Seeing beyond the League: A History of International Organization

1945 was a momentous year for international organization. In April that year, delegates from fifty states—all Allied or neutral powers of the ongoing Second World War—met in San Francisco to create the United Nations Organization. Among those in attendance were three officials from the soon-to-be-defunct League of Nations. Invited less than two weeks before the conference’s beginning, they were only admitted under the rather ignominious title of “unofficial representatives” of the League. During the conference’s opening session, they were seated in the back row with the general public, which included children. They were, as Patricia Clavin memorably put it, “guests at their own funeral.”

But the League’s unofficial officials were not the only representatives of international organizations at the conference in San Francisco. Present there, too, were members of the Permanent Court of International Justice and International Labor Organization, as well as the founders of the newly created International Monetary Fund and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Nor was San Francisco the only conference on international organization held that frenetic year of 1945. The previous month in Mexico City, delegates from twenty member-states of the Pan American Union passed a resolution on the “Reorganization, Consolidation and Strengthening of the Inter-American System.” In it, they resolved that “the inter-American system ... should be further improved and strengthened.” Later that year, in October, some two hundred delegates to the fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester issued a resolution “demand[ing] for Black Africa autonomy and independence.” And in Paris in November, women from forty states formed the Women’s International Democratic Federation with the goal “to organize women in all countries of the world to defend their rights and to achieve social progress.” For the small powers as much as the great, the colonized as much as the colonizer, women as much as men, the time seemed ripe for reorganizing the world.

Simon Jackson and Alanna O’Malley’s groundbreaking new edited collection, The Institution of International Order: From the League of Nations to the United Nations, explores the history of these two international institutions and the relationship between them. Gathering eleven different scholars from diverse fields and disciplines, together they chart, as Jackson and O’Malley summarize, “the evolution of internationalist ideas, institutions, and practices at—and between—the League and UN” (p. 4). In so doing, they exhibit the very latest in historical scholarship on these two international organizations.

After decades of neglect, historians have in the past two decades reprised the history of the League and UN. This new international history has replaced an older narrative of their rise and fall with a newer one of rise in
some areas and fall in others. For all its strengths, this new history of the League and UN has mostly centered on a single time period (before 1945 or after), a single place (Geneva or New York), and a single class of historical actor (state delegates or international officials). The Institution of International Order, by contrast, pluralizes notions of period, place, and actor in the history of the League and UN. This exciting and important volume thus points the way toward a new global history of these two international organizations. “The overall effect,” Jackson and O’Malley rightly note, “is not merely to supplement the new international history of the League and UN with a bestiary of additional case studies, but to globalize it methodologically” (p. 4). So convincing are they of the need to pluralize this history that some readers might be left wondering whether From the League of Nations to the United Nations in fact goes far enough. For the concept that arguably most needs pluralizing is that which Jackson and O’Malley define singularly, and which sits at the heart of the collection: international organization itself. In 1945, as indeed throughout the twentieth century, alternative international organizations existed. The League and the United Nations were just two ways of organizing the world among many.

At first glance, the question of periodizing the League and UN might seem obvious. The League began in 1919. It ended in 1946. The UN was established a year earlier and was meant to be different from the League, as the lukewarm reception of the League officials in San Francisco appears to confirm. For a long time, scholars took this periodization for granted, treating 1945 as what Jackson and O’Malley term “the hallowed rupture of “Year Zero”” (p. 2). This notion of the caesura of 1945 in turn supported a series of alleged binary oppositions between the pre- and postwar worlds: between a prewar world of empires and a postwar world of nation-states; between fascism and communism; between racial-civilizational hierarchies and developmental-economic ones; between claims for rights based on membership of a particular group and claims for rights based on one’s individuality.

Historians have in recent years begun to problematize the idea of 1945 as international rupture, instead exploring what Nova Robinson calls “the bridge between the League and the UN” (p. 156). As Jackson and O’Malley observe, however, the assumption of discontinuity persists, not least in the idea that interwar claims to minority rights gave way to postwar claims to human rights. Two of the contributors to this volume complicate this view. In chapter 1, Andrew Arsan reveals that even some of the founders of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) understood these new individual-centered rights as compatible with older minority-centered rights. Arsan pieces together an intellectual biography of the Lebanese philosopher and UN delegate Charles Malik, who was key to the drafting and finalization of the UDHR. For Malik, Arsan concludes, human rights were not a rejection but rather an extension of minority rights. Extending this argument, Nathan Kurz in chapter 4 contends that some proponents of human rights in the postwar period explicitly relied on interwar precedents of minority rights. In arguing for a right to petition the UN for human rights abuses, for example, the World Jewish Congress cited a 1933 petition to the League in defense of the minority rights of a German Jew, Franz Bernheim. At least for some contemporaries, then, postwar human rights built on interwar theories and practices of minority rights. The worlds of the League and UN were in many ways connected. In some places, they appeared to be one and the same.

If period is one axis upon which Jackson and O’Malley stake their historiographical intervention, place is another. As Susan Pedersen notes in the foreword, The Institution of International Order represents a “multi-local history of internationalism” (p. xii). The contributors to this collection thus view the League and UN not from the grand assembly halls and labyrinthine offices of the Palace of Nations in Geneva or the UN Headquarters in New York, but from their domains in Rio de Janeiro, Dhaka, Aleppo, and elsewhere. Jackson and O’Malley make the case, in short, that “the prisons of West Africa or the banks of the Amazon and Tigris were places just as ‘international’, and quite as constitutive of ‘internationalism’, as the smoke-filled rooms and champagne-oiled assemblies overlooking the Lac Leman or the East River” (p. 4).

Of course, “multi-local” means different things to different people. This volume’s contributors tend to interpret multi-locality in one of two ways. Some examine how the League and UN were made and remade in different places around the globe. In chapter 2, for example, José Antonio Sánchez Román shows how League treaties were shaped by the regional and national contexts of Latin American delegates to League conferences. At the 1921 Conference on Communication in Barcelona, Latin American delegates insisted that the freedom to navigate international waters was not a right but a concession granted by sovereign states. In making this argument, some Latin American delegates drew on shared regional concepts. The Chilean jurist Alejandro Álvarez used hemispheric “American international law” to con-
tend that freedom of navigation was an issue not of international but domestic law. Other Latin American delegates relied on national precedents. The Brazilian delegates to the conference drew on the writings of Brazilian jurists responding to international pressure to grant foreign ships access to the Amazon River.

In a similar vein, Florian Hannig in chapter 5 shows that the UN’s turn to humanitarianism took place not through the General Assembly or Security Council in New York, but through the activities of one of its agencies in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971. According to Hannig, humanitarian aid has not always been a central component of the UN’s agenda. Established as one of the UN’s first humanitarian agencies in 1951, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was initially poorly funded, temporary, and confined to Europe. Through its intervention in the Bangladeshi refugee crisis, however, the UNHCR was transformed into one of the world’s most important humanitarian organizations. Between 1966 and 1975, the UNHCR’s budget increased thirty-fold (p. 127). Contributors like Sánchez Román and Hannig thus conceptualize multi-locality as a centrifugal force in internationalism, radiating from the so-called peripheries in to the international center.

Other contributors use a multi-local approach to show how different places around the globe were themselves remade by the League and UN—multi-locality as a centrifugal force, in other words. In chapter 7, for instance, Sarah Shields examines how the League’s interventions in interwar territorial disputes in the Middle East led local governments to essentialize the identities of their citizens. In adjudicating ownership over Mosul and Aleppo in 1925 and 1936 respectively, League officials sought to categorize their populations into different ethno-linguistic groups. League officials assumed these identities would indicate support for a particular government. In interviewing local residents, however, they found that residents’ political preferences were based more on social, economic, and political interests than on any supposed ethnic or linguistic identity. Still, as Shields carefully reconstructs, the League’s ethnocentrism motivated local governments to pressure residents into registering as members of particular groups.

Meanwhile, in chapter 9, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and José Pedro Monteiro follow the League’s impact on the Portuguese Empire in Africa. Even before the League’s creation, Jerónimo and Monteiro reveal, the Portuguese government sought to pre-empt criticism by reorganizing their imperial administrations in Angola and Mozambique. Later, when complaints against unfree labor practices in Portuguese colonies reached the League, the Portuguese government was forced to ratify the 1926 Slavery Convention and introduce a new Native Labor Code. Imperial reform through the League, as Jerónimo and Monteiro’s chapter demonstrates, was often one of style over substance. Two years after implementing the new Native Labor Code, the Portuguese government refused to ratify the International Labor Organization’s Forced Labor Convention. As Shields, Jerónimo, and Monteiro recognize, understanding the many impacts of the League and UN necessitates introducing new geographies into this history. It also requires bringing in new historical actors.

In questioning when and where the League and UN were made, Jackson and O’Malley’s collection also questions who made them. Historians of the League and UN have traditionally assigned leading roles to the state delegates and international officials who predominated at the Palace of Nations and UN Headquarters. Shifting away from Geneva and New York brings far more heterogeneous constituencies into view. In this volume, Jackson and O’Malley greatly expand our sense of the range of actors who historically engaged with the League and UN. What results is an international landscape peopled not just by delegates and officials (chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5), but ethnic and religious minorities (chapters 4 and 7), colonized and indigenous peoples (chapter 9), non-Western intellectuals (chapters 1 and 8), and nongovernmental organizations (chapters 4 and 6), among others. Everyone is potentially an internationalist in this history.

Even as The Institution of International Order broadens the category of who counts as an internationalist, however, it narrows the content of those same peoples’ internationalism. For by equating international organization with the League and UN, Jackson and O’Malley downplay the importance of other international organizations. Part of the problem might be conceptual. The notion of “order” in international relations is difficult to pin down. Claims to international order are often more reflective of aspiration than reality. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the phrase “new international order” was used to refer to at least four different periods: the post-First World War order, the post-Second World War order, the New International Economic Order of the 1970s, and the post-Cold War order. Many would now add today’s so-called “new international disorder.” It seems clear, then, that there has never been one international order but multiple: a European international order and an extra-European imperial one; a capitalist order and a
organizations existed, both before and after. Nor did the qualifier “institution” add much clarity, since, as Jackson and O’Malley acknowledge, “efforts to institutionalize the management of world order have a history as old as the exercise of imperial power” (p. 6). It might be better, then, to think not in terms of order but organization.

A deeper issue is the book’s framing, as captured in its subtitle, From the League of Nations to the United Nations. The volume privileges the League and UN as the world’s pre-eminent international organizations. This makes some sense since, as Jackson and O’Malley note, the League and UN “are distinguished ... by their emergence within global wars of unprecedented scale and destructiveness” (p. 6). To be sure, the particular wartime gestations of these two international institutions shaped them in fundamental ways. For one, these two global wars placed pressure on the League and UN’s founders to open their organizations up to universal membership. The resulting “state-based and inclusive” structure, as Susan Pedersen terms it, made the League and UN inherently responsive to geopolitical change (p. xiii). As states joined first the League and later the United Nations, they transformed these organizations from within. A UN General Assembly that began with fifty-one member-states in 1945 counted three times that many by 1980. These two UNs looked and acted very differently.

But the exceptionalism of the League and UN should not be overstated. They were not the only international organizations born out of the First and Second World Wars. Far from it, as revealed by the internationalist visions of inter-Americanists, pan-Africanists, and feminists in 1945. Indeed, this has been the tenor of recent work, which conceptualizes a history not of a single internationalism but rather what Patricia Clavin and Glenda Sluga call a “plurality of internationalisms.”[7] State-based international organizations were not the only ones sensitive to geopolitical change. For many—especially those shut out of the ruling apparatus of the nation-state—the appeal of international organizations lay precisely in their subversion of the state. Just as the political unit of the nation-state was contested throughout the twentieth century, so too was that of international organization. Nor did the internationalists of the First and Second World Wars hold a patent on international organization. Other international organizations existed, both before and after.

While Jackson and O’Malley frame The Institution of International Order around the League and UN, individual chapters note the existence of alternative international organizations. Some contributors do so by suggesting that the League and UN were not the only ways of organizing the world. Alternative international organizations existed, some of which pre-dated the League. Mats Ingulstad and Lucas Lixinski in chapter 3, for instance, highlight the role of the Pan American Union (PAU), established in 1890, as an “alternative model of internationalism” (p. 65). As Ingulstad and Lixinski demonstrate, international organizations like the PAU sometimes cooperated with the League and UN. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and again in San Francisco in 1945, Latin American delegates amended the founding documents of the League and UN respectively to accommodate the PAU and other regional organizations. At other times, alternative international organizations competed with the League and UN. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ingulstad and Lixinski remind us, some proposed turning the PAU into a rival “League of American Nations” (p. 75).

Other contributors intimate that Western liberal internationalism was not the only ideology interested in organizing the world. Nova Robinson in chapter 6 follows a campaign by the Liaison Committee of International Women’s Organizations for a convention on the status of women. The campaign was dominated by Western women’s organizations and aimed at the League and UN. At various points in Robinson’s narrative, however, non-Western women’s organizations intrude, alluding to the existence of women’s internationalism beyond the League and UN. This includes the Supreme Council of the General Oriental Feminist Alliance, a regional Arab women’s organization based in Syria, which maintained its own campaigns and conferences. Universal or regional, Western or non-Western, international organizations proliferated.

Still other contributors reveal that alternative international organizations were also imagined, if never realized. Konrad Lawson in chapter 8, for instance, retrieves a movement for world federation in postwar Japan. The movement was represented in Japan’s National Diet by a committee on world federation, which claimed more than a hundred lower and upper houses members (p. 192). During the decade after the Second World War, Lawson finds, the idea of world federation was raised in two-thirds of sessions of the National Diet. Support for world federalism was not restricted to the “losers” of the Second World War. In the United States, Gallup polls in 1946 and 1947 showed a majority of Americans favored a world government with power over all national armed
forces (p. 184). Even after the UN was formed, support for alternative international organizations persisted.

If The Institution of International Order is in part a testament of how far international history has come, it is also a commandment for how much further this history has to go. The dominance of the contemporary internationalist imaginary by the League and UN is a product of this history, one that awaits explanation. Just as historians should avoid, as Andrew Arsan warns, “smooth[ing] away the complexities and contradictions that make [Charles] Malik such an intriguing figure,” neither should they flatten out the complexities and contradictions that made international organization such an alluring concept (p. 24). What is needed, then, is a history of international organization in its many guises. What would this new history of international organization look like? It would seek to pluralize notions of period, place, and actor. It would, in short, look a lot like this book. But it would see at, between, and beyond the League and UN.

Notes


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