Chapter 1

Introduction

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CONFIGURATIONS OF AMBIGUITY

The near impossibility of identifying the common qualities of global organizations probably follows from the fact that their most publicly visible features seem to assemble into contradictions. They tend to be sources of popular prestige and gathering points of NGO activism, yet in the media every major calamity of international relations and global finance becomes a failure of global governance (the examples are too numerous to mention, though Kosovo, Rwanda, Iraq, and Syria come instantly to mind). Many of their goals involve correcting the wrongs of states, yet they are persistently, almost defiantly state-centric; and even with the creation of new norms and the dramatic rise of NGO participation in their initiatives, their decision-making remains dominated by states (Weiss and Daws 2007: 3). They trumpet their efforts to be transparent and accountable, yet regularly generate documents that heighten obscurity, while producing ideas and policies behind closed doors. They are commonly seen as epicenters of an oppressive neoliberal world order, associated with a dramatically widening global income gap between rich and poor, while being called upon to lead the way in ending hunger, reducing poverty, and promoting development. The list could go on.

The complexity of these organizations can also be seen in the challenge of naming them. Clearly they are international in the sense that states are always central to their structure and procedures; and they are multilateral in the sense that states coordinate their policies in groups or blocs and occasionally in consensus. Strictly speaking, the organizations that we consider in this volume are not all United Nations specialized agencies, even though they are all closely interconnected – the World Bank Group, for example, was created in the Bretton Woods conference in 1944 before the Charter of the United Nations was drafted a year later; and the World Trade Organization is one of four officially designated “Related Organizations” created between 1957 and 1997. Our intention, therefore, is not just to offer a set of ethnographic studies of the

Footnote:
1. The other related organizations are each concerned with weapons regulation: the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty
UN, but to take a new approach to those entities often referred to as “global organizations.”

The sense in which these organizations are global, however, is particularly complicated. In some respects, they are not global at all. State interests are often a deciding, and limiting, factor in what they are able to do. They struggle to transcend strictly national or even international frameworks, yet, as institutions of “global” governance, remain clearly dependent on them, and therefore take on qualities that are neither entirely global nor post-international (Fleischman and Kalman 2015). In these global spaces, particularities are asserted. The concept of indigenous peoples, for example, is very much based on the existence of distinct rights and identities. Forums of pastoralists and farmers in the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) similarly bring locality into universal space; and there are many more similar examples to be found. International law has universal aspirations, but often in support of locality, while the UN as a whole is now (together with the NGO boom of the past several decades) promoting a bottom-up approach in its advancement of human rights and development.

In other ways these institutions achieve their intended universality. Nothing they do can be in conflict with universal human rights, and an overarching sense of humanity is a more general reference point for their work. Certainly globality can be seen in the elaborate alchemy of actors that they bring together: bureaucrats with cosmopolitan backgrounds and identities, state-sponsored diplomats, and a bewildering array of NGOs, some with their own global mandates and others that are part of global networks and social movements. The common denominator of the contributions to this volume, then, is a distinct kind of institution, situated in intersections of the “local,” the “national,” and the “global,” in which globality emerges as the central point of reference (although as much in the realm of ideals as in reality).

By setting ourselves the challenge of exploring these institutions using the methods of ethnography, the first obstacle we face is this seemingly deep-seated ambiguity. Or perhaps it is not an obstacle at all, but a place to begin, the kind of thing that characterizes the terrain that, as ethnographers, we want to explore.

Despite a growing awareness of their social and historical density, bureaucracies, (global organizations in particular) are still commonly reified, still seen as essentially rational, efficient, and dispassionate – or their opposite: dysfunctional and arbitrary. Only the people who work within structures of institutional incoherence can tell us how things actually work – or fail to work – as they act on multiple, sometimes conflicting interests. The ethnographic studies included in this book each question the monolithic representations of international
institutions produced by their mandates and by the outside perspectives that focus only on the content of their documents and public statements. Instead, ethnographers portray institutions by starting with the people who populate them, above all the ways that they maneuver through structural obstacles and opportunities, and in the process reveal the tensions and contests behind formal appearances. Reflecting on the contributions of the ethnography of institutions, Colin Hoag finds that, simply by shifting attention away from the products of bureaucratic process and toward the period of time before decisions are rendered, “bureaucratic practices appear not as the product of logics (a contextualized rational choice), orders of discourse, or superordinate powers, but as a tangle of desires, habits, hunches, and conditions of possibility” (2011: 86).

The institutions of global governance as depicted by anthropologists are social worlds with distinct characters, influenced by their connections with civil society, states, transnational corporations, and publics. They are also influenced by the visions and personalities of the people who work in them, situated in an ebb and flow that includes diplomats, consultants, activists, lawyers, interns, translators, media representatives, office workers, archivists, housekeepers, and security personnel. They are worlds apart, united by cosmopolitan ideals in their inspiration and commitment to diplomacy in their methods.

As with any organized, goal-oriented setting of human interaction, much of what happens within global organizations is like a theater production. Everyone plays a role, some of course more important than others, but each indispensable. As with the unfolding of a good story, there are unexpected alignments of interests that complicate the usual division of roles. Diplomats, civil servants, and activists (NGOs, the private sector, etc.) do not always stay tidily in their places, but sometimes form alliances that cross boundaries, or come into conflict in efforts that are meant to be collaborative.

Finding themselves in the middle of this drama, ethnographers aim at unraveling and revealing the internal structures and unwritten rules and practices that are not always discernible to the outsider but that nevertheless establish the framework for the actions that follow. Following the interactions of experts through administrative or activist networks reveals the porous boundaries of institutions, their extensions of influence into other administrative and social realms. Listening to these experts talk about what they do and why they do it reveals the dominant attitudes that influence the priorities of policy – but that also dissent from them: the palace intrigues, resistance to dominant ideas, the contradictions internal to institutions, the thoughts that never find their way into the media or official publications. Whether their research involves tagging along with diplomats as they rush between office buildings in Manhattan, collating stacks of documents, listening for hours on end to NGO delegates delivering their prepared statements in UN meetings, or participating in any number of things that take place in global organizations, ethnographers at the same time develop a kind of “double vision” that picks up on informal exchanges,
snippets of conversation, small, accidental insights that accumulate to reveal the complexity, diversity, and irrationality of organizational life.

Even in the process of rationalizing the world, of making (often excessive) use of numerical indicators, legal categories, and formal procedures, global organizations cannot help but take on some of the qualities of the people who create them and work in them. In essence, these institutions are expressions of human determination, ingenuity, error, and frailty in ambitious projects of human betterment. As subjects of anthropological inquiry, they appear quite different from the way they present themselves, in much the same way that individual persons, considered closely by a sympathetic observer, almost never appear quite like their self-representations.

CROSSING THE GATE

It is now taken for granted that ethnography takes for its subject matter a wide range of quintessentially “modern” settings, including courts, police forces, laboratories, and nongovernmental organizations, and, moreover, that this methodological approach is no longer the exclusive province of anthropology but is taken up by scholars in a wide range of disciplines. At the same time, it is a bit surprising how long it took for ethnography to make a transition in its subject matter, from people on the margins of states and empires to the “modern” institutions that sometimes exercised power in those settings. The anthropology of institutions – a term that includes both the sub-field and method at the foundation of this book – has been a legitimate part of the discipline for only a few decades. This development, Marc Abeéls finds (Chapter 2 in this volume), is an outcome of globalization, of the rapid flow of information and images, which contributed to erasing the mythical and “exotic” qualities that once favored different societies as ethnological subjects. In these changed and rapidly changing circumstances, institutions have become the legitimate subject matter of anthropological inquiry.

An early example of institutional ethnography – one that is remarkable in its audacity, yet rarely acknowledged as part of the history of the discipline – comes from a series of “shop floor studies” by the Manchester School in the 1950s and 1960s, in which Max Gluckman’s classic study of colonial ritual and relationships in Zululand became a source of inspiration for interpreting the dynamics between workers and managers in a British factory (Wright 1994: 10–14). This kind of extension of anthropological research methods to “modern” subjects did not occur with any regularity in the discipline until, in essence, it became impossible to ignore. In a globalized world, people could no longer be understood in isolation from transnational activist networks and powerful institutions. In the 1970s, the subject matter of anthropology, with its focus on former (or current) colonies and marginalized people, was being called into question, in a shift Laura Nader referred to as “studying up.” “What if,” Nader exhorted, “in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power.
rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?” (1972: 289). Corresponding with the tenor of this question, a new direction took place in anthropology, which eventually made it possible (and legitimate) to include such things as business, scientific enterprises, and government institutions among the “field sites” of anthropology (Gellner and Hirsch 2001). A literature (almost a sub-field in itself) emerged specifically dedicated to the “anthropology of the state” (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Trouillot 2001). The limits of the subject matter of anthropology, once defined largely by colonial projects, were transformed by applying the tools of ethnography to the loci that can be considered the essence of modernity: the sources of the power of states, courts, legislatures, financial institutions, the European Union, and, ultimately, institutions of global governance.²

A particularly important source for the ethnography of global institutions, and another kind of challenge to colonial projects, came from a direction that we might call “from below,” with its origin in local settings – the people and communities on the margins of states that constitute the “classic” subject matter of anthropology. The invasion of global organizations into fields where anthropologists did research, usually among people on the margins of states, was suddenly evident in the form of projects, advisors, and funds (Müller 2013: 3–4).³ In some cases, ethnographers also found catastrophic conditions of dispossession and displacement that accompanied this invasion, and that added powerful feelings of indignation to their research motivations. Anthropologists were able to see how local actors were both impacted by and able to navigate the agencies that appeared in their midst with the goal of their improvement. At this point it was almost to be expected that the anthropologists’ curiosity would turn to these agencies themselves as part of the subject matter they were trying to understand, using the approach of “the ethnography of organizations.” The participation of anthropologists in international development projects and the human rights movement especially favored this shift to the study of global bureaucracy. These researchers were ideally situated to investigate the movement from interventions and activism in the margins of states to meetings sponsored by major agencies based in Geneva and New York. This starting point tended to emphasize the networks that create links between local settings and global agencies (see Riles 2001). In these circumstances, the participation of anthropologists as observers in UN agencies was less a matter of finding the centers of power being exercised in local settings and more the challenge of following activists and experts as they moved through networks that converged into international meetings. That is to say, having discovered new forms of networking among the people with whom they worked, some anthropologists “followed” the people and their networks to the

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² See, for example, Abélès (2001), Latour (2009), and Shore (2000).
³ Examples of the ethnography of global institutions of development with a focus on local settings include Mosse (2005 and 2013) and Li (2007).
institutions of global governance, and, from there, developed research agendas that began from the institutional vantage point.\(^4\)

Regardless of what combination of motivation, curiosity, and serendipity brought them to enter a multilateral agency as an observer, each of the contributors to this book at some point “crossed the gate” following a decision to better understand an organization with powerful impacts on peoples’ lives. In some cases, the fundamental contradiction between power and participation (that key distinctive feature of the UN and its related bodies) stimulated their interest in institutional research, acting as both a basic finding and a source of impetus. As anthropologists, each found a way to stay or to keep coming back, to extend the time and depth of their observations. And to do their research, each developed a method or a regime of observation tailored to their unique circumstances as investigators. To put it simply, they not only had to cross the gate, they had to figure out what to do once they got to the other side.

CENTRAL THEMES

This leads to a question that now allows us to introduce the central themes of this book: what are the main qualities of global organizations, aside from their structures and mandates, that emerge from close attention to their human composition, to the shifts between formality and informality, the discreet sidebars and cafeteria conversations, and all the other accumulated experiences and observations that follow from long-term involvement in the daily life of the institution? Of course, the subheadings that we provide in answer to this question are not intended as a complete list of traits. Taken together, however, these different points of discussion help us to arrive at a complex picture of global institutions, in some ways an ethnographic account in itself, one that departs from the classic reifications of bureaucracy or knee-jerk reactions to their most visible powers and incapacities.

\textit{Method}

One of the common themes of the papers assembled in this book centers on the distinct problems of entry and access to information associated with the ethnography of global institutions. Once they collect their badges and find their way beyond the gates, past security, and into the hallways, meeting rooms, offices, archives, and cafeterias of global institutions, what is it that makes an ethnographer different from other kinds of scholar, some of whom might be sharing the same space and working on the same topic? What is the \textit{ethnography} of the United Nations and its related organizations?

\(^4\) This grassroots-to-the-capital approach to the anthropology of international organizations is emphasized in Müller’s historical overview of institutional ethnography (2013). Examples can be found in Niezen (2003) and Merry (2006).
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Knowing the human qualities of institutions well enough to report on them in detail requires deep familiarity. An ethnographic approach therefore involves, above all, long-term research: time in the field is ideally measured not in weeks, but in months and years. This approach is also participatory. Even when the focus of inquiry is on one meeting, one brief event, the ethnographer engages in as much self-exposure to institutional work and collective activity as possible. Ethnographers set themselves the goal of practicing a kind of empathy, putting themselves “in the shoes” of others, understanding them as human, with their own motives, emotions, areas of competence, fields of action, and moral dilemmas. Their central task in institutional ethnography is to situate this personal empathy in its context, to “unpack” or “translate” the actions and attitudes of human actors within their professional setting. And, in so doing, they ideally approach their judgments at a remove, not content with basing them on public political contests or institutional policy statements. This empathy involves a process of critical immersion, learning the way things work from the inside, the terminology, procedures, values, and relationships. Such immersion is critical in the sense that, despite a shift in anthropology toward greater proximity of ethnographers to their objects of study, there is never fully a release from the perspective of the observer, the note-taker and would-be writer. Admittedly, there are some who become completely immersed in the roles they take on as part of their entry to the field, in their professional lives as fieldworkers. But at some point there is a distance involved in observation, which means that one is never fully part of what one is observing, even as a participant. The inner voice of the writer intrudes, takes note, and situates the unfolding of social life in an exterior project.

There is wide variation in terms of the particular regimes of access within which the contributors to this volume did their work. Every organization, as a subject of inquiry, calls for boundaries and identities to be negotiated, and the duration of stay and focus of research to be formally approved, sometimes in ways that reflect the formalism of management consultants (Gellner and Hirsch 2001: 5). In meeting these requirements, the contributors to this volume differed in the periods of time in which they made use of their access and the roles they filled, whether as “researcher,” “intern,” “consultant,” “delegate,” etc. Several drew attention to the challenge of doing ethnography with interlocutors whose backgrounds were similar to their own, to the point of being able to collaborate with anthropologists in their observations and interpretations. This experience is discussed by Holmes and Marcus (2005) and Deeb and Marcus (2011) in reference to what they call “para-ethnography” in “para-sites” in which there is a basic “epistemic partnership” with

5 Annelise Riles (2006: 3), by contrast, emphasizes the recent emergence of multiple dimensions of ethnographic proximity.

6 Abeés develops this point in his edited volume on the WTO, noting that, as a whole, the discipline Anthropology has changed, in part through the ethnography of institutions. Whereas for a long time it had for its object remote, alien, unfamiliar societies, “today,” Abeés writes, “the Other is more and more taken up with the same problems we have: from one part or another of the same planet, one finds oneself subjected to transnational economic and political strategies” (Abeés 2011: 18).
subjects whose perspectives, curiosity, and intellectual ambitions closely resemble those of the ethnographer. This collaboration occurs in a sometimes difficult situation, a bit like attempting to be at the same time both a fish and an ichthyographer (Modzelewski 2001: 133).

This is not to say, however, that as sites of inquiry, global organizations are always readily familiar to the ethnographer, even when they share many things in terms of outlook and professional training with their interlocutors. Global institutions each possess their own culture, language, and daily practices, sometimes taking on deeply distinct, seemingly indecipherable forms. They are places where the ethnographer needs to actively cultivate understanding of the seemingly impenetrable. Familiarity is not a given that follows from the common qualities one might have with the people who occupy the agency’s offices.

The ways to accomplish such familiarity constitute the foremost challenge of ethnography. The models offered by those contributors who discussed method as a central part of their work share a central concern with how to begin to investigate the wide-ranging, complex, rife-with-contradictions reality of global institutions. For Marc Abeльès, this challenge was addressed through a team approach to the World Trade Organization, using a diverse, international team of ten researchers to cover a variety of institutional activities and to conduct interviews from various starting points or premises of interlocution. For Maria Sapignoli, the preferred approach was to diversify her roles and points of engagement with an institution (the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues). And for Jane Cowan, the solution involved entering the UPR (Universal Periodic Review) with a small team of researchers, which included Julie Billaud and another collaborator, taking on various statuses and roles while examining different aspects of the review process. These are only a few examples of the basic initial methodological challenge faced by every institutional ethnographer – establishing a regime of access in conditions of bureaucratic hierarchy, systemic secrecy, and control or “management” of knowledge.

These examples also reveal that methodological problems and their solutions are inseparable from the very nature of the organizations under investigation. The anthropologists’ conditions of entry and engagement reflect significant qualities of bureaucratic hierarchy, cosmopolitan staffing, and rhizomatic extension of institutional activities and ideas through (and beyond) the institutional system. “Method” in this sense is more than a technology of research; it is also deeply informative, revealing in itself something essential about the institutional Other.

**Officialdom, Expertise, and Experience**

Mark Malloch-Brown, reflecting on his long career that culminated in the position of Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations, observed a Jeckyll and Hyde quality to the UN, manifested in a permanent tension among its different employees, whom he classifies as the “people who work there who just want to get by” and
those “who have a personal sense of commitment to making a real difference” (Malloch-Brown 2015). The stereotype of “Gucci-shoed bureaucrats taking long lunches,” he observes, is more than offset by the work of individuals acting on a sense of purpose, whose efforts, taken together, make the UN a “force for good.” Hope for the betterment of the world, his reflections make clear, can be grounded in the visions and dedication of civil servants.

One of the things that sets apart global organizations from other kinds of institution is the tremendous variety of personal experience in officialdom. These agencies are made up of people with a starting point of cosmopolitan life experience and values, and who come together from many parts of the world, resulting in a kind of diverse, institutionally oriented statelessness, brought into being through a full range of human variety and life experience. To this diversity among officials we can add the variety of organizations in which they live and work, with their very different regimes or “cultures” of expertise, ranging from the econo-centrism of financial agencies such as the World Bank to the legal expertise favored in the Human Rights Council, along with the particular specialisms of smaller agencies such as the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) or the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC).

At the same time, it is possible to arrive at the impression that there is something distinctive about their employees, that there are certain qualities they commonly share. The civil servants who populate UN agencies in particular often begin their careers motivated by personal idealism. Often they have chosen their careers not only because of the prestige and benefits that come with UN officialdom, but because they genuinely want to make the world a better place, starting with their small corner of responsibility. They might recognize from the outset that there will be obstacles to projects of human improvement, but in the midst of efforts being made to save lives and make them better they see themselves as agents of possibility.

Then the pressures of conformity to institutional agendas make themselves felt. They are sometimes called upon to apply policies with which they fundamentally disagree, or required to be diplomatic in circumstances in which they are personally outraged. The agency can act like a magnet applied to the wrong side of their moral compass. More often than not, they respond by subverting their personal convictions and passions and simply getting on with the job. After all, no UN employee wants to be responsible for a failure of diplomacy by straying from the limits of sanctioned policy discourse. So the language they use in public communication tends toward the cautious and conciliatory, replicating the patterns in place.

It is, of course, to be expected that there would be resistance to this repression of conscience. Officials might use different methods to express their frustration, such as subtly inserting their own opinions into documents, infiltrating the flow of information that appears in the form of such things as Internet postings, newspapers, reports, and policy recommendations. Or they might break the rules by arranging closed door meetings intended to facilitate dialogue between stalemated states and NGOs.
that were otherwise only supposed to communicate through formal mechanisms. These are the conditions in which the private experience of officials encounters the moral hegemony of the institution. Given such conditions, it is important to consider the possibilities for collaborative resistance on the part of officials, whether their private opinions might be at odds with the dominant goals and policies of the agency, and, if so, the extent to which they are able to collaborate with other officials in somehow acting contrary to the trajectory of the agency’s official policy and practice.

There is a paradoxical ethic of statelessness among those who administer organizations that are centered upon the concerns of states. Ironically, states are sometimes the initial reference point for recruiting those who seek careers as UN civil servants, with preference given to hiring those from under-represented regions, and relatively fewer opportunities given to those from powerful and influential states, particularly in starting positions at the UN Headquarters. But once a potential employee is vetted and approved, they go through a process of denationalization, swearing loyalty to the organization and its goals above any rival personal, organizational, or national interests or sources of membership. The purpose is to eliminate, to the extent possible, the kind of state-oriented politicization that stands opposed to the principle of neutrality among international civil servants. An identity transformation ideally takes place, in which the employee’s country of origin is made secondary to their institutional belonging. This is physically evident in the fact that some 30,000 UN employees carry light-blue United Nations laissez-passer identity cards, which accompany or supersede (depending on the policy of the state they are entering) state-issued passports at border crossings. Both the occupational and legal identities of the employee are ideally oriented toward statelessness.

One of the distinguishing things about global organizations is the extent to which labyrinthine bureaucracies are infused with experts, permanent or temporary appointees whose specialized knowledge goes beyond the requirements of bureaucratic administration, and is applied to the tasks of program design and implementation. To the extent that international institutions intervene in the world, they require expert knowledge about the world. Experts have distinct roles in the bureaucratic system, including permanent, hierarchically ranked, agency-specific staff and temporary consultants hired for specific, limited tasks. Special Rapporteurs are a distinct category of autonomous expert in the UN’s human rights system, a cadre of highly qualified “volunteers,” responsible for independent, victim-oriented, on-the-ground reporting of state compliance with human rights (see Piccone 2012: ch. 1). Experts

7 This element of diversity as a recruitment priority is set out in Chapter XV, Article 101(3) of the UN Charter: “Due regard shall be paid to recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.” While an ideal, it is not always met in practice, as is suggested by the finding in Kofi Annan’s 2006 reform agenda that, “targets for increasing recruitment for unrepresented and underrepresented Member States have been met by one fifth of Secretariat departments” (United Nations 2006: 16).

8 For a comparative view of the socialization of bureaucrats, in this case among those working for the state, see Zachary Oberfield’s Becoming Bureaucrats (2014).