M. Patrick Cottrell’s study of institutional replacement draws from International Relations (IR) theory and the history of global governance to argue that political contests over the legitimacy of an institution can supplant one institution with another during certain critical junctures. As a distinct developmental outcome of institutions, replacement occupies an “analytically distinct middle ground between resilience and dissolution” (p. 15). Cottrell aims to show when replacement is likely and what it entails politically. By making replacement his “empirical baseline,” he hopes to also improve our understanding of institutional continuity and gradual change (p. 2). The work is self-consciously problem-driven, rather than theory- or method-driven, and the opening pages of each empirical chapter pose questions that Cottrell sets out to answer.

Much of the book consists in Cottrell convincing his readers that institutional replacement, though rare, is indeed a phenomenon worth investigating. His argument on this point is compelling. Many important global governance institutions replaced prior ones after a period of crisis, and we cannot understand these institutions without taking their predecessors into account. Institutions do not materialize ex nihilo, but possess an evolutionary lineage that renders historical contextualization a top priority for careful IR scholars. For example, many people dismiss the League of Nations as an abject failure and portray the United Nations (UN) as an important, if sometimes fragile, success story. But these two institutions have in fact promoted the same fundamental principles, and the story of the UN’s creation indicates it would likely not exist without its cognitive ancestor. As Cottrell puts it, the UN “contained the genealogical imprint of its predecessor, but also attempted to correct the flaws of the League laid bare by the legitimacy contests it experienced over the two decades prior” (p. 66). In other words, to understand the UN we must see it as a replacement institution. Cottrell’s primary theoretical contributions
comprise drawing attention to this understudied phenomenon and providing a theoretical framework on which future investigations can rely.

That framework is primarily concerned with the different political pathways to replacement. “Replacement by reaffirmation” occurs when change agents challenge the ability of an institution to pursue agreed-upon principles and goals, leaving the shared commitment to extant ideas and values uncontested. By contrast, “replacement by reconstruction” involves a more fundamental rethinking of the conceptual resources from which an institution draws, rendering an institutionuviable amid a sea change in shared beliefs concerning both the nature of global problems and the optimal responses to them. Cottrell seeks to deepen our understanding of these processes by providing historical narratives of global institutions from a social constructivist perspective.

Cottrell confines his empirical investigations to international security institutions—the UN, the Mine Ban Treaty, and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The first two are replacement institutions; the latter one may one day be replaced, though for now it appears resilient due to a deep structure of legitimacy underlying it. Cottrell devotes one chapter to each institution, and the narratives he provides are historically informative and interesting. IR scholars conducting research on any of these institutions would benefit from reading both the book’s opening theoretical chapters and the empirical chapter on their institution of interest.

While cornerstone security institutions exhaust the empirical investigation, the exact scope of Cottrell’s theory is not specified. International security institutions are presented as a “hard case” because of the collective action problems they pose (p. 32). This implies that Cottrell’s theoretical framework should be even more illuminating of non-security institutions, but “institution” is notoriously difficult to define. Cottrell’s working definition of institutions is sufficiently expansive to comprise formal organizations and multilateral agreements. This is the standard usage in IR, but it is unclear whether Cottrell believes the causal logic and normative concerns he elucidates would apply, for example, to informal
institutions at the national level. There is no obvious reason why the theory would apply only to international security institutions, and yet attempting to theorize institutional development in general through an application of the concept of legitimacy is a daunting task. The theory therefore risks trying to explain too much of socio-political life.

In any case, it is also unclear what precisely the book’s causal theory is, or to what extent the word “causal” is an appropriate qualifier. Asking why some institutions are replaced and others are not ostensibly requires a causal explanation, but the book’s strengths are also its weaknesses when it comes to providing one. One advantage of Cottrell’s argument is that it leaves ample space for human agency and historical contingency. His emphasis on critical junctures draws the reader’s attention to periods wherein structural constraints are lessened because the perceived legitimacy of an institution is in crisis. While this theoretical move allows Cottrell to avoid the pitfalls of deterministic and highly stylized rationalist models of human behavior, it shifts attention to causal connections that are difficult to identify and impossible to predict. For example, whether or not an institution gives rise to a replacement depends in part on whether the institution is resilient and change agents’ arguments concerning its legitimacy are convincing. But identifying the qualities “resilient” and “convincing” ex ante requires more operational specificity than Cottrell supplies, lest we risk defining these causal factors by reference to the outcome of interest such that replacement reveals institutions to lack resilience and arguments to be convincing.

Cottrell’s normative argument concerning the “paradox of legitimacy” is also sometimes less than convincing (p. 9). Cottrell follows Ian Hurd’s After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council (2007) in conflating legitimacy with the perception of legitimacy, meaning the “‘belief that an institution ought to be obeyed’ and hence exist” (p. 34). Legitimacy in Cottrell’s theoretical argument is thus what Friedrich Kratochwil and and John Gerard Ruggie call an “intersubjective appraisal” rather than an objective moral quality.[1] Cottrell draws from this conceptualization to warn that we should
not confuse normative change with progress, since institutions can have “too much legitimacy” (p. 196). The trouble comes when Cottrell makes the secondary theoretical move of marrying legitimacy with authority such that the two concepts are mutually implicated. Cottrell’s conceptualization suggests that you cannot have effective international authority without a positive valuation of institutions by the governed, but empirically this is a dubious proposition.

In the examples he cites, most notably, the NPT and World Trade Organization, Cottrell correctly observes that many less powerful states have very different ideas than we do concerning their institutional legitimacy. But if these institutionalized power relationships are locked in despite widespread, non-Western perceptions of their illegitimacy, and if legitimacy is indistinguishable from perceptions of legitimacy, it is difficult to see why the central normative problem at issue is that these institutions are “too legitimate” to effectively challenge. Rather, it seems more accurate to say that a few privileged global actors are empowered to determine which institutions are legitimate while less powerful actors, including some of the most populous states in the world, must put up with the consequences. Whether or not less powerful countries believe that free trade treaties “ought to be obeyed,” the option of exit from global capitalism is not readily available. This insight equally applies to security institutions, which many outside the West see as instruments of US hegemony. Augmenting this weakness of the normative argument, there are instances of conceptual slippage in the text between legitimacy and the “right to govern,” a phrase that seems out of place in a book about political contestation of entrenched global authorities (pp. 63, 179).

Nevertheless, Cottrell argues persuasively that institutional replacement is a political phenomenon worth studying. Equally important, Cottrell shows that scholars interested in this phenomenon should direct their attention to the debates over and challenges to the legitimacy of institutions, a terrain of international political contest more significant in the twenty-first century than arms races or battles over territory. The empirical chapters are
well done and historically informed, a methodological necessity for any constructivist work interested in institutions, which, as Cottrell reminds us, are often rooted in temporally specific normative logics and cognitive frames. And though it sometimes suffers from the conceptual baggage that sociological legitimacy so often carries, Cottrell’s argument on what he calls the “dark side” of legitimacy poses provocative questions concerning the best way to strike a balance between effective authority and Gramscian hegemony (p. 195). Given the proliferation and increased powers of global institutions, such questions are indeed worth pondering.

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