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The Problem of Membership in International Organization

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ABSTRACT—Membership problems plague international organizations of all types. All organizations are in some way exclusive, and there is a hierarchy of acceptable joiner-nations with the European nations leading the list. Each organization appears statistically to have a norm of membership toward which its number tends. If it falls short of the norm, it is under compulsion to expand. If it exceeds the norm, expulsions or boycotts are likely to ensue. The ideal condition of an organization, therefore, is "normal" membership, not necessarily "total" inclusion of all nations legally admissible. More is to be lost by too large an organization than by one too small. There is a superfluity of discrete national memberships in separate organizations, which necessitates amalgamation of organizations.

When President Sukarno of Indonesia declared his intention of withdrawing his country from the United Nations in order to spite the former imperial powers in that organization, his bombshell was met at first by incredulosity and disbelief, even among his own followers and among the Indonesian delegation to the United Nations.² They, like many of us, had been living in a world of misconception about the significance of membership in international organizations. They had the vaporous notion that at all times international organizations seek benevolently to enlarge their membership and that the members of such international organizations can be expected to have a benevolent regard for the organizations. There went along with the notion, too, the idea that there is nothing decisive in just *how many* or *which* organizations a country belongs to—the more the better—in that membership in one presumably does not contradict membership in another. An international organization viewed in this light is like a sponge: soft, benign, and absorptive.

Indonesia's quitting the United Nations has brought to the surface the fact that one of the most critical problems faced by international organizations today is the problem of membership. For instance, the United Nations has faced the problem of membership for Red China and the question of Soviet Russian membership in connection with her refusal to pay her assessments for the peace-keeping operations of the United Nations.³ The most critical problem for the Common Market is British membership. The most critical problem for the

British Commonwealth of Nations has been South African membership and now, in a sense, Malaysian membership. The problem of Spanish membership plagues European organizations like NATO and the Council of Europe. When we add to this such questions as French membership in SEATO and Cuban membership in the Organization of American States, one is tempted to view the problem of membership as a *contemporary* crisis in international organization, were it not for the fact that such pioneer organizations as the League of Nations were victims of critical membership problems, too. The League failed partly because the United States did not join. The members that were in the League were not adequate to the task of maintaining world security.

Membership Profile

A brief profile of the membership of international organizations will help introduce the problematic aspect of membership. According to the *Yearbook of International Organizations* of 1963-1964,⁴ which is my major source of information on membership in international organizations, there were 141 entities—117 states, and 24 dependencies—holding membership in 162 separate international organizations. The 141 potential members held a total of 3778 memberships in the 162 organizations. The fact that there are less than 4000 memberships instead of 6 times that number, as there would be if all states belonged to all organizations, is a consequence of the fact that most international organizations are, for one reason or another, exclusive. They may be exclusive because they deal with subject matter that only the technologically evolved countries can usefully cope with; or because they deal with objects that exist at only certain points on the surface of the globe, such as certain minerals or certain foods. They may be exclusive clubs for given regions of the world, and *within* given regions there may be further grounds for exclusiveness on the basis of technological advancement or geography. The exclusive character of international organizations is not meant here to mean the kind of snobbishness or haughtiness that characterizes an exclusive golf club, but merely that, for one rea-

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² An Indonesian government note of January 20, 1965 to the Secretary-General of the United Nations fixed March 1, 1965 as terminal date for its withdrawal from the organization. The Secretary-General indicated his willingness to respect the action in his note to the Indonesian government of February 26, 1965.

³ The term "membership" here is being used in its literal sense rather than its technical or legal sense. Legally, China is a member of the United Nations already, and the Red Chinese issue is dealt with as a problem of representation. If the Russians walked out over the contributions issue, they would still be likely to retain legal membership in the organization.

⁴ Union of International Associations, 9th ed. (Brussels: Union of International Associations, 1962). The *Yearbook* is a compendium of summary description of individual international organizations, and it lists the members of each organization.

son or another, certain nations do not qualify for membership. Lack of qualifications is not a reflection on a given nation. It is no slur against an African nation that it cannot become a member of a pan-American organization; it simply is not American.

The tendency for international organizations to be exclusive is borne out by a tabulation of their memberships. Some 60 international organizations have 10 or fewer members; 40 organizations have between 11 and 20 members; 24 have between 21 and 30 members; and the members continue to decline down to the 81 to 90 bracket, in which there are no organizations at all. This inverse relation between the number of organizations and the number of their members *changes*, however, in the bracket of organizations with between 101 and 110 members, where 7 organizations, all in the United Nations family, are represented. This break between the United Nations family and the tendencies of all other organizations, suggests that a different type of exclusiveness is applied by the United Nations, albeit, like the others, it is in some way exclusive.⁵

Not only do international organizations tend to be exclusive, they rely on a rather exclusive class of desirable joiners. One-fifth of the nations of the world account for almost one half of all memberships in international organizations. The top 29 nations, in other words, hold 1786 memberships. France, holding membership in 91 organizations, is leader, followed by the Netherlands with 81 memberships. The United States ranks seventh with 64 memberships. It is the European nations that head the list, by and large, although the large number of inter-American organizations enables 4 Latin-American countries to figure among the first 29. These, incidentally, are the largest countries of Latin America. There is a whole fifth of the nations of the world that belong to no more than from 12 to 20 international organizations—belong to little more, in other words, than the United Nations family. Apart from them, international organizations appear to be made up of exclusive groups of the "right kinds" of nations.

A Norm of Optimum Size

In searching for a theory to explain these figures, one arrives first of all at the idea of an inverse ratio in international organizations between size and effectiveness. The Common Market is effective, thus, because it is small; and the United Nations ineffective because it is huge. Or, put it another way, organizations may become smaller and smaller in dealing with less and less until they are completely effective in nothing; or they may become larger and larger in dealing with more and more until they lose effectiveness in everything. This theory is too simple, however, to encompass the fact that the United Nations has a world-wide membership and is capable of effective action in certain instances.

Membership norms are better viewed in their own terms. In expressing norms here, I use modal averages,

⁵ Charter of the United Nations, Article 4 restricts eligibility for membership to nations that "in the judgment of the Organization" can meet their international obligations.

not *means* or *medians*. The norm of membership for the United Nations and eight other agencies in its family of organizations is the membership of the United Nations itself that, though changing slightly from year to year, is roughly just over 100. There are some 27 organizations, including 7 agencies of the U.N. family with a membership norm of only 40. These are organizations that are open to membership from any nation of the world but deal with subject matter so technologically demanding that the world at large cannot cope with it or relate to it. Technological development here implies wealth and commerce; thus, only certain nations can take part in the Customs Cooperation Councils or the Refrigeration Institute. In other words, once United Nations specialized agencies or other world-wide institutions become demanding in this way, their normal membership is cut down to less than half that of the top United Nations group. There are some 32 international organizations that are open to all countries in the world but are relevant only to those nations whom fate and geography have brought together. The geography of population, for instance—the population surplus and deficit areas—determines the membership of the Intergovernmental Committee on European Migration. The geographic accident of being a littoral state determines the membership of the International Maritime Consultative Organization and fishing organizations. These organizations, potentially world-wide but actually limited by geography, have a normal membership of 20.

Our norms are now dropping very fast. Having reached this level among the organizations open potentially to the world for members however, the norms begin to level off. The next groups of organizations are those restricted to members within a given region of the globe, such as Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, or the Soviet Bloc. The norm for the 19 inter-American organizations has been 21 members; the norm for 34 European organizations has been 16 members; the norm for two middle-eastern organizations has been 12, as has been the norm for four Soviet Bloc organizations. Only in the case of the 30 nations who founded the organization of African unity does one find an important upswing in the number of states embraced by a regional entity.

There is just one further membership norm worth consideration here and that is one dictated by exclusive considerations *within* regions; the normal membership involved here is eight. This last norm is for such organizations as the Common Market, the Carribean Organization, or the Warsaw Treaty Organization. One of the most selective norms is that of the organizations made up on the basis of purely political grounds from among diverse nations scattered about the globe, such as certain units of the British Commonwealth of Nations or the alliance organizations, like CENTO or SEATO. This norm, too, is eight. In summary, then, there are the world organizations with full world membership, the potential world organizations that, for technological reasons, have only half the world as members, the poten-

tial world organizations that for geographic reasons, have only one-fifth the world as members, the regional organizations with from 12 to 21 or 30 members, plus the restricted regional groupings and political groupings with a norm of 8.

Expand and/or Die

What one sees in looking at the membership norms of various types of organizations is that large groups of them have far fewer than their potential members: potential world organizations with from 20 to 40 members and the potential regional organizations with only 8 members. The mandate for expansion among these organizations is fairly clear because, in failing to expand, they stand to lose touch with the ultimate object of their efforts. The International Finance Corporation and International Development Association, for example, have only three-quarters the membership of the United Nations, and neither can count itself fully effective until the missing quarter is made up. The international organizations of the world concerning fishing are another case in point. Each is able to regulate fishing in certain areas of the globe, such as the North Pacific or North Atlantic, among the littoral nations in those areas. But their fishing grounds are subject to raiding by the ships of governments that are not members, thus repeatedly proving the necessity for generalizing the world membership of organizations aiming to conserve and promote the fishing industries.

For other organizations, to expand is to die. A live man and a dead man look very much alike: the difference between the two is extreme but qualitative—it is scarcely visible. International organizations can be killed in the same way. Members can be admitted whose existence in the organization is so destructive of the purposes and procedures of that body that, although the change is not visible, qualitatively the organization has changed and in terms of its original objectives is dead. It is on this ground that suitors of numerous international organizations are left today on the doorstep. Red China is kept out of the United Nations for not being peace-loving; Britain has been kept out of the Common Market as a result of the sin of a triangular love affair involving the Commonwealth. Spain has been kept out of NATO and the Council of Europe because it would be a dictatorial wolf among democratic sheep. Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform for revisionism; Cuba, from the organization of American States, for subversion; and the Union of South Africa, from the British Commonwealth of Nations, for apartheid. Although the merits of these cases are subject to ongoing debate, the principle involved is a clear one if one looks at it in ideal terms. The North Atlantic Treaty organization, for example, is primarily concerned with organizing military forces for the defense of Western Europe against attack by Soviet forces. The Soviet Union, being a European country, could conceivably join NATO; but, if it did so, it would kill the organization. NATO's reason-for-being would be gone. With the Soviet Union as a member, NATO would be an alliance among all the greatest powers in

the world against a potential aggressor, but *there would no longer be any potential aggressor*—hence no reason for the organization to exist.

The problem of membership in international organizations then, is the question of whether an organization will die if it expands or whether it will die if it fails to expand. I would advance the thesis that what I define as “perfect” organizations face grave risks in expanding, whereas the organizations that I define as “imperfect” face real danger if they fail to expand. What I define as “perfect” are the world organizations that include generally all countries in the world, and, also, regional organizations that include generally all countries of the region. The “imperfect” organizations are those with potential world membership that, in fact, have less than all as members, and the potential regional organizations that, in fact, have less than all regional nations as members. To put it another way, perfect organizations tend to have stable norms of membership while imperfect organizations tend to have unstable ones.

Price of Admission

If we are to work with the hypothesis that organizations with “normal” membership, like the United Nations, are best served by greatest caution in the admission of new members, then the presumption would be against the admission of Red China to that body.⁶ Since the United Nations has very nearly universal membership, which is its ideal, then it is advanced very little further toward its ideal by the admission of one more state. And should that state promise any further trouble for the organization, a cautious policy on admission would seem the natural one. The question of the admission of Red China to the United Nations is seldom discussed in terms of the interests of the organization itself, apart from that of any of its members. There are governments that admire Red China or fear it and feel that something should be done *for* China. They are not concerned directly with doing anything *for* the United Nations. It is their interests and not that of the organization that govern. Unless a case can be made that Red China can do something *for* the United Nations, one fails to find any solid grounds for its admission. It might transpire that, in the event of the admission of Red China, the price of admission might be paid by other United Nations members in the form of disrupted procedures and the obstruction of the interests of the majority of member nations. Such a price could scarcely fall within the interests of the organization.

There is some value for neutral nations in the comfort that comes from the existence in the United Nations of a powerful veteran obstructionist like the Soviet Union. Its willingness to disagree with the former imperial powers of the West serves to protect the feeling of neutrality of those new and weak nations that hate Western imperialism above all. But the United Nations can utilize only one of this breed. What is the added value in hav-

⁶ The most complete discussion of the Chinese representation issue is found in Brown (1955).

ing two, both Russia and China? The argument that United Nations membership might appease China and mollify her is, in effect, offering up the United Nations as a sacrifice to detract China from some other potential object of her desires and has nothing to do with the edification of the United Nations itself. The idea that China would behave differently inside the United Nations than out of it is guesswork.

Essentially, the same line of reasoning would underline the desirability of leaving the questionable suitor nations standing at the doorstep of any world or regional organization having a generally full complement of members. They could be left there indefinitely.⁷ The United Nations applied loose standards over the past decade while its drive for universality necessitated wholesale admissions of newly independent nations. Otherwise it would have had a patently abnormal membership and could thus justify putting membership growth on a par with integrity as an ideal. Now that universality has been regained, it would be natural for the United Nations to become more conscious of its integrity and more willing to make calculated judgments on admissions, suspensions, and expulsions. The Indonesian secession from the United Nations may have awakened that institution to the possibility that, perhaps, under the circumstances Indonesia should have been expelled. The League of Nations was not destroyed by the withdrawal of the Axis powers and the expulsion of Russia. What proved the inefficacy of the League was its inability to take *action* against the Axis powers in Asia, Africa, or Europe; and it would have faced the same problem whether the Axis powers had remained in the League or not—possibly less of a problem if out, for then they could not have disrupted proceedings.

The Goose That Laid The Golden Egg

The organizations, world-wide or regional, that have imperfect memberships, i.e., significantly fewer than the number of potential members, appear governed by a logic that is almost the reverse of the foregoing. The European Community of the "Six"—Benelux, France, Germany, and Italy—aspire to become a United States of Europe. For this it must have both integrity *and* members. The slow progress of the Council of Europe toward the same goal, even though it included all the states of Europe, prompted the Six to make a start toward a United Europe by advancing integration among themselves, although they constituted less than half the European states. The imperfectness and instability of this approach became apparent almost immediately: The Community found it impractical to proceed too far toward unity without carrying the other European states, particularly Britain, along with them; and the British failed to see how they could prosper outside the framework of a European trading block. Negotiations for British membership eventually broke down in 1963, however, be-

⁷ Although little is available as yet on the ostracism of Cuba and of the Union of South Africa from their respective organizations, Spanish ostracism from NATO is discussed in Whitaker (1961).

cause the deGaulle government of France did not wish to taint the integrity of the existing community by admitting Britain and all its outside involvements, particularly those with the United States and the British Commonwealth.⁸ The European Community had accomplished a miracle in inspiring and underpinning vast economic growth in Western Europe. Why kill the goose that laid the golden egg by tinkering with the membership question?

Thus will the necessity for imperfect organizations to expand their membership always be subverted. It is the anticipation of higher benefits that causes an imperfect organization to take the risk of accepting new members into its ranks, but there are apt to be immediate, though lesser, benefits in remaining exclusive. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is a conspicuously imperfect organization. It attempts to co-ordinate international assistance funds going to the underdeveloped world, but includes as members only the wealthier and donor nations. Possibly, if some new and more ample organization could encompass both donor and recipient nations in its membership a higher degree of perfection might be achieved in its program. But why disturb the goose? The donor nations might be more generous with their money within the framework of the OECD than within the framework of some more representative organization. The irony of this situation is that false trust in the benefits of exclusiveness is just as damaging to imperfect organizations as false trust in the benefits of absolute universality is to perfect ones.

The Measure of Man

There is another reasonable standard of membership that derives from the nature of man rather than from geography. Of the 162 international organizations 124 have 30 or fewer members. They are, for the most part, organizations in which all members can take part in all organs or functions. There can be much lost to an international organization of any type once its membership passes the point where all members can sit down together and in a relatively unstructured way talk over their plans or differences. Since no regional organization has more than 30 members, they will never have to face the problem in an acute form; but the nearly 60 organizations with potentially world-wide membership will be affected, probably in a way that will limit their memberships. Here again, the natural dynamics of international organizations makes for exclusiveness.

In order for an organization to break away from this restrictive influence it must establish a constitutional system by which less than all members can act for all. In setting its sights on world-wide membership, the League of Nations instituted such a system under the Council, whose membership was limited, and a similar arrangement was made later in the United Nations Security Council. The executive councils of other world organizations have been given varying degrees of authority to ex-

⁸ Although possibly overdone, this theme is thoroughly discussed in Nora Beloff (1963).

ercise their organizations' power. But such constitutional arrangements, which are a sine qua non in world organizations, are difficult to achieve and maintain. The system of executive councils in the League of Nations and early United Nations was not put to a severe test because the memberships of world organizations then was between 25 and 50; and there remained the potentiality of effective action even in plenary session and in committees of the whole. It has been the surpassing of the 100-member figure that has put the United Nations Councils to the test and, as we have seen, United Nations Charter revision has had to begin in order to adjust the constitutional order to the massive increase in membership.

In order to have a world organization, there was no choice but to exceed "human dimensions" in the size of its membership. There simply could not be "conversation" among *all* the nations of the world, and they had to act through a constitutional system by which all members were represented by a few in an executive council. The problem was not that the world organization became too big, but that it grew too fast. The United Nations had growth pains during the early Sixties as new voting groups struggled to find their places in the organization, as the structure appeared to need some doing over, and as the Secretariat strained to include nationals of the new members. The Common Market anticipated similar growing pains in connection with the admission of Britain along with the trading partners that had formed the European Free Trade Association.

Human dimensions are not only a natural limitation on the size of membership of any given organization, they are a limitation on the number of organizations a single nation can join effectively. It is by no means to the benefit of the European nations that they are members of so many organizations: the United Nations family, numerous other world organizations and equally numerous European organizations. Multiple membership is a necessary evil. Many organizations exist in Europe because they were each started by slightly different membership, and the difference in membership continued to keep them apart. Likewise, the slight differences among the membership in organizations of the United Nations family has succeeded in keeping them apart. The International Labor Organization has an interest in preserving its tripartite membership of representatives of governments, employers, and labor unions. The United Nations financial organizations must do without the communist-bloc nations and certain of the less developed nations. A place must be found for the Holy See in the Universal Postal Union.

The price of the multiplicity of organizations is poor co-ordination and the diffusion of interest and effort among member nations. The value of the amalgamation of institutions has been demonstrated recently in the

struggle to unify the Coal and Steel Community, the Common Market and Euratom within an over-arching European Community. The fusion was resisted by the deGaulle government on the grounds that it would strengthen the Community unduly. Fusion was promoted by the other members of the Community precisely to achieve greater strength. Earlier, the United Nations took steps to strengthen itself by amalgamating its sister organizations within a single financing scheme for technical assistance that it controlled through its Economic and Social Council.

One can recognize the motive for leaving a fledgling international organization to the nations that show an interest in membership. It is impossible to force a larger membership upon it, because unwilling members could simply say "no" and refuse to co-operate. But when a variety of organizations have evolved to the point where their memberships approximate the membership norms of their regions, or approximate world-wide membership, then there is good reason to amalgamate sister organizations and thus help diminish the number of memberships in international organizations by individual nations to "human" proportions. Can France validly argue that it is able to co-ordinate its interests in 91 international organizations simultaneously? Once again we see here a reason to value the restriction, even diminution, of memberships in international organizations.

It appears in the last analysis that, quite contrary to the notion that international organizations are served by a loose and absorptive concept of their memberships (except in specific cases where organizations suffer from membership deficits), most additional membership can be undesirable, from several points of view. It may be positively destructive of the goals and, therefore, of the life of an organization. It may be a case of "too much too soon." Or it may exceed humanly manageable proportions. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of memberships is their superfluity, deriving from a superfluity of organizations of parallel membership; and the cause of excess or harmful memberships is more apt to be interests of individual nations rather than the interests of the organizations themselves.

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