Evolution and Replacement
A Review of M. Patrick Cottrell The Evolution and Legitimacy of International Security Institutions

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The primary claim of M. Patrick Cottrell’s *The Evolution and Legitimacy of International Security Institutions* is that international security institutions are replaced after a political opportunity for axiological or bureaucratic organizational change is opened after successful contestations of their legitimacy. Cottrell argues two forms of replacement exist in international security institutions. The first form, *reaffirmation*, occurs when an institution is no longer fit to realize its founding values in the global order. The second form, *reconstruction*, occurs through the reconstruction of an institution whose values have shifted. The analytic structure of Cottrell’s modes of replacement reflects either the maintenance of values or the maintenance of the institutional form of the security institution. Cottrell defines replacement as (re)negotiation (cf. 2, 15, 20, 23, 58). One virtue of this definition – and, I think, the book – is its emphasis on politics. International security institutions are not stable, unchanging units of analysis. Cottrell’s emphasis on negotiation in historical moments of political opportunity underscores the fact that institutional legitimacy and the global order always hold the potential to be changed. At the same time, negotiation is not replacement but one possible mechanism by which replacement may occur, and so the definition of replacement the book employs is unorthodox, if still aimed at tracking an important yet neglected political phenomenon.

Perhaps more curiously, despite the book’s argument about replacement, *evolution* supplants *replacement* in its title. Evolution indicates a broader category of
change (9), which better reflects the broader scope of the book’s application. I am not concerned with scope, however. I worry that the term evolution threatens to undermine negotiation. Negotiation, questioning of legitimacy, revaluation, and so on, are all central to the political changes the book tracks. Cottrell is right to point out that legitimacy is “a political and contingent concept” (34). When he speaks of the ‘DNA’ of an institution (cf. 6, 80) he also renders the contours of an institution ‘biologically’ determined in advance. This is out of spirit with the book’s argument about history, timing, and negotiation – all of which the book successfully shows to be of central importance to security institutional replacement.

Cottrell’s argument has two main audiences. First, the book is an example of fine constructivist IR and constructivists are, therefore, its main audience. Perhaps the more important audience, however, is realists. The very motivation for focusing not merely on institutional replacement but on the replacement of international security institutions reflects this fact, I think. Security institutions are ‘hard cases’ for constructivists, as it were, because the explanatory burden shifts. Instead of appealing to distributions or balances of power, material changes to regional or global arrangements of hegemony to account for the legitimacy – or failure to be legitimate – of security institutions, Cottrell appeals to the success or failure of values, discourses, and campaigns to reinterpret or to shift those values or the institutions ‘overseeing’ them. Cottrell does a fine job of historicizing institutional changes to emphasize the contingency of such changes. With the explanatory burden shifting, I worry the book does not do enough to address the realist position. Though realism informs the very project of the book, materialist challenges to the book’s argument are only addressed implicitly, by way of the overall
success of Cottrrell’s non-materialist account. I think it would be a mistake to say, though, that Cottrrell ignores the significance of weapons in his account, to take one materialist example. I think one success of the book’s design, then, is that it does not have to reference realism consistently; the whole book is to serve as an alternative mode of explaining a neglected political phenomenon not by emphasizing so-called immaterial factors but by putting material factors in a new context.

Cottrrell develops a spectrum of institutional change. Institutions may be resilient, replaced, or dissolved. (Again, evolution yields a broader analytic scope, allowing such a spectrum, which goes beyond replacement.) What does it mean for an institution to be on a spectrum of institutional change, as opposed to positing three modes or possibilities of institutional change? It might be the case that there are only two modes (i.e., resilience and dissolution) and that institutional replacement marks the dissolution of one (e.g., League of Nations) and the Birth/Resilience of another (e.g., UN). (Note how the study includes case studies of resilience and replacement but not of dissolution.) The right way to understand the spectrum, however, is to see each point on the spectrum as a mode of responding to contestations of legitimacy. The spectrum is not so much a spectrum of institutional change, I think, but a spectrum of institutional coping – even coping with change, perhaps. Understanding institutional change this way emphasizes, too, the importance of legitimacy to Cottrrell’s account. Although Cottrrell is right to note that legitimacy is not a ‘cheery’ concept in practice, if the ‘dark side’ of legitimacy is always a component of legitimacy – and I think it is – then it should have informed his opening chapter(s) on legitimacy. This is especially important given the emphasis of the book on contestations over legitimacy.
Although Cottrell’s study of international security institutional replacement does not claim to be history, nor does it claim to be theory, it opens new avenues for work that lies at the intersection of the history of political thought and international political theory. If Kant’s ideas did influence the League of Nations and the UN, a fruitful study might begin to look at ways Kant was appropriated for and in the establishment of these hallmark institutions. As political contestation does not occur in a vacuum, neither did Kant. Such a study might look not only at how Kant’s ideas informed discussions and founding documents, but why Kant’s ideas animated it and not the ideas of natural lawyers or competing cosmopolitans, for instance.

In the end, Cottrell’s carefully researched study of international security institutional replacement is a welcome addition to a neglected topic in IR. A new focus of qualitative, interpretive, theoretical, and quantitative research that delves deeper into the mechanisms and histories of institutional resilience, reaffirmation, and reconstruction – security or otherwise – is opened by Cottrell’s work.