The quest for legitimacy in world politics – international organizations’ self-legitimations

Outline of the topic

International organizations (IOs) take increasing interest in their legitimacy. They employ a broad variety of self-legitimations in order to convince different “social constituenc[ies] of legitimation” (Reus-Smit 2007: 164) of the rightfulness of their authority. In contrast to more normative oriented legitimacy research which deals with the rightfulness or acceptability against the backdrop of external normative standards, this workshop’s objective is to contribute to empirical legitimacy research in the field of International Relations by focusing on self-legitimations of international organizations.

The need for a broader understanding of international organizations’ self-legitimations has arisen in the context of recent developments in International Relations. First, a general interest in the topic of legitimacy and international organizations was fuelled by the acknowledgement that international organizations exercise different types of authority (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Steffek 2003; Zürn et al. 2012). The rise of authority beyond the state put the issue of legitimacy high on the agenda. Second, various empirical studies document that international organizations increasingly face contestation and resistance (della Porta 2007; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2011; O’Brien et al. 2000). In the face of growing politicization, international organizations’ responses and their attempts at resolving crises of legitimacy take centre stage. Thus, a deepened knowledge of international organizations’ self-legitimations can help us to comprehend the complex processes of legitimation and delegitimation in the international sphere and is crucial for understanding why some international organizations are more legitimate than others.

Generally, the concept of self-legitimation (Barker 2001) comprises a diverse range of efforts made by international organizations to establish and maintain a reliable basis of diffuse support, i.e. a form of political support that is enduring and not solely reliant on the generation of particular outputs (Easton 1975: 444). As such, self-legitimations can be distinguished from other types of activities designed to win specific support, for instance, those relying on one-time inducements and payments or those that try to achieve compliance by means of coercion. What is more, in order to build up a reliable basis of political support international organizations have to
address a variety of audiences with different interests and normative reference points (Clark 2003: 79; Seabrooke 2007: 254; Zaum 2013: 16-19). Addressees of self-legitimations may be international organization’s staff, member state governments and its citizens and even external audiences of non-member states. The proposed concept of self-legitimation is broad enough to take into account these different forms of self-legitimations and the interactions between them. Finally, self-legitimations can be analyzed on the level of (verbal or non-verbal) discourses scrutinizing the meanings of legitimacy and structure of legitimacy claims made by international organizations (Biegoń 2013) or on the level of practices (see Zaum 2013: 223-224) examining more substantive forms of behavioral adaptation and change, such as IOs communication policies, transparency regimes, accountability measures, procedures to include civil society organizations an efforts to improve the performance of IOs.

Besides the aim of contributing to conceptual clarifications and to gain deeper insights into the empirics of self-legitimations of particular international organizations, the workshop’s objective is to inquire into the similarities and differences of self-legitimations in different international organizations and the effects of self-legitimations. While we still need better insights into the fine details of self-legitimations this workshop will also benefit from comparative research going beyond individual cases. Pertinent questions are for instance: What factors account for similarities and differences of self-legitimations in different IOs? Does the type of authority exercised by IOs play a role or can we rather observe certain “trends of self-legitimations” across a variety of different IOs? What impact do self-legitimations have? Can self-legitimations moderate processes of politicization? What types of self-legitimations are more successful than others etc.?

**Relation to existing research**

The workshops objective is to contribute to research on the empirical legitimacy of international organizations. While most of the exiting research in this field operationalizes legitimacy as a credential attributed bottom-up to international organizations by social constituencies, we argue that this perspective is too narrow as it misses the ‘genetic’ aspect of legitimation (Ofle 2006: 26). Legitimacy is and can only be the result of an interactive political process (Barker 2007: 20; Hurrelmann, Schneider, and Steffek 2007: 8). These complex processes of legitimation culminating in the (non-)attribution of legitimacy comprise both the bottom-up attribution of
legitimacy by social constituencies and the top-down cultivation of legitimacy by rulers (Bourricaud 1987; Brasset and Tsingou 2011). At the core of this interactive understanding of legitimation lies the observation that individuals do not attribute legitimacy to international organizations in a societal vacuum but are constantly influenced by a broad variety of legitimacy claims (Beetham 1991: 4). These legitimacy claims are ‘the lifeblood of politics of legitimation, and such politics are essential to the cultivation and maintenance of an actor’s or institutions legitimacy’ (Reus-Smit 2007: 159). By proposing to concentrate on self-legitimations we want to facilitate research on top-down processes of legitimation and want to contribute to a deepened understanding of legitimation processes.

**Likely participants**

We welcome scholars working in the field of empirical legitimacy research in particular in the field of International Relations and European Integration Studies as well as scholars from the field of organizational studies dealing with processes of legitimation within elite circles of IOs.

**Type of papers**

The workshop will profit from three types of papers: we welcome papers addressing methodological issues of studying the practices and discourses of self-legitimations as well as conceptual papers clarifying, for instance, the relation between legitimacy claims and legitimacy beliefs or outlining typologies of self-legitimations etc. What is more, empirical papers providing in-depth studies of self-legitimations or more comparative papers focusing on a range of different IOs - we define international organizations broadly to include regional and global organization, clubs of governance, regimes, and networks governed by formal international agreements – constitute a valuable contribution to this workshop.

**Biographical notes**

The Workshop is collectively organized by Matthias Ecker-Erhardt, Jennifer Gronau, Henning Schmitke and Dominik Zaum. The workshop director is Dominik Zaum.
Dominik Zaum is Professor of Governance, Conflict, and Security at the University of Reading, and a Senior Research Fellow in Conflict and Fragility at the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). He has written widely on international organisations, in particular the UN, and on questions of legitimacy in international order. Recent relevant publications include “The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945” (OUP 2008), “Selective Security: War and the UN Security Council since 1945” (Routledge/IISS 2009), and “Legitimating International Organizations” (OUP 2013).

References


