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# Unpacking international organisations

The dynamics of  
compound bureaucracies

Jarle Trondal,  
Martin Marcussen,  
Torbjörn Larsson and  
Frode Veggeland

# Unpacking international organisations

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# Abbreviations

AD	Administrator (European Commission)
AST	Assistant (European Commission)
CDR	Career Development Review
CFDP	Common Foreign and Defence Policy
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
DDG	Deputy Director-General
DG	Director-General
	Directorate-General (of the European Commission)
EC	European Community
ECB	European Central Bank
EU	European Union
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GS	General Secretariat
IO	International organisation
IR	International relations
ITO	International Trade Organization
NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SNE	Seconded national expert
TAD	Trade and Agriculture Directorate
WTO	World Trade Organization

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# Foreword

This book introduces international bureaucracy as a key field of study for public administration and also rediscovers international bureaucracy as an essential ingredient in the study of international organisations. The questions posed by this book are to what extent, how and why international bureaucracies challenge and supplement the inherent Westphalian intergovernmental order based on territorial sovereignty. To what extent, how and why do international bureaucracies supplement the existing international intergovernmental order with a *multidimensional* international order subjugated by a compound set of decision-making dynamics? The ambition of this book is to rediscover international bureaucracies as a key engine of international organisations in particular, and as one important component of modern public administration more generally. The book explores the compound nature of international bureaucracy by comparing three such institutions: the European Commission, the OECD Secretariat, and the WTO Secretariat.

This book is the result of six years of co-operation between the authors. The project was launched in 2003 with the idea that international bureaucracy should be given more systematic scholarly attention and with a wish to compare everyday life inside international bureaucracies. The project was titled 'DISC – Dynamics of International Secretariats'. The initiative to compare international bureaucracies was partly triggered by claims in the literature of the *sui generis* nature of the European Commission compared to other international bureaucracies. This claim, we believed, was often put forward without systematically comparing the European Commission with other international bureaucracies, and thus, it was more often claimed than tested. Prior studies of the OECD and the WTO also indicated that the *sui generis* claims of the Commission should be challenged, substantiated and partly modified. This book adds to the comparative literature on international organisation particularly and to the wider field of public administration with fresh and original empirical observations from the life inside international bureaucracies.

During the 2003–9 period the research group has met several times in Brussels, Copenhagen, Kristiansand and Oslo to discuss and write. We have benefited extensively from the excellent infrastructure provided by the Larsson family in Brussels, by Martin Marcussen in Copenhagen, by Jarle Trondal in Kristiansand, and by ARENA in Oslo (the Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo). The process of writing this book has been firmly co-ordinated among the authors. All the authors have written in every chapter and the book is thus truly multi-authored. The need to ease the burden on each author, however, means that some authors have had the main responsibility of certain chapters. In order to make the book as coherent as possible and also in order to make the arguments as solid as achievable, all chapters have been internally reviewed by all authors through the whole writing process. Among the most enduring discussions in the research group has been how to operationalise different decision-making dynamics within international bureaucracies and also how to disentangle them. The second continuing theme of discussion during the project period has been how to theoretically account for what we see. How do we best theoretically anchor the compound dynamics within international bureaucracies?

The project has been supported over the years by financial allowances from the Joint Committee of the Nordic Social Science Research Councils, from the Norwegian Research Council, and from ARENA. Thanks should also be given to the CONNEX network (Connecting Excellence on European Governance) for providing opportunities to present and discuss earlier versions of the book at several conferences and workshops. Different sections of the book have been presented at several CONNEX conferences, the Norwegian Political Science Association, the European Consortium for Political Research and the European Union Studies Association. We have benefited greatly from discussions with Michael Bauer, Morten Egeberg, Hussein Kassim, Morten Øgård, Anchrit Wille and two anonymous referees who provided valuable comments on several draft versions of this book. We are also indebted to Simon Bulmer for thorough comments on the very last draft of the manuscript. During the production of the book the editorial team at Manchester University Press has been most helpful. Without their support and backing we would not have been able to finalise this manuscript. The authors would also like to thank Hege Haugland, Lene Jeppesen, Zuzana Murdoc and Anders Siegumfelt for much-needed research assistance, and Melinda Hill for improving our language. Last but not least, we are most grateful to those officials at the European Commission, the OECD Secretariat, and the WTO Secretariat who gave of their scarce time to this project.

Jarle Trondal, Martin Marcussen, Torbjörn Larsson and Frode Veggeland  
Kristiansand, Copenhagen, Brussels and Oslo



# Part I

## Introducing and theorising international bureaucracy



# The bureaucracy of international organisations

International bureaucracies are compound systems of public administration that blend departmental, epistemic and supranational decision-making dynamics. The intergovernmental dynamic is seen to be less essential within international bureaucracies. The fact that the departmental dynamic seems to be overwhelmingly present does not mean that other dynamics are absent; rather, the departmental logic seems to be the basis and maybe even the precondition for the two other dynamics to play out. This world of multiple behavioural dynamics is depicted in this volume as being organised around concentric circles where *the departmental dynamic serves as the foundational dynamic* at the very centre of bureaucracy. Behavioural dynamics within international bureaucracies are activated fairly independently of the larger international organisation in which these bureaucracies are embedded. This book also illuminates the fact that the mix of behavioural dynamics within international bureaucracies is organisationally contingent and more complex than assumed by the theoretical orthodoxy of the study of international relations (IR). International bureaucracies seem to share important behavioural dynamics due to the *organisational characteristics* of these bureaucracies.

International bureaucracies constitute a distinct and increasingly important feature of public administration studies. However, the role of international bureaucracies has been largely neglected in most social science sub-disciplines. This lacuna perhaps reflects a more general gulf between various social science sub-disciplines, such as public administration and organisation theory (March 2009), as well as comparative public administration scholarship and research on international organisation and administration (Heady 1998: 33; Jörgens et al. 2009). This book takes a first step into a third generation of international organisation (IO) studies. Paradoxically, this requires that the study of international organisations is somehow ‘normalised’, i.e. that a public administrative turn comes to characterise IO studies (Trondal 2007a).



Comparing cases of international bureaucracy will arguably move the study of international bureaucracy towards 'normal science'. 'Even if there is only one [Commission], we should study this case carefully and in a comparative fashion' (Schneider 2008: 279). Until now studies of international bureaucracy have largely lacked comparative designs. For example, the study of the European Commission has been criticised for the 'N=1' problem (Warleigh-Lack and Phinnemore 2009: 216). There has also been a tendency in the literature to assume that international bureaucracies can somehow be understood by reading their formal mandates and legal provisions. This book argues that one of the defining features of international bureaucracies is their compound nature consisting of multiple behavioural dynamics, role definitions and identities among the incumbents. Since the study of national administration has a long tradition of studying the lives and day-to-day routines of national civil servants, such a perspective, if applied to international bureaucracies, would imply a normalisation of IO studies – a so-called public administrative turn (Trondal 2007a). Despite the obvious differences that exist between national and international bureaucracy, a third generation of IO studies would be based on long and extensive experience and theoretical development within the area of public administration studies. This requires that new questions be asked and new concepts applied to the field of IO research.

Some scholars (e.g. Rosenau 1997) picture the nation-state as weakened, hollowed out and fragmented due to the advent of international bureaucracies. Others argue that international bureaucracies merely strengthen and integrate the nation-state as a coherent Westphalian system of territorial sovereignty (e.g. Biersteker 2003; Moravcsik 1998). Moreover, some picture international bureaucracies as a key motor in the transformation of nation-state institutions (Cowles, Caporaso and Risse 2001; Wessels, Maurer and Mittag 2003). Others argue that the effects of international bureaucracies are moderate and are associated with the evolving dynamics of domestic change (Andersson 2002; Olsen 2003a). Conflicting assessments of these kinds represent more than standard academic turf-battles with regard to the transformation of political orders (see Hurrelmann et al. 2007). We are in fact facing complex, puzzling and poorly understood relationships between the nuts and bolts of international bureaucracies and policy making within domestic governments.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the *modus operandi* of international bureaucracies is essential in order to better understand how decisions are shaped within international organisations and also how and to what extent international organisations transform domestic government(s) and governance. The emergence of relatively independent international bureaucracies may profoundly transform the executive branch of government in Europe (e.g. Graziano and Vink 2007).

The pertinent question targeted by this book is to what extent, how and why international bureaucracies challenge and supplement the inherent Westphalian intergovernmental order based on territorial autonomy (Gourevitch 2003; Kegley and Raymond 2002: 192; March and Olsen 1998; Rosenau 1996). To what extent, how and why do international bureaucracies supplement the existing international intergovernmental order with a *multidimensional* international order subjugated by a compound set of decision-making dynamics? In order to approach these large-scale questions, this book focuses on the following research questions:

- Firstly, what behavioural dynamics predominate in the everyday decision-making processes within international bureaucracies? More specifically, *to what extent* are intergovernmental behavioural dynamics transcended or supplemented by supranational, departmental and/or epistemic behavioural dynamics within international bureaucracies?
- Secondly, under what conditions do different behavioural dynamics dominate within international bureaucracies? More specifically, *under what conditions* are intergovernmental dynamics bypassed by supranational, departmental and/or epistemic behavioural dynamics within international bureaucracies?

The ambition of this book is to rediscover international bureaucracies as a key engine of international organisations in particular, and as one important component of modern public administration more generally. The book has two main objectives:

- 1 Firstly, the book systematically compares behavioural dynamics within a carefully selected number of international bureaucracies. The focus is on studying these dynamics within international bureaucracies at the actor level – that is, by studying the behaviour and roles as perceived by the officials themselves. The book outlines a conceptual map of four generic behavioural dynamics that are likely to be evoked by these officials: intergovernmental, supranational, departmental and epistemic dynamics (see below). Essentially, the Westphalian international order dominated by the intergovernmental dynamic is challenged to the extent that international bureaucracies embed supranational, departmental and epistemic dynamics in everyday decision-making processes. Admittedly, there are no guarantees that these dynamics always materialise in the actors' behaviour and ultimately in the decisions reached by international organisations. However, they serve as cognitive and normative frames for action, rendering it more likely than not that particular decision-making

- dynamics are associated with certain behavioural patterns (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981: 86; Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen 2001: 250).
- 2 Secondly, the book illuminates some causal factors that may help to explore the conditions under which different behavioural dynamics are manifested in the behavioural and role perceptions of the incumbents of international bureaucracies. Essentially, we do not propose to 'test' the four dynamics outlined above in a rigorous manner. They serve more as 'searchlights for illuminating empirical patterns in our data' (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981: 20).

### What is international bureaucracy?

International organisations penetrate ever more areas and levels of national government. Evidently, the international political scene has become increasingly organised in the post-Second World War period, reflected in the upsurge, institutionalisation and impact of international bureaucracies (Finnemore 1996; March and Olsen 1998). There are currently around 5,000 international organisations, many of which have semi-autonomous institutions in addition to plenary assemblies (Bauer and Knill 2007: 14). In a world of international organisations there is a rising number of 'unelected bodies' that complement the traditional branch of government at the domestic level based on elections (Vibert 2007). The task of international bureaucracies has become increasingly that of an active and independent policy-making institution and less a passive technical servicing instrument for the plenary assemblies (Lemoine 1995: 28). International bureaucracies are important, though not omnipotent, centres of gravity of most contemporary international organisations and serve partly as a new branch of government.<sup>2</sup>

International bureaucracies consist of the permanent secretariats of international organisations. They are organisationally separate from the plenary assemblies of international organisations and have a formal autonomy vis-à-vis the member states. The autonomy is often codified in staff regulations. International bureaucracies typically have fixed locations, they have a formalised division of labour vis-à-vis the plenary assembly, they have regular meetings, and they are staffed mostly with permanent personnel recruited on the principle of merit, although sometimes supplemented with a more flexible set of contracted temporary staff (seconded officials). One essential element of international bureaucracies is that the staff have sworn an oath of undivided and primary *loyalty* towards the international bureaucracy. With respect to the formal organisation of international bureaucracies, they are mostly vertically-specialised bureaucracies, often with an administrative leader at the top. The European Commission (the Commission) is *sui generis* by

also having a political umbrella at the top with the College of Commissioners and their Cabinets. Even more important, the Commission is unusual in being organised outside the Council of Ministers and thus formally independent of member-state preferences and the inherited intergovernmental order. The Commission is the hub in a multilevel union administration that spans levels of governance, and has gained administrative capacities to support its formal independence vis-à-vis the Council (of the European Union) and the European Parliament, for example with respect to the initiating and implementation of legal acts (Curtin and Egeberg 2008). This particular institutional role of the Commission being an autonomous international executive serving as part of a quasi-federal European executive order was also envisioned by Jean Monnet (Duchêne 1994).

International bureaucracies are also horizontally specialised bureaucracies, resembling the ministerial organisation of the member states where different policy portfolios are linked to separate ministers. Beyond purely administrative functions such as arranging meetings, translation, legal assistance etc., some international bureaucracies also increasingly enjoy initiating and implementing functions vis-à-vis the plenary assembly and monitoring functions concerning member states' implementation of decisions. They are also important in integrating external institutions (such as member-state ministries and agencies, and other international organisations) into their own decision-making process through committees and boards (for example the Commission's web of expert groups). For example, within the EU, executive functions such as policy initiation, policy formulation and policy making are increasingly transported from national governments to international bureaucracies.<sup>3</sup> International bureaucracies contribute to initiating, formulating and influencing the policies and politics of international organisations, and to the administrative continuity and institutional memories between the ministerial meetings. Essentially, international bureaucracies have increasingly become political secretariats for the international organisation. However, despite being created by the states, the international bureaucracies are not necessarily instruments of these states.

Historically, it was the creation of international secretariats that transformed 'a series of conferences into an organization' (Claude 1956: 194). An early example of a permanent international secretariat was in the League of Nations (although this was largely staffed with seconded national officials without a primary loyalty to the secretariat, and also overly staffed with personnel carrying out technical servicing rather than policy making) (Lemoine 1995: 18; Mathiason 2007: 28). What is key to the *de facto* existence of international bureaucracies is that its officials should act relatively independently of the member states and be loyal to the international bureaucracy. The first international bureaucracy to

dictate that its officials should be internationally loyal was the League of Nations, which in 1920 claimed that:

the members of the Secretariat, once appointed, are no longer the servants of the country of which they are citizens, but become for the time being servants only of the League of Nations. Their duties are not national but international. (League of Nations 1920: 137)

Whereas most international-relations approaches view international organisations as black boxes and an epiphenomenon to inter-state relations, this study unpacks the executive arms – the bureaucratic interior – of international organisations, and does so comparatively. The Commission is no longer depicted as a unique case among international bureaucracies. The goal is to analyse the similarities and differences in the internal working of international bureaucracies. The literature on international organisations has only recently started conceptualising and empirically illuminating the inner core of international bureaucracies (see Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Reinalda and Verbeek 2004b). However, ‘to date, we do not really know how to conceptualize international organizations and how to deal with the organizational components’ of international bureaucracies (Gehring 2003: 13). This book offers an organisation-theory approach in order to conceptualise the compound nature of international bureaucracies, and provides a comparative empirical analysis of the behavioural dynamics within three such bureaucracies – the Commission, the OECD Secretariat, and the WTO Secretariat. The book thereby challenges claims like ‘comparing the Commission with international secretariats ... would certainly be of very limited usefulness’ (Christiansen 1996: 77).

One rationale for comparing the selected international bureaucracies is that they share some basic organisational features as public inter-state bodies that are organised according to well-known organising principles from domestic executive institutions. However, these three international bureaucracies differ in many respects. Most importantly, they differ with respect to their degree of independence vis-à-vis the member states (see above). Moreover, they also vary with respect to the size and heterogeneity of membership (global vs. regional), their main outputs (hard law vs. soft law), and the top leadership of the administrative apparatus (administrative vs. political). A second rationale for studying international bureaucracies generally and the selected international bureaucracies in particular is the idea that everyday behavioural dynamics inside international bureaucracies reflect *less* the international organisations in which they are embedded and much more the *organisational variables* of the international bureaucracies themselves. Previous studies of management reforms within different international organisations suggest that the international organisation as such is of

limited relevance in order to explain reforms of their international bureaucracies (Bauer and Knill 2007: 194). Hence, it is time to unpack the black box of international bureaucracies.

Executive politics in Europe is in transition, arguably moving towards a European Administrative Space (Curtin and Egeberg 2008). One essential characteristic of this executive transformation is the increased integration of national ministries and agencies on the one hand and international bureaucracies on the other. The transformation of public administration is seen in the literature as the spread of second-generation New Public Management reforms (e.g. Christensen and Lægread 2007), as reforms of international organisations (Bauer and Knill 2007), and as the increased integration of the public administrations of international organisations and domestic government systems (Egeberg 2006). This study contributes to this literature by analysing the compound nature of international bureaucracies. Whereas most of the previous studies of international bureaucracies have been single-case studies, this volume presents a comparative analysis of three selected international bureaucracies. This book, however, does not study the historical routes, roots and reforms of international bureaucracies as has been done elsewhere (e.g. Bauer and Knill 2007; Mathiason 2007).

How can we *explain* the compound nature of international bureaucracies? Theoretically, this book suggests a middle-range organisation-theory approach to explain the everyday behavioural dynamics of international bureaucracies. This approach advocates that the internal dynamics of international bureaucracies may be accounted for by analysing their

- organisational components;
- recruitment procedures;
- relationships with external institutions;
- demographic composition of personnel.

The advanced argument suggests that these organisational characteristics foster the emergence of compound behavioural dynamics among the incumbents (see Table 1.2 below).

This introductory chapter is organised as follows:

- The first section outlines and substantiates the compound nature of international bureaucracies.
- The second section provides a short literature review of past and more recent studies of international bureaucracies.
- The final sections present the methodology and data that underpin the book, followed by a description of the structure of this volume.

**The compound nature of international bureaucracies: a third generation of study**

Domestic public administration is traditionally established to prepare and implement public policy. Historically, the study of public administration has been limited to the study of domestic administrative systems, notably reforms and politics within domestic ministries and agencies (e.g. Christensen and Lægreid 2007). A 'public administration turn' in the study of international organisations, particularly in the study of the Commission (Trondal 2007a), has recently directed increased attention to the reforms and dynamics of the 'ministries' and 'agencies' of international organisations.

With this volume we are basically drawing the contours of a third generation of research on international organisations. In the first generation, the main lines of debate concerned whether or not international organisations were effective decision-making forums. There seemed to be general agreement that the most important actors on the world scene were nation-states. While some would argue that these nation-states could reap immediate benefits from international co-operation in the form of reduced transaction costs, others would argue that when the salience of policy issues was raised, i.e. when issues were politicised, they were primarily dealt with in purely bilateral forums. In other words, multilateralism is good when it is harmless. In that first generation, there was not much interest in what was going on below the intergovernmental surface. International organisations were mainly dealt with as black boxes, with the distinct characteristics of international bureaucracies being ignored. Therefore, in the second generation of research on international organisations, attention was directed at the international bureaucracy, highlighting the fact that bureaucracies at an international level could be expected to be just as compound as any other bureaucracy at a national level. In the second generation, the field of international organisation research was opened up for public administration scholars. This development can be described as a public administration 'turn' in international organisation research (Trondal 2007a). To discover that international bureaucracies can have identities, resources, authority and interests of their own is, of course, an important development (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). However, when seen from a purely public administration point of view, this seems to be a less novel discovery.

Therefore, the purpose of a third generation of international organisation research is to go one step further by studying the criteria for and the patterns, dynamics, conditions, varieties and dynamics of international bureaucracies. In the second generation of study, the challenge was to bring international bureaucracies back into the study of international politics and to argue that bureaucracies matter in their own

right. The third generation of studies is mainly interested in studying *how* they matter. The fact that international bureaucracies are compound systems on their own account requires that we analytically treat them as such. There is no one way of doing that. In the same way as a broad spectrum of public administration tools exists for studying the organisational dynamics of national public administrations, we would expect in a third generation of research on international organisations that multiple research strategies are applied to highlight different aspects of the international bureaucracies – their structures, resources, authority, relations, functions etc.

Whereas the second generation of international organisation studies viewed international bureaucracies as complex systems, this volume adds two elements:

- Firstly, by outlining explicitly *what components* make up the compound systems of international bureaucracies.
- Secondly, by suggesting *conditions under which* each component is more likely to be mobilised than others.

Whereas the second generation of international organisation research largely applied *either/or* theorising, this study suggests that a *both/and* approach should be applied. Such an approach tends to view the everyday decision-making processes in international bureaucracies as compound (Olsen 2007b). This view reflects the ‘growing recognition of human and social complexity’ in recent integration theory (Geyer 2003: 19). The idea of compound administrative systems is not new. ‘This view of political order harks back to a tradition from Plato, Aristotle, Polybius and Thomas Aquinas and their ideas about how “mixed” orders and combinations of competing, inconsistent and contradictory organising principles and structures may co-exist and balance interest, values and claims to power’ (Olsen 2007a: 13–14). However, the *study* of compound administrative systems signifies a fairly new scholarly turn (Olsen 2007a: 13) and it tends to see administrative systems as combining and balancing ‘a repertoire of overlapping, supplementary and competing forms’ (Olsen 2007b: 22–23). This classical tradition in the study of public administration argues that robust and legitimate administrative systems should balance several competing dynamics sequentially and/or simultaneously (Jacobsen 1960; Olsen 2007a). Multidimensional orders are considered more robust against external shocks and therefore preferable to uni-dimensional orders (March and Olsen 1989; Vibert 2007). Conceptualising public administration as compound systems is based on the assumption that international bureaucracies rest on the mobilisation of multiple complementary sets of institutions, actors, interests, decision-making arenas, values, norms, and cleavages (Schmidt



2006). The empirical yardstick thereof is the mobilisation of intergovernmental, supranational, departmental and epistemic behavioural dynamics among the officials of international bureaucracies. In essence, the transformation of international bureaucracies has to do with the shifting mix of co-existing everyday behavioural dynamics within international bureaucracies.

Recent literature has assumed that the Commission represents a critical case of transformation beyond the Westphalian political order. It is argued that if we do *not* observe transformational dynamics within the Commission we should not expect similar dynamics within other international bureaucracies (Johnston 2005). This assumption is challenged in this volume by advocating that international bureaucracies are multidimensional administrative apparatuses, embodying contradictions and dilemmas that are difficult to resolve and that affect how decisions are made. International bureaucracies are seldom unidimensional as suggested by realist and neo-liberalist theoretical orthodoxy, stressing the intergovernmental nature of international organisations. This book challenges this theoretical orthodoxy by seeing international bureaucracies as compound systems of public administration. They are not merely neutral tools used by member governments to fulfil predetermined preferences; they are also Weberian rule-driven bureaucracies, epistemic communities of professional experts, and socialising institutions that transform nationally oriented officials into community-minded supranational officials (Checkel 2003; Haas 1992; Lemoine 1995). International bureaucracies are multidimensional organisations that should be analysed by fine-grained operational accounts in order to understand their diverse *modi operandi*. They live with inbuilt tensions between at least four behavioural dynamics:

- 1 An intergovernmental dynamic;
- 2 A supranational dynamic;
- 3 A departmental dynamic;
- 4 An epistemic dynamic.

This book argues that these actor-level dynamics may be complementary rather than contradictory (cf. Herrmann, Risse and Brewer 2004). As suggested by early contingency theory (Thompson 1967: 44), integration research (Pentland 1973: 196) and recent neo-institutional approaches (Olsen 2007a: 13), bureaucracies tend to combine and integrate a multidimensional set of organisational components and decision-making dynamics. We suggest that a compound system of public administration manages to integrate a multidimensional set of behavioural and role perceptions. Behavioural and role perceptions are generalised receipts for action as well as normative systems of self-reference that provide