

BOOK REVIEW

Jens Steffek, *International Organizations as Technocratic Utopia*, Oxford University Press, 2021, ISBN 9780192845573, 256pp, \$100
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For a long time, international legal thought on international organizations has notoriously received little attention.¹ In the last few years, however, we have seen a renewed interest, partly in response to Jan Klabbers' arguments on functionalism as the mainstream (but *passé*) theoretical foundation of international organizations,² and partly following the heightened interest in the history of international law.³

Jens Steffek's book offers a fascinating analysis of the intellectual history of international organizations that offers many relevant insights to our discipline. His stated goal is to complement the constructivist scholarship of international relations (IR) that explains *how* international organizations can be influential actors in the international sphere. He does so by tackling the question of *why* they do so – that is, 'how it happened that people came to believe in the virtues of global bureaucracies in the first place'.⁴

The 'heuristic tool' that Steffek introduces to carry out his investigation is the concept of 'technocratic internationalism'.⁵ This is defined as a 'loose tradition of thought'⁶ that combines a belief in 'cooperation across borders and expert rule'.⁷ This definition is left intentionally broad so as to encompass different ways of thinking about expert global governance. Only at the end of the book does Steffek make a brief classification of what he sees as the four main 'varieties' of technocratic internationalism: intergovernmental institutions (a 'classic' functional international organization), trans-governmental institution (the example being 'allied wartime executives'), supranational institutions (obviously never realized at the global level, but with the closest

¹J. Klabbers, 'The EJIL Foreword: The Transformation of International Organizations Law', (2015) 26 *European Journal of International Law* 9, at 19.

²J. Klabbers, 'The Emergence of Functionalism in International Institutional Law: Colonial Inspirations', (2014) 25 *European Journal of International Law* 645; Klabbers, *supra* note 1; A. Nollkaemper, 'Saving the Scarecrow', (2015) 26 *European Journal of International Law* 957; L. Boisson de Chazournes, 'Functionalism! Functionalism! Do I Look Like Functionalism?', (2015) 26 *European Journal of International Law* 951; G. F. Sinclair, 'The Original Sin (and Salvation) of Functionalism', (2015) 26 *European Journal of International Law* 965; J. Klabbers, 'The Transformation of International Organizations Law: A Rejoinder', (2015) 26 *European Journal of International Law* 975; J. Klabbers and G. F. Sinclair, 'On Theorizing International Organizations Law: Editors' Introduction', (2020) 31 *European Journal of International Law* 489.

³A. Peters and S. Peter, 'International organizations: between technocracy and democracy', *The Oxford Handbook of the History of International Law* (2012); G. F. Sinclair, *To Reform the World: International Organizations and the Making of Modern States* (2017); G. F. Sinclair, 'Towards a Postcolonial Genealogy of International Organizations Law', (2018) 31 *Leiden Journal of International Law* 841.

⁴J. Steffek, *International Organizations as Technocratic Utopia* (2021), 8.

⁵*Ibid.*, at 15.

⁶*Ibid.*, at 12.

⁷*Ibid.*, at 16.

example being the European Commission), and inter-sectoral co-operation (which includes private actors, like the Codex Alimentarius Commission).⁸

Chapter 1 explores the origin of technocratic internationalism. Steffek relies on Max Weber's theories of rationalization and bureaucratization of modern societies to explain that the appeal of expert rule is wired in our modern thinking. Modern societies need expertise because they are built on rationalization, organization, and efficiency. Predictably, there is disagreement on the extent and way that experts should participate in governance. However, at the core, Steffek's argument seems to be that expertise is a fundamental element of modern societies, and that for this reason it was somewhat natural that anyone who tried to think how to best organize international governance would also believe that expertise ought to be central.

The six central chapters illustrate the evolution of technocratic internationalism from the early 1800s to modern days. Here, Steffek analyses the works of some well-known and less-known authors, while showing in the background how their thinking was shaped by historical events. The authors are divided into four main periods: pioneering (1815–1914), utopian (1914–1930s), paradigmatic (1940s–1960s), disintegration (from the 1970s).⁹ The account starts in Chapter 2, with the creation of the first international organizations. The first organization, a 'public union', was a technical body with a narrow scope (the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, established by the Congress of Vienna). However, some of the other organizations established in the second half of the nineteenth century resemble more closely modern international organizations, and are still active today (the International Telegraph Unit and the General Postal Union). The establishment of these organizations was accompanied by the first functionalist arguments: transnational problems need transnational solutions. It is around this time that some international lawyers (including Paul Reinsch, a founder of modern IR) started putting forward proposals to create more international bodies where experts would manage transnational problems.

Chapters 3 and 4 proceed to analyse the inter-war utopian proposals of an organized international community of expert rule. Steffek remarks that the consolidation of technocratic ideas and functionalism was made possible at this time by the expansion of state bureaucracies, most notably with the American New Deal. Perhaps the most captivating aspect of this analysis is the fact that Steffek shows how, at this more than at any other point in time, technocratic internationalism was a common element of the thinking of a vast array of authors with different ideological backgrounds. This included right- and left-wing liberals (including but not limited to the early work of David Mitrany, a classical IR author), an Italian fascist (Giuseppe De Michelis), and a French syndicalist (Francis Delaisi).

The establishment and the early days of modern international organizations are covered in Chapters 5 and 6. The central claim of Chapter 5 is that, despite all the disillusionment brought by the Second World War, elements of technocratic internationalism survived in many IR thinkers of the 1940s – including in authors not traditionally associated with it, like the realist Hans Morgenthau. This thinking was consolidated in the 1950s and 1960s, the 'heyday of technocratic [international organizations]'.¹⁰ The most prominent thinker of the time is Ernst B. Haas, known as the founder of neo-functionalism. However, Steffek shows that technocratic internationalism also animated officials of international organizations, who worked to stress the de-politicized nature of international organizations, and to strengthen their welfare and development programs.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the critique of international organizations in IR, starting with a focus on Robert Cox, Richard Ashley, and Tom Weiss. Steffek shows that the foundations of contemporary criticism of international organizations were laid in the 1970s, as part of the broader social changes

⁸*Ibid.*, at 183–5.

⁹*Ibid.*, at 180–3.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, at 11.

of that decade. In this respect, it also highlights that, intellectually, the criticism against international organizations is as a-ideological as the early functionalist arguments: it can come both from the left and the right.

The final chapter summarizes the main findings and presents a critique of technocratic internationalism. Developing the arguments made by Klabbers with respect to functionalism,¹¹ Steffek develops an argument made earlier in the book to argue that all technocratic internationalism ‘has features of an ideology’ because it does not really question the belief that ‘political problems of transnational scope need transnational solutions, and that [international organizations] with in-house expertise are required to deliver them’.¹² In making this argument, Steffek seems to provide a markedly technocratic nuance to Klabbers’ story of functionalism. Both technocratic internationalism and functionalism, in fact, are conceived as loose traditions of thought (‘a broad church’, in Klabbers’ words)¹³ and are described as prominent and long-lasting in the intellectual history of international organizations. As Klabbers himself stated, the technocratic angle is another possible way to narrate the story on functionalism; simply, it is one that he has chosen not to pursue.¹⁴

The technocratic character of international organizations is not a new topic in international law scholarship. It is present in Klabbers’ earlier work,¹⁵ as well as in other prominent studies on international organizations.¹⁶ This scholarship has advanced an interesting argument that does not find echo in Steffek’s work: that, from very early on, the technocratic character was used to defend international organizations against those fearing that these new institutions would impinge sovereignty.¹⁷ Thus, in this view, rather than being the fruit of the *zeitgeist* (as Steffek submits), the technocratic character of international organizations would have been used instrumentally to strengthen international co-operation.

Whatever its origins, it is clear that now the emperor’s new clothes have been exposed. As Steffek remarks in Chapter 7, international organizations have been constantly under attack from all sides of the political spectrum for decades. In the last pages, Steffek describes the current backlash against international organizations as part of the ‘fundamental tension of modern political life’ between democratic ideals and the need for expertise.¹⁸ In taking this stance, Steffek seems to believe that the problem with technocratic internationalism is with the ‘technocratic’ part of it. It is unlucky that he does not develop further his view on current events. Although he expresses an essential concern, I believe that the discussion on the backlash against international organizations (even if only against their technocratic aspects) should be understood in the context of other competing trends. The tension that the backlash reveals is not only between democracy and technocracy, but also between state-centred bureaucracies and transnational networks of experts. Moreover, it is not necessarily a tension against expertise *per se*, but against Western and neoliberal forms of expertise. Steffek acknowledges many of these tensions in the course of the book, but does not use them to draw general conclusions about the current backlash against international organizations.

¹¹*Ibid.*, at 48–9; Klabbers, *supra* note 2.

¹²Steffek, *ibid.*, at 185.

¹³Klabbers, *supra* note 2, at 976.

¹⁴Klabbers, *supra* note 1, at 12.

¹⁵J. Klabbers, ‘Two Concepts of International Organization’, (2005) 2 *International Organizations Law Review* 277, at 279–80; J. Klabbers, ‘The Normative Gap in International Organizations Law: The Case of the World Health Organization’, (2019) 16 *International Organizations Law Review* 272.

¹⁶R. Howse, ‘From Politics to Technocracy - and Back Again: The Fate of the Multilateral Trading Regime Symposium: The Boundaries of the WTO’, (2002) 96 *American Journal of International Law* 94; Peters, *supra* note 3; J. E. Alvarez, *The Impact of International Organizations on International Law* (2016), at 190–261.


¹⁷Peters, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸Steffek, *supra* note 4, at 193.

Steffek's book should be praised for many aspects, starting from the originality and depth of his analysis. In a moment when the legitimacy of international organizations is very much in doubt, Steffek took on an ambitious project to understand why we ever thought (and some of us still think) that expertise-laden international organizations could help us address political problems. His style of writing needs also to be praised. Steffek offers a marvelous example of clarity in writing, complemented by a masterful use of signposting – also known as the art of making the reader understand what you will talk about before talking about it.

At the core, Steffek's book is essentially an IR book. Although his analysis is complemented by knowledgeable historical remarks and a look at current events, the book remains focused on the history of ideas. However, the ambitions of the book are broader: 'contribute to a better understanding of international governance' and 'overcome the disciplinary isolation of IR and foster dialogue with neighbouring disciplines', including law.¹⁹ Therefore, what can lawyers learn from this book about the history of international organizations and the current backlash? I believe that Steffek's book represents a fantastic resource to think about the backlash against international organizations (and particular against its technocratic elements) in a historical perspective: not as something that is simply driven by current political events, but as a deeper historical trend that has revealed some of the structural weaknesses of the very idea and design of international organizations.

As for any book, there are always some themes or issues that a reader wishes were devoted more space. Personally, after finishing the book I was left wondering to what extent the establishment of the League of the Nations and the United Nations (UN) were influenced by the ideas analysed by Steffek. Some of the authors covered in the book were diplomats or international organization officials, so it is understood that their thinking would have influenced their work. However, what is missing is an analysis of the extent to which technocratic elements were present in the discussions and negotiations leading to the establishment of the organizations. This could be particularly interesting as one would expect to see different approaches taken, for example, in the negotiations of the UN and of its specialized agencies. These observations perhaps reflect my own training as a lawyer, and could be seen as ways in which our own discipline could bring forward Steffek's brilliant project.

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¹⁹*Ibid.*, at 14.

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