

Hanhimäki, Jussi M.: *The United Nations. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008. ISBN: 9780195304374; 184 S.

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The Oxford University Press' *Very Short Introductions* series aims to „combine authoritative analysis, new ideas, and enthusiasm to make often challenging topics highly readable“.

The United Nations is – without question – a challenging topic to tackle in some 150 pages. Jussi M. Hanhimäki's analysis achieves to cover, in a well-structured and easily readable manner, a range of central aspects that help with the understanding of the trajectory of this „impossible hybrid“ (chapter 2) But, while the author certainly manages to provide the unfamiliar reader with a useful introduction to the topic – by identifying the UN's greatest challenge as being a structural imperfection that manifests itself in „an impossibly wide gap between its ambitions and capacities“ (p. 3) – the question whether Hanhimäki's book is just a *very short* or also a *good introduction* to the topic remains.

Jussi M. Hanhimäki has obtained a Ph.D in American History from Boston University in 1993. He considers himself a „specialist in American foreign policy and the history of the Cold War“ with a focus on the transatlantic relationship after 1945. By profession and education a historian, Hanhimäki confidently maneuvers – without losing the leitmotif – through the 65+ years of the United Nations' operations.

The book is organized into seven chapters, in the course of which the author elaborates on topics as diverse as the UN's historical embeddedness and functions in the post-World War II period with a still prevalent nation-state (chapter 1 and throughout most of the book), the UN's Security Councils working process (chapter 3), efforts of peacekeeping and peace building (chapter 4), economic and human development (chapter 5) and the question of implementing universal human rights. The final chapter on reform and future challenges (chapter 7) captures the essence of his argument in two divergent poles.

On the one side stands the normative ar-

gument – Hanhimäki cites the UN's webpage, where it is proclaimed, that „one of the great achievements of the United Nations is the creation of a comprehensive body of human rights law, which, for the first time in history, provides us with a universal and internationally protected code of human rights [...].“ (p. 145) Even though, not fully implemented in daily practice, the existence and wide acknowledgement of this body of law should be seen as evidence that „the UN remains an indispensable part of the global community of the early twenty-first century“ and „millions of people around the globe would soon be worse off“ if it suddenly disappeared.

On the other side – and this is the historical argument – the problem of the UN is its structural deficits „as an organization founded at a specific historical moment when the nation-state still reigned supreme.“ The fact that the UN could in many cases not live up to its own expectations is made out in its „inherent tension between universalism and national prerogatives.“ (p. 146)

The reader gets a good idea as to how the devastating experience of World War II shaped the international community's hopes and goals for the future course of world affairs – giving birth to (though not for the first time) an international forum that proved functional enough to navigate humanity, through what Eric Hobsbawm once called the „Age of Extremes“, into the 21st century. But what might have been *the best hope of mankind* (chapter 1) in and after the summer of 1945 remained a „tool of nations“. The UN, Hanhimäki states, „developed structures and bureaucracies that in some ways are its own worst enemy.“ Approached from this perspective, the initial question of whether the UN succeeded in fulfilling the goals – the prevention of war, the protection of human rights, the establishment of a respected framework of international law, and the promotion of social progress and larger freedom – for which it was brought into existence, can be understood in somewhat more relative terms.

Of course the organization's design was and still remains flawed – the UN Security Council's capabilities to act in facing wars and confronting threats was structurally handicapped due to its composition. The war-

winning veto powers (the so called P-5) proved to be less amicable during the emergent Cold War period on how to specifically make the world better – or at least, more secure. Hanhimäki makes a valid point in describing the historical pressures that determined the development of the UN – in a continuing process of transformation the organization's bodies were extended and adapted, additional bodies founded, to cope with an ever changing inter_national_configuration (i.e. the post-colonial situation) and newly emerging issues (in an increasingly interconnected „globalized“ world – human development).

The author shows well the ambiguous nature of this process that did not always result in the most efficient solutions, as the „UN has a tendency not to reform but to build new structures on top of already existing ones“ (p. 147). In reaction to the enormous growth in activities and bodies, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan animated the creation of a High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence, in the center of whose 2006 report the concept of „Oneness“ was developed. The last pages of the book are dedicated to a short analysis of how the UN might develop in the future, picking up on the organization's internal awareness of its need to reform. The concept of „Oneness“ is an ambitious attempt to overcome the organizations current fragmentation in order to provide the world with a „coherent and strong multilateral framework.“ (p. 144) Hanhimäki remains skeptical as to whether the wealthier countries' will be more committed to provide the UN with a sufficient support base in the future, pointing to the fact that the fundamental dilemma persists – the divide between each nation-state's domestic affairs on the one hand ,and the their international entanglements on the other.

In conclusion, the book is a highly readable account that proves the authority of its author/ in the field. Particularly felicitous in my opinion is Hanhimäki's achievement to identify crucial cornerstones, around which he developed in synchronic and diachronic perspective a stringent argument. The book's strength lays not so much in introducing new ideas to the study of the UN (which might not have been the authors aim), but it is a valuable

enlargement of Oxford University Press' *Very Short Introduction* series. As a final remark: one might want to reconsider the validity of the succinct 1954 statement of former U.S. ambassador to the UN, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.: „This organization is created to prevent you from going to hell. It isn't created to take you to heaven.“ (p. 2)

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