



# International Institutions in a Stratified International Society (UN) Making Global Disparities

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## EDITORIAL

The hierarchical nature of international society, that is, its built-in structural inequities, has recently attracted the attention of international relations theorists. In this article, we highlight the role of international institutions in both reproducing and altering disparities across states and other global subjects, an overlooked component of global social stratification. We argue that focusing on institutions can help us better understand the processes that maintain and change global inequalities, and that institutionalist research can benefit from shifting its focus away from the dominant cooperation paradigm and toward capturing the diverse 'inequality' effects of institutionalised interactions in global politics. A dual case study of the Ottawa and Oslo Conventions prohibiting anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions exemplifies this shift in perspective.

International institutions are defined as formally established sets of norms governing cooperation and conflict among state and non-state global players, some of which also permit for the establishment of international organisations (IOs) and/or are enforced by IO bureaucracies. We use the term phrase 'international society,' which refers to the social dimension of global order and encompasses a wide range of entities, including states, non-state groupings, and even people. We use the phrase purposefully (instead of 'asymmetry' or others) to follow sociologist's conception of disparities as structural.

Multiple social inequalities among global subjects – structural (economic, political, and other) disadvantages that (groups of) states and other members of international society face based on socially determined criteria beyond

their influence – and stratified in the sense that its members are ranked into unequal social positions –characterise international society. In this sense, inequalities refer to the analytical observation of unequal outcomes combined with the moral premise that modern social interactions are (or should be) typically expected to progress toward greater overall equality.

Critical approaches to International Political Economy (IPE) acknowledge that international institutions perpetuate hegemonic systems but they emphasise on the economic dimension of inequality. This has led to the conclusion that change is unlikely to come via international institutions and must instead start with collective action. The sociological studies of international organisations described here provide helpful insights into intra-institutional power dynamics, but they mainly focus on a single institutional setting, neglecting to address the link to uneven global macro structures in a systematic manner.

The formation of social categories and the allocation of immaterial rewards based on these categories might coincide empirically when it comes to processes of status ascription or stigmatisation, such as when states are labelled as "rogue states." However, because 'notions of status evolve through time and geography' and different institutional contexts may attach different social benefits to the same categories, the relationship between categories and immaterial rewards is more fluid in many circumstances. Consider the treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which explicitly stigmatises nuclear weapons possession. Emulation isn't always obvious, but it can be thought of as an inter-organizational translation of existing concepts and behaviours that is then customised to a specific institutional fit.