

Can International Organisations Be Democratic? A Reassessment

Dawisson Belém Lopes*
Guilherme Casarões**

Abstract: This article makes the case for viewing international organisations (IOs) as global polyarchies. Our argument is twofold: on a theoretical level, IOs often meet the criterion of philosophical coherence, as they are based on rules of membership and decision-making that are compatible with those found in democratic institutions. On a practical level, we believe the concerns of IOs about pluralism, inclusiveness and efficacy go far beyond rhetoric, and may decisively influence their activities as well as their outcomes. To this end, the first section explores Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy and applies this to global institutions. In the subsequent sections, we advance our empirical argument with the UN as a case study. We reach three main conclusions. The first is that, at the bureaucratic level, the UN Secretariat performs some typically democratic functions, such as multilateral representation and the constitution of international regimes, which turns it into an important channel for feasible democracy in international politics. Second, at the multilateral level, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) represents a specific kind of representative polyarchy by allowing the greatest possible number of countries to have an equal say in global affairs. And third, it also serves as a gateway for multilevelled international representation by including a diversity of non-state actors in what has been called the 'Third United Nations.'

Keywords: international organizations; polyarchy; United Nations; Robert Dahl; democracy.

Introduction

After the Cold War, 'democracy' and 'global governance' became buzzwords for scholars and politicians alike. Democratic credentials became a prerequisite for countries to join (or remain in) supranational blocs such as the European Union (EU), or intergovernmental organisations such as Mercosur or the Organization of American States (OAS). Likewise, promoting democracy became a broad foreign policy objective of the USA, among others, and even an institutional goal of the UN, whose ideas and practices became centred on fostering democratic institutions and values around the globe.

* Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil; dawisson@ufmg.br. ORCID iD 0000-0002-1949-1001.

** Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV), São Paulo-SP, Brazil; casaroes@gmail.com. ORCID iD 0000-0002-8887-6538.

As democracy has been transformed into some sort of global benchmark in the context of a Western-led liberal international order (Ikenberry 1999), attempts have also been made to make global governance more democratic, especially by reforming international organisations such as the UN or the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹ Over the past two decades, a series of official reports, resolutions, and high-level panels have proposed formulas for making the UN more representative, efficient, and accountable (Barnett 1997; Weiss et al 2018). In the meantime, emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil – acting in large coalitions or in smaller groupings such as BRICS or the IBSA Forum – have also begun to push for global governance reform, aimed at creating more room for the demands of developing countries (Hou 2013).

The results have been mixed. Despite calls for more democratic governance from states, global technocrats, scholars, activists and politicians, most IOs have not been significantly transformed. As Thomas Zweifel (2006: 1-2) has noted:

Democracy is on the rise as a core value and the dominant governance principle worldwide [...]. But international institutions have not necessarily followed suit; as states transfer more and more rule-making powers to them, they suffer from a growing crisis of legitimacy.

There are two sets of hypotheses about why this is the case. The first could be called *exogenous* explanations, which claim that IOs reflect the underlying power relations and values of the international system, thus making their reform unlikely or even impossible. While most realists believe the global status quo is maintained by the balance of power among the great powers (Mearsheimer 1995), some liberals believe this is the outcome of a growing division between fragile democracies and strong dictatorships (Kagan 2008). While these arguments are largely valid, they don't explain why IOs did not become more democratic even at the height of US unipolar power, and as democracy expanded globally.

The second set of explanations, which could be called *endogenous*, argues that IOs are intrinsically undemocratic. This 'skeptical view' was first advanced by Robert Dahl, who argued that IOs based on democratic principles would hardly be able to function, as they were opaque 'bureaucratic bargaining systems' in essence, thus necessarily lacking mechanisms of democratic control and accountability. In his view, citizens should be wary of delegating political rights to international bodies, as the latter are not directly accountable to any electoral constituencies. As a result, citizens are unable to oppose, complain about or even fight back against the decisions and actions of IOs, lacking the levers to prevent IO officials from implementing global public policies that are inimical to their individual or national interests.

In this view, IOs frequently go unchecked by other sources of democratic power, and are virtually uncontrollable. Moreover, it holds that multilateral bureaucracies often fail to address popular demands, since most are ill-equipped to channel and make sense of collective expressions of will. In a nutshell, then, IOs fall short of achieving a reasonable degree of democratic legitimacy, no matter which definition of democracy one might mobilise (Dahl 1999).

Along the same lines, Robert Keohane (2005: 63) argues that:

There is no prospect of democracy on a global basis [...]. There is no global public: that is, no representative, globally distributed set of people who identify with the world as a whole, as a political unit, and communicate freely with each other on the basis of common institutions and practices.

We believe, however, that it is possible to make a theoretical bid for democratic IOs – and mechanisms of global governance more broadly – by adopting a different analytical framework. Using the UN as our case study, as it is the paradigmatic example of a universal organisation both in terms of membership and policy-making (Kennedy 2007; Weiss et al 2018), we argue that rather than being thought of as global *democracies*, IOs should be seen as global *polyarchies* (Lopes 2016). This conceptual leap, which we will discuss in the next section, lie at the centre of our argument: if it is true that most electoral and representation standards cannot easily be applied to global governance, it is also true that some functions performed by IOs are compatible with ‘polyarchic’ democracy (Dahl 1973, 2006). Ironically, it is Dahl’s most important concept – that of polyarchy – that provides the key to solving the equation he was so skeptical about.

In line with Moravcsik’s framework for analysing the ‘democratic deficit’ in world politics (Moravcsik 2004), we argue that IOs are global polyarchies, as they are both *philosophically coherent* and *practically viable*. As regards the former, most IOs follow rules of membership and decision-making that are compatible with those found in democratic institutions. As regards the latter, the concerns of IOs with pluralism, inclusiveness and the efficacy of IOs go well beyond rhetoric, and may decisively influence their processes and the outcomes stemming from those processes.

This article is structured as follows. In the first two sections, we examine Dahl’s concept of *polyarchy* and its application to global governance institutions. In the subsequent sections we develop the following three empirical arguments, based on an analysis of the UN. The first is that, at a bureaucratic level, the UN Secretariat performs some functions, such as providing for multilateral representation and the constitution of international regimes, which turn it into an important channel of feasible democracy in international politics.

Second, at a multilateral level, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) represents a specific kind of representative polyarchy by allowing the largest possible number of countries to have an equal say in global affairs. And third, the UNGA further serves as a gateway for multi-levelled international representation by including a diverse range of non-state actors, in what has been called the ‘Third United Nations’ (Weiss, Carayannis and Jolly 2009), in its deliberations.

Democracy and polyarchy

Given that this study is meant to engage with Dahl’s arguments, we need to remind ourselves of his basic definitions. Among the innumerable aspects of democracy, he chose to

focus on two: democracy as a system of popular control over governmental policies and decisions, and democracy as a system of fundamental rights. He interpreted the first as:

... consisting of rule by the [...] *demos*, with a government of the state that is responsive and accountable to the *demos*, a sovereign authority that decides important political matters either directly in popular assemblies or indirectly through its representatives, chosen by lot or, in modern democracies, by means of elections (Dahl 1999: 20).

The second involves:

providing an extensive body of rights [...] of at least two kinds. One consists of rights, freedoms, and opportunities that are essential to popular control and the functioning of the democratic institutions themselves [...]. The other consists of a broad array of rights, freedoms, and opportunities that [...] tend to develop among a people who govern themselves democratically [...] (Dahl 1999: 20).

Dahl's argument about why IOs cannot be democratic is based almost entirely on the first definition. The main problem, he says, is that IOs have been designed with such extensive delegation procedures – from citizens to states, and from states to international bureaucracies – that the *demos* cannot effectively control important final decisions (Dahl 1999: 21). This is so for three main reasons: (1) international institutions lack popular control, that is, there are no channels of political participation, influence, and control 'roughly equivalent in effectiveness to those already existing in democratic countries' (Dahl 1999: 31); (2) representatives of a hypothetical international *demos* would be unequally distributed among different countries; and (3) gains and losses of global policies across particular groups, regions, or countries would also be unequal in that their enforcement and legitimacy would have to rely on a common identity or political culture.

Building on this perspective, Miller (2010) argues that global democracies are not feasible and not necessarily desirable. Individuals across the world do not seem willing to accept global democratic rule, largely because the convergence of interests and beliefs that would allow them to submit to the majoritarian decisions of a potentially weak democratic arrangement do not exist. Trying to make IOs – particularly the UN – more democratic would run into intractable problems, such as how to create structures of direct popular control (for example, a World People's Assembly alongside the General Assembly), how to live up to the principle of equal constituencies, and how to determine the scope of the decisions such a global democratic institution could feasibly make. Ultimately, he argues, efficient and legitimate mechanisms for making IOs more accountable and limiting their ability to exercise their powers in an arbitrary way need not be democratic (Miller 2010: 157).

Both Dahl (1999) and Miller (2010) disregard the idea of regarding IOs as democratic because they occupy themselves with democratic issues. It does indeed seem just about

impossible to transform the UN, or any other IO, into a 'one-person, one-vote' system. However, following Miller's parameters, they do have the potential to be populist (in the sense of being accountable to at least some of the people whose lives they affect), egalitarian (in the sense that they provide small states and their citizens with an opportunity to voice their views on the global stage), and broad in scope (in terms of the policies they advance).

Our argument demands a conceptual twist. Instead of arguing that IOs could or should become democratic, we argue that they may well work best as global *polyarchies*. This is Dahl's seminal conception, in which he claims that real-world political systems should not be measured in terms of an ideal notion of democracy, but in terms of the extent of their democratisation, which will always be partial or incomplete. In this view, democratisation is a function of two dimensions: the degree of opposition (organised contestation through regular, free, and fair elections), and the degree of participation (the right of virtually all adults to vote and contest for office) (Dahl 2006: 8).

Dahl therefore counters the notion that democratic regimes must be all-inclusive institutions that allow all global citizens to make and sustain the *polis* in question. Whether due to size or demographic distribution, contemporary states – even those regarded as solid democracies – lack mechanisms for including most of their citizens in deliberative processes about high-level political choices (Dahl and Tufte 1973). Assuming that people rarely have direct access to public administration, as in utopian accounts of pre-modern democracies, 'representation' becomes the most important element of today's pluralist political regimes. Through inclusiveness and contestation, such representative institutions allow some (yet not all) individuals or groups to make the choices the entire polity will abide by. Were it not for the dramatic rationalisation of modern politics propelled by representative institutions, states would long ago have become ungovernable (Dahl 1970).

We also argue that most of Dahl's conclusions about the nature and extent of polyarchies contradict his own skepticism about the democratisation of international institutions and organisations. Even though the scale may differ, the same problems seen at these 'outer edges' of democracy – a lack of popular control, unequal representation, a lack of political identity – may also be evident at home. Therefore, if it is true that expanding contestation and inclusion do make domestic political systems (more) polyarchic, it must also be true that IOs can mitigate part of their democratic deficit by moving towards polyarchy.

Making IOs more polyarchic, however, cannot simply be a normative endeavour. Various authors have proposed some sort of Kantian democratic world government, in the form of a federation of national democracies with an elected global assembly and an executive arm (Gould 2004; Miller 2010). Archibugi (2008) and Held (1995) are among those who argue that the path to global democracy involves radical reform of the UN – first, by reducing the inequalities among states and altering the oligarchic logic of the UN Security Council (UNSC), and then by creating an assembly elected directly by all the world's peoples. Dahl (1999) regards these arguments as 'optimistic'; indeed, they may be seen as utopian. However, since their emergence, various authors have attempted to identify concrete institutional steps that could be taken to establish global polyarchies.

Zweifel (2006) was one of the first authors who examined the intersections among global governance, institutions, and democratic procedures from an empirical point of view. He argues that 'transnational democracy' should be evaluated in terms of seven criteria: (1) powers of appointment and removal; (2) public participation in decision-making; (3) transparency; (4) reason-giving; (5) a capacity to overrule decisions conferred by law; (6) monitoring; and (7) independence from external political processes. While some IOs fare poorly in several or all of these respects, others have shown an impressive record of democratic functioning. But Zweifel's argument does not challenge the notion that IOs lack some basic democratic credentials, even when 'operational' conditions are met.

Another noteworthy contribution is that of Tallberg et al (2013), focusing on transnational actors and access to IOs. They develop a sophisticated analytical model to grasp why, when, and how non-state actors find adequate conditions to support their causes, and achieve significant results. By measuring the different levels and dimensions of transnational actors' access to intergovernmental decision-making, the authors try to capture and qualify some barely explored aspects of democracy at the global level. Finally, Koremenos (2013) looks at how distinct issue areas in International Relations have given birth to diverse forms of international treaties, related to dispute settlement, punishment, or compliance mechanisms.

While these analysts have shed light on important empirical aspects of global polyarchic rule, namely the relationships among IOs, transnational actors and international law, they lack a clear conceptual framework. On the other hand, authors who have sought to develop new understandings of global democracies have largely adopted a post-modern approach, partially or entirely rejecting statist and cosmopolitan notions of global democracy (Archibugi et al 2012; Little and McDonald 2013; Scholte 2014).

Our *global polyarchy* argument seeks to bridge this gap by offering a perspective that is empirically guided and accepts that IOs will be constituted by nation-states for the foreseeable future, but continues to advocate a cosmopolitan view of democratisation. In the next section, we will look at prospects for a 'polyarchic turn' within global governance institutions.

Prospects for global polyarchies

As noted previously, growing pressures for more democratic global governance have led to improved mechanisms of representation in international institutions. While, obviously, not all states are democratic – and all democratic states do not necessarily occupy some kind of moral high ground, as some liberals would want us to believe – growing numbers of democracies, and their growing global influence, have impacted on the way in which states in general, and even individuals, perceive and relate to IOs. If we accept the notion of a growing international society, and assume that it reflects or adheres to certain values which its members are seeking to advance, it follows that institutions which emerge from state interactions should reflect these same values (Bull 1977).

Should the international order change, those institutions can be expected to either: (1) disappear, as they would be ill-fitting and lack legitimacy, as exemplified by the closure

of the League of Nations after World War Two; (2) be reconfigured in order to realign them with the new order, which some said should be done to the UN at the start of the bipolar period; or (3) adapt progressively to the new times, but run the risk that if they do so too slowly or not thoroughly enough, option one may well come into play. The UN today falls under option three. While it may still disappear, shifts are visible towards becoming a more democratic organisation. Seeking to situate changes within the UN in a broader post-Cold War framework, Zweifel (2006: 78) notes:

Can private actors participate in UN decision-making? Not yet. But the upsurge of ethnic conflicts after the Cold War, from the Balkans to Rwanda to East Timor, has renewed the sense that the UN must protect not only its member states, but also minorities within them. In 1992 the Assembly adopted its Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities, which includes the right 'to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social and public life'. And under Secretary-General Annan, the UN launched the Millennium Assembly to bring the system closer to the world's peoples.

IOs play three roles that may be thought of as potential niches for democratic improvement. The first is the establishment of global norms and patterns of behaviour through international regimes. We draw on Krasner's oft-cited definition of regimes as 'sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations' (Krasner 1982: 186). In this respect, we need to distinguish between principles and norms underpinning any given regime on the one hand, and the rules and procedures that stem from it on the other. While sovereignty and reciprocity are the cornerstones of most international regimes, democracy is more closely linked to their procedural aspects so as to ensure, for instance, the participation in and long-term adherence of large numbers of countries to some cooperative arrangements (Kahler 1992). A recent example of the democratisation of global politics through multilateral regimes is the principles and rules developed within the UN to regulate civil uses of the Internet. This diplomatic effort, led by Germany and Brazil, has resulted in a framework which is meant to regulate the conduct of both state and non-state actors on the worldwide web (Abdenur and Gama 2015). By raising the costs of state espionage and other kinds of freedom-constraining behaviour, this protocol shows vividly how international regimes may affect people's ordinary lives in a way that would have been unimaginable at the time when Dahl was formulating his seminal theory on polyarchic democracy.

The second role played by IOs that may be regarded as democratic is one of policy-making at the global level. If international regimes provide the framework for states to make multilateral decisions, their implementation relies on a body of bureaucrats and experts who work closely with transformative agents on the ground, forming what has been called 'epistemic communities.' According to Haas, an epistemic community is 'a network

of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area.¹ They share a set of principled beliefs, causal beliefs, and notions of valid knowledge, and have a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992). Even though there is no necessary link between epistemic communities and democracy – on the contrary, some analysts even regard technocracy as a major obstacle to political representation and participation within states – we could argue, following Antoniadis (2003), that the global expansion of democratic regimes has impacted positively on three key dimensions of policy-making. On the eligibility side, democracy has become a criterion for state membership of numerous regional governance and cooperation mechanisms; examples include the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the OAS, Mercosur's Ushuaia I and II Protocols, the EU's Copenhagen criteria for membership, and the 'democracy clauses' included in external EU agreements (see European Parliament 2005).

On the formulation side, there is a growing number of committees of experts and high-level panels whose members serve in their personal capacity, and are selected in terms of geographic criteria.² On the implementation side, ever since the end of the Cold War, institutions have increasingly based their decisions on democratic values and principles. The UN, for instance, has ostensibly been promoting democracy abroad through its conventions, treaties and resolutions, its subsidiary agencies,³ as well as its Secretariat (UN 2009). The word 'democracy' has yet to be included in the organisation's charter, but most of its work has been aimed at establishing fully fledged democracies where they did not exist before, or improving democratic mechanisms in countries that are institutionally fragile or undergoing political transitions (UN n.d.).

Finally, looking specifically at the UN, we may even consider a third dimension of potential democratisation, namely international security. The coercive use of force is widely regarded as the boundary between the domestic and the international. In this sense, the persistent bid on the part of G-4 nations (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) for bold UNSC reform that would accommodate both rising and established powers in the global oligarchy that has run the world since 1945 hints at the intersectional nature of this issue. For some time now, a sense has developed among analysts and practitioners alike that the moment for change has come, as UNSC reform could trigger other pluralising dynamics and pave the way for enhanced global polyarchy, both inside and outside the institutional realm (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Japan] 2016).

Polyarchy as legitimacy

One could logically rule out a democratic possibility for the UN by affirming that it does not attach itself to any clear constituency (Dahl 1999; Keohane 2005; Miller 2010). Indeed, if we adopt a minimal definition of democracy resting on institutional design and accountability and not on normative assumptions (Przeworski 1994), the lack of a specific purpose challenges the existence of any 'international democracy.' This conceptual conundrum is brought to surface by the perennial question: 'Who does the UN represent?' In this sense, assuming that IOs of this kind are designed to advance the interests of individu-

als is not only idealistic but also dangerous. That would take us to a Rousseauian/Burkean conception of the UN as the promoter of a 'general will' that has long proved impracticable, particularly in a universe that now exceeds seven billion people.⁴

In fact, the most down-to-earth assertion about the constituency behind the UN is that it comprises no more than a few hundred members (Hurrell 2007). In this view, the Charter's preamble, 'We the Peoples,' is but a lofty statement and not a meaningful one. After all, what really makes the UN happen is its member states, represented by their respective governments and officials, and not the people who live in those states. While largely accurate, this conception raises a whole new set of issues, notably the validity of the 'one member, one vote' formula. Any Indian or Brazilian could easily argue that their heavily populated states should weigh more heavily in multilateral decision-making than, say, tiny Pacific islands such as Samoa or Tonga. Among others, they could point to the fact that the IMF and EU Council have adopted models involving relative voting weights.

It is useful to compare the main voting forums at the UN (excluding the Security Council) with the typical structures of chambers in bicameral legislatures. Current UN procedures resemble an upper house, with majoritarian representation and moved by the logic of 'one state, one vote.' However, some advocate that the senate-like, majoritarian representation of UN bodies should be transformed into a parliament-like, proportional one. While it would undoubtedly bring people closer to the organisation, some pressing questions arise. The first is that, when putting together countries with populations ranging from a few thousands to hundreds of millions of people, determining a minimum and maximum number of seats for each country will naturally result in distortions in representation. It is also worth considering whether population should be the only factor in determining a state's share in such a world parliament. Of course, if we are talking about *democracy* at its purest, people must be considered above everything else. On the other hand, what if a country, regardless of the size of its population, is ill-suited to every other aspect of international life, and therefore unable to live up to its seats? Conversely, how to deal with a country that has a relatively small population but is one of the most proactive members or biggest donors of the organisation in question? Over the past few decades, as Meisler (1997: 225) has noted:

governments that together paid 75% of a budget chafed whenever they were outvoted on Third World economic issues by a two-thirds majority that together paid less than 1% of that budget. Nor did it seem to make sense when countries with a total population of only ninety million could outvote countries with a total population of almost five billion.

A third and no less important issue relates to inward democracy among the constituent elements of any IO, notably the UN. Efforts to make IOs more democratic will not succeed unless member states become more accountable to their citizens as well (Miller 2010). Even if a generous share of today's governments has been democratically elected, most of the world's people have never had a chance to vote for a president or to choose their representatives. How can one neglect the 1.4 billion Chinese living under a barely

accountable, single-party regime, or even those countries that, albeit democratic on the surface, systematically deny popular access to the policies they make?

This line of reasoning leads to the core of the skeptical argument, which is efficient at unravelling the tension between universalism and particularism in the UN. Thus Kennedy points out that while the early paragraphs of the UN Charter 'are an amazingly bold and idealistic proclamation of the human enterprise, within another few pages there is a constant affirmation that states and governments are the only important actors' (Kennedy 2007: 206) This tension poses a fundamental problem to any international body that seeks to bridge its own democratic gaps, for no other formula seems feasible. Opportunities for bypassing the single most distinctive trait of international politics, namely state sovereignty, seem limited or non-existent. No matter how strongly some authors have argued in favour of the demise of the Westphalian system of nation-states and the rise of alternative forms of global governance, especially in the post-Cold War period (Zacher 1992), none have settled the issue thus far. States are still the main units that link individuals to the 'world out there,' particularist solutions prevail in international relations, and no meaningful change is expected in the foreseeable future.

How, then, could the UN be democratic? Our argument is based on two different perspectives on and expectations for the organisation's work in world politics. They are related to what Weiss et al (2018) have suggestively called the 'first' and 'second' UN. Whereas the former consists of its member states, the latter involves its Secretary-General and international civil service. We will therefore consider the 'double-edged' IO that is the UN in terms of these two perspectives. The first focuses on the role of the Secretariat as a prime example of the international bureaucracies that tend to develop under multilateral institutions and sometimes even bid for autonomy, pursuing policies of their own (Thakur and Weiss 2009). The second focuses on the role of the UNGA as a potential 'parliament of man,' proactively building channels between state interests and the civil society (Kennedy 2007). While these perspectives have different starting points, we believe an effort to synthesise them would be highly beneficial. Only then could we talk about democracy, understood as an institutional form providing accountable channels of representation between people and governments, and producing policies based on this interaction.

In the course of playing out our logic, we will address three questions: Can the role of the UN bureaucracy and Secretary-General be seen as detached from the interests of member states? (2) Can the UNGA be seen as a 'parliament of man' in which individuals and not just the states they live in are represented? And (3) Have any attempts been made to advance 'UN policy'? Our answer to all three these questions is in the affirmative, and we shed more light on this below.

Polyarchy as bureaucratic efficiency

The UN Secretariat is responsible for managing the day-to-day activities of the organization. Among its duties are administering the policies laid down by various UN organs and agencies; managing peacekeeping operations and mediating disputes; managing eco-

conomic, demographic and social surveys and studies; organising conferences; and publishing and disseminating UN documents, also in translation. As international civil servants, UN bureaucrats are meant to be apolitical, in the sense that they may not 'seek or receive instructions from any Government or outside authority,' according to the official description. Currently, the Secretariat comprises about 40 000 staff members not only at the UN headquarters in New York but also in various UN offices around the world. While not charismatic, Weberian bureaucrats perform key functions in a given polity, and establish rational-legal political domination. According to Mingst and Karns (2006: 76), similar to the classical definition, UN staff

derive authority in performing 'duties of office' from their rational-legal character and from their expertise; they derive legitimacy from the moral purposes of the organization and from their claims to neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity; they derive power from their missions of serving others.

They go on to say that UN bureaucrats play a central role in shaping the agendas of various kinds of meetings, drawing on their own views about conflict situations and moral imperatives in the process. Therefore, they assume essentially political attributes, although not necessarily in the ideological sense of the word. Following this logic, just as any national bureaucracy has to be accountable to some degree, so has the UN Secretariat. And just as bureaucrats confer stability on to political rule by making politics predictable, steady, and rational, the role of bureaucracy at the UN must not be underplayed.

Counter-intuitive as this may seem, academics have not taken the role of the UN Secretariat as seriously as they should.⁵ As late as the mid-1980s, Pitt (1986: 23) stated explicitly that '[t]he bureaucracy, the internal workings of United Nations secretariats, have been neglected.' This happened despite the fact that the Secretariat had become some sort of 'super-bureaucracy,' a bearer of considerable power within the organisation, capable of influencing not only decisions made at the UN but also, in some instances, by its member states. According to Mingst and Karns (2006: 72), both the UN Secretary-General and the bureaucracy as a whole 'command authority to shape agendas and the ways issues are framed,' possess significant moral prerogatives, and tend to emphasise their neutrality and impartiality so as to put themselves above the self-interest of states.

But the structure of the UN bureaucracy has changed considerably over time. During the UN's first two decades, its staff suffered from two drawbacks: a lack of purpose, and a lack of geographical representativity. According to Pitt (1986: 24), after World War Two 'there was a rather hurried recruitment of a small band of mainly European officials. Because peacekeeping was the key activity, some of these officials found themselves mixed up in military activity, an unusual and often uncomfortable role for quiet and anonymous civil servants.' In any case, the visibility of the bureaucracy was almost entirely linked to peacekeeping. While they enjoyed momentary attention in the mid-1960s, particularly during the Congo crisis, its bureaucrats were again pushed to the back of the stage as the UN moved out of military activities.

By the time the UN had matured, its staff differed from the first generation of international civil servants; it had become more international, more diverse, and bigger. This growth in size and quality created a particular organisational culture which still persists today, and it was unclear at that time whether this new culture would undermine the organisation's original ideals. In any event, in the 1980s the bureaucracy suffered from two new problems. The first was the rapid turnover of staff and departments, constituting a change away from the 'stable world of Weber' (Pitt 1986: 28). Secondly, the growth in numbers of staff made the bureaucracy and its work far more complex. In this setting, the common charges of mild corruption, holding on to privileged information, overpay, and managerial inefficiency found room to develop.

Indeed, the hierarchical, dynamic, and complex institutional setting of the UN Secretariat has allowed the emergence of 'institutional deadlocks.' These can take the form of choke points in the structure, including informal gatekeepers who exercise control over information, and constitutional rigidities that make it very difficult to retain qualified staff. Choke points tend to diminish as professionalisation peaks and turnover reduces; yet the emergence and consolidation of a UN technocracy to replace the old political appointees seem to be a partial solution only, as the new power elite are 'of a rather more entrepreneurial character, who may be brought in initially for their technical skills, and then proceed to build an empire' (Pitt 1986). These rigidities began as a response to a more plural UN at the onset of decolonisation. However, as more newly independent countries joined the organisation, geography began to obscure meritocracy, as described by Thomas Weiss (2008: 109, emphasis added):

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the influx of new member states following decolonization led states to clamor for 'their' quota of posts in international secretariats, following the bad example set by the major powers. *This resulted in a downplaying of competence and an exaggeration of the importance of national origins as the main criterion for recruitment and promotion.*

Regardless of the struggle of member states to include their nationals in the bureaucratic game of the UN, perhaps seeking alternative paths to power, the Secretariat has not been able to overcome yet another shortcoming: the modest size of its staff compared to the challenges facing the organisation. Childers and Urquhart counter the common impression of a 'vast, sprawling bureaucracy' by noting that

The entire UN system worldwide, serving the interests of some 5,500,000,000 people in 184 countries [now 7 billion in 193 countries], employs no more workers than the civil service in the American state of Wyoming, population 545,000 ... and less than the combined civil services of the Canadian province of Manitoba and its capital city of Winnipeg (cited in Weiss and Daws 2009: 14-15).

These figures indicate that the Byzantine qualities of the UN bureaucracy derives from its complexity rather than its size or its financial and other resources. Indeed, it is this odd combination of a complex, powerful, yet meagre bureaucracy that lies at the root of its problems. 'While all bureaucracies share certain problems,' Weiss argues, 'the United Nations has peculiar difficulties, and the deterioration over time of its independence and competence is striking. In terms of leadership, [...] intellectual and operational leadership at all levels are circumscribed and more lackluster than is desirable' (Weiss 2008: 107).

We need to take note of the role that the UN can play in developing new forms of citizenship beyond the European model. Auvachez (2009: 43-46) speaks of a global 'supra-national citizenship-building movement' whose carriers are international organisations and courts, with special emphasis on the UN and its branches. She believes the recent establishment of tribunals mandated to prosecute individuals for crimes against humanity and the inclusion of non-state actors (NGOs and national parliamentarians) in some deliberative processes within the UN are two robust indicators of how IOs have improved their capacity to empower citizens, not to the detriment of states, but *despite* some state resistance. When it comes to the UN, she notes with enthusiasm that 'two modes of citizen access are promoted in the UN practice: *participation*, through NGO involvement, and *representation*, through parliamentarians' involvement. The overlay of those two models is increasingly explicit in UN discourse' (Auvachez 2009: 58-59).

In her view, this shows that 'citizenization' must be measured in empirical and historical terms rather than purely theoretical ones. When we do so, the historical record reflects significant growth in this type of transnational or supranational citizenship, backed by the constantly expanding role of the UN Secretary-General. The intensive media and other exposure given to Kofi Annan (1997-2007), the first UN leader who rose up through its own bureaucracy, shows that, rather than being a mere senior civil servant, the Secretary-General has become an international political figure 'subject to the problems and possibilities of political leadership' (Mingst and Karns 2006: 73). Utilising all the personal and institutional resources at his disposal, Annan sought, all at once, to serve as a neutral connector in and independent representative of the global community, and to reform the UN so as to make it more accountable and democratic. By adopting the essentially political role of 'global executive,' the Secretary-General becomes the charismatic leader of a rational-legal structure of international rule. And by improving the organisation's transparency and accountability, its chief civil servant reaches out to a stronger idea of international democracy, making such 'citizenization' possible and feasible.

Polyarchy as contestation and inclusiveness

While the UN Secretariat performs the executive functions associated with international rule, the UN's most inclusive political body is its General Assembly (UNGA). Even though the UN Charter establishes the Assembly as one of the six principal organs of the UN, it invites particular academic scrutiny, for it is 'the only one in which all member states are represented with equal votes' (Peterson 2009: 97). Given that it represents the interests

of 193 member states, its voice is supposedly heard in most corners of the globe, and the legitimacy of its decisions is unparalleled. Following Kennedy (2007: 208), it would not be too much to consider the UNGA 'the closest we are ever going to get to a parliament of man.' Its authority resembles that of a national legislature, allowing the UNGA to play a legislative and oversight role over the other 'branches' – including the UNSC – established by the Charter. The UNGA determines which states are to serve on the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, and the Trusteeship Council. It also selects the Secretary-General, and appointing the judges to the International Court of Justice (Peterson 2009).

Despite this, much like the UN Secretariat, the UNGA receives relatively little attention from scholars, politicians, and the public alike. Not even the end of the Cold War could give the Assembly a more appealing image. Ultimately, its moral capacity has never been seen as deserving of greater practical powers. The UNGA is toothless when deliberating on security matters; it has little power of the purse, and is highly vulnerable to refusals by member states to pay their dues. It has limited capacity to act, even when it is fully entitled to do so, because of the limited time it spends in session every year. While the UNGA received huge public attention during its first years of existence, this waned rapidly as it became paralysed and marginalised by the binary power politics of the Cold War. While the general debate at the 15th session in 1960, the quarrel over the Arab-Israeli conflict seven years later, and the pronounced third-worldism in favour of a New International Economic Order in the early 1970s attracted some attention, 'these were exceptions to a steady trend of decreased attention indicative of institutional decline' (Peterson 2009: 97).

This decline becomes even more prominent when contrasted with the growing prominence in the 1990s of the UNSC. This was a sign of an unbalanced organisation, whose brain seemed to be working while its main vital organ was left to decline. This is not to say that the UNGA is inherently incompatible with the globally prevailing Westphalian logic, or even that it has no function at all. Much to the contrary, as Peterson argues, the UNGA 'expresses and reinforces' the norm of sovereign equality in three ways: by including all member states, by giving each of their delegations one vote, and by adopting resolutions by majority, be it simple, for most of them, or two-thirds, for 'important questions.' Hence, he continues, 'it has always been easy to rally large majorities for asserting and reasserting sovereign equality and the related principles of territorial integrity, political independence, and nonintervention in the affairs of other states' (Peterson 2009: 98). This leads to a theoretical paradox. If a 'spirit of democracy' has been pushing IOs, and the UNGA more specifically, towards structural reform, and if democracy, as we have defined it, rests its meaning largely on individual representation, the UNGA should undermine, not reinforce, sovereign principles. After all, for any individual to have his or her voice heard and interests represented at the international level, the first step would be to remove state mediation. First, because all countries have equal votes in the UNGA, regardless of the size of their populations and the dilution of their individual voices; second, because not all countries are democratic, that is, many do not operate in terms of principles of individual

representation; and third, even in democratic countries, some large minorities are under-represented or not represented at all.

This paradox seems to suggest that, if the UNGA is to embody some kind of international democracy, it should work in tandem with the notion of the nation-state. The most likely strategy would be not to abandon the Westphalian system in terms of membership and representation, but to include, *together with nation-states*, a diversity of non-state actors in the global arena. The individual will count, but together with the state, not in spite of it. That is why there seems to be a strong movement among members of the UNGA to involve national and transnational civil society in their deliberations, via the accreditation of NGOs at UNGA meetings (Kennedy 2007). Ultimately, as Peterson (2009: 113, emphasis added) argues:

In a continued world of states, the UN system would continue as a mechanism for coordination among autonomous members, and the UNGA as a forum for deliberation among all members. With primary loyalties remaining at the state or regional level, the 'democratic deficits' resulting from the lack of direct election of delegates or a second 'people's chamber' might not be perceived as particularly important. *The General Assembly could instead enhance the current systems for UN cooperation with individuals and organizations from various sectors of society.*

This 'additional' UN consists of NGOs, external experts, scholars, consultants, and committed citizens who work closely with the UN's intergovernmental machinery. The roles of the 'Third UN' include advocacy, research, policy analysis and idea-mongering. It combines forces to put forward new information and ideas, pushes for new policies, and mobilises public opinion around UN deliberations and operations, in a way that seems fully compatible with the notion of polyarchic democracy.

Conclusion

Discussions of the UN's democratic potential have been motivated by the assumption that democracy is an inescapable fate which the global system of states will need to deal with in the coming years. This so far at least two main reasons: democratic regimes have impressively multiplied around the world over the last decades, and many experts on international law and world politics now regard individuals as active agents of globalisation, implying that international institutions need to involve them in decision-making processes whose consequences they are to experience. More democratic – or polyarchic – IOs become even more important in a context where democracies are being threatened from within, as we have persistently witnessed in the last few years.

Even if this prediction turns out to be entirely misguided, the mere expectation it engenders is enough of a stimulus to change the way in which IOs behave and play out their political roles. We subscribe to the view that 'the UN [...]' reflects an institutional structure

created in one historical period that is trying to cope with the challenges of a different era' (Weiss et al 2018: 108). Flowing from this, it has become evident that new institutional roles and forms need to be created to deal with new global phenomena. While our essay is only a preliminary effort in this direction, it has already identified a handful of possibilities for polyarchy to become more prominent on the global stage.

This also requires the acknowledgement of the relevance of IOs – particularly the UN – in complementing the territorial and sovereign nation-state by performing traditional political functions the latter are clearly failing to play today, notably because those tasks reach well beyond state jurisdictions as well as their managerial capacity.

Notes

- 1 We acknowledge that there are important conceptual differences between global governance and international organisations. The term 'global governance' was defined by Rosenau (1992), among others, as multilateral processes and arrangements, including international regimes, institutions, and organisations, underlying a given global order. IOs are the concrete institutions that help to sustain global governance structures.
- 2 These high-level panels and experts include the UN Economic and Social Council's Committee for Development Policy and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; the UN Human Rights Committee; the European Commission's Expert Panel on Health Issues; and the Open Society-led initiative of an Independent Panel for the Election of Inter-American Commissioners and Judges for the Organisation of American States' (OAS) human rights system.
- 3 These include the UN Development Programme, the UN Democracy Fund, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- 4 See the interesting background paper by Luis Cabrera (2017) which, inter alia, makes the case for a UN Parliamentary Assembly. While we agree that it would be desirable in principle for a global body to take over some of the roles played by domestic legislatures, this would be hard to achieve in practice, as we believe our suggestions are more practical at this stage.
- 5 See, for example, Kent (2016), Myint-U and Scott (2007); Chesterman (2007); Mathiason (2007); and Reinalda (2013).

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About the authors

Dawisson Belém Lopes is a professor of international and comparative politics at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), and a researcher at the National Council for Technological and Scientific Development (CNPq) in Brazil. He has authored four books and dozens of peer-reviewed articles about international organisations, global governance and democracy, Latin American politics and Brazilian foreign policy, and served as visiting researcher at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, Germany, and visiting professor at the Catholic University of Louvain in Mons, Belgium. Professor Belém Lopes is the current deputy dean for international affairs of UFMG.

Guilherme Casarões teaches Political Science and International Relations at the Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo of the Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV-EAESP). He holds a Ph.D. and MA in Political Science from the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). His research focuses on Brazilian politics and foreign policy, Latin America-Middle East relations, and global governance. Among his most recent publications are 'The Evolution of Brazilian Foreign Policy Studies: four perspectives' (*Routledge Handbook of Brazilian Politics*, 2018) and 'Geo-economic Competition in Latin America: Brazil, Venezuela, and Regional Integration in the 21st century' (*Latin America Report*, 2017). He has been a Visiting Fellow at Brandeis University and Tel Aviv University.

As Organizações Internacionais Podem Ser Democráticas? Uma Reavaliação

Resumo: Este artigo defende uma abordagem conceitual para as OIs como poliarquias globais. Nosso argumento é duplo: em termos teóricos, OIs frequentemente atendem ao critério de coerência filosófica uma vez que suas estruturas são baseadas em regras de filiação e tomada de decisão que são compatíveis com aquelas encontradas em instituições democráticas; em termos empíricos, acreditamos que OIs democráticas são pragmaticamente viáveis no sentido que sua preocupação com o pluralismo, inclusividade e eficácia vão muito além da retórica e podem influenciar de maneira decisiva o processo e os resultados provenientes dela. O texto é estruturado da seguinte maneira. A primeira seção é dedicada a construir uma ponte entre o conceito de poliarquia de Dahl e sua aplicação às instituições de governança global. As seções subsequentes avançam nosso argumento empírico, tendo as Nações Unidas como um estudo de caso. A respeito disso, três conjunturas são pontuadas: (1) no nível burocrático, o secretariado da ONU desempenha algumas funções democráticas típicas, como representação multilateral e constituição de regimes internacionais, os quais se tornam um importante canal de uma forma viável de democracia na política internacional; (2) no nível multilateral, a Assembleia Geral da ONU (AGNU) representa a pedra angular de um tipo específico de poliarquia representativa ao permitir que o maior número possível de países tenha voz ativa em questões globais em pé de igualdade; (3) A AGNU é também a porta através da qual a representação internacional em vários níveis é possível através da inclusão de uma diversidade de atores não estatais, no que tem sido chamado de 'terceiro' das Nações Unidas.

Palavras-chave: organizações internacionais; poliarquia; Nações Unidas; Robert Dahl; democracia.

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