

Power of Rules and Rule of Power

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The theme of the 59th Annual meeting of the International Studies Association (ISA) was “Power of Rules and Rule of Power”. In her presidential address, Ashley Leeds confronted the traditional assumption that domestic politics is governed by rules, while international politics is always characterized by anarchy and chaos. Historically, researchers modelled international relations as interactions conducted in a vacuum of any rules. Power was the only reasonable response to survival. This conceptualization of interactions in the international system generated debates about the use of power and the role of alliances around the great paradigms of realism, neo-realism and liberalism. Such debates, however, did not match observations where a formal international structure (government) was not always required for the emergence of rules.

On the contrary, Leeds argues that a web of formal and informal rules, sometimes explicit and codified, other times implicit, shape and influence the interactions of diverse actors in the international system. Strong states might have disproportionate power over rules and norms that influence outcomes in war, peace and wealth distribution, but power is endogenous to the processes that generate explicit and implicit rules. Often the unequal distribution of power is contested leading to changes in rules. Other times rules become more resilient and sustainable despite challenges. The relationship between power and rules is fundamentally interactive and under constant negotiation.

Treaties are an example of such institutional constraints that influence the choices of states. Leeds and her co-authors (Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015) have found that democratic states facing bigger domestic constraints on policymaking tend to prefer flexible agreements. Increasing flexibility in agreements and treaties allows democratic states more options to opt-out if necessary. This is true for trade agreements, but evidence also suggests that democratic states include higher number of reservations in human rights treaties. Leeds points out that treaties and international agreements are only one set of rules. Every set of written rules is accompanied by unwritten norms and implicit rules that correspond to practices and expectations of international actors. Such informal rules can be as powerful as formal agreements. Changes in practices lead to often unforeseen deviations in informal rules. In turn, changes in informal rules can lead to shifts in norms, and eventually to new

regulations that permeate international relations including the formal interactions of political leaders and elites and other relevant actors.

Thus, in the 'anarchical' world of international relations, rules matter. These rules, both formal and informal, interact with power dynamics to inform and influence the interactions of the members of the international system. The theme of the 59th annual convention underlines the importance of recognizing the relative and relational influence of power and rules in international politics. To do so, research should examine official rules, but also probe what role informal rules play in shaping formal regulations of international interactions and power dynamics. The nexus of actors, issues, and interactions define international relations as a research field, but also impact international studies as a profession. The articles included in this special issue and the forum expand, question, and problematize such interactions. Collectively the special issue addresses four questions:

1. To what extent is power dependent upon or independent of implicit and explicit normative and institutional processes that govern areas of international politics?
2. What are the processes by which formal and informal rules of interaction are established in international politics?
3. What are the current structures of power and rules in the international studies profession, both within and outside academia?
4. How do these structures affect what we study and how we study it?

These questions subsequently define what an acceptable research topic is, what topics are marginal, and who is side-lined from the study of international relations. What we choose to focus on and how we decide to study it is based on the intersection of our own background/experiences and the incentives produced by the academy. Given that the discipline has been dominated, for quite some time, by white males from western/global north countries, it is therefore not surprising that we have seen topics like interstate conflict and US Foreign Policy at the forefront of the research agenda in international relations, while research related to human rights and gender were overlooked, as they tend to be the focus of female scholars.

This brief introduction is divided into two sections. The first section addresses articles that challenge our perspectives of who is a member of the international system and who is not, and the role of informal international rules and governance. The second section introduces short commentaries addressing the power and rules in the profession and their impacts on how we study international relations.

The international system features a variety of rules and norms that are created, enforced, but also contested. To evaluate arguments about changing rules and norms in the international system with respect to system membership and conquest, in his article “*Do International Rules and Norms Apply to Non-State Actors?*” Lemke looks at how “territorial contenders” help us to understand such changes. According to Lemke, “territorial contenders” are “independent political entities controlling populated territory, but are unrecognized by other members of the international system and are unauthorized to control their territory by the sovereign states within whose boundaries they exist” (1). Utilizing an original dataset that contains 187 territorial contenders within the territory of the 62 developing world sovereign states between 1816 and 2010, he finds support for his contention that the rules for admission to the club of nations have changed since WWII. In addition, while it is true that conquest of territory is not accepted among sovereign states, there is little or no normative pressure to avoid such conquest when one actor is a territorial contender. Lemke’s piece highlights an important evaluation of how rules pertaining to system membership have changed over time. Most arguments pertaining to such rules and norms had not been tested as data had not been available. Given that IR is about interaction of actors in the international system, it is important that we take into consideration who is being represented and which rules apply to which actors.

In his article, “*Ruling from the Shadows: The Functions of Informal International Rules in World Politics*,” Tiekou also focuses on rules in IR, but he takes a slightly different approach by focusing on the informal rules that are embedded within formal rules, and in turn impact international political outcomes. Drawing on insights from the United Nations Organization (UN) system, he demonstrates how informal international rules (IIRs) are ubiquitous and more importantly, how they impact international politics. While many of these rules are not official, partially written, or wholly unwritten, they are reflective and self-regulated, needing no third party to enforce them. One of several examples provided by Tiekou is the fact that since the establishment of the Bretton Woods system after WWII, the president of the World Bank must be an American citizen while the managing director of the International Monetary Fund is a European citizen. This IIR is unofficial and unwritten yet

fully established. Tieku also illustrates examples from the African Union, where informal rules are being created, developed, and maintained. In fact, IIRs tend to be a stepping stone for establishing laws as they provide policymakers with templates for negotiations. IIRs can also emerge to fill gaps that are left behind due to incomplete contracting. In addition, they can act as enablers and disablers of formal rules. Tieku concludes that we need to have a better understanding of the impact of IIRs outside of formal rules and organizations, and across different regions in the world.

In “*Democracy Challenges Informal International Governance*,” Herz and Hoffman focus on how informal international institutions can pose a challenge to democratic norms, especially the development of mechanisms to curtail the abuse or concentration of power. They argue that informal international governance, which often involve unwritten and vaguely specified rules, provide shared expectations, standards and forms of conflict resolution that substitute for legally binding rules, yet they do not require any public legitimization. As a result, the power and growth of informal networks impact three mechanisms important for the maintenance of democracy: the debate on forms of curtailing the abuse of power, participation through deliberation, and vigilance by citizens. Informal institutions do not allow for transparency of power relations and exclude a majority of citizens from participating let alone knowing about the power relations and decision making process. Herz and Hoffman maintain that informal institutions are important and can play a role in strengthening the development and maintenance of democracy, but we need to investigate and have a better understanding the dangers they can they can pose as evidenced by the backlash and backslide of democracy in many developed countries around the world.

In “*Border Rules*,” Simmons, similar to Herz and Hoffman, discusses ways in which rules affect, and are affected by, individuals. In particular, she focuses on the impact of rules about international borders, both formal and informal, that are emerging both among states and in local practice. Most of the focus in IR has been on the formal rules at the international level, such as those involving territorial integrity, border treaties and demarcation practices, etc. However, less attention has been given to how such cluster of rules (both formal and informal) collide and intersect with the relatively new norms of universal human rights, especially those that have emerged as a consequence of globalization such as the changing demographics, mobility and interdependence. As a result, Simmons maintains that new rules of border governance have emerged. While there is no one source for such rules of governance, they involve defining, practicing and enforcing three interrelated goals:

demarcation, security, and filtering. In order to accomplish these goals, states may need to create the bureaucratic, information collection and physical infrastructure to do so. Simmons concludes by calling for a research agenda that reflects the new border governance structure; one which will give us a better understanding of how borders and boundaries influence international, national and local life.

The authors in the forum on Power and Rules in the International Studies Profession, shift our focus to the rules and powers in the academy. In her commentary “*Limits to Access, Limits to Understanding*” Ashley Leeds maintains that all international relations scholars tend to make choices about what to study and how to study it. However, these choices are based on the incentives created by the rules and norms in our profession and one’s own lived experiences. The dominance in the discipline by white men from the Global North has led to the domination of certain topics and research methods. In order to have a deeper understanding of the world we live in, it is necessary that we diversify our discipline to include individuals from different backgrounds and experiences.

Ann Tickner continues the discussion in “*Power and Rules in the Profession of International Studies.*” She also highlights the current structures of power and rules in the international studies profession. Tickner enquires who holds the power to make the rules that shape the international studies profession. She argues that answering this question requires a critical understanding of who is recognized as a member of the profession. Informal rules of reflect hidden power structures in the profession that often regulate how international studies should be studied excluding methodologies and approaches that differ from the dominant epistemology. The exclusionary selection of membership in the profession ultimately determine what topics and areas become mainstream and labelled as ‘important’ research.

Colin Wight in “*Living on the Margins: Producing a Periphery of International Relations*” confronts the reality of casual and adjunct academic staff who are precariously in the margins of the profession, but never fully recognized as members of the field. Yet, without these ‘half’-members’ universities could not function and full members of academic could not be producers of research. Tickner recognizes some of the patterns identified by Wight but she advocates a more inclusive field that moves beyond the narrow narratives of political sciences and opens to other fields such as geography or anthropology. Wight, on the other hand, is more interested in the structure of modern academia that forces both universities and tenure-track or tenured members of the discipline to increasingly rely on staff

who are employed on casual contracts. At the same time the very survival of universities and tenured academic staff depends on restricting who can become a full-time, tenured faculty.

In "*Power Politics and International Relations Studies in the Global South*," Jessica De Alba-Ulloa looks at a different dimension of memberships by exploring power dynamics in academia from North to Global South. Using the case of Latin American study of international relations always poorly developed and dominated by US theoretical frameworks and authors, Alba-Ulloa shows that the Global South has not been able to offer a constructive alternative to Northern US and European academic production. Yet, unlike Tickner, Alba-Ulloa ends on a more optimistic note. Constant changes in the international system and power dynamics create new opportunities for Global South academics to reframe the agenda of what is relevant in the study of international relations either by creating new schools of International Relations or creating new areas or even expanding current studies in existing research agendas.

International Relations has evolved as a field from the assumptions of anarchy to the study of rules and regulations, both written and tacit, that influence the interactions of states and non-state actors. Both in the field and the profession what often shapes our understanding of international relations is not what we explicitly study and recognize, but what we ignore or marginalize. We hope this issue will provoke more thoughts of what is international relations and for whom.

Reference

Chiba, Daina, Jesse C. Johnson, and Brett Ashley Leeds. "Careful commitments: Democratic states and alliance design." *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 4 (2015): 968-982.