A rational agenda: 
a Weberian concept International Organizations’ power in IR

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Abstract:
This article sheds light on the problem of conceptualizing the power of international organisations (IOs) in the international relations (IR) of sovereign states. The 20th century spread of IOs to near ubiquity in most relevant policy issues and their growing authority in many inter-state affairs makes the study of the power and authority wielded by IOs one of the most important, if elusive research issues in IR today. To conceptualize the power of IOs, this article returns to Max Weber’s holistic theory of bureaucracy. It draws on Weber’s notion of ‘rationality’ as a bureaucracy’s ‘modes of calculation’ which define their logic of operation, or, in constructivist terminology, the substantive content of what constitutes a bureaucracy’s nature and authority. Applying Weber’s insights to the study of IOs thus contributes to a better understanding of IOs’ use of power as political agents in IR. Instead of conceiving IOs as epiphenomenal structures to the interest of states, Weber’s insight offer a more holistic insight of IOs that explains both the demand for their bureaucratic authority by the growing complexity of IR and the dynamics that pressure IOs to expand and entrench their authority through the “rationalization” of international political spaces. The argument is made in four parts. First, influential theoretical perspectives of IR literature on IOs are reviewed to illustrates why Weber’s work, with all due caveats, remains relevant for the study of IOs. Second, examples from recent studies on the role of IOs in the spread of ideas and policy norms are revisited for evidence of IOs acting in agreement with Weber’s concept of bureaucracy. These support the application of his concepts to the study of IOs. Third, building on these observations, Weber’s “paradox of domination” is applied to the current divide in IR literature between those stressing IOs’ rational (efficient) instrumentality and those seeking to expose their propensity for dysfunctional and pathological behaviour. The article concludes by returning to the literature on ideas and policy norms in IR to suggest how, conversely, the select ideas and policy norms advocated by IOs in IR are uniquely determined by their purpose as discursive instruments in IOs’ exercise of power.

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1. Introduction

Do International Organisations (IO) wield power and exercise authority of their own in the international relations (IR) of sovereign states? Media and politics certainly are replete with accounts of the growing prevalence of IOs, even as views on the meaning of IOs’ importance remain diverse and controversial. On one hand, the spread of IOs to near ubiquity in most policy issue in the 20th century, as well as their growing authority in many intra-state affairs, is seen as a step towards taming the capriciousness of anarchic IR. On the other, IOs are at times vilified as signs of a looming dystopia where the sovereignty and self-determination of nations is disempowered by an opaque, global technocracy (cp. Keohane, Macedo, & Moravcik, 2009). Even in the face of budget-cuts and efforts to reform their rules of governance, one of the few shared opinions is that the influence of IOs will likely only grow.

Despite such controversies, contemporary IR theory is surprisingly devoid of critical research on the power of IOs over external actors and structures in world affairs. State-centric, rationalists IR literature emphasises the primacy of state interests for outcomes and regards IOs as largely epiphenomenal. Here, the political authority exercised by IOs is seen as an indirect representation of state power. In contrast to this view, (neo-) institutional literature looks inwards to the regularizing powers that IOs exercise as institutions. It thereby often abstracts from IOs’ external environment. Finally, constructivist studies point to the specific power that IOs exercise through the strategic framing of political meanings. Yet, these studies are mostly concerned with confirming the causation of effects by constructed meanings. They rarely interpret their findings with a view of IOs as political agents that exercise authority. A nevertheless surprisingly common theme among all these literatures is their characterization of IOs as bureaucratic organisations. Starting from observations, this article responds to the omission in theory on IO power in IR. It argues that IOs’ bureaucratic character determines their unique power in IR as strategic advocates of distinctively select ideas and policy norms.

For this, the article returns to the work of Weber on bureaucratization. It does so for three distinct reasons: First, Weber’s work in this field provides a framework and vocabulary for analysing the unique character of IOs’ bureaucratic power. Applying Weberian concepts to the study of IOs provides much needed terminology for conceptualizing the unique character of IOs power. Constructivist research in particular shows that far from being passive, technical instrument of states, IOs do exercise power in IR. Yet, IOs lack traditional bases of power such as economic or military might and do not necessarily exercise power over others in a rationalist, relational sense of power as conceptualized in the tradition of Dahl (1957).
Instead, IOs construct their intents in technical, apolitical terms and exercise power in by means of a strategic social construction “in which actors strategize rationally to reconfigure preferences, identities, or social context” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 888). Power of IOs is thus better understood by the enacted, exclusionary character of an IOs’ hegemony over certain policy discourses, arguably more akin to Foucault’s notion of systemic power born from constructed “truths” and “knowledges” (Foucault, 1980; also Mills, 2003, p. 67-76).

The value of Weber’s work on bureaucracy in this context rests on his fundamental insight that “rationality” does not refer to a bureaucracy’s instrumental efficacy to exogenous interests, but to the substantive content that intrinsically defines a bureaucracy’s *modus operandi* – in Weber’s words the “modes of calculations” – by which bureaucracies adapt to and ultimately dominate their socio-political environment. Investigating the quintessential Weberian idea of rationality and processes of rationalization, Burrell (1984) distinguishes between a *formal* and a *substantive* rationality. In Weber’s work, it is formal rationality that reflects a systematic, calculable, impersonal and rule-governed conduct that defines the “progressive embodiment of reason in social institutions and practices”, or bureaucratization, yet finds consequently itself in “perpetual tension with substantive rationality” (ibid., 1984).

It is beyond this article to give the notion of Weberian rationality its due. The relevant insight here is that IOs as bureaucratic organisations “rationalize” political spaces in IR in ways not dissimilar to the dynamics that Weber describes as bureaucratization in western capitalist societies. Moreover, IOs do so by employing the constitutive power of ideas and policy norms (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). These in turn reflect a bureaucracies’ formal rationality.

The second reason for returning to Weber is to emphasise the importance of historic context to the development of theory. Weber goes to great lengths to ground his analysis within a specific, evolving historic context. Unlike more universal, historically de-contextualized models of IR theory today, a distinct historical perspective helps identify the dialectic and reciprocal dynamics that characterize the bureaucratic authority of IOs in IR. Weber notes that this very dimension of historical change constitutes both the demand for the creation of bureaucracies and their observed pervasive and expansive character. Re-introducing historic context is thus crucial to formulating a holistic framework on the bureaucratic power of IOs.

Finally, and as a corollary to the above, this articles aims to utilize Weberian ideas for a more holistic conception of IOs that addresses the current divide in IR literature between, on the one hand, studies on the rationality behind the creation of IOs, their mandates and constraints
(e.g. Hawkins, Lake, Nielson & Tierney, 2006) and, on the other, more constructivist investigations of IOs’ dysfunctional, even pathological behaviour (Barnett & Finnemore, 1997) and hypocrisy (Weaver, 2008). The article argues that such a division is misleading to the extent that “dysfunctions” of IOs are explainable by IO power as an expansion of rational authority over time. Crucially, this is in turn a consequence of a bureaucracy’s intrinsic need to “rationalize” the erratic environment they operate in; the very raison d’être that legitimizes the existence of bureaucracies. Referred to as Weber’s “paradox of domination” (McNeil, 1978), this link is pivotal to the study of why and how IOs exercise power in IR.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, three theoretical perspectives of IR literature on IOs are reviewed. These are (i) Principal-Agent (PA) models that build on neoliberal/neorealist assumptions, (ii) institutionalist theory emphasising more path-dependent behaviour, and (iii) constructivist work on the diffusion of ideas and policy norms by IOs. The review illustrates why Weber’s bureaucratic theory, with all due caveats, remains relevant for the study of IOs.

Second, I draw on samples from recent studies on the role of IOs, notably the IMF and World Bank (e.g. Park & Vetterlein, 2010), in the spread of ideas and policy norms. These serve as secondary sources of evidence for IOs acting in agreement with bureaucratic adaptation and domination strategies and support the idea of applying Weber’s concepts to the study of IOs.

Third, and building on these observations, Weber’s “paradox of domination” is applied to the current divide in IR literature between those stressing IOs’ rational (efficient) instrumentality and those seeking to expose their propensity for dysfunctional and pathological behaviour.

Finally this paper returns to the literature on the power of ideas and policy norms in IR to suggest how, conversely, the select ideas and policy norms advocated by IOs in IR are uniquely determined by their purpose as discursive instruments for an IOs’ exercise of power.
2. Weber’s relevance to the contemporary literature on global bureaucracies
(Why Weber?)

Weber’s work on bureaucracies, rational-legal authority, and the bureaucratization of the modern state (*ibid.*, 1991) never looks to the international level. Evidently, there were far fewer IOs in Weber’s time and their influence was far more limited. How then, does his work speak to the study of 21st century IOs; bureaucracies of a far different kind than those studied by Weber? And which of his concepts relate to a now vast and specialized literature on IOs?

A central argument in this article is that a crucial insight from Weber’s work for the study of global bureaucratic organisations is a contextual perspective of how IOs, as political agents, exercise their authority and expand their power through the “rationalization” of political issues and “spaces” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). In his work, Weber takes great care to heed the reciprocal relationships of bureaucracies with their environment. Arguably, his very ontology of the causes, the pervasiveness and consequences of bureaucratization is developed from a historical sociology of the modernizing state and the emergence of western capitalism. Bringing out these relational elements in Weber’s work, McNeil (1978) labels them (i) bureaucracy’s adaptation to, and (ii) domination of their socio-political environment.

Applying these concepts to the study of IO’s political agency in IR potentially opens up a new perspective for understanding IOs by recognizing their agency in IR. Notably, it offers a concept on the pressures, constraints and effects of IOs to exercise power, which they do in ways described by Finnemore & Sikkink as strategic social construction “in which actors strategize rationally to reconfigure preferences, identities, or social context.” (1998, p. 888). Concepts like these feature prominently in constructivist research on the global diffusion of ideas and norms. Yet even as the bureaucratic nature of IOs is observed in many well-known studies, notably Barnett & Finnemore (2004), most research in this field focuses only on either adaptation or domination strategies – usually the former – to the exclusion of the other.

The reason much contemporary theory struggles with more interdependent, dialectic, and often even paradoxical concepts, lies largely in their abstraction from the contextualized historical perspective that was pivotal to Weber’s theory on bureaucracy. Yet, there is a demand for research on global bureaucracies to reconcile such dialectic relationships between – in the terminology of McNeil – adaptation and domination strategies by IOs. The following brief review of three influential strands of contemporary IO literature illustrates this need.
First, a widely influential tradition is neorealist/neoliberal theory of IR and, by extension, the global bureaucracies within them. This school of thought is largely economistic and rooted in assumptions of instrumental rationality and efficiency concerns (Barnett & Finnemore, 1997). Following Waltz (1979) it understands world politics to be analogous to a market filled with utility-maximizing competitors. In a competitive state of anarchy in IR, (only) rational states may chose coordination over unilateral action, and delegation to IOs and multilateral regimes over coordinated efforts. According to this logic, IOs are created and continue to exist because states invest in them to achieve pareto-superior outcomes for themselves. Global bureaucracies are thus dependent on state interests and, at most, exploitative of opportunities as agents who are both “self-interest seeking with guile” (Williamson, 1985; quoted in Lake & Powell, 1999) and constrained within a limited “zone of discretion” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Neorealist/neoliberal theory consequently does not account for IOs themselves being influential for, or transformative of the international political environment. International politics is thought to be constituted solely by the interests of states. Adaptation therefore is an inescapable and constant need of IOs. Domination strategies, in contrast, impossible.

Second, an equally vast (neo-)institutionalist literature encompasses a diverse field of research with roots in economics, sociology and political science united by an interest in the intrinsic strengths and limits of institutions, their character and their regularizing sway over actors and outcomes (Scott, 2008). It argues persuasively that many structures and outcomes are not adequately explained by a rationalist logic. Rather, they are often consequences of unanticipated effects and constrained choices that do not move rapidly to a unique, rational solution (March & Olsen, 1984). As institutional studies emphasize structural regularity and “the adaptive change and evolution of organizational forms and practices” (Selznick, 1957), they tend to place the external relations of institutions outside their analytical frames. The impact of IOs as agents on their environment is largely unheeded by institutionalist theory.

Finally, a comparatively smaller literature explores more constructivist dynamics in IR (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), not least to theorize on IOs as autonomous actors in world affairs. They argue, as Weaver (2007) does, that “in agreement with recent constructivist work, [...] IOs derive autonomy and influence via their expertise and the ability to formally or informally set agendas for member states by defining issue areas...” (p. 469). These studies often ground their analysis explicitly in observations of IOs as bureaucratic bodies which display a very distinctive form of authority that follows from their own internal logic and behavioural proclivities (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). As these studies investigate the
specific bureaucratic impetus that IOs bring to world affairs, they are arguably the most amendable to an analysis of how IOs take an active part in IR. Despite this, the majority of these studies are first and foremost concerned with showing that constructivist effects as such exists. Commonly they do so to explicitly counter rationalist arguments that view IO behaviour as epiphenomenal to other forces. As a consequence, constructivist research has not paid sufficient attention to developing a theoretical grounding for the causes, conditions and consequences of IOs as drivers of a global diffusion of certain ideas and policy norms.

An example here is the highly insightful case collection on the political advocacy for norms by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by Park & Vetterlein (2010). Their volume collects a great variety of studies on the norms and ideas impressed, with varying success, upon policy makers across the world through the IMF and WB and synthesises the findings into a cyclic model of norm dynamics. However, it leaves several crucial questions unanswered: Are ideas and norms advocated by these IOs of a common kind? What determines success in the advocacy of norms in IR? And what does the advocacy of ideas and norms reveal about the nature of the IOs? Like many constructivist researcher, Park & Vetterlein (2010) are concerned with the dynamics and impacts of ideas and policy norms themselves, but less with the agents advocating them in the first place.

To briefly summarize then, no single current body of IR theory conceptualizes autonomous agency of IOs despite the rich and varied research on IOs available. Rationalists treat them as structures of rules, principles and decision-making procedures through which others, usually states, act (Krasner, 1983). Institutionalist research focuses inward and neglects the exogenous environment and an institution’s relation with it. Constructivists study the imprint of norms and ideas in IR, but without grounding their analysis in an appreciation of agency.

To address this lacuna the article turns to the conceptual work of Weber (1991) on the rational-legal authority of bureaucracies and their strategies of adaptation and domination as the defining characteristics of bureaucracy’s power and authority in an evolving environment.
3. Bureaucratic adaptation and domination in the advocacy of policy norms

Bureaucracies, IOs included, persevere over time because they adapt. And they exercise power and influence over their socio-political environment in ways that are made visible by constructivist research on the diffusion of ideas and policy norms in politics. As in domestic settings, bureaucratic strategies of adaptation and domination of IOs add up to an exercise of power as these organisations do not merely adapt passively to changing exogenous demands, but to evolutions of "political opportunity structures" (Béland, 2009, p. 703). IOs, as bureaucracies, expand their authority to a position of power in the sense that: “an imbalance of power exists, which structures social action to such an extent that any understanding of the ultimate consequences of struggle would see that power as central” (McNeil, 1978, p. 66).

It is worthwhile to elaborate a bit further on the concepts of bureaucratic adaptation and domination in IR as their meaning in (post-) Weberian works differs from more common uses of these terms in IR literature. To clarify the conceptual differences, I draw on recent research concerned with ideas and policy norms advocated by IOs (e.g. Park & Vetterlein, 2010) as examples of both adaptation and domination by IOs. The chosen examples serve to further emphasise the argument that evidence of bureaucratic adaptation and domination strategies is observable among IOs, most notably in works on the transnational diffusion of ideas and policy norms. Crucially, the emphasis in reviewing these studies is placed on the political agency of IOs, rather than on impacts and dynamics of ideas and policy norms themselves.

**Adaptation:** Weber’s notion of bureaucracies as adaptive organisations carries a different connotation compared to contemporary uses of the term. Current IR theory sees adaptation of IOs as reactive changes to exogenous influences. Emphases differ to the extend that neoliberal/neorealist theories focus on shifts towards an equilibrium that maximizes IOs’ utility and, in the case of PA-models, their autonomy while complying with external demands. Institutionalists on the other hand stress path dependent dynamics of adaptation and reproduction according to institutional logics of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1984).

As McNeil (1978) notes, Weber’s view on the rational-legal nature of bureaucracy has itself been used to interpret bureaucracy as a rationally efficient tools to achieve (political) interests. Such arguments arguably confound Weber’s use of “rational” with an economistic view of efficiency. This becomes evident in studies pointing out the functional inefficiency of Weber’s ideal-type bureaucracy (Stinchcombe, 1959; Eccles, 1981). Quite to the contrary, Weber uses “rational” to describe formal rationality as the modus operandi of bureaucracies;
the “means of calculation” (ibid, 1991) they operate by. Weber does not rule out inefficient, irrational, even paradoxial outcomes of bureaucratic behaviour in a larger context.

What is bureaucratic adaptation than? To Weber, adaptation is fundamental to the process of bureaucratization, which he in turn conceives as a trend towards a growing prevalence of rational-legal authority in an increasingly complex modern society. As such, adaptation to circumstances is opportunistic, as well as reactive, and a consequence of any bureaucracies intrinsic drive to expand its position of power. Bureaucratic adaptation then reflects agency driven by an organization’s internal dynamics as well as responsivity to external stimuli.

That this holds true for individual IOs “bureaucratising” their socio-political environment can be seen in the comparative study by Lardone (2010) on the agency of the World Bank (WB) in advocating New Public Management (NPM) norms in Latin America. By highlighting the differences in the strategies employed by the WB for engaging policy discourses in Chile and Argentine, Lardone shows how the WB’s capacity to spread policy norms “is closely related to its capacity to adapt to different political and institutional countries in which it operates.” Moreover, even though NPM norms originate from outside the WB, it was not advocated by the WB in a purely instrumental role. Rather, Lardone emphasises that NPM norms were validated within the WB only to the degree that they allowed the WB to enter, by different strategies in different countries, policy discourses which it was previously barred from. The study thus highlights the interdependence between the adaptation of the WB to exogenous norms and their “cultural validation” in the domestic politics of WB clients.

Lardone’s study supports the subtle, but important difference in defining adaptation among IOs. The WB did not simply act instrumentally to a rising policy paradigm like NPM. Rather, these norms were contested within its bureaucratic culture and gained traction only by their ability to expand WB authority in evolving “political opportunity structures” (Beland, 2009). Similar observations are made by Leiteritz & Moschella (2010) who find an analogous case of “reciprocal interaction of two sets of mechanisms – inside-out and outside-in” in the IMF’s role in promoting capital account liberalization as universal, global policy norm.

Adaptation is consequently not only determined by (i) bureaucratic culture and its rational modes of calculation (such as the compatibility of then spreading NPM norms with the economistic perspective prominent within the WB), and (ii) the rational interests of states in IR (such as “Wall Street-Treasury Complex” that Leiteritz & Moschella (2010) find favouring
capital account liberalization), but also by (iii) the political agency of IOs to expand rational authority. Bureaucratic adaptation is thus also intimately linked to strategies of domination.

**Domination:** Many studies acknowledge that IOs exercise authority. Lacking classic sources of IR power, they do so primarily through hegemony over policy discourses and their ability to produce, disseminate and monopolize policy ideas. Once again, studies on the WB contain excellent anecdotes for this. Dethier observes that “Externally, the Bank influences the global environment in which development efforts are undertaken by producing and disseminating research and data that contribute to global development knowledge.” (2007). Former WB chief economist Stiglitz criticises that the WB’s “predominant role in development research is so strong that, were it involved in the production of an ordinary commodity, it might be accused of anti-trust violation, dominating the industry” (2007; quoted in Weaver, 2008).

Observations like these are usually explained by IOs exploitation of asymmetrical information, echoing Weber’s view on bureaucracies’ authority from expertise when: “the ‘political master’ finds himself in the position of the ‘dilettante’ who stands opposite the ‘expert’, facing the trained official who stands within the management of administration.” (1991).

Though modern IR theory on IOs is clearly no stranger to information asymmetries (see Hawkins, Lake, Nielson, & Tierney, 2006; Martin, 2006; Michaelowa & Borrman, 2006), virtually all studies in this tradition investigate degrees of IO autonomy within, presumably, inviolable constraints determined by state interests. What is missing therefore is research on the intrinsic dynamics that motivate IOs, as agents in IR, to construct such asymmetries as a source of rational, “expert” authority as bureaucracies over political issues and interests.

How can domination then be conceptualized? Weber’s notion of a bureaucratic position of authority, or “Machstellung der Bürokratie”, is defined by three characteristics. First, it is not any absolute authority. Second, it is manifested in a sense of structural permanency that goes beyond influencing singular decisions. And third, crucially, Weber describes domination as a procedural objective of bureaucracies who are themselves agents of bureaucratization in society. The aggregate of these is bureaucratic domination in the sense that an “imbalance of power exists, which structures social action to such an extent that any understanding of the ultimate consequences of struggle would see that power as central. (McNeil, 1978, p. 66).

A revealing case here is the study by Broome (2010) on the IMF’s pivotal role in establishing universal current account convertability as a global policy norm. It is exemplary of IOs bureaucratic domination as it emphasises three things. First, the importance of historical
context shaping IOs’ opportunities to exercise authority. Even though universal current account convertability was enshrined in the IMF’s founding Articles of Agreement, it remained in a political limbo for much of the post-War period all the same, as member states shirked compliance through vague “transitional arrangements” that frequently lasted decades. Only shifts in the global political economy of the 1980s and 90s provided the IMF with the window of opportunity needed to achieve broad a acceptance and validation of this principle. Second, Broome shows how the IMF, though one of the most powerful IOs in history, had to lean on its intellectual authority and its capacity to persuade governments to truly achieve norm compliance, rather than its less effective means for coercion and material pressure:

“[...], the Fund’s capacity to exercise authority rests on its ability to fix the meaning of current account convertibility as a policy norm, as well as to advocate for social recognition of open current accounts when faced with a window of opportunity to facilitate a redefinition of actors’ interests.” (Broome, 2010)

And finally, though not the main direction of his argument, Broome gives references of how the IMF’s late success in cementing current account convertability as a global standard changed the IMF itself, as advocate of this policy, from a “white elephant” to an authority that exercises power both directly through evaluation and benchmarking mechanisms and indirectly through its role as a signifier of a nation’s “policy credibility” to financial markets.

In conclusion then, Broome’s case study is a good reflection of bureaucratic domination by an IO in IR as it mirrors all three of Weber’s criteria outlined above. First, the IMF’s influence is clearly not an absolute authority, but dependend on a specific historic context and the wider shifts in the political economy of IR. Yet IOs are not epiphenomenal to other forces either. In this case, only wide IMF membership, its intellectual authority on macroeconomic policy and its pre-defined interests can explain the, eventually, rapid convergence towards a universal policy norm. Second, the IMF has no power to force individual decisions of sovereign countries. Even today, a few states reject current account convertability as advocated by the IMF and states that adopt it do so, as Broome notes, through “periods of gestation” that build domestic validity for this norm. And third, the IMF’s authority is both a driver and a result of a trend of “rationalization”. In this case a trend that shifts perspectives concerning currency controles from being the subject of any state’s political discretion towards being regarded as “distortion” of a more technocratically framed “working of the international monetary system as a whole”. The latter than is the explicit concern of the IMF
(IMF 2001, p. 3), including its legitimate authority for supervision through country and global surveillance assessments and the shaming of noncompliant states.

To summarize; current research on the diffusion of ideas and policy norms in IR through IOs provides ample evidence for bureaucratic behaviour – notably adaptation and domination strategies – by IOs that agree with Webers views of bureaucracies in the modern state.
4. IOs in the 21st century and Weber’s Paradox of Domination

Observing bureaucratic strategies of adaptation and domination among IOs opens up analysis to the application of Weber’s comprehensive take on the role and nature of bureaucracy within the social and economic development of modern society. For Weber, adaptation and domination strategies are complementing and indivisible elements of bureaucratic behaviour. Crucially, he saw them linked in a “paradox of domination” that develops when “rationalization” becomes embodied in organizational form (McNeil, 1978).

Rather than adapting passively to exogenous change, bureaucracies adapt to opportunities that arise from change. To Weber, the source of these opportunities lies in the ever-growing complexity that characterizes a modernizing society; hence his emphasis on historic context. Unlike in contemporary, de-contextualized models on IOs, bureaucratization here is not seen as the result of specific, a-priori known tasks being delegated to the efficient execution by a bureaucratic organisation. Rather, bureaucratization follows from the need to develop predictability and rational control over an inherently “irrational”, unpredictable socio-political environment. Simultaneously, bureaucracy exercises power in the sense that the very process of “rationalization” that legitimizes bureaucratic action – to borrow terminology from discourse analysis – “involves the exclusion of certain possibilities and a consequent structuring of the relations between different social agents” (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000).

If power is a relation between various actors as the objects of this power relationship (Dahl, 1957, p. 203), then Weber’s “paradox of power” describes the intrinsic pressures of bureaucracies for developing power relationships over and with other socio-political actors that are born from the very need to gain predictability in inherently erratic environments.

“Only through impersonal coercion and discipline of subordinates and clients could [bureaucratic] organizations achieve the coordination necessary for rational, i.e. quantitatively or logically calculable, action” (McNeil, 1978, p. 65).

This article seeks to apply Weber’s paradox to the study of IOs. As bureaucratic organisations, IOs are inherently driven to rationalize the volatility and unpredictability inherent to IR. In doing so, they too establish power relationships over the states they serve.

Applying this “paradox of domination” to the study of IOs sheds new light on an acute divide in current IO research. This divide runs between the perceived rational, instrumental efficiency of IOs on one hand, and observations of IO behaviour in defiance of such rationality on the other. The former conceptualizes IOs as pareto-improving calculations of
states. The latter observes pathologies (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999), hypocrisy (Weaver, 2008) and deviations from mandates as evidence that contradicts such rationalist conceptions. This section explores (i) the “causes of bureaucracy” and (ii) the “perseverance of bureaucracy” in IO research to identify potentials for theoretical synergy. These depend on adopting a ‘Weberian’ historical view on IOs in favour of de-contextualized approaches such as PA-models as the latter are by default ill-suited to accommodate both IOs’ agenda-setting power over states and the states’ authority over IOs as mutually (inter-) dependent variables.

4.1. Causes of bureaucratization

Weber investigates bureaucracy from the perspective of a society’s historic development (Miner, 2006). His ontology of bureaucracies can consequently only be fully grasped by recognizing its grounding in the context of emerging Western industrialism (McNeil, 1978). In essence, Weber’s notion of bureaucratization, which he observes in both private and public enterprise, sees it as a response to modernizing societies’ inevitably growing uncertainty and unpredictability, which drives demand for efficiency and specialization as counteragents:

“The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly ‘objective’ expert...” (Weber, 1991, p. 215).

Weber’s theory, if applied to IOs, contrasts starkly with the rationales of the origins of (global) bureaucracies forwarded by contemporary IR research. Institutionalist studies nearly always depart from existing institution and, as a consequence, do not offer accounts for why institutions, including the bureaucratic organisation, are created in the first place. Similarly, constructivist scholars tend to subordinate the making of bureaucracy to the structuring force of social construction. Among these theories then, the neoliberal/neorealist school is arguably the one most explicitly concerned with the genesis of global bureaucratic organisations.

IOs in this literature are explained by the specific functions they bring to competing state interests. An excellent overview is given by Hawkins et al. (2006, p. 13-20). They classify functional benefits that states draw from IOs as (i) harnessing IO specialization for highly specific tasks, (ii) mitigating policy externalities in (game theoretic) coordination and collaboration dilemmas, (iii) facilitating collective decision-making, (iv) resolving disputes, (v) enhancing the credibility of policies or (vi) a “lock-in” of policy-biases. IOs are thus explained by the pareto-efficient outcomes they achieve for states based on the relative distribution of capabilities among them (Legro, 1996). And states always remain the principal
actors with IOs epiphenomenal to their interests as “even small agent-source problems might lead principals to end their delegation at the first future opportunity” (Hawkins, et al., 2006).

How does all this compare to Weber’s view on the presuppositions and causes of bureaucracy? A crucial differences is the inherent conflict between bureaucracy as the embodiment of rationalization and its irrational environment. Weber identified this conflict as the source of bureaucracy’s drive to expand rationalization to different spheres of life. To him, bureaucracy is not the instrumental outcome of calculated action, but responds to the demand for rational authority to mitigate a modern society’s growing uncertainty and complexity.

Precisely such a concept of conflict between bureaucracy and its larger environment is missing in most contemporary research on IOs in world politics. This distinction is essential because it is through this conflict and the resulting demand for efficient administration that Weberian bureaucracies are pressured to engage actively with their environment through “external power strategies” (McNeil, 1978). They do so by constructing problems and solutions in ways that are amendable to the abstract, impartial manipulation of either quantitative information or complex legal rules on which they uniquely thrive (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Unlike Barnett & Finnemore’s notion of IOs, IOs as bureaucracies in a Weberian sense are not defined by a pre-determined mandate invested upon them. Therefore, judging IOs by whether they perform their given tasks efficiently or neglect them in “pathological” ways does not provide a meaningful distinction. The outcomes of bureaucratic action need not be rational by default. Weber’s theory only requires that bureaucratic action can be traced back causally to “the modes of calculation” used by bureaucratic elites in making decisions. Bureaucracy is constituted by “rationality” or “efficiency” in a sense not unlike what constructivist and discourse theory termed the substantive content of ideas. They conceptualize interests and values of political actors and shape institutions (Schmidt, 2009).

For IOs this means that – unlike notions of state interests translated to efficient outcomes by IOs – rationalization of IR as the raison d’être of IOs as Weberian bureaucracies is fully compatible with irrational, even pathological outcomes. This insight is pivotal for research attempting to capture origins of IOs along with their perseverance and expansive behaviour.

4.2. Perseverance of bureaucracy

Among Weber’s most iconic insights is that: “Once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy” (Weber, 1991, p. 228). In contrast to the many citations of this phrase in studies on domestic public sector
organisations, IR scholars have only recently started investigating the intrinsic resilience of IOs as bureaucracies. Prominent neoliberal/neorealist approaches in particular tend to give little reason for expecting IOs to persevere beyond their utility as agents to rational states.

“The state-centric utility-maximizing frameworks most IR scholars have borrowed from economics simply assume that IOs are reasonably responsive to state interests (or, at least, more responsive than other policy tools would be); otherwise states would withdrawn from them.” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, p. 35).

Institutionalist research in contrast emphasizes the adaptive evolution of organizational forms and practices in response to a changing environment (Selznick, 1957). Drawing on this literature, Barnett & Finnemore’s work, along with studies following in their tradition, aim to explain observations of path dependent perseverance and expansions of IOs that contradict neoliberal/neorealist assumptions. They distinguish between IOs that perform with efficacy and conferred legitimacy and those that become “dysfunctional” by exhibiting behaviour inexplicable by a rationalist view. Consequently, even studies critical of neorealist/neoliberal theory remain curiously bipartite, using the concept of bureaucracy selectively to explain such dysfunctional behaviours instead of developing more holistic analytical approaches.

Weber, in contrast, argues that bureaucratic perseverance and resilience are consequences of two concurrent and mutually reinforcing causes; one intrinsic to the character and function of bureaucratic organisation and the other a corollary of the bureaucratisation of society.

First, the intrinsic source of bureaucracies’ resilience according to Weber, as well as some more contemporary research, is the bureaucrats’ own interest for sustaining the rationale of their existence. Weber (1991) develops an almost behaviourist view to support his reasoning.

“... the professional bureaucrat is chained to his activity by his entire material and ideal existence. […] They have a common interest in seeing that the mechanism continues its functions and that the societally exercised authority carries on.” (p. 228)

To Weber therefore, bureaucracies have, as aggregated interest of the professionals within them, a vested interest in preserving their power, which in turn implies the continuously expansive “rationalization” of socio-political spheres as the base of bureaucratic power:

“... the sure instincts of the bureaucracy for the conditions of maintaining its power in its own state […] are inseparably fused with the canonization of the abstract and ‘objective’ idea of ‘reasons of state’” (Weber, 1991, p. 220)
The study by Lardone (2010) quoted earlier vividly illustrates the bureaucratic dynamics that drive behaviour in agreement with this observation in the case of the WB. It shows how the internal validation of norms, in Lardone’s case NPM norms, depends on their success in expanding the WB’s authority externally. The upshot of this in Weber’s theory is that the expansive instinct of bureaucracy is complemented by the socio-political environments’ growing dependence on bureaucracy where their rational authority has been established:

“The ruled, for their part, cannot dispense with or replace the bureaucratic apparatus […]. If the official stops working, or if his work is forcefully interrupted, chaos results, […]. The idea of eliminating these organizations becomes more and more utopian.” (p. 229).

Many scholars have drawn on Weber’s insights and many parallels to his observations can be found. Rational choice studies following Niskanen (1994) resonate to some extend with Weber’s view of the professional bureaucrat who is intrinsically tied to the expansion of rational authority. Barnett & Finnemore (2004) prominently argue that IOs, once created, may stray from their original goals through “mission creep” and explain this by identifying IOs as bureaucracies. Weaver’s work on “organisational hypocrisy” (2008) of the World Bank highlights mechanisms of IOs to navigate the many interests of their stakeholders.

Advances in PA-models as portrayed by Hawkins, et al. (2006) explore constellations that favour degrees of autonomy and tenacity among IOs even from the perspective of rational states. Yet, all these approaches define their observations as deviations from an IOs rational, instrumental default behaviour. And they engage the concept of bureaucracy selectively to explain only these deviant behaviours observed in spite of different (rational) expectations.

A crucial insight to research on IOs is thus the notion that bureaucratisation also signifies evolving power relationships between bureaucracies and their environment. Unlike contemporary theory on IOs, analysing global bureaucracies from the vantage point of a Weberian “paradox of domination” makes the partition into “deviant” and “non-deviant” behaviour, along with assumptions of IOs’ pre-determined instrumentality, largely redundant. Following the dynamic inherent to the “paradox of domination”, IOs as bureaucratic organisations do not “shift” from “non-deviant” to “deviant” behaviour. And neither do they operate in unconstrained micro-rational efficiency. Rather, they pursue a constant behaviour of opportunistic adaptation by “rationalizing” problems and policy issues broadly within their purview. As illustrated above, this is a dialectic process where internal validation broadly within a given IO depends on the external expansion of its expert authority. In time, this awards successful IOs with an increasingly powerful position of bureaucratic power in IR.
To briefly summarize the previous sections: the power of IOs in IR as forwarded by this article rests strongly on adopting a Weberian view of historic context, adaptation, domination and bureaucratic power in IR. Table 1 illustrates these distinctions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>“classic” IR perspective</th>
<th>Weberian perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>Responsive/Reactive</td>
<td>Opportunistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>Probabilistic</td>
<td>Conditional, constructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Possessed/Relational (e.g. Dahl)</td>
<td>Pervasive/Enacted/Performed (e.g. Foucault)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy</td>
<td>Conferred (Mandated)</td>
<td>Self-validating/self-propagating logic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Context:** A historic dimension of IR as an evolving socio-political environment is a crucial adoption of a Weberian concept. By allowing for historic evolution, growing complexity in IR leads to differentiation, which in turn creates demand for specialized expert administration and, thereby, bureaucracy. In a-historic conceptions of IR such as those underlying PA-models, the aggregate of political issues and topics is, usually implicitly, unchanging. Demand for IOs then follows from rational calculations that are represented in the mandates given to IOs. A Weberian historic view in contrast identifies a systemic demand that drives bureaucratization irrespective of any specific mandates conferred by exogenous interests.

**Adaptation:** In an evolving historical IR context, adaptation has the potential to become opportunistic, rather than simply reactive. IOs have and use these opportunities to react selectively to emerging demand in ways that play to their strengths and interests. As the cited examples show, this is less of a consciously strategic selection by IOs as uniform actors, but the result of the reciprocal interaction of IOs with their socio-political environment where only compliance to internal culture combined with external gains can validate new trends.

**Domination:** Bureaucratic domination than is less a probabilistic assertion of certain interests over others, but, as identified by constructivist scholars, a “strategic social construction” which frames political issues and international social spaces to IOs’ rational modes of calculations. This excludes or de-legitimizes plausible alternatives. Like any constructed meaning, successful bureaucratic domination dependents on auxiliary scope conditions.

**Legitimate power:** As a consequence, the successful legitimate power of IOs is ultimately not a relational enforcement of a given mandate, but an enacted authority that pervades the respective policy discourses and legitimates itself through the self-propagating logic of the formally rational, predictable and rule-bound administration that bureaucracies specialize in.
5. Ideas and policy norms in IR as the rational agenda of IOs

Having conceptualizing the power of IOs in IR with the help of Weber’s paradox of domination, I finally aim to explore the link to constructivist literature on the role of ideas and policy norms in IR (e.g. Béland & Cox, 2010). Much of this later literature studies the cascade (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), contestation (Wiener, 2009) and diffusion of norms as phenomena in their own right, yet makes only passing references to agency. The “Weberian perspective” on IOs forwarded earlier suggest a need to aligned this literature more closely with a sense of agency, including agency of IOs as catalysts for ideas and policy norms in IR.

Doing so provides a theoretical grounding to pursue vital subjacent questions regarding ideas and norms in world politics: First, why are certain ideas and norms advocated while others are not? Second, what determines the relevance, adequacy, applicability, appropriateness, and resonance (Schmidt, 2008) of certain ideas and norms to IOs in comparison to others? And finally, what purpose motivates IOs as agents to champion certain ideas and policy norms?

Having so far elaborated on the character of IOs as bureaucratic actors in IR, this final section aims to delineate specifics in the nature of said ideas and norms from an inverse view of their relation with IOs; i.e. the purposes they serve to IOs’ as bureaucracies who exercise power as rational authorities. To do so, the above questions are pursued in inverse order.

First, what purpose motivates IOs as agents to champion ideas and policy norms in IR? To the extent that ideas and policy norms serve as discursive instruments, tools, and even weapons (Blyth, 2007) for IOs as they reconfigure “international social space” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) in the pursuit of expanding their authority, the very nature of the ideas and policy norms advocated by IOs is in turn determined by their agency as bureaucracies.

Applying the “paradox of domination” to the study of IOs rests on the notion that their existence follows from the demands of an increasingly complex and unpredictable IR environment, rather than from efficiency calculations of states. Yet, IOs cannot found themselves (though many IOs are founded by other IOs) and states do endow them with certain tasks. The IMF’s Articles of Agreement\(^1\) for example mandate it, among other things, to “promote international monetary cooperation” and “facilitate the expansion and balanced growth of international trade”. IOs are restrained by these mandates and the expectations they create. Even so, official mandates do not translate into pre-defined instrumentalities in a neorealist/neoliberal sense. They tend to be ambiguous, subject to political compromises,

\(^1\) [http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/aa/aa01.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/aa/aa01.htm)
their scope and meaning are usually open to interpretation. The authority of IOs thus manifests itself in the translation of abstract mandates, such as facilitating international trade or effective development aid, into criteria amendable to a bureaucracy’s modes of calculation.

As discursive tools, the ideas and policy norms advocated by IOs serve two purposes. They address IOs’ mandates and the behaviour expected from them, and they do so in agreement with IOs own internal “modes of calculations”, i.e. the substantive content of their “rational” authority. Ideas and policy norms thus serve IOs as the means of their power; as the tools to expand their authority as bureaucracies through a strategic social construction of preferences, identities and context over time, while simultaneously complying with external interests and expectations at a given point in time. Lardone (2010) and Broome (2010) illustrate these dynamics in the case of policy norms advocated by the WB and IMF respectively.

Regarding the second question, it is precisely a given idea or policy norm’s function as discursive instrument, or, in the words of Schmidt (2008), their relevance, adequacy, applicability, appropriateness, and resonance to IOs as agents in IR, which points to the specific properties to expect from the ideas or policy norms that are advocated by IOs. The scope, domain and depth of any idea and policy norms’ impact is not determined their intrinsic values alone, but by their overall “fit” as a discursive instrument to IOs’ agency. With respect to IOs’ bureaucratic power, three properties in particular define this “fit”. These are (i) the compatibility with IOs’ bureaucratic “modes of calculations”, (ii) their ability to satisfy the expectations of exogenous principals, stakeholders and clients, and (iii) their potential in expanding IOs’ bureaucratic authority. The best “fit” of a given idea or policy norm as discursive instrument for an IO exercise of bureaucratic power lies in the overlap of these criteria as depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Criteria for IO advocacy of norms](image)
The first is compatibility with bureaucratic modes of calculation, which arguably is also the most researched criteria. A number of studies emphasise the WB’s disposition towards “apolitical, technocratic, and economic rationality” (Weaver, 2008) and similar assessments exist for IOs like the OECD (Woodward, 2009) or IMF (Chwieroth, 2006).

Quite a few of these studies explore the socialization of staff and the constant renewal of these dispositions in IOs’ internal culture and discourse. For the WB, Wade (2002) and Broad (2006) termed these practices “paradigm maintenance” (also quoted in Weaver, 2008, p. 79).

Ideas and policy norms advocated by IOs serve to persuade others of new preferences or to value new policy goals. Inevitably, they will thus comply with, or be adapted to the internal “rational” modes of calculations of IOs as their legitimacy as bureaucratic organization in turn depends on acting “precisely, unambiguously, continuously and with as much speed as possible”, according to calculable rules “without regard for persons” (Weber, 1946, p. 215).

Second, IOs employ ideas and policy norms in their discursive interaction with principals, stakeholders and clients to justify and legitimate their authority and actions. As Best (2007) notes, the legitimacy of IOs is an external, conferred legitimacy that depends on the perceptions that others have of an IO and its work. For their existence and legitimate action then, IOs rely on the commitment of outside powers. A first element in maintaining this conferred legitimacy is without a doubt the defining technical and apolitical functionality of IOs as bureaucracies. The dictate to operate on rational criteria, rather than any political bias or agenda of their own, is essential to both the legitimate perception of IOs in IR and to their own intrinsic identity. Further elements are the formal mandates of IOs. IOs are expected and legitimated to operate only within their conferred tasks and responsibilities. Still, the criterion as a whole goes necessarily beyond the rational bureaucratic discharge of formally delegated tasks. The functions of IOs to states often go beyond technical neutrality and formal mandates (see Abbott & Snidal, 1998). Likewise, by reconfiguring international “social space” (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) in the steady expansion of IOs unique authority, the dependency of states and other actors in IR on IOs deepens and spreads to new issues.

Woodward for example charts the fundamental changes of character of the OECD, which went from an exclusive club for coordinating policies internationally to a much more inclusive venue where members strive to uncover appropriate domestic policies to meet their common objectives. (ibid., 2009, p. 12). The OECD’s advocacy of policy norms relevant to domestic issues would consequently be judged differently today than at the OECD’s creation.
Third, ideas and policy norms are championed by IOs if they expand and exploit opportunities for the legitimate intervention in domestic, interstate, and transnational spaces. As Barnett & Finnemore (2004) point out, already the claim of an idea or policy norm to global universality favours IOs who excel as centralized nodes of expertise for internationally uniform principles (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). Prima facie, IOs’ technocratic impartiality implies authoritative and unbiased judgements in global affairs vis-a-vis the partial interests of nation states. Lardone’s (2010) study exemplifies how the internal validation of NPM norms within the WB depends on the ability of these norms to access new policy discourses among the Bank’s client countries. A study by Park illustrates the contrary for global safeguard norms on environmental standards and policies where: “... the decline of the Bank’s overall safeguard policy norm is determined by the lack of cultural validity among the Bank’s increasingly powerful MIC [Middle Income Countries] borrowers. Far from making the Bank central to developing states needs, the Bank has undermined its own relevance ...” (Park, 2010)

The answer to the final question why certain ideas and policy norms are advocated and not others is thus tied to the dialectic pressures inherent to IOs’ paradox of domination. An IOs’ need for ideas and policy norms as discursive instruments with specific properties creates a three-way filter which separates ideas and policy norms advocated from those that are not. The ideas and policy norms successfully advocated by IOs as political agents in IR are those within the intersection of the three criteria above. First, ideas and policy norms that do not comply with an IO’s inner, rational “modes of calculation” would fail to make headway within the organisational culture and discourse of a given IO. Second, ideas and policy norms that fail to comply with the (evolving) perceptions of an IO’s mandate and functionality that other actors have come to expect rely upon, they would harm the conferred legitimacy IOs depend on. Finally, if ideas and policy norms fail to translate into an expansive “canonization of the abstract and ‘objective’ idea” (Weber, 1991), and thereby reconfigure socio-political issues and spaces in favour of a bureaucracy’s rational authority, they would be discarded by any successful bureaucratic organization in favour of ideas and policy norms that do.

The ideas and policy norms which make their presence felt in world politics due to the work of IOs are therefore inevitably of a common kind. They all embody the rational nature of an IOs’ modes of calculation, agree with external expectations of its functionality and, crucially, serve to expand an IOs authority as bureaucracy in a Weberian sense. They are uniquely determined by constituting the means by which IOs wield power as political agents in IR.
6. Conclusion

The conclusion is best stated by contrasting the arguments made in this article on developing a concept for the power of IOs in the Weberian legacy before the evident caveats to its applicability to empirical research. Scholars writing on concepts of power at least since Dahl (1957) have noted the near impossibility to operationalize such concepts for actual observations. There is clearly no viable way to measure the “Machtstellung der Bürokratie”; a bureaucracy’s position of power of IOs as the product of their rational agency. And in practice, as Dahl notes, any concept of power will have to be defined by operational criteria. And yet, the aim of a more holistic concept of the bureaucratic power of IOs provides a reference to identify omissions and synergy potentials in existing studies concerned with specific aspects of IOs. For studies on ideas and policy norms in IR, the “rational agenda” of IOs as catalysts of their diffusion indicates a very specific pre-selection among the vanguard studies of this literature that are strongly concerned with IOs in particular. And for institutional work on the perceived dysfunction of IOs, it highlights that the concept of ‘bureaucracy’ needs to be self-standing term as to not become tautological with an organisation’s dysfunction vis-à-vis its formal mandate in the first place.

In short, a Weberian perspective on the bureaucratic power of IOs provides perspectives for constructivist, institutionalist, and even realist research that help promote a better understanding of the palpable observations, yet elusive understanding of the authority that International Organisations wield in the affairs of the world; both today and tomorrow.
REFERENCES


