

World Culture in the World Polity

A Century of International Non-Governmental Organization

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For a century and more, the world has constituted a singular polity. By this we mean that the world has been conceptualized as a unitary social system, increasingly integrated by networks of exchange, competition, and cooperation, such that actors have found it “natural” to view the whole world as their arena of action and discourse. Such a conceptualization reifies the world polity implicitly in the often unconscious adoption of this cultural frame by politicians, businesspeople, travelers, and activists, and explicitly in the discourse of intellectuals, policy analysts, and academicians.

Like all polities, the world polity is constituted by a distinct culture – a set of fundamental principles and models, mainly ontological and cognitive in character, defining the nature and purposes of social actors and action. Like all cultures, world culture becomes embedded in social organization, especially in organizations operating at the global level. Because most of these organizations are INGOs, we can identify fundamental principles of world culture by studying structures, purposes, and operations of INGOs. By studying INGOs across social sectors, we can make inferences about the structure of world culture. By studying the promotion of world-cultural principles that INGOs are centrally involved in developing, we can see how INGOs shape the frames that orient other actors, including states. [...]

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An Historical Overview of the INGO Population

Data

Since 1850 more than 25,000 private, not-for-profit organizations with an international focus have debuted on the world stage. They include the Pan American Association of Ophthalmology, International Exhibitions Bureau, Commission for the Geological Map of the World, International Catholic Child Bureau, International Tin Council, and Tug of War International Federation. Most are highly specialized, drawing members worldwide from a particular occupation, technical field, branch of knowledge, industry, hobby, or sport to promote and regulate their respective areas of concern. Only a few, such as the Scout Movement, International Olympic Committee, International Red Cross, and World Wildlife Fund, are widely known.

We analyze data on 5,983 organizations founded between 1875 and 1988. They constitute the entire population of INGOs classified as genuinely international bodies by the Union of International Associations (UIA) in its *Yearbook of International Organizations*. [...]

Data quality and coding issues

The UIA limits INGOs to not-for-profit, non-governmental organizations (TNCs and IGOs are excluded). They vary in size from a few dozen members from only three countries to millions of members from close to 200 countries. About half of the INGOs in our data base have members from at least 25 countries, 20 percent have members from 50 or more countries, and only 11 percent have members from fewer than eight countries. [...]

Basic historical patterns

Figure 42.1 presents the number of INGOs founded and dissolved in each year between 1875 and 1973. Not-for-profit international organizing grew rapidly in the latter part of the nineteenth century, with about 10 new organizations emerging each year during the 1890s. The population burgeoned after the turn of the century, reaching a peak of 51 foundings in 1910. The severe collapse after that point led to a low of four foundings in 1915. Swift recovery after World War I yielded a period of fairly steady growth followed by some decline during the 1930s that preceded another steep fall going into World War II.

Following the war, international organizing exploded. By 1947 over 90 organizations a year were being founded, a pace that was maintained and even surpassed through the 1960s. The pattern for dissolved INGOs is similar, indicating a generally steady proportion of INGOs that eventually dissolved, but revealing peaks of fragility among organizations founded just before each of the wars.

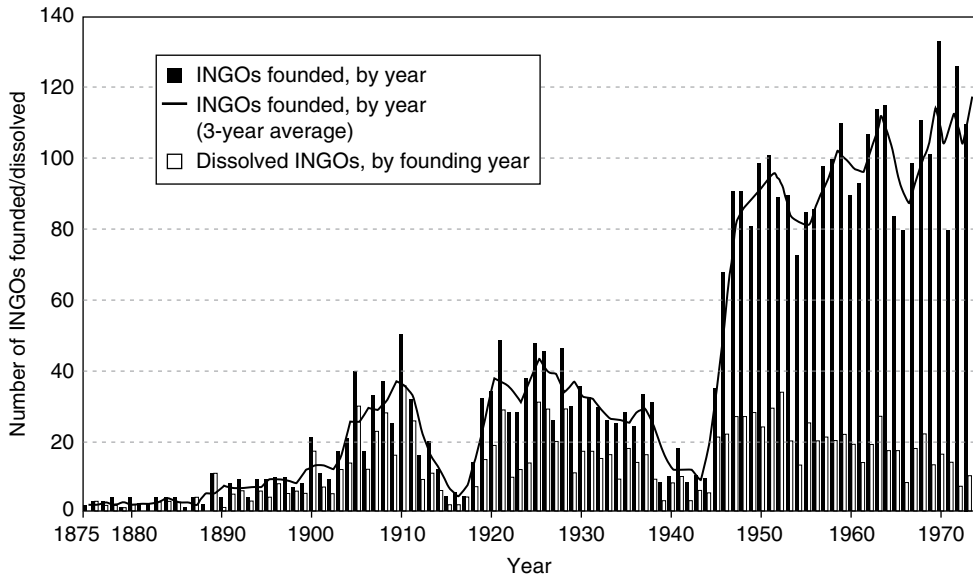


Figure 42.1 International non-governmental organizations: INGOs founded and founding dates of dissolved INGOs, 1875 to 1973.

Source: Yearbook of International Organizations (Brussels: Union of International Associations, 24th edn. 1984–5, 27th edn. 1988–9).

INGO foundings and dissolutions thus match the general “state of the world” rather well, rising in periods of expansion and declining rapidly in times of crisis, with the declines beginning shortly before the outbreaks of the world wars. [...]

World Development, INGOs, and Capitalist and Interstate Systems

Global organizing proceeds in mutually reinforcing tension with the expansion of the nation-state system. INGOs began to proliferate during the heyday of nationalism and European imperialism; bringing the last “unclaimed” regions of the globe into the world economy and under the jurisdiction of states made the notions of “one world” and “one history” structurally compelling.

This dialectic is further evident in the effects of the world wars. The precipitous decline in INGO foundings after 1910 reflects the dominance of states for most of that decade, but the war also strengthened the conception of the world as a single polity and prompted expanded INGO (and IGO) efforts to organize the world polity. After a similar cycle in the 1930s and 1940s, a much broader discursive space for INGOs opened up as global technical and infrastructural resources increased exponentially. World-polity organizing jumped to a higher level than ever before, just as the independent nation-state form was adopted by or imposed on the rest of the world.

The dialectic between world-polity and national-level organization is also evident in the relationship between IGOs and INGOs. Many IGOs were founded as INGOs and later co-opted by states, including such major bodies as the World Meteorological Organization, the International Labor Organization, and the World Tourism Organization. Moreover, INGOs have often been instrumental in founding new IGOs and shaping IGO activities. Thousands of INGOs have consultative status with agencies of the United Nations – over 900 with the Economic and Social Council alone – and most IGOs engage relevant INGOs as providers of information, expertise, and policy alternatives. IGO authority is not relinquished to INGOs, but IGO decisions are heavily influenced by INGO experts and lobbyists. [...]

INGOs as Enactors and Carriers of World Culture

Almost all INGOs originate and persist via voluntary action by individual actors. INGOs have explicit, rationalized goals. They operate under strong norms of open membership and democratic decision-making. They seek, in a general sense, to spread “progress” throughout the world: to encourage safer and more efficient technical systems, more powerful knowledge structures, better care of the body, friendly competition and fair play. To achieve their goals they emphasize communication, knowledge, consensual values and decision-making, and individual commitment. Following are five basic world-cultural principles that underlie INGO ideologies and structures: universalism, individualism, rational voluntaristic authority, human purposes of rationalizing progress, and world citizenship.

Universalism

Humans everywhere have similar needs and desires, can act in accordance with common principles of authority and action, and share common goals. In short, human nature, agency, and purpose are universal, and this universality underlies the many variations in social forms. Most INGOs are explicit about this – any interested person can become an active member, and everyone everywhere is a potential beneficiary of INGO activity.

Universalism is evident also in the breadth of INGOs’ claims about what they do. Physics and pharmacology are presumed to be valid everywhere. Techniques for playing better chess are not country-specific. Red Cross aid will alleviate suffering in Africa as well as Asia. Across every sector, the purposes and means of action promoted by INGOs are assumed to be useful and meaningful everywhere.

A world not characterized by universalism does not coalesce as a singular polity; rather, it develops distinct subworld polities (societies, civilizations, empires) across which joint mobilization is unlikely. At the opposite extreme, a world state would thoroughly incorporate and regulate individuals and organizations – universalism would prevail but it would be bureaucratically absorbed.

The present world polity lies between these two extremes. Neither segmental nor ad hoc, neither is it *étatisée*; legal-bureaucratic authority is partitioned among multiple states. The principle of universalism that INGOs embody remains culturally autonomous because INGOs operate in the interstices of this decentralized structure.

Individualism

Most INGOs accept as members only individuals or associations of individuals; the main exceptions are trade and industry bodies, which often have firms as members. Individualism is also evident in their structures: INGOs use democratic, one-person–one-vote decision-making procedures, they assess fees on members individually, and they downplay national and other corporate identities in their conferences and publications. In the world-view embodied by INGOs, individuals are the only “real” actors; collectivities are essentially assemblages of individuals.

The combination of universalism and individualism may undermine traditional collectivities like the family or clan, but it also strengthens the one truly universalistic collectivity – humanity as a whole. INGOs habitually invoke the common good of humanity as a goal. The cultural dynamic at work parallels that characterizing national polities: As cultural constructs, the individual and the nation reinforce one another. In recent times, this centuries-old dynamic has shifted to the global level.

Rational voluntaristic authority

INGOs activate a particular cultural model when they organize globally, debate principles and models, and attempt to influence other actors. This model holds that responsible individuals acting collectively through rational procedures can determine cultural rules that are just, equitable, and efficient, and that no external authority is required for their legitimation. Such “self-authorization” runs counter to Weber’s analysis of authority as forms of domination because INGOs cannot dominate in the conventional sense. INGOs have little sanctioning power, yet they act as if they were authorized in the strongest possible terms. They make rules and expect them to be followed; they plead their views with states or transnational corporations and express moral condemnation when their pleas go unheeded.

INGO authority is thus informal – cultural, not organizational. It is the agency presumed to inhere in rational individuals organizing for purposive action. Its basis can only be the diffuse principles of world culture, for INGO authority does not flow from any legal-bureaucratic or supernatural source.

Rational voluntarism is encouraged by the decentralized character of formal authority; at the world level, it is practiced by states and transnational corporations as well. For example, because sovereignty implies that no state has authority over any other, collective actions by states can occur only via rational voluntarism. This is why most IGOs, like INGOs, have resolutely democratic formal structures. It also helps explain why the legal-bureaucratic authority of states is brought into play to enforce INGO conceptions and rules.

Human purposes: Dialectics of rationalizing progress

The rational character of INGOs is evident in their purposive orientation, formalized structures, and attention to procedures. INGOs in science, medicine, technical fields, and infrastructure activities are engaged in purely rationalized and rationalizing activity; almost all other INGOs rely on science, expertise, and professionalization in their operations and programs. What INGOs seek is, in essence, rational progress – not the crude nineteenth-century idea that steam engines and railroads would lead to heaven on earth, but the more diffuse and embedded concept of “development” that now prevails. This concept includes not only economic growth but also individual self-actualization, collective security, and justice.

At all levels, progress is assumed to depend on rationalization. Rational social action is the route to equality, comfort, and the good life. Rational production and distribution achieve all sorts of collective purposes. The scientific method, technique, monetarization, logical analysis – these are the favored *modi operandi*. These instruments of progress may often be criticized, but they are built into worldwide institutions and the ideology of development.

Rationalization, however, has another face. A tension operates between the rational and the irrational that strengthens both. Disenchantment of the world via rationalization endows the agents of disenchantment with increasing substance and sacredness; the apparent failure of actors to behave entirely rationally leads to theorizing about actors’ irrational selves or cultures. Rationalized actors are thus culturally constituted as having complex “non-rational” subjectivities that are more primordial than objectified rationality. À la Nietzsche, the irrational becomes the arena of authenticity. Moreover, this face of rationalization launches widespread movements claiming to be anti-science, anti-Western, or postmodern: Western science, capitalism, and bureaucracy are imperialistic, dehumanizing forces against which authentic peoples must struggle to maintain their true, non-rational natures.

The rational/irrational tension thus generates conflict, but the irrational and subjective are continually channeled into rationalized activities and forms (e.g., revolution, UFO cults). Movements of self-exploration and expression, though rhetorically rejecting rationalism, also are rationalized (transcendental meditation becomes a test-improvement technique). Thus we find sports, leisure, spiritual, and psychological INGOs in abundance.

World citizenship

The principles discussed so far come together in the construct of world citizenship. Everyone is an individual endowed with certain rights and subject to certain obligations; everyone is capable of voluntaristic actions that seek rational solutions to social problems; therefore, everyone is a citizen of the world polity. World citizenship rules infuse each individual with the authority to pursue particularistic interests, preferably in organizations, while also authorizing individuals to promote collective goods defined in largely standardized ways.

World citizenship is strongly egalitarian. Individuals vary in their capacities, resources, and industry, but all have the same basic rights and duties. Correspondingly, only fully democratic governance structures are consistent with world citizenship. "Autocratic" tendencies are decried even within some INGOs (e.g., Greenpeace and the International Olympic Committee).

World citizenship is prominently codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which depicts a global citizen whose rights transcend national boundaries. The Declaration insists that states ensure the rights of their citizens and even that every human has the right to a national citizenship. In the absence of a world state, however, these obligations cannot be imposed on states. Acting as the primary carriers of world culture, INGOs translate the diffuse global identity and authority of world citizenship into specific rights, claims, and prescriptions for state behavior.

Here again we observe that states sometimes act as agents of informal world-polity authority. World citizens must turn to national states for protection of their rights, and INGOs back them up in the process. Increasingly, individuals need not be national citizens to make claims on the state; noncitizen residents of many countries have extensive rights almost equivalent to those of citizens, simply because they are human.

The cultural principles *re*-presented by INGOs are also integral to the world economy and state system, but INGOs push them to extremes. Their discourse is often critical of economic and political structures, stigmatizing "ethnocentric" (non-universalistic) nationalism and "exploitative" (inegalitarian) capitalism. INGOs dramatize violations of world-cultural principles, such as state maltreatment of citizens and corporate disregard for the sacredness of nature. Such examples illustrate the contested nature of these principles; they are widely known but by no means uncontroversial. [...]

Conclusion

INGOs are built on world-cultural principles of universalism, individualism, rational voluntaristic authority, progress, and world citizenship. Individuals and associations construct rationalized structures with defined goals, some diffuse (world peace, international understanding), but most quite specific and functional. Some INGOs, including sports, human rights, and environmental bodies, dramatically reify the world polity; human rights and environmental INGOs are especially prominent because of their conflicts with states over world-cultural principles. But most INGOs unobtrusively foster intellectual, technical, and economic rationalization that is so thoroughly institutionalized that they are hardly seen as actors, despite the enormous effects they have on definitions of reality, material infrastructure, household products, school texts, and much more.

The decentralization of authority among states facilitates transnational organizing (because centralized barriers to rational voluntarism are weak) and forces transnational organizations to focus their attention on states. Contrary to the claims of global neo-realist theories, states are not always leaders of social change; they can also be followers. In mobilizing around and elaborating world-cultural principles, INGOs

lobby, criticize, and convince states to act on those principles, at least in some sectors and with respect to some issues.

How extensively this model of global change applies we cannot say. One of the central tasks for world-polity research is the development of a general theory about the conditions under which INGOs are able to take the initiative *vis-à-vis* states. A related task is the study of INGO relationships with the other major sets of reified world-polity actors, IGOs and transnational corporations. The literature contains many case studies touching on these relationships but little systematic analysis.

If a legal-rational world state emerges, much of the INGO population is likely to be co-opted to staff its bureaucracy and advise on policy decisions. To this point, we think of the operation of the world polity only as a world proto-state. A singular authority structure is lacking, states monopolize the legitimated use of violence, and states jealously guard their sovereignty. Nevertheless, the world as a proto-state has shared cultural categories, principles of authority, and universally constructed individuals who, as world proto-citizens, assume the authority to pursue goals that transcend national and local particularisms. More often than is commonly acknowledged, the resulting organizations prove to be effective. If they are absorbed in a formal global authority structure in the future, it may well be said that the road to a world state was paved by the rational voluntarism of INGOs.