Looking for Utopia: Experts and Global Governance

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has given an old question new traction: what exactly is the meaning of appeals to expert authority in politics? Though basing political decisions on the best available scientific and technical knowledge may be a plain task on the surface, and calls for 'listening to science' regularly maintain this perception, the relationship between expertise and politics is complicated. Given the particular centrality of expertise to global governance practices and institutions, what would an international political theory of expertise look like? Two recent volumes on the subject offer highly original answers to this question. Read alongside each other, Lucile Maertens and Marieke Louis' *Why International Organizations Hate Politics* and Jens Steffek's *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* bring to the fore the technocratic legacies and depoliticising tendencies of global governance. In this review essay, I first discuss the historical emergence of technocratically-inspired international organisations as portrayed by Jens Steffek, and then turn to Lucile Maertens' and Marieke Louis' practitioner-centred account of how depoliticisation works and is best understood analytically. I then offer a comparative discussion and propose that, with the help of both books, we can picture global governance as driven by a search for utopia.

Keywords

expertise, global governance, international organisations, technocracy

The coronavirus pandemic has given an old question new traction: what exactly is the meaning of appeals to expert authority in politics? Though basing political decisions on the best available scientific and technical knowledge may be a plain task on the surface, and calls for 'listening to science' regularly maintain this perception, the relationship between expertise and politics is fraught with complications: how do political actors

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identify, select and involve experts? How can individual experts speak on behalf of a field characterised by disagreement and constant flux? How and by whom do expert recommendations get translated into policy? What are the effects of expert priorities on political deliberation?

These questions cut right to the heart of the subject matter of politics. From Plato's (2007) philosopher-kings to Arendt's (1972) problem-solvers, from calls for more expertise and less democracy (Brennan, 2016) to proposals for democratised expert involvement (Pamuk, 2022), nothing less appears to be at stake than the nature of political authority as such (Fischer, 2009). Much of this work is about democracies, but can we apply the same arguments to international relations (IR)? Expert involvement is not least particularly extensive in global governance: intergovernmental and non-governmental international organisations routinely rely on the competence and specialist knowledge of epistemic communities that collaborate to address pressing but technical challenges, from labour standards to climate action, public health measures to development aid.

So what would an international political theory of expertise look like? Two recent volumes on the subject offer highly original answers to this question. Read alongside each other, Lucile Maertens and Marieke Louis' *Why International Organizations Hate Politics* and Jens Steffek's *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* bring to the fore the technocratic legacies and depoliticising tendencies of global governance. They do so in complementary ways. Though entering the debate from different angles – theories of international organisation and intellectual history, respectively – both take considerable care to speak to IR more generally. Both volumes share serious reservations about what they see as a core commitment of international organisations: functionalism. Understood as an ideological orientation, functionalism receives harsh blows from all three scholars. They nevertheless take it seriously as not merely a descriptive conception of how international cooperation works, but as a genuine defence of value-free, expert-driven global governance.

In this review essay, I first discuss the historical emergence of technocratically-inspired international organisations as portrayed by Jens Steffek, and then turn to Lucile Maertens' and Marieke Louis' practitioner-centred account of how depoliticisation works and is best understood analytically. I then offer a comparative discussion and propose that, with the help of both books, we can picture global governance as driven by a search for utopia.

Technocratic visions of world order

Scholars working at the intersection of History and IR have done substantial work to bring to light the modern intellectual developments and practical projects that historically drove an 'objective internationalism' (Sluga, 2013: 12–13) and a new 'confidence in the capacity of experts to harmonize across national borders' (Mazower, 2012: 192). Steffek's (2021) history of the idea that 'international relations should be managed by experts, bureaucrats, and lawyers, rather than by politicians or diplomats' (p. 1) should be read in relation to this rapidly developing scholarship. The confidence in the capacity of experts, it is argued, was fully inscribed into the development of modern global governance once experts became 'the central figures at the

international conferences' of the nineteenth century's closing decades (Murphy, 1994: 63). What path led to the centrality of experts as the global governance actors they are today? Steffek's answer is, the path of 'technocratic internationalism' (see Schot and Kaiser, 2016).

What stands out across the various instantiations of this loose tradition of thought and practice is a promise 'to transform violent and unpredictable international *politics* into rational, orderly, and competent public *administration*' (Steffek, 2021: 1, emphasis original). This promise has exerted lasting influence on the creation of the League of Nations, the United Nations system of agencies and the European integration project. Steffek divides this ambitious history into four phases: a pioneering phase from the Congress of Vienna to the First World War; a utopian phase in the interwar period; a paradigmatic phase from the 1940s to the 1960s; and a disintegrating phase from the 1970s to the present.

Steffek's narrative takes his readers from the early-nineteenth century technocratic blueprints of Henri de Saint-Simon and John Stuart Mill to the early-twentieth century proposals of the likes of Paul Otlet, Paul Reinsch and J. A. Hobson. Though self-consciously Eurocentric, Steffek's account does document how technocratic internationalists used the imperial periphery as laboratory to develop their practices, and how the legacies of this experience lived on intellectually and institutionally. From the British East India Company to the Suez Canal, such formally or informally imperial experiments with technocracy were numerous. They all left an impact on the path to institutionalised global governance, gradually taking shape through international commissions, international conferences, and the so-called 'public unions' regulating transnational industry – throughout with a clear and expanding mandate for expert involvement (see Murphy, 1994).

A remarkable chapter on the interwar period will be of particular interest to ongoing debates about the history of IR as a discipline. Steffek shows how the crystallisation of expert-based forms of global governance, at this point in time, took the shape of a response to the triple helix of the First World War, the Great Depression and the expansion of the welfare state. At the intersection of these overlapping shifts lay a perceived need for technical and scientific specialists to step in and, rather than advance one ideological project over another, solve technical problems. Expertise could be understood as the necessary underpinning, as it were, of third-way politics *avant la lettre*. In the minds of international theorists, and at the hands of international bureaucrats, this often took the form of a longing for a utopia of global governance built and carried out by technical experts. In this spirit, Steffek (2021) tells us, internationalists began to build institutions such as the 1917 Allied Maritime Transport Council, created to address diminished shipping capacities faced by Western nations in the aftermath of German submarine warfare (p. 65). Though disbanded quickly, this experiment with technocratic institutional design lived on in the memory of its creators, among which influential IO architects Arthur Salter and Jean Monnet.

There have always been, Steffek stresses throughout, considerable variations within the big tent of technocratic internationalism. Adherents and promoters could be very far apart from one another on the political spectrum, and though their practical proposals professed immunity from politics, there were liberals, conservatives, socialists and

fascists among them. *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* documents them all, with a separate chapter dedicated to authoritarian technocrats. Giuseppe de Michelis, a diplomatic representative of fascist Italy in Geneva, projected 'Italian corporativism to the international level', envisaging 'a global scheme to allocate capital, labour and raw materials, with a united 'Eurafrica' as avant-garde'. Syndicalist and later Nazi sympathiser Francis Delaisi is another authoritarian exponent of technocratic internationalism, having authored the 'Delaisi plan', a strikingly Saint-Simonian scheme for 'transnational public works intended to unite the European continent' (Steffek, 2021: 85, 86).

Finally Steffek connects the dots up to the postwar period, in which a reinvented League of Nations was hoped to forge a 'global New Deal'. He argues that the creation of the United Nations' expert-driven agencies projected experiences under the Roosevelt administration 'with the technocratic agencies of the New Deal onto an international level' (Steffek, 2021: 129). Against this background, an interesting intellectual shift unfolded. While experiments with new forms of global governance were in full swing, the dominant intellectual edifice of technocratic internationalism, David Mitrany's IR functionalism, received an update of sorts. A young Ernst Haas attacked Mitrany's work as 'reformist ideology' and criticised functionalists' belief in the automatic proliferation of institutions. 'Tasks do not take care of themselves', Haas famously proclaimed, and 'form does not automatically follow function' (cited at Steffek, 2021: 137). In the place of this tacit liberal teleology, Steffek (2021) argues, 'neo-functionalists abandoned Mitrany's teleological reasoning, his cosmopolitanism, and his ideal of political devolution' (p. 139).

Post-war institutions such as the FAO, the ILO or the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) all played with this newly depoliticised premise. International integration could accordingly be a response to objective forces of technical necessity – what CEC founding president Walter Hallstein called *Sachlogik*. This is the tenor of Steffek's *longue durée* narrative, which comes as a rich source for further discussion. If its triumph was in part a projection of Western domestic experiences onto the international level, was technocratic internationalism a project that designed global governance after the image of Europe? If its successes have depended on the imperial conveniences of a laboratory in the periphery, is technocratic internationalism, in its final instance, the embellished twin of Western supremacy and hubris? Did expert governance arise out of a pact of convenience between internationalism and imperialism?

Not a small feat for a work of history, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* has its fingers on the pulse of our time. This stands out where the author reminds his readers of an intimate connection between 'anti-intellectualism and anti-internationalism': whether from populist, isolationist, or anti-globalisation points of view, international institutions are typically contested through critiques of expert rule. However valid or not one thinks these critiques are, from EU to IMF and World Bank to World Health Organisation, IOs are experiencing a crisis of popular legitimacy. Steffek's book shows that the fragile foundations of their international authority date back to the intellectual architecture of international organisations. So how do these foundations inform IO practices today?

The work of international anti-politics

Depoliticisation, the deprivation of 'an element' of its 'political character' with the goal of denying or concealing 'contingency, choice and deliberation' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 12, 13), has a firm place among theories of international organisations and global governance in IR (Allan, 2018; Kennedy, 2016; Petiteville, 2018; Sending, 2015; Stone, 2017). Barnett and Finnemore's classic *Rules for the World* addresses the 'myths of impartiality or value-neutral technocracy' that inform the desire of IO staff to be 'perceived as apolitical technocrats'. They suggest that IOs try to take a 'neutral stance' to 'maintain the claim that they are impartial and are acting in a depoliticized manner' (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 21).

How exactly this plays out, and what precisely a 'depoliticised manner' looks like, has remained under-theorised. In *Why International Organizations Hate Politics*, Lucile Maertens and Marieke Louis fill this gap persuasively. Starting, much like Steffek, from the premise that functionalism should be understood not just 'as a theory of IOs but as a logic sustaining [the] IO tendency to claim their apolitical character', they argue that IOs in fact have a deep-seated aversion to politics (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 7). As they depoliticise issues through a broad repertoire of practices, they structurally antagonise the political sphere of contestation and disagreement. This does not imply a strategy to conceal what the realist reader might say goes on behind closed doors – depoliticisation 'can be both', 'essentially strategic or unintentional' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 12).

Examples of the dynamic abound: from the IMF dressing up the Washington Consensus as impartial, to the ILO's self-perception as non-partisan regulators, to the EU's technocratic outsourcing of border control. Annabelle Littoz-Monnet's recent work in this context has shown how UNESCO was able to expand its mandate and attain action capabilities by mobilising external experts as agents that can endow other actors with epistemic authority regardless of the latter's own epistemic credentials (Littoz-Monnet, 2017; see Littoz-Monnet, 2020).

So what, then, does depoliticisation *do* – and why do IOs love it? Maertens and Louis argue that IOs bring expertise into play by 'emphasizing the technical dimension of an object', a process they call technicisation. This 'fixes the issue in a context of administrative regulation' and so prevents it from being placed in or captured by the realm of politics (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 10). Technicisation, in other words, relies on domain ascription: as soon as a governance object or issue is labelled as belonging to the domain of technicalities rather than the domain of politics, it becomes governable on the particular terms, by the particular means, and following the particular principles of that domain. The technical domain can be preferable not least because, as others have pointed out, 'unlike theological, metaphysical, moral and even economic questions – that are forever debatable – purely technical problems have something refreshingly factual and neutral about them' (Flinders and Wood, 2014: 142). Of course this caricatures 'technical problems': hardly anyone would disagree that scientific knowledge is subject to constant revision and refutation. But as Maertens and Louis amply illustrate, this caricature is precisely part of what makes depoliticisation powerful.

Why International Organizations Hate Politics starts by articulating an analytically concise and helpful framework that distinguishes between three sets of practices and three logics of depoliticisation: practices relating to experts, formats and time; and logics that are either 'functional-pragmatic', 'legitimacy-oriented' or 'responsibility-oriented' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 13–14). IO depoliticisation, the volume emphasises with the help of this framework, may appear as a mere matter of improving functional efficiency, much like in any other bureaucracy. But as anti-political institutions, IOs often silence 'the political, economic, social and cultural complexity of the problems at stake' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 17). In practice this means that IOs use depoliticisation variously to 'expand their mandate', 'challenge responsibility attribution', 'conceal structural and political causes of pressing world problems' or 'shy away from their responsibilities' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 185). Maertens and Louis show not only how deeply engrained depoliticisation is as a feature of standard IO practices, but also how it routinely allows IO policies and interventions – from delivering technical assistance to meeting quantified targets – to appear neutral or natural. International anti-politics, in a nutshell, continually obscures its own making: the contestation, negotiation and haggling at the heart of all policy-making.

IOs can produce their own expertise by hiring technical specialists and so professing organisational expert status. The World Bank, for example, does this by developing large-scale datasets that are then deployed as a tool by other governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental agencies and institutions. UNDP publishes annual reports on human development; UNEP does this in the case of the environment. But in addition to producing and offering their expertise, IOs can also 'go beyond their mandate by claiming this in-house expertise to justify their role within the international system and gain in autonomy'. Maertens and Louis point to UNEP as an example, which in 1999 justified its first-ever post-conflict field mission in the Balkans precisely by 'highlighting its technical functions and expert knowledge on environmental assessments' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 29–30).

Another way in which expertise plays into everyday IO practices is the expert status that staff members can obtain almost automatically: someone can become an expert based on their professional experience working in the ecosystem of an issue-specific IO. Often the distinction between a substantive technical expert and this latter type gets blurred, changing the threshold for status ascription. Finally, IOs can also simply recruit external experts. Since the 1980s, the authors note, there has been a steady growth in proportion of budget expenditures by UN agencies on external consultants, defying several UNGA resolutions expressing discontent about a 'tendency towards excessive use of consultants' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 32).

From a rich and detailed range of case studies, Maertens and Louis extrapolate several ways in which IOs position themselves against politics: they can claim expert status, internally or externally; but they can also more generically provide 'technical interpretations of the world' that translate international problems into technicalities. An illuminating example is the case of the EU/IMF adjustment programme in Greece, whose coordinating Task Force in 2011 focussed on transparency as ultimate goal. This focus allowed it, Maertens and Louis (2021) argue, to 'circumvent representative democracy by privileging the rationalization of public policies', effectively negating politics by

aiming for efficiency rather than collective debate (p. 44). Despite posing as a neutral intermediary, the Task Force in fact actively worked to shape controversial public sector reforms in Greece.

The book is empirically rich but also methodologically innovative. In one section, for example, Maertens and Louis assess neutrality claims not by asking whether statements and policies are genuinely neutral, but instead by examining what Annelise Riles has called the 'character and aesthetics of information' (Riles, 2000: 2). This outlook leads them to analyse typical IO *formats* – factsheets, maps, training materials and databases – for their role in performing depoliticisation. On this basis, the authors show how IOs produce neutrality through their choice of specific types of information: they typically draw, for instance, 'general and simplified conclusions' and sell 'lessons learned' models based on a 'success story' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 57, 59). IOs can further furnish this claim by providing information in 'universal formats' that 'avoid partisan controversies' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 60–61) or by claiming universality as they disseminate information to global audiences on supposedly universally accessible platforms and rely on an idiom of universal values (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 66). This echoes Pouliot and Thérien's (2018) adaptation of Cox: 'universal values are always for someone and for some purpose.' (p. 56). IOs are subsequently able to circulate neutrality, and as a result displace agency on their audiences, by reversing ownership as they present their action as simply answering needs and demands and creating proximity (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 68, 70). Finally IOs advise from a position of neutrality as they disguise political recommendations as evidence-based policies and mix 'information and recommendation'; or convey 'best practices' as having no alternatives (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 73–75).

A chapter on the timing of depoliticisation makes a particularly original contribution that is sure to inspire further research. Interest in time and timing in international relations has recently grown (Hom, 2020). Maertens and Louis speak to this literature through a practice-theoretical lens. Timing, they argue, can itself turn into a depoliticising practice: 'delaying discussions, postponing decision-making or enlarging negotiations' timeframe[s] are commonly used by both IO member states and secretariats as depoliticization practices.' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 85). Political stakes are, in other words, diluted by multiplying commissions, committees and working groups which add to a fragmented negotiation process where the 'big picture' becomes 'scattered as a result of never-ending debates' – this is depoliticisation Kafka-style (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 85). This can be a deliberate strategy, but also the result of 'institutional and professional habits and path-dependency' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 87).

Timing can be a matter of delays or routines. In the case of delaying practices, 'depoliticization does not necessarily consist in creating a taboo or denying the legitimacy of a debate, but in making the discussions go on as long as possible' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 87). Maertens and Louis here point to how negotiations can become *institutionalised*, that is rendered permanent. Consider decades-old calls for reforming the ILO Governing Body, UN Security Council membership, or the IMF: by assigning a permanent committee tasked with the issue, the problem gets off the table by forever 'addressing' it. Negotiations can alternatively be *complexified* by adding more steps to procedure or by adding new issues and methods to the discussion (Maertens and Louis, 2021:

91–92). A third delaying practice is to *duplicate* entities and actors in charge, as in the case of ILO Governing Body reform negotiations in the 1960s, which took place simultaneously in two mutually distrusting committees (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 93–94). IO staff can also gain time by means of routinising: this can take the shape of recurring emergencies creating confusion 'about what political priority and emergency actually mean'; or institutional fatigue giving rise to a 'progressive decline of political willingness' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 96–97).

As a contribution to theories of international organisation, the book offers a fresh perspective. In line with IR's practice turn, the authors emphasise contestation and performance as key to the construction of IO expert status. But more surprisingly, they bring to light the easily underestimated role of timing in this: 'IO members and bureaucracies' can 'play on time to delay, dilute and routinize the political content of their action' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 17). Along with other depoliticisation practices examined, this can demobilise actors, deflect responsibility, or conceal political causes. Maertens and Louis offer a provocative conclusion: when we talk about the politics of expertise, we easily assume that expertise somehow stands apart from politics or that one is threatening the other. But the two are intertwined, and very visibly so in the global governance context: international organisations claim to be apolitical – but this claim can contribute to the original problem, when the 'apolitical claims' themselves provoke 'the politicization of . . . expertise' (Maertens and Louis, 2021: 189).

Conclusion

Today the technocratic-international complex is once more hotly contested: on one side are those with high hopes for a utopia in which autonomous knowledge brokers deliver hard facts that yield incontestable policy; on the other, an array of sceptics, cynics and reasonable objectors who share a principled if often vague reluctance to submit to the unelected (see Collins and Evans, 2017; Friedman, 2020; Pamuk, 2022). Impressive in their empirical detail and theoretical sophistication, but also in their agenda-setting potential, the books under review in this essay make this tension intelligible by exposing its intellectual legacies and navigating its practical logics. *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* and *Why International Organizations Hate Politics* share a concern with the utopian hope of functionalists that, in the end, global governance offers a way out of the contentious political struggles between nations. They both outline numerous technocratic and indeed antipolitical blueprints for good global governance, formulated and put forward by a range of thinkers across time, and a range of practitioners across today's various institutions.

Read in conjunction, these creative and thought-provoking volumes allow us to think of global governance as literal, quintessential utopia: where a premium is placed on escaping politics by means of involving experts, the ultimate result – intentional or not – is a loss from sight of human political agency. Global governance ends up happening from nowhere: from *ou topos*, no place. Technocratic institutional design, and depoliticisation as its built-in dominant logic of practice, then has a profoundly utopian effect: it turns nowhere into a real place from which global governance emanates. From this position, global governance simultaneously derives its strength – this is what makes the UN's blue helmets possible – and its weakness: claims to impartiality can variously appear as

a cloak behind which ulterior motives hide, or as an authoritarian shield that fends off popular contestation and accountability. This is one of the chief reasons global governance legitimacy is so fragile – as Steffek (2021) puts it, what makes expertise distinctive in international affairs is that the 'international machinery of expert government can be disrupted more easily' than 'most domestic equivalents' (p. 194).

Open questions remain, and though neither book fully answers them, to pose them is part of their achievement. First, there is a theme lying underneath both volumes that neither makes explicit: technocracy and depoliticisation, it seems to be implied, acquired their significance through the blueprints and projects of white, male Europeans. With the notable exception of Alva Myrdal (Steffek, 2021: 143–147), barely a female technocrat makes an appearance in either book. If this representation is accurate, what is the relationship between gender and the technocratic character of global governance? What about race? Both aspects merit further attention, with important consequences for how we understand and further conceptualise technocratic global governance. One way of continuing this line of inquiry would be to establish dialogue between work of the kind reviewed here and recent scholarship on women's international thought (Morefield, 2021; Owens and Rietzler, 2021; Owens et al., 2022), as well as proliferating work on empire, race and racism (Acharya, 2022; Anievas et al., 2015; Getachew, 2019).

Second, both books find technocracy to be compatible with the full spectrum of political persuasions – we come across technocratic fascists, technocratic socialists, technocratic liberals and so on (see Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2021). This implies a theoretical challenge: is technocracy itself politically agnostic after all? If so, is depoliticisation in fact a real achievement, rather than a logic that masks political commitments that are always there? Or is technocracy fundamentally, as many social and political theorists have insisted (Bauman, 1989; Foucault, 1978; Hayek, 1952; Marcuse, 1964), a form of authoritarianism?

Both *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* and *Why International Organizations Hate Politics* enrich the field with fascinating empirical material, conceptual innovations and intriguing arguments that will equip IR scholars with the tools to further investigate these important questions. Global governance as an invisible hand, we learn from both books, constitutes a productive expression of political authority that maintains historically privileged positions. To capture the meaning of global governance's technocratic utopia, and its ability to remove agency from sight, scholars will do well to focus on making the hand visible. A promising way of doing so is to follow the example of Steffek, Maertens and Louis and to zoom in on the thinkers and practitioners engaged, for better or for worse, in the anti-political project of global governance.

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