

MacKenzie, David: *A World Beyond Borders. An Introduction to the History of International Organizations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2010. ISBN: 9781442601826; 205 S.

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A history of international organisations (IOs) entitled „A World Beyond Borders“ seems both, long due and promising. To be clear from the start: This is a helpful book that nevertheless bases rather on conventional narratives and thus will not truly satisfy historians aiming at a global history of international organisations.

Other authors tried to tackle the history of international organisations with the classic focus on the 19th and 20th century, most prominently Akira Iriye, Madeleine Herren and Bob Reinalda.<sup>1</sup> While Iriye delivers a general overview and the narrative of an evolving „global community“, Herren provides a very empirical introduction that is of utmost value to study IOs from a perspective of entangled history. Reinalda offers an encyclopaedic overview with enriching insights but does not present a new narrative of IOs. So what is MacKenzie's contribution in this context?

The book starts with an introduction to international organisations, covering the 19th century until the early 20th century, followed by chapter 2 that deals with the League of Nations. The third chapter tackles the interesting period during World War II. Chapter 4 analyses the United Nations in the „Cold War“ years. The next two chapters cover regional and other organisations (5) and „the world of international NGOs“ (6). The book concludes with the seventh chapter on the UN in the modern era, which deals with the United Nations' role after 1990. It seems obvious that the focus of this book lies on the 20th century as the period of international organisation until the League of Nations (established in 1919/20) is dealt with only in the introduction (11 pages). The implicit periodisation can be described as mainstream since it focuses on 1) everything before the League, 2) the League, 3) the UN until 1989, 4) the UN after 1989/90 and today.

In the first introductory part, MacKenzie

offers a definition of international organisations: „States created international organizations to do things that they could not do on their own or to prevent from happening things that were not in the state's interests. International intergovernmental organizations did not create themselves or exist on their own; they were designed, supported, and operated by the countries that created them“ (p. 1). This definition appears somehow normative and rather uncritical; furthermore it also only includes IGOs and NGOs and not other forms of international organisation such as epistemic communities and transnational networks, for instance. Later, the book provides another definition according to which IOs „...are cooperative ventures between, among others, governments, peoples, businesses, scientists, organized labour, and professionals; they are involved in virtually all aspects of human life from politics, culture, and business to the environment, human rights, and disarmament; and they are found almost everywhere; in the developed and the developing world among the rich and the poor, and across the political and ideological spectrum.“ And they can act, make a difference, change a state's, peoples' and institutions' behaviour (pp. 1/2). Here, by a reference to Barnett/Finnemore's constructivist interpretations of IOs as active bureaucracies<sup>2</sup>, MacKenzie turns from a functionalist explanation for the rise of IOs to a constructivist norm-generating role of IOs. Then he briefly mentions realist and liberal takes on IOs – without referring explicitly to these theories of international relations.

Despite mentioning the peculiarities of individual institutions, MacKenzie identifies some common features of IOs: 1) their actions relate to a purpose, although these goals can change; 2) IOs serve as an arena (ma-

<sup>1</sup> Akira Iriye, *Global Community. The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*, Berkeley 2002; Madeleine Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865. Eine Globalgeschichte der internationalen Ordnung*, Darmstadt 2009; Bob Reinalda, *Routledge History of International Organizations. From 1815 to the Present Day*, London/New York 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Barnett/Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World. Organizations in Global Politics*, Ithaca/London 2004.

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chinery for negotiations, norms of behaviour-generator), 3) IOs function as a clearing house for information. (p. 3) Although he provides quite differentiated views on the origins and nature of IOs, MacKenzie shows also a tendency to idealise these: „International organizations arose from the shared concerns and interests of governments and people’s interests that transcended national borders and the concerns of a single state“ (p. 3). This is again a rather functionalist and idealist vision of IOs that should be confronted with newer, critical interpretations.

For MacKenzie, the League of Nations, „...was to wear many hats: keeper of the Treaty, handmaiden of the great powers, provider of collective security, colonial overseer, social activist, and the voice of peace for humankind“ (p. 14). The author follows the narrative of a partially successful League in various areas (except collective security) and states that even in „failure“ sections like disarmament, economic affairs or minority rights, the League contributed to generate international norms, procedures and information that proved to be helpful for the UN (p. 28). The main problem of the League was that the „great powers“ did not full-heartedly support it and the US remained a non-member: „It was never a truly global organization; for most of its existence it resembled a Eurocentric collection of the victors of the First World War.“ (p. 29).

MacKenzie regards the UN as „...wholly new, but in many ways it was based on the example of the League“ (p. 53). The United Nations appeared more attractive to the „great powers“, which somehow guaranteed the relative stability of the organisation and contributed, in MacKenzie’s words, to its becoming a „truly global organization with a greater emphasis on social and economic issues and a much more diverse membership than ever found in the League“ (p. 54). The book acknowledges different perspectives on the UN and its institutions and policies: „From the hope for the future of humankind to the handmaiden of the Western imperial powers, from a bastion of collective security to an impotent debating society, the UN has meant different things to different people at different times“ (p. 140). While the UN failed in disarma-

ment, MacKenzie makes out some successes in banning nuclear weapons in areas where these were not existent yet (pp. 63, 64). In his view the United Nations was not a decisive player in the decolonisation process (p. 72) – an assessment that may be questioned. In the part on the UN development policy (pp. 73-76), the author rather draws a positive picture, which may also be contested: „The UN made a positive impact on development in the Cold War era, but there were limitations to its success“ (p. 76). He explains the „uneven but effective efforts“ of the UN as a result of the lack of money (p. 74). One may ask whether this and not the wrong programmes were the reasons for the mixed development record of the UN.

In the quite interesting chapter on regional organisations, MacKenzie presents an overview on the regional institutions in the western hemisphere (mostly the Organisation of American States), in Europe, Africa and Asia. Furthermore, the post-imperial organisation of the Commonwealth, the Francophonie, Ibero-Americanism and the community of Portuguese-speaking countries is mentioned. Although there is a hint at the thought that the Commonwealth would be better suited than the League of Nations to deal with world problems, a broader discussion on the relationship between empires and the emergence of international organisations would have been desirable.<sup>3</sup>

In the chapter on nongovernmental organisations, MacKenzie provides a categorisation on the views, which can be held towards NGOs with reference to Volker Heins: „...NGOs have been around long time, although there were not very many of them until the late nineteenth century. Some professional associations, women’s groups, intellectual societies, workers’ unions, charities, and religions, as well as organizations that worked to ban prostitution and the opium trade, could loosely be described as NGOs“ (pp. 110/111). Generally, the author offers a good overview on the changing role the increasing number of NGOs played.

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton 2009, particularly the first two chapters.

After a modest appraisal of the UN, MacKenzie turns again in his conclusions to the general role of international organisations: IOs facilitate spaces for debate, expose issues affecting millions, give aid, assistance and information: „International organizations focus attention on problems, offer potential solutions, and take action in places and areas ignored by others. And today, more than ever, global problems – in the environment, international trade and economic development, human rights, health, agriculture and food, criminal activity, and so on – will require global solutions, and international organizations will help to fill this void“ (p. 141).

In international relations' theory terms, MacKenzie displays realist, functionalist and idealist explanations but rather neglects more critical studies or global history analyses. Beyond that, unfortunately no true narrative is identifiable, no overall question. For example: Can we speak more of continuities or changes if we compare the 19th and the 20th century, the League and the UN, 20th century NGOs and public unions of the 19th century? Admittedly, it is indeed difficult to present an overarching narrative on a phenomenon of 150-200 years that has not been satisfactorily inquired by historians yet, but a provocative thesis (can we actually speak of a „global community“?) would have stimulated the debate.

While the lack of an innovative narrative (what I would have expected from the book's title) is rather common and thus excusable, it is rather surprising that this study does not specifically discuss the state of the art. MacKenzie rather referred to some major introductory works (Clive Archer, Margaret Karns/Karen Mingst, Thomas Weiss, Craig Murphy) but not to ongoing historical research endeavours, for example efforts to come to a new history of the League of Nations<sup>4</sup> or Madeleine Herren's global history introduction to IOs.

MacKenzie provides a nice reading, but too often refers to rather established narratives of IOs that do not always reflect the respective state of the art. In sum, it is an overview that can be used for introductory courses, but clearly suffers from a strong focus on the second half of the 20th century, a rather uncontested common periodisation and a narrative

that also remains too conventional as it is rather not based on newer historical research.

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<sup>4</sup>Historians from the universities in Geneva, Oxford, St. Gallen and Heidelberg launched a new approach to achieve a new history of the League of Nations. They organised a conference in Geneva on newer archive-based historical research on the League in August 2011.