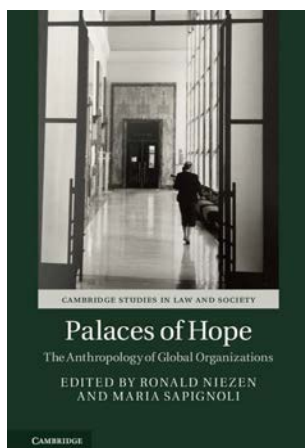




Review of *Palaces of Hope: The Anthropology of Global Organizations*.
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1. INTRODUCTION



What does really happen in the so-called “Palaces of Hope”? Which are the factors truly playing a role in international organizations’ decision-making process? How does human behavior influence the context of global institutions, conceived as working environments made by people from all over the world daily facing issues of international relevance? The answer to all of these questions, and a further investigation on the phenomenon of “humanization” of international institutions, is offered by this book, an ambitious work where leading figures in the field of anthropological studies and institutional ethnography guide the reader in the world of international organizations, which are approached in this ouvrage through the lenses of ethnographic studies and anthropology. Among the important

personalities reunited in “Palaces of Hope” figure, as editors of the book, Ronald Niezen and Maria Sapignoli, respectively Professor in Civil Society and Public Policy in the Faculty of Law and the Department of Anthropology at McGill University and Research Fellow in the Department of Law and Anthropology at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Conceived as an anthology, “Palaces of Hope” is a mosaic of the different experiences of its contributors, who present the results of their researches in a kaleidoscopic and multifaceted view. Sharing the outcomes of their studies, the authors allow the reader to discover the human side of such world-reforming organs and to really understand the crucial role played by the behavioral factor in the institutional scenario: palaces, institutions and rooms are brought into life thanks to the vital blood given from the human determination, of which they are expression.

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Since the League of Nations, international organizations have been constantly growing and global institutions have nowadays become a fundamental pillar of the New World Order. After the experience of the WWII, States felt the necessity of a new international scenario to avoid the errors of the past: in this sense, the creation of a supranational intergovernmental structure to which delegate part of sovereignty, in the aim of establishing neutral mechanisms of global governance, has been saluted as an ultimate guarantee for worldwide nations and for citizens all over the world.

In 1945 the Organization of the United Nations was born, and since that moment the creation of supranational organs given the task of guaranteeing the common values of the international community (such as human rights and fundamental freedoms) as well as ensuring worldwide acceptable conditions of peace and development has raised constantly in importance, making international relations progressively more institutionalized.

In such a scenario, crucial decisions are nowadays taken in the context of global organizations, which are composed by “functionaries” representing States and other entities, and the consequences of such actions – or, inactions – are of primary importance for the worldwide context, where they are heavily perceived in concrete terms.

Notwithstanding with the positive outcomes of such a system, in the last decades this reality has been starting showing its limits and it is currently facing several difficulties. International organizations are often perceived as abstract entities, void bureaucratic organs operating in an un-personal way and completely detached from the concrete scenario in which they are called to intervene. In general, there is poor understanding of the real aim of their interventions and their decisions are perceived as lacking any kind of humanist consideration.

Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that the primary prerogative of international organizations is that they are composed of and created by people, being this at the same time their major strength and their point of weakness.

The challenge of this book is therefore to focus on such crucial aspect, starting from the assumption that the functioning of international institutions comes as the reflection of their officials’ behavior. In this sense, ethnography and anthropology are the perfect tools to reach the heart of such matter and therefore to deeply comprehend the implicit mechanisms underlying in such organizations. To achieve this ambitious goal, it is necessary to merge within the working and living environment of the institutions object of the research. Such an innovative approach has wisely been carried out by the authors of “Palaces of Hope”, providing in this book the outcomes of their researches. Often, a story of incoherence is unraveled: things are shown as they actually work, or fail to work, because of the raise of multiple and not so rarely conflicting interests.

Thanks to this innovative “humanist” way to conceive international institutions, several of the most discussed issues entangled within the very nature of global organizations can be explored in a new perspective. Among others, the so-called “fiction of the non-political” issue is explained, the notions of officialdom, expertise and experience are investigated, and the delicate relation existing between international institutions and NGOs is explored, together with the issue of accountability at the international level.

2. A METHODOLOGICAL PREMISE: THE KEY ROLE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The strength, the exhaustiveness of this *ouvrage* is given by the fact that, thanks to the vast competence of its contributors, different techniques and methods are explored to approach global institutions in the most comprehensive way: from fieldwork to training, the authors have had the chance to truly experience the reality object of their studies, merging with it and actively participating in the everyday life of global institutions. In this sense, the tool of participant observation represents an extremely useful instrument to unravel the unedited mechanisms of interactions existing among officials working in the international scenario. In this sense, it is important to consider not only officials' behavior in the formal decisional context of meetings and reunions but also, and in particular, the significance of their interactions in informal situations - coffee areas, meeting rooms and unofficial events play a role and streets and corridor chats raise in importance in the delicate mechanisms of equilibrium governing international organizations.

It is mostly the case of a long-term research, carried out in a participatory way. Dealing with human factors, empathy plays a role: it is necessary to fulfill a process of critical immersion, learning the way things work from the inside, the terminology, the procedures, the values, by directly engaging with people involved in the context. In this sense, interviews are used to understand officials' points of view, as well as to gain experience on their skills and thereby providing a qualitative cut to the research, in particular when the case of investigating complex realities like international prosecution of war crimes. On the other side, quantitative criteria are considered while analyzing the amount of data obtained thanks to long-term field work experiences.

At last, the line of thought guiding the work of the authors is a teleological one: there is the need to understand what is the causal link between the events (both official and informal) happening in the "Palaces of Hope" and the assumption of important decisions having necessarily relevant consequences at the international scope.

3. A CHORAL INVESTIGATION ON INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

"Palaces of Hope" is composed of thirteen chapters providing a wide perspective on how the existence of international organizations can be investigated through the lenses of anthropology and ethnography. The book opens with an introduction in which the editors explain the scope of their work, and continues with the collection of dissertations elaborated by the contributors to the *ouvrage*, in the aim of providing the reader an exhaustive vision of such a complex matter.

The first experience presented is the one of Marc Abélès, who guides the reader among the spaces of WTO diplomacy, revealing the tight relationship between technical discussions carried on at the official level on a side, and unofficial diplomatic meetings happening within the environmental context of the organization on the other side. The author emphasizes the significance of such interconnection, showing how the official scene, described as a “*public spectacle*”, is nothing but the top of the iceberg of the negotiation process, being this one conceived as a “*public and private drama*”. Abélès’s realistic view reveals itself in particular in the case study of the Round Meeting in Doha 2008, which shows how negotiations can be complex because of the divergence of interests.

The focus shifts then to the United Nations Security Council and its “*informal working culture*”, as it has been investigated by Niels Schia. The influence of internal dynamics is highlighted, and it is shown how formal decisions are *de facto* provoked by a series of behavioral factors strictly connected to the informal environment in which officials behave and interact in their ordinary life.

Maria Sapignoli charges herself with the intriguing duty of describing the real meaning of the relationship among people dealing with the priorities of the UN system, taking the example of the UNPFII of which she had direct experience both in terms of field-work and of training activities. The individual raises as central figure of her investigation, which encompasses the description of the activities of lobbying, networking and participating to official and non-official events.

Romanticizing international organizations as the world guardians of universal values often hides the crucial issue the accountability of such organs, notably with reference to the so-called “*Audit culture*”. Here is the contribution of Jane Cowand and Julie Billaud giving light to the audit mechanisms implemented at the international level. In particular, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is studied as a public audit ritual dedicated to human rights: it appears how the sensitivity of the actors plays a fundamental role in such review, where official guidelines are held on a side to leave the room for interpersonal interactions.

Accountability is also addressed in Sally Merry’s analysis on how Human Development Index is elaborated by the UN Statistical Commission. Her work highlights the concreteness of the consequences deriving from a humanist approach to quantitative indicators, which in the end really make the difference in development issues.

An interesting outcome can be found in the research of Tobias Berger who, with an exquisite ethnographic approach, presents the case-study of “Village Courts” in Bangladesh, where the danger of detaching the *bureau* from society had been avoided by international officials who, aware of such risk, have adopted an innovative “*workshop*” method in the institutions of such courts, making sessions of imaginary conflicts with fictional characters in order to focus more on interactions rather than on legal *bureaucracy*.

It is up to Robert Hitchcock then to show the real potential of field studies, approached in a long-term and multi-stranded perspective. In his analysis, it is the relationship between UN Headquarters and country teams to be investigated, with a particular comparison of boardrooms and field. The personal experience of the author in Lesotho and Namibia allows him to explain how the rhetoric of central institutions often has to face the reality of “*broken promises*” towards affected populations.

Furthermore, the relationship between institutions acting at the global and the local level is studied by Miia Halme-Tuomisaari, who presents an innovative way of approaching international institutions which would set aside the so-called “*Geneva-umbrella*” system. In the author’s vision peripheral entities actively collaborate with the decisional heart.

Noor Johnson and David Rojas focus, in a comparative perspective, on the role played by NGO in the UN global climate change standard setting scene. The relevance of the topic shows the primary actuality of this research, and the *leitmotiv* of interpersonal relations comes into new importance in approaching climate change diplomacy, both official and unofficial.

In the field of human rights, the issue of *bias* with regard to officials responsible for providing uniform and objective standards is gamely illustrated by Christoph Brumann who, exploring the UNESCO’s designation of the criteria defining the “*Outstanding Universal Value*” (OUV) of cultural heritage according to the provision of the World Heritage Convention of 1972, reflects on the man-made nature of such concept and on the *de facto* impossibility to detach this abstract provision from a human evaluation.

A legal anthropology perspective, as a good example of qualitative research, is provided by Richard Wilson who, investigating the judicial activities of the Prosecutor Office at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), explores how the performance of the so-called “*propaganda trials*” has been conceived in a teleological perspective from legal personnel. As a matter of fact, supranational tribunals created by the UN do not play the mere role of neutral adjudicator of cases, rather they also are invested of the mission of seeking truth and restorative justice.

The last section of the *opus* is left to Ronald Niezen, who guides the reader in an overview of the UN’s uses of anthropological knowledge with his main case-study coming from his experience at the UNESCO Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and the Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues. Anthropology conceived as the primary source of popular knowledge in human life is presented as the most strategic tool of global governance, thereby deserving implementation and elaboration. The strategic orientation that anthropology could adopt is promoted as the further step which would allow global institution to make a step forward and to achieve objectives which for their complexity seem to need much more work to be done.

4. CONCLUSION

As a PhD researcher in international law with some experience in the field of international institutions, the reading of “Palaces of Hope” has provided me with some innovative, useful tools perfectly applicable to my research which, as a jurist, I am now able to conceive from a new, unconventional perspective. As a matter of fact, legal experts are educated for, and used to, approach world’s phenomena by the lenses of norms, regulations and jurisprudence, sometimes becoming so “provision-focused” that they risk to completely

miss the “human side” of the matter. From such incomprehension, issues may arise: frequently jurists struggle with the gap between “abstract” norms and “concrete” phenomena, and their work is perceived from the international community as detached from reality. On the contrary, the anthropological perspective and the ethnographic approach guiding the spirit of “Palaces of Hope” allow the reader to perceive reality, and in particular the world of international institutions, in such a human-oriented way that it is impossible, even for a jurist with no prior understandings in anthropological studies, to miss the crucial implications of such vision and to understand the value of the so-called “human factor” in the context of global institutions. For this reason, I am grateful to “Palaces of Hope” for having offered me the unique opportunity to perceive international institutions and relations in a completely new light, making them more comprehensive, more intelligible and, consequently, much more accessible.