questions, methods and theoretical loyalties. With a view to bureaucratic structure and agency, there is less weight of disciplinary tradition and convention in terms of how to identify important research questions and carry out empirical IPA research. TI research hence appears in a better position to capture innovative features related to IPAs and to explain how they shape the contours of an emerging transnational polity. Put simply, TI research highlights the gaps that open between traditional approaches and novel IPA realities.

Both perspectives on IPAs are of value – and in specific areas they are probably less distinct from each other than this pointed summary suggests. But there is a clear epistemological choice: either one subsumes IPAs into existing disciplinary paradigms, or one attempts to focus on what appears to be new and empirically puzzling. The more IPAs are analysed in the latter way, i.e., as organizational-bureaucratic structures beyond the nation state, the less likely traditional PA toolkits will suffice for understanding their innovative aspects.

Not to be mistaken, the developments pushing towards global governance are open ended, not teleologically determined (Zürn, 2018). While it is difficult to define the emerging TI perspective, in this essay we attempt to clarify its contours, and ponder advantages and disadvantages as compared to a more clear-cut PA approach towards IPAs. Erecting a Manichaean dualism between the two perspectives is beside the point and not our intention. Instead, we reflect on relative positions to advocate a problem-driven approach to the study of IPAs.

PA and international bureaucracies

There is no denying that PA has only belatedly 'discovered' international bureaucracies as an object of study. Tellingly, the debate on international bureaucracies was not kicked off by the PA camp, but by constructivist IR scholars (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Nevertheless, scholars from PA have since become ardent followers of the trend. Indeed, the classical topics developed by PA to come to grips with the national bureaucratic phenomenon appeared ideal for being applied and transposed to the study of their international counterparts.

Two traditional lines of PA research dominate. First the question of the relationship between politics and administration. Here the debate about bureaucratic autonomy, styles and the budget processes may serve as illustrations (Bauer & Ege, 2016; Knill et al., 2016; Patz & Goetz, 2019). The second debate revolves around questions related to staff and staffing (Bauer & Ege, 2012; Knill & Balint, 2008; Marcussen & Trondal, 2011; Mele et al., 2016). The debate on representative bureaucracy of IPAs became especially widespread in this area (Badache, 2020; Eckhard, 2020; Gravier, 2013).

Given these efforts we know a great deal more about the 'nature of the bureaucratic beast' – and we have learned to what extent IPAs are similar in procedures and structures to national bureaucracies. One major finding is that the principles of organization of IPAs are largely the same as in national bureaucracies, but that their institutional embedding in the broader organizational context vary (Bauer et al., 2017, p. 181). While the insights gained allowed raising exciting questions about the programmatic underpinning of PA as a discipline, expectations that IPA research would bring about innovation to PA as a discipline never materialized (Bauer et al., 2017, p. 189). PA may still hold a strong potential to engage in the study of 'unsettled and transitional political orders' (Trondal, 2020) of which IPAs form the institutional backbone. Yet, mainstream PA has been left untouched by IPA research. Similar to the failure to engage more systematically in administrative issues within EU studies (see e.g., Kassim et al., 2004; Kassim & Menon, 2003), PA may give away another chance to reconnect to cutting edge issues and new thriving research debates.

Against this background, there are painful conclusions to be drawn. The results of PA inspired IPA research remain islands of knowledge within a disciplinary community not very interested in what is perceived as exotic research at its margins. Moreover, no encompassing analytical PA theme has emerged to which individual IPA results could add on. To put it provocatively, and also self-critically, pure PA research on IPAs risks producing sophisticated studies for PA specialists and beyond that little more than data-rich dead ends.

IPA research in the spirit of transnational institutionalism

Academic disciplines are conventions. Once established they bring to bear bias – as they tell scholars what to research and perhaps more importantly what to exclude from the range of valid research questions. It is therefore interesting to see that the broad variety of IPA research from outside of PA has been enormously productive.[1] Most studies in this field follow a puzzle-driven, empirical setup. Often the starting points are observations that sit uncomfortably with respective theories and approaches. These puzzles prompt research questions which need to be answered by getting into dialogue with theories and concepts not only from PA but also from comparative politics, public policy, economics or sociology. What sets this research apart from most PA inspired IPA research is that intra-organizational patterns are not per se the primary focus of the chosen research designs. Rather institutional change and diffusion (including actors and structures from the IPA's systemic environment) as well as the implications for policy output patterns are put centre stage. It would be overstating to claim that PA research on IPA positions bureaucratic structures as dependent variables, while IPA research in the TI line conceives them as independent variables. But such a view is also not completely off the mark.

Three characteristics of TI research on IPAs stand out. First, there is a tendency towards interdisciplinarity and theoretical eclecticism. While some argue that IPA scholars need to firmly root their conceptual choices in existing PA scholarship (Christensen & Yesilkagit, 2019, p. 947), TI perspectives combine PA toolkits with what others outside the disciplinary tradition have found before. Second, there is a firm belief in the independent actorness of international institutions and a drive towards emphasizing the need for a sound microfoundation of empirical research (Eckhard & Ege, 2016). This laid the basis for IPA research contributing to an illumination of the black box of IOs and studying IPAs as part of policymaking sub-systems (Rittberger et al., 2019). A third – more implicit – characteristic is the assumption of the emergence of a transnational system as the future state of the political world (Stone & Moloney, 2019) with IPAs as the 'nuts and bolts' of this transformation.

Throughout this literature, the 'political' aspects of IPAs are, therefore, far from being neglected (as claimed by Christensen and Yesilkagit (2019), for example). Quite to the contrary! The relationships between IPAs and their staff on the one hand and member states and their permanent delegations on the other hand remain central themes. For instance, research suggests that in addition to traditional agency relationships, a stewardship model between the IPA and member states that is based on low goal divergence and low information asymmetry may lead to softer exercise of political control (Jankauskas, 2021). Moreover, scholars show how member states

can exert unilateral influence on IPAs, thereby theoretically acknowledging member states in IOs as complex principals (Dijkstra, 2015; Urpelainen, 2012). These studies find that it is, in particular, the politics of staffing (Novosad & Werker, 2019; Parízek, 2017), the politics of financing (Bayram & Graham, 2016; Goetz & Patz, 2017; Graham, 2016) but also the politics of evaluation (Eckhard & Jankauskas, 2018, 2020) that allow individual members to circumvent multilateral voting.

Actors' interactions and relative influence capacities of IPAs are also key concerns. There are numerous studies looking into IPA's influence both on the IO's principals and IO policy outputs (see Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009; Ege et al., 2021). In addition to the general influence potential that lies in organizational routines (Bayerlein et al., 2020), the literature has identified various active strategies by which influence can be exerted. IPAs can persuade decision-makers of the benefits of certain policy options (Hanrieder, 2011) or publicly shame their principals where they see implementation failure (Squatrito et al., 2019), to name just a few strategies. In addition, IPAs often offer expertise in exchange for discretion when member states lack this expertise themselves (Johnson, 2014). It has also been shown that IPAs make use of their own (moral and expert) authority that is based on the unquestioned recognition by national and international decision-makers (Liese et al., 2021). IPAs have even been found to make strategical use of *external* expertise which helps them to become active in areas outside their own mandate (Littoz-Monnet, 2017).

It is the regrowth of politics stretching over emerging structures of collective action beyond the nation state that is the implicit agenda of this research – no matter from which subdisciplinary base researchers advance. More instinctively than consciously reflected, structures of these evolving transnational political systems are chosen as angles to launch empirical research projects (see, for instance, Dijkstra, 2017; Heller et al., 2019; Margulis, 2018; Thomas & Turnbull, 2018) – and this explains the common interest in IPAs by a broad range of research without prior affinity to PA questions.

The road ahead

The propositions developed above offer an explanation as to why we observe a convergence of a broad range of subdisciplinary research towards IPAs – without much concern for *national* PA scholarship as a source of orientation. Precisely because it is not the similarities of IPAs to national bureaucracies that are of interest. Rather IPAs are of interest because they are conceived as ledgers or anchors of what transforms our nation states and what will probably bring about new, more liquid forms of multileveled political authority (Krisch, 2017). We do not yet have a clear notion of what this new order will be – and it is precisely the indetermination of the end point

which poses such analytical difficulties and at the same time encouragement to think outside disciplinary boxes.

Therefore, a problem-oriented and interdisciplinary approach to researching IPAs as *empirical phenomena* rather than defining IPAs into pre-structured disciplinary lenses seems the best way ahead. While we agree that starting from the established disciplinary realm of PA was highly useful to establish an IPA research agenda – and we ourselves have produced research to this effect – our efforts should now go beyond launching IPA research as a part of typically national PA scholarship. Rather, we need to put the understanding of the new empirical phenomena of *policymaking beyond the nation state* front and centre.

But what does such a problem-oriented perspective look like in practice? One way to approximate it is by deriving a taxonomy of research questions from the fundamental trichotomy of polity, policy and politics. Such an attempt builds on Rittberger and colleagues (2019), who conceive of international organizations as political systems, but it remains at the same time open to new modes of governance that emerge because of the anarchic character of the international system.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, we suggest a few crucial research problems and questions to provide some guidance for the future study of the IPA. Such a problem-oriented view on IPAs is characterized by the endeavour to connect at least two dots of the political trichotomy. Because each political science subdiscipline has a favourite perspective, this may inspire scholars to draw on the respective disciplinary strengths in terms of concepts/theories/ methods and include them into their own research – overcoming disciplinary blinders and providing a more comprehensive picture of the problem at hand.

The first problem-oriented perspective focuses on politics-administration relationships: how different interests within an IO are able to change the rules of the political game and the role of IPAs in such an (emerging) international politico-administrative system. The institutionalization of the relationship between bureaucracy and the political sphere is crucial for understanding national political systems. This perspective is still underdeveloped for the international system. What exactly is the 'political sphere' in IOs? What does it mean for IPAs to have multiple principals, a volatile membership base and permanent budgetary instability? And what exactly is the 'administrative sphere' and to what extent do IPAs fill political vacuums? To what extent are IPAs simply vectors of politics and under what conditions are they able to play an independent role? Are there at all stable exchange relationships or are these patterns constantly in flux?

More specifically, this highlights questions of institutional change and reform (Bauer & Knill, 2007; Ege, 2019). For decades, governments have contributed to the creation of multiple institutional islands or 'national fiefdoms'

(Kleine, 2013) within IOs, by providing extra budgetary funding for pet-activities while circumventing IOs' collective decision structures (Patz & Goetz, 2019). This has put IPAs on a slippery slope towards more institutional fragmentation and a stronger need for coordination – be it between different organizations (Mele & Cappellaro, 2018), within a single IPA (Graham, 2014) or between headquarters and regional branches (Hanrieder, 2015) and implementing field offices (Eckhard, 2016). Even in the face of major crises, member states seem unable to agree on a reform that cuts back on IPA activities to streamline the organization, because they are unable to find a compromise that hurts each government party *equally* (Eckhard et al., 2019). How IPAs can help to break the joint-decision trap would, therefore, be a crucial question for problem-oriented IPA research.

The second problem-oriented perspective concerns the puzzle of how organizational structure and institutions determine (global) public policy (Peters, 2016). While most studies are looking at the rational design of IOs as a dependent variable, the central question here is about the *effect* of a certain institutional set-up (or changes thereof) on the content of political decisions. The central goal is to understand why global policies look as they do. For instance, research on structural autonomy captures the extent to which an IPA was granted formal competencies, is structured internally and embedded in the IO political system and aims to establish how this affects the behaviour of civil servants and eventually the development and implementation of public policies (Bauer & Ege, 2017; Trondal, 2011; Trondal & Veggeland, 2014). This is also related to the classical PA theme of politicization of civil service systems and its consequences for organizational policy-making (Peters & Pierre, 2004), which is still understudied for IPAs. Given the absence of party politics at the IO level, this may not sound surprising. Yet this does not mean that there are no political cleavages that are built into the international civil service. Staff's nationality is a key issue that has received some attention recently (Badache, 2020; Bauer & Ege, 2012). Yet, there are cleavages between groups of member states (donor vs. recipient; autocratic vs. democratic) as well as potential societal cleavages (social movements such as Fridays For Future vs. economic interests). The IPA literature is largely blind as to what kind of role IPAs play in exploiting or mediating such conflicts (but see Saerbeck et al., 2020, who show how IPAs orchestrate information flows among NGOs in Twitter debates).

A third perspective reflects the classic thinking that politics determine policy. IPA research in this direction looks at the influence of the secretariat and means of political control. So far, we have a limited understanding of how IPAs influence the formulation and implementation of public policies beyond the nation state. There is of course a considerable amount of case-study evidence of IPA influence. Yet, we still lack systematic accounts connecting varying bureaucratic qualities to context conditions for such influence. In this regard, IPA studies suffer from the same weaknesses as

research on the policy influence of national bureaucracies. Despite its long tradition, research so far has failed to disentangle the administrative influence on policy content beyond rather vague statements and assumptions about bureaucratic characteristics that should determine the policy influence of the bureaucracy. At the same time, a large share of IR literature still conceives of IPAs as being fairly irrelevant in theoretical terms, with a dominant focus on the role member state interests and power asymmetries in order to account for policy decisions.

To address this research gap, it may be time for scholars to consider alternative conceptual lenses. The reality of IO policy-making for instance seems to be characterized much more by organized anarchy (Cohen et al., 1972) and networks of individual policy entrepreneurs, who consist of member state and IPA representatives exploiting windows of opportunity (Oksamytna, 2018; Zeigermann, 2020) than is currently recognized in most of the literature. Saerbeck et al. (2020) illustrate an innovative way forward by using social network analysis to systematically study changes in IPAs agenda setting role over time. This suggests that looking at IPAs from a dynamic policy perspective might provide space for new insights on policy-making beyond the nation state.

Outlook

As is the case with all grand transformations, those in the midst of it will find it hardest to make sense of what is going on – distinguishing the relevant from the ephemeral, and developing a collective interpretation of what they experience. We are currently in such a transition phase. Our disciplinary knowledge is better suited to make sense of the past, about how the state of the world was, and especially about the emergence and role of the political institutions connected to the nation state and liberal democracy as we know it, rather than being useful to give orientation for what is coming. We are currently entering a new phase – in which developing new analytical frames is the task. The challenge is to situate IPAs and their role in a new field of studies of Transnational Institutionalism. We will need to engage in conceptual synthesis, but we are still lacking an appropriate language and terminology to start such a project. In that situation, the best to do is identifying empirical puzzles and following up with well-crafted systematic research. A TI-inspired perspective is particularly promising because it presumes a selective choice of (important) explanatory variables at a theoretically abstract level, instead of risking to fall for secondary aspects of administrative operations.

Thus, a problem-driven approach, inviting research from a wide-range of subdisciplinary origin, appears the best we can do. Step by step, we then stand the chance to aggregate our observations and integrate our results into what might be the disentanglement of bureaucratic politics of

transnational governance. And there is no doubt that IPAs will constitute a central institutional backbone of such a new science of politics and policy-making beyond the nation state. The PA perspective on IPAs will not vanish, but it is by itself insufficient to provide the intellectual anchor for the project ahead. What is more, sometimes disciplinary traditions risk disguising more than they reveal. The way ahead will involve further empirical analysis and conceptual thinking from all relevant disciplinary corners, the synthesis of the complexities we encounter as well as persuasive theoretical propositions, innovative conceptualizations, testable hypotheses and rigorous empirical strategies to guide further studies. The way ahead is to avoid disciplinary garbage cans of any kind and instead encouraging pluralistic dialogue among the subdisciplines, about what IPAs are, how they function and how they affect the politics beyond the nation state.

Note

1. Take the ECPR general conferences as examples. Since 2016, a section dedicated to international bureaucracies has been organized. In 2021, the section received 138 paper proposals for 12 panels. By conservative measurement, three quarters of paper givers indicate a non-PA social science subfield as disciplinary affiliation. While all these scholars are interested in international institutions, this emerging community has close links to IR without being dominated by IR paradigms.

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