

The NGO Challenge for IR Theory

Workshop Chair: Dennis Dijkzeul, Ruhr University, Bochum

Location: Belasco

Time: 8 AM - 6 PM, Feb. 14, 2009

Workshop Summary:

The renewed interest in NGOs during the 1990s only accelerated in the 2000s, as NGOs continued to proliferate in issues, numbers, and regions of the world, and their impact became impossible to ignore. Anticipating the future, NGOs are likely to remain significant and intriguing actors in world politics. However, we—IR scholars interested in NGOs—have not yet learned from the past, when scholars failed to generate a theoretically informed research agenda on NGOs. Many IR scholars return from field research on NGOs to discover that the main lines of IR theory cannot explain, or even discern, much of what they have seen. This is a growing problem, particularly among young scholars entering the field. In spite of efforts to bridge the gap, there still exists an embarrassing dearth of studies that are both empirically rich, and also theoretically engaged with the central debates of IR theory. The proposed workshop will bring together twelve scholars, each combining theoretical facility and extensive knowledge of real NGOs. Our aim is no grand theoretical synthesis. Instead, we intend to convene a more serious intellectual conversation that clarifies the questions, and sharpens the debate, on the NGO challenge for IR theory. We are convinced that the empirical challenge of NGOs is —for IR theoryll in the sense that the discipline itself will be broadened to encompass much more of the reality of world politics. There is an unfortunate imperative in IR scholarship to pose misleading theoretical dichotomies (or trichotomies) between realism, liberalism, and constructivism, as if a particular empirical case could verify only one of them. Our experience of NGO field research suggests, instead, that the theoretical and empirical challenge comes to this: How does a particular organization or network simultaneously institutionalize a) interstate cooperation and normative compliance, b) conflict and asymmetric power relations, and c) reshaping actors’ ideas and material structures? We find international organizations and institutions politically interesting precisely because they often do two-out-of-three (or all three) things at once. In this ISA workshop (and round table), participants will bring to the table cases and experiences that raise significant theoretical problems touching on any of the following themes: 1) ACTORS: Without demanding that participants agree on a common definition, what light can the range of definitions of NGOs shed on their distinctiveness as actors, or similarities to other actors, in world politics? If networks are created by, or closely linked to, NGOs, what are networks, and can they be understood as collective actors? What other kinds of actors do NGOs partner with or influence, and how do they do so? 2) NORMS: Norms are essential to the self-understanding and public claims of all NGOs, but in what sense do NGOs really create, implement, or enforce norms? Where are the norms that NGOs carry and promulgate actually located? Where do they reside? To claim that norms are —institutionalizedll in fluid, protean and internally conflictive networks is to claim what in comparison with other forms of institutionalization? What conceptions of institutions are implicit or explicit in our understanding and experience of NGOs? 3) POWER: How do NGOs claim to exercise, and actually exercise, what forms of power? How consistent or variable is NGO power? How, and in what respects, can NGOs be instrumentalized by other actors, or act as agents and initiators themselves? 4) CONSTRUCTION & CONSTITUTION: Who or what makes (constitutes) NGOs? Are NGOs socially constructed, and if so, how? How have NGOs shaped more powerful actors including states, multinational corporations, and IGOs? Is there something bigger than states—an international community, a transatlantic alliance, a UN System, a global civil society, or an American Empire—and what role do NGOs play in its —constitutionll? Cutting across these substantive themes is a common focus on theory, not only to diagnose how and why realism, liberalism and constructivism in their conventional expressions have often missed essential aspects of NGO reality, but also to explore and compare how theoretical innovations or borrowings might transcend those blind spots. How do recent innovations in theories of intergovernmental organizations apply to NGOs, or not? How are NGOs conceptualized in relation to, and in comparison with, IGOs in recent IGO theory? The envisioned product of our workshop will be an edited volume, titled *The NGO Challenge For International Theory*, expected to be published in 2011, edited by William E. DeMars, Dennis Dijkzeul and Aart Holtslag.

Workshop Participants:

- Dennis Dijkzeul, Ruhr University
- William De Mars, Wofford College
- Aart Holstag, University Massachusetts, Lowell
- Morten S. Andersen, London School of Economics
- Cristina Balboa, Yale University
- Elizabeth Bloodgood, Concordia University
- Shareen Hertel, University of Connecticut
- Patrice McMahon, University of Nebraska Lincoln
- Karen Mingst, University of Kentucky
- James Muldoon, Rutgers University
- Anna Ohanyan, Stonehill College
- Bertjan Verbeek, Universiteit Nijmegen

ISA Workshop Observer Registration has closed.