

Research: An Overview

In broad terms my research is in international relations theory and international organization. Specifically, I focus on international institutions, their relationship with states, and the grounds for their explanatory power. My dissertation grows out of, and speaks to, debates in international relations theory about the possibility of independent institutional effects, and how and to what extent institutions matter. My project is informed by an abiding interest in the concept of emergence, a converging area of scholarly attention across complexity science, systems biology, and segments of political science, social theory, and philosophy. In brief, emergence is concerned with the non-reductive nature of organization in natural and social systems, and has been used by researchers to analyze entities ranging from ant colonies to cities, and from minds to, I argue, international institutions.

My dissertation explores the issue of how to theorize institutions and institutional effects in world politics. Put simply: what are international institutions? And on what basis can international relations scholars ascribe causal significance to them, rather than to their constituent parts and member states, or to the ways in which they have been put together? I argue that the first question has to do with conceptions of institutional design, structure, and functioning. That is to say, it is about the nature, or ontology, of international institutions. The second question is about the extent to which institutions can be capable of independent influence, in view of power politics and the role of state interests and strategies, as well as that of global interest groups. It is an analytical question regarding the explanatory status of institutions in international relations theory.

These two questions, the ontological and the analytical, are interrelated. While not new--after all, they are fundamental questions--they have acquired new relevance and taken new turns in recent years. Core theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of institutions are once again receiving the attention that they deserve. Building on currents in international relations theory and the philosophy of social science, my research argues that different conceptions of the nature of institutions govern the ways in which the explanatory role of institutions is to be interpreted. This is crucial because determining whether institutions "matter" empirically depends on whether their purported causal efficacy can be well accommodated within a corresponding theoretical framework. In other words, claims about the explanatory power of institutions cannot outgrow the theoretical basis that warrants them. Despite their differences, realism and institutionalism both share a functionalist theory of institutions: institutions are posited to be tools that actors (especially states) use instrumentally to exert power and influence over others, or to resolve problems of asymmetric information and other barriers to cooperation. Constructivist studies of institutions that focus on strategic aspects of social construction also partake of this functionalist view inasmuch as institutions become the sites and tools through which global interest groups act to socialize states.

I enter this debate by arguing that, given this functionalist ontology of institutions, empirical evidence could not by itself be the arbiter of theoretical and substantive disputes because confirmatory instances of institutional effects could reasonably be reinterpreted to mean that state considerations remain paramount. In short, existing

assumptions regarding institutions come to compromise the explanatory role that institutions are said to have.

This presents the puzzling quandary of a growing empirical literature on international institutions constructed on questionable foundations. That is, there exists a mismatch between theory and empirics that my research seeks to resolve. I argue that the key lies in having a reasoned defense of a theory of relative institutional autonomy. In other words, *without showing that institutions are not simply expressions of state interests and strategies, while recognizing states' powerful role in institutional design, the case that institutions are causally consequential is in doubt*. Thus, the question of institutional ontology must be tackled before the explanatory role of institutions can be clarified. To address this issue my study contextualizes the debate on institutions and institutional effects by situating it within the interdisciplinary literature on organization in social systems. My research shows why both the functionalist and the principal-agent models of state-institutions relations entail the reduction of institutional effects to conditions of institutional crafting and contracting, respectively. I then focus on providing the basis for an alternative to treating institutions as pliant instruments or subcontractors, arguing that institutions, if they are to have an explanatory role, have to be conceptualized as complex social environments that are emergent from, but irreducible to, the ways they have been designed or contracted for.

My dissertation both complements and challenges existing research on different counts. On the one hand it echoes calls to reformulate the theoretical basis for institutional effects as a necessary task. On the other hand, it develops a defensible and original alternative to functional and contractual conceptions of institutions. The result is that my research takes into proper consideration the role of state power and interests in institutional design, while defending the view that institutions are causally consequential in world politics.