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From Heterogeneities to Inequalities

# Institutional Mechanisms of Global Inequality Reproduction

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**DFG Research Center (SFB) "From Heterogeneities to Inequalities"**

Whether fat or thin, male or female, young or old – people are different. Alongside their physical features, they also differ in terms of nationality and ethnicity; in their cultural preferences, lifestyles, attitudes, orientations, and philosophies; in their competencies, qualifications, and traits; and in their professions. But how do such heterogeneities lead to social inequalities? What are the social mechanisms that underlie this process? These are the questions pursued by the DFG Research Center (Sonderforschungsbereich (SFB) "From Heterogeneities to Inequalities" at Bielefeld University, which was approved by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as "SFB 882" on May 25, 2011.

In the social sciences, research on inequality is dispersed across different research fields such as education, the labor market, equality, migration, health, or gender. One goal of the SFB is to integrate these fields, searching for common mechanisms in the emergence of inequality that can be compiled into a typology. More than fifty senior and junior researchers and the Bielefeld University Library are involved in the SFB. Along with sociologists, it brings together scholars from the Bielefeld University faculties of Business Administration and Economics, Educational Science, Health Science, and Law, as well as from the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) in Berlin and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. In addition to carrying out research, the SFB is concerned to nurture new academic talent, and therefore provides doctoral training in its own integrated Research Training Group. A data infrastructure project has also been launched to archive, prepare, and disseminate the data gathered.

**Research Project C5 “Conceptions of Global Inequality in World Society”**

This project deals with the emergence of a global semantics of inequality within world society. Through three comparative case studies it traces how ideas about global social inequality that draw on various aspects of heterogeneity have developed in international organizations, both programmatically and on the policy level. In addition, the project is particularly interested in the question of whether it is specific global discourses, e.g. on issues of justice, the climate, environmental protection, security etc., that serve as the main vehicles for the emergence of such a global semantics of inequality.

The main project goal is to describe shifts in semantics of inequality in world society and to map this shift in a detailed fashion in the context of the case studies. In particular, these case studies focus on reports, statistics, and policy statements of three international organizations (World Bank, UNDP, OECD). Changes in notions of inequality, which are reflected in semantics have effects on how ‘progress’ in development is quantified, and it has a tangible effect on the projects and measures of international organizations. These semantics emerge within a cycle of communication between national and international, public and private actors concerning problems in economic and social development.

The text corpus to be analyzed includes development-related reports, statistics, and policy statements of international organizations. These are supplemented by reports, policy proposals, and working papers ("nonpapers") written by administrative units within the organizations. Negotiation protocols will be analyzed in order to determine how specific ideas have gained entry to and shaped the semantics of inequality. In this process, the project will seek to identify more directly the different actors involved in the formation of particular notions of inequality, most particularly organizational staff, representatives of member states, representatives of other governmental and nongovernmental organizations, or experts from the academic community. These groups of actors do not only participate in the formation of certain ideas on inequality, but to some extent are also addressees of specific measures or proposals, e.g. member states which benefit from a programme and who then possibly also adopt these notions of inequality within their own programs and policy formulations. Such an approach is also able to account for the influence of NGOs on the forms of observation and the subsequent policy formulations by international organizations.

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# Institutional Mechanisms of Global Inequality Reproduction

**Caroline Fehl and Katja Freistein**

**Abstract**

In the field of International Relations, some extent of disciplinary agreement exists that inequalities matter to global political outcomes. Yet, it is striking that the very term "inequality" does not occupy a central position in the vocabulary of IR theorists and a shared conceptual framework to compare different dimensions of inequality is so far missing. Similarly, for research about social inequalities, the dimension of global relations has not played a major role, so far. Ideas to formulate a theory of global inequality have been proposed , yet not systematically explored. The paper argues in favour of broadening inequality research to the realm of the global. The main focus of the paper is on (in)equality in institutional orders, proposing that international organisations and institutions can alleviate but also perpetuate and deepen inequalities among state and/or non-state actors. Which processes within organised forums contribute to the production or mitigation of inequalities and thus function as mechanisms is a further key question of the paper.

Key Words: Global Order; inequalities; institutional mechanisms; international Political Sociology

## 1. Introduction

International relations are relations among un-equals. All states do not possess the same economic resources, military capabilities or prestige, and International Relations (IR) scholars working from a wide range of theoretical perspectives have argued that such differences have a profound impact on patterns of conflict and cooperation in the international system.[1] Given this widespread disciplinary agreement that inequalities "matter" to global political outcomes, it is striking that the very term "inequality" does not occupy a central position in the vocabulary of IR theorists, and that scholars have thus far failed to develop a shared conceptual language that would allow them to compare different dimensions of inequality or to discuss how they are interrelated. As for research about (social) inequalities, the dimension of global relations has not played a major role, so far. Ideas to formulate a theory of global inequality have been proposed (Kreckel 2006), yet not systematically explored. In that sense, inequality research could be broadened to the realm of the global, even if no comprehensive theory of global inequalities is developed here.

Mainstream IR theories uphold the metanarrative of an anarchical system which is composed of formally "like units" and accords equal rights to all – despite their material differences, which are captured by notions such as "relative power" or "asymmetry" (e.g. Keohane 1984, 1988; Krasner 1978; Waltz 1979). Others, in contrast, draw attention to manifestations of hierarchical order among states (Lake 2009; Donnelly 2006; Dunne 2003; Hobson and Sharman 2005). Both of these perspectives, while disagreeing on the nature of global political order, maintain a distinction between structure – as defined by "given" material and immaterial attributes of states – and order, as defined by gradations of rights and authority relations among states. This dualistic view of structure and order has two major shortcomings. First, it naturalises those inequalities that are said to define the structure of the system, preventing scholars from investigating their *generation and reproduction*, rather than their consequences for state interaction. And second, it makes it hard for scholars from different theoretical camps – realists pointing to the relevance of material power gaps in an anarchical world and as well as their critics who emphasise the possibility of hierarchical political order in the global realm – to see the *joint* research agenda to which they could be contributing.

To overcome what we view as an artificial and unhelpful theoretical fragmentation, this paper proposes a sociological perspective that understands (global) society as defined by a multitude of inequalities and that draws attention to the *social processes* through which *both* material and immaterial inequalities, differences in resources as well as rights, are generated. In this perspective, *social* inequality is (re)produced – or reduced – through mechanisms which allocate a variety of goods (military capabilities, economic wealth, knowledge, technology, cultural protection, access to

[1] See the literature review in the following section.

collective decision-making procedures) to states and other global political subjects, based on socially defined distinctions and categories. To refocus attention on these multiple social processes of inequality generation and on their interconnectedness, we propose to study international relations through the new conceptual lens of "inequality research".

This shift of analytical focus, we argue, makes it possible to understand unequal relations in international society in terms that are both more generalizable and more nuanced than prevailing dichotomous concepts such as hierarchy/anarchy or centre/periphery. In elaborating our perspective, we draw on "inequality research" that has long constituted a central field of inquiry within the neighbouring discipline of sociology but has remained underexplored in International Relations theory. A contribution to the growing field of International Political Sociology, the paper adds a systematic new perspective to the discipline and at the same time ties together related but so far independent strands of existing research.

In addition to proposing a new master frame for analysing international relations, the paper zooms in on the specific roles that *international organisations* (IOs) play in (re)producing or reducing inequality in international society.[2] While not the only arenas for the generation of inequalities, international organisations can be seen as instrumental in providing *mechanisms* for managing relations between the subjects of international society. The goal of the paper is to combine existing sociological research on inequality with IR research on the design, effects, and evolution of international institutions and to develop a typology of processes through which global inequalities are generated or mitigated within institutionalised settings.

Empirically, the research frame we propose makes it possible to explore the institutionalisation of inequalities in international politics across a broad range of policy-areas and in their inter-relatedness. For instance, inequalities in one policy field – e.g. trade – can have repercussions on inequalities in another field – e.g. nuclear energy; outcomes of policies within one organisation can affect other organisations, and finally, outcomes may have long-term effects for the international order at large.

With this heuristic framework, we aim to put forth a new research agenda and facilitate more systematic empirical studies of inequality (re)production and change in global relations. Bringing together perspectives from inequality studies in sociology and (empirical and theoretical) insights generated in IR allows us to see how seemingly given inequalities in the international system are *socially* produced, reproduced, and changed. International organisations, we argue, are a critical

[2] In line with sociological usage, we employ the term „organisation" to denote clusters of formal rules, as opposed to broad societal conventions that sociologists refer to as "institutions". "International Organisation", in our understanding, thus includes both IOs with budget, staff, and headquarters, and formal agreements that lack these physical attributes.

element in this process. In our understanding, IOs are embedded in a larger social context which is always already structured by inequalities. These inequalities are themselves socially generated, but they constitute a "given" status quo at any particular point in time. The activities of international organisations, in turn, produce social *outcomes* that can transform or confirm these pre-existing inequalities – in the issue-specific context in which they operate as well as in the wider international society.

International organisations are not necessarily the only, but certainly important arenas in which equal and unequal relations between states and other subjects of international relations are negotiated and managed. Focusing on the role of IOs in inequality reproduction and change, we argue, offers a promising avenue for reconciling micro- and macro-perspectives that have thus far been studied in different strands of IR theory. Most existing treatments of unequal global order have embraced a macro perspective in highlighting how broad changes in global (material and immaterial) inequalities have shaped past and present struggles over new (institutional) world orders at critical historical junctures. Conversely, students of international organisations have paid great attention to (routine) micro processes that take place in international organisations, but without relating these to the larger question of social inequality. By reframing these institutional processes as *mechanisms* of inequality (and equality) generation, we are able to link both perspectives and to see how global political structures are anchored in the foundational practices of international organisations.

Thus, we seek to establish the institutional (re)production and transformation of global inequalities as a new focus of analysis within the field of international political sociology. We argue that many contributions to the above mentioned literature already touch upon related questions, yet, for want of a common conceptual framework, have remained isolated from each other. Because they have not been understood as forming part of a unified, comprehensive research agenda, scholars have been prevented from linking key insights from different research strands.

In this conceptual (and somewhat explorative) paper, we will therefore synthesise a considerable variety of perspectives within IR that have – explicitly or implicitly – dealt with questions of unequal relations in the global realm, paying particular attention to institutionalist research that provides insights into how organisations manage (in)equality between their members. Turning to the vast literature on social inequalities that sociologists offer, we focus mainly on theoretical contributions that indicate how (social) inequalities come about and through which *mechanisms* they are reproduced.[3] Taken together, insights from IR and sociology help us to generate a broad heuristic of

[3] Even within sociological inequality research, mechanism approaches are both rather recent and represent attempts to condensate causal patterns of inequality (re)production from the variety of empirical observations. They are one way of approaching inequality from a structural angle, i.e. by identifying how and why inequalities have become structural features of society, yet also accounting for (collective) agency.

(in)equality management mechanisms that organisations dispose of. In particular, we distinguish between two sets of mechanisms in the reproduction of inequality in and by international organisations: *discursive mechanisms* and *mechanisms of (re)distribution*. Giving examples for both, we shortly sketch several examples and one small case study that exemplify how a shift of the analytical focus to inequality works out empirically. Particularly with regard to existing research, these examples illustrate how the proposed perspective helps to re-evaluate organisational processes with regard to the (re)production of (in)equality in global affairs.

## 2. Unequal Relations in and beyond the State

The perspective we propose can be situated within the emerging field of an international political sociology. Yet, it also draws on insights from a variety of other IR theories that have in some way or other addressed the issue of inequality in the international system, as well as on sociological research on inequalities *within* the state which, we argue, has been only partially used to explore the dynamics of international society. The following section reviews these existing contributions as well as their shortcomings and contradictions, which our paper seeks to address.

In addition to outlining theoretical influences on our approach and its contribution to the field, this review provides us with a (preliminary) empirical inventory of inequalities that have been recognised and discussed by political subjects and/or scholars as *relevant* to global relations. Why is such an inventory needed? As discussed below, sociologists understand social inequality as referring to the socially determined distribution of *any* material or immaterial goods (or "capitals") that affect an individual's personal life chances and, by implication, its power within society, for instance wealth, eligibility for certain occupations, political participation, access to cultural products and events, access to information technology and the world wide web, or sexual opportunities.[4] An individual that disposes of these resources or "capitals" can use them to improve her overall "class" or "status" within society or his position within a more circumscribed peer group, corporate organisation, etc. What constitutes the most relevant goods is likely to differ across social contexts. By analogy, inequality research in IR must begin with identifying goods that enable states and other non-state political actors to fulfil their (material and immaterial) needs and objectives. Existing IR discussions of international structure constitute an obvious starting point for generating an inductive, albeit necessarily incomplete list. [5]

[4] Here, power is understood in a narrow, Weberian fashion as the ability to control others and social outcomes.

[5] Some sociologists adopt the view that we can only speak of an unequal relation when social subjects themselves criticise this relation as unjust (Harris 2001; Therborn 2006). In contrast to this approach, we assume that discursive processes which "naturalise" social inequalities play an important role in the

Realism and "neoliberal institutionalism" (aka "modified realism"), the two perspectives that dominated disciplinary debates in the 1980s, share an understanding of the structure of the international system as defined by the unequal *material capabilities* of states (Keohane 1984, 1988; Waltz 1979). Capabilities can be measured both in terms of general economic strength and in terms of specific military assets, and their distribution at a given historical moment influences the prospects for inter-state cooperation. Inequality research in International Relations, we argue, must take into account these inequalities in wealth and military power, but without replicating the shortcomings of realist and neoliberal institutionalist approaches. As discussed earlier, both distinguish the unequal structure of the system from its "anarchical" political order, which is marked by the interaction of sovereign equals without the intrusion of a higher authority and which can be differentiated from "hierarchical" domestic political orders.[6] While they acknowledge that distributions of power shape cooperation regimes and inter-state institutions (Keohane 1984, 1988; Mearsheimer 1994; Koremenos/Lipson/Snidal 2001a, b), they fail to grasp the ways in which material inequalities are themselves *generated* by institutionalised state interaction.

Contrary to these mainstream IR theories, structuralist approaches within the field of International Political Economy (IPE) have long recognised the existence of unequal order in the international system. Despite their very different theoretical leanings, realist (Gilpin 1981; Krasner 1976), neo-Marxist (Wallerstein 1989) and neo-Gramscian (Cox 1996) theories of hegemony agree on the analysis that the liberal economic order established after World War II, and the trade and production relations that it bolsters, work to the advantage of powerful economies in the North and West and to the disadvantage of peripheral Southern economies. Inequalities of *economic development and wealth* – and, in some approaches, even differences in *domestic political structure* that result from the international division of labour – are thus redefined as outcomes of international interaction and of hegemonic politics that secure their legitimacy and acceptance. While these are important steps in the direction of the perspective we advocate, IPE approaches to unequal order are still limited by their focus on the production of economic inequalities through economic interaction, and by their neglect of the roles that formal political organisations play in generating and stabilising economic (and other) inequalities.

A different challenge to the anarchy assumption underlying mainstream IR theory has come from a range of approaches that can be broadly categorised as "sociological": social constructivism, writings in the tradition of the English School, global society/world society approaches – to name only the most prominent labels – conceive of international relations as a system of social relations in which

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reproduction of inequalities. As a consequence, any collection of social relevant inequalities is likely to overlook certain socially produced differences that have become too naturalised to be identified by contemporaries.

[6] See the critiques by Lake (2009) and Wendt and Friedheim (1995).

actors as well as structures are constituted through social interaction (Albert and Buzan 2013; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Bartelson 2009 a, b; Boli and Thomas 1997; Doty 1996; March and Olsen 1989; Neumann and Sending 2010; Onuf 1989; Weaver 2008; Wendt, 1999; Tickner 2003). This shared assumption implies, *inter alia*, that structure, defined by material or other forms of inequalities does not (alone) determine international political outcomes, but is constituted itself by interactions and changeable global models, and that states are capable of constructing alternative political orders to anarchy (e.g. Wendt 1992). Our approach shares these fundamental assumptions, but again, seeks to overcome certain blind spots in existing sociological approaches that inhibit their potential for analysing global inequalities.

One problem lies in the tendency of many constructivist works to focus on social structures – norms, collective identities, "security communities" – that unite rather than divide states and that transcend or constrain rather than re(produce) power inequalities (e.g. Adler and Barnett 1998; Johnston 2001; Risse-Kappen 1995). The focus on these "equalising" dynamics and the juxtaposition of power and identity or power and norms has resulted from constructivists' efforts to demonstrate the utility of their perspective against the realist and neoliberal IR mainstream. Unfortunately, it has distracted attention from social processes of inequality (re)production that add to or reinforce existing material disparities between states. Similar problems have also plagued the extensive literature on "global governance". In expanding the IR research agenda to include a multiplicity of subjects besides the state (Bohman 1999; Holzscheiter 2005), this literature provides a useful starting point for analysing unequal relations not just between states but also between other global subjects. Yet, as critics have noted, it has largely failed to address the role of power inequalities in governance networks (Barnett and Duvall 2005).

Another strand of sociologically informed research that touches on but at the same time skirts around questions of inequality (re)production in the global realm is the recent literature on the legitimacy of international institutions and organisations. While recognising the ability of international organisations to generate political *authority* and the need for legitimising this authority, they do not discuss the institutionalisation and legitimation of *unequal* authority relations in these organisations.[7] This blind spot reflects a normative bias of many of these contributions, which either equate institutional legitimacy with certain forms of political equality (Kuper 2004; McGrew 2002; Steffek 2003; Zürn 2000; Zweifel, 2005; see Peters 2013 for a critique) or focus on the normative question of what constitutes a "just" global order (Archibugi 2004; Held 1995).

The fact that many sociologically informed theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of International Relations avoid the issue of global inequality can be well explained by the dynamics of

[7] See Hurd (1999) for an exception.

disciplinary debates. Still, it is actually quite surprising if one goes back to the discipline of sociology that constitutes a central point of references for all of the above authors. For the godfathers of the discipline as well as their present-day successors, social *stratification*, the division of people into classes and other groups which are granted unequal access to socially valued rewards, is a – if not the – defining feature of *all* historical and contemporary societies (Grusky 2011). Accordingly, theories of stratification have been a central focus of sociological theorising, and the generation and effects of different types of social inequality a vast field of empirical sociological research.[8]

While a comprehensive review of this huge body of sociological work is beyond the scope of this paper, most textbooks locate the origins of stratification theory in the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber (e.g. Crompton 2010: 27-34; Kerbo 2007; 2011). Whereas Marx' theory focuses on unequal relations between *classes* that are based on the different positions individuals hold in the capitalist process of production, Weber adds the dimensions of social *status* (referring to individuals' membership of groups with different lifestyles that have different degrees of social prestige) and *party* (referring to individuals' participation in political power) to paint a more complex picture of stratification (Weber 1946). Weber assumes that inequalities among individuals and groups exist on these three separate dimensions, which all constitute sources of power within society. Yet, he recognises that class, status, and party influence (without fully determining) one another. This basic Weberian conception of stratification was taken up and refined in many later influential social theories, for instance in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's conception, people accumulate different forms of *capital* to maintain or improve their position in different, hierarchically structured social fields. Cultural (symbolic) capital (taste, lifestyle, etc.) is particularly central to class/status distinctions, but is not completely independent from the possession of, e.g., economic capital (Bourdieu 1984).

In the more empirically oriented lines of sociological inquiry, the focus of researchers has been less on the stratified structure of society at large than on exploring how various individual differences – e.g. in race, gender, or sexual orientation – are linked to income and status differences and how social inequalities affect social behaviour (e.g. crime) or political preferences (Neckerman/Torche 2007). Within this line of research, the issue of *intersectionality* – that is, the question of how "heterogeneity markers" such as race or gender interact with one another in generating inequality – is one focus of discussion that tries to go beyond the artificial separation of different markers and points to their inter-related nature instead (Mann and Kelley 1997).

Given the centrality of social inequality to sociological theorising and research, it appears rather odd that many "sociological" IR theorists should emphasise the harmonious and unifying, rather than the

[8] For detailed overviews and seminal texts, see Crompton (2010); Grusky (2014), Kerbo (2011).

conflictual and divisive aspects of "society" in studying global relations.[9] More in line with a genuinely sociological view of society is a small but growing body of literature that applies sociological concepts to the analysis of *inequality and stratification* in the international system. These contributions include, in particular, constructivist and English School analyses of international hierarchies, great power privileges, "outlaw" states and practices of intervention and semi-sovereignty (Buzan et al. 1993, Dunne 2003; Donnelly 2006; Onuf 1989; Reus-Smit 2005; Simpson 2004, Keene 2013a, b); discussions of legitimacy in international relations that draw on Weber's theory of legitimate rule (Hurd 1999); historical analyses of colonial and neo-colonial orders (Bartelson 2009 a, b; Hobson and Sharman 2005); as well as discussions of "status" orders and sociological fields in international relations (Singer and Small 1966; Adler-Nissen 2012; Keene 2012; Lebow 2008; Ringmar 2002; Wolf 2011).[10]

These existing discussions of unequal global relations from a sociological perspective provide many important insights that complement older, materialist treatments of unequal order and that we take up in our own approach. In particular, they draw attention to unequal distributions of (substantive and participatory) *rights* in past and present international law which are influenced by but by no means identical with gradations of economic or military power. Furthermore, they highlight the importance that states as well as non-state actors on the global scene place on informal gradations of *social recognition* (including concepts such as esteem, respect, honour, or status). Lastly, they accord a prominent place to discursive processes (of identity construction) that *legitimise* unequal relations in the global realm.

Within the confines of this paper, it is impossible to do justice to each of these approaches by highlighting their specific contributions and drawbacks. However, there are a few problems that most of them share and that, in our view, warrant a rethinking of sociological inequality research in international relations. First, many of the above contributions tend to focus on unequal orders that encompass either the whole international system/society (e.g., the identification of "great powers" or "outlaw states") or a defined geographical part of it (e.g. the Soviet sphere of influence, the European colonial system). While this focus has generated valuable insights, it is based on an incomplete application of sociological theories of inequality to the international realm. By juxtaposing *the* material power structure in a defined group of states with *the* hierarchy of rights or status in the same group, existing approaches overlook the possibility that inequalities in material

[9] Keene (2014) explicitly formulates this critique with regard to certain arguments within the "English School" of International Relations.

[10] Whereas the works cited here reflect Marxian or Weberian understandings of stratification and inequality, another prominent account of hierarchy in the international system, namely that of David Lake (2009), is based on a rationalist contract theory of inequality. While not explicitly referring to this source, Lake's approach resembles *functionalist* explanations of social inequality in the field of sociology (Davis/Moore 1944).

resources, rights, and recognition may manifest themselves differently in different spheres of social interaction (e.g. the trade system, a certain environmental regime, a regional human rights organisation…) and that most states form part of multiple subgroups of international society and thus occupy different social positions in different regional and sectorial contexts.[11] In sociological studies of (intra-state) inequality, such complex, overlapping inequalities are a central concern.

The second, related conceptual problem is that the macro perspective of most international political sociologists on unequal global order inhibits their ability to theorise and empirically observe the (re)production of inequality in social interactions. Although all of them assume that unequal political orders are socially constructed, analyses of the construction process itself are mostly limited to studies of big "founding moments", such as the Congress of Vienna or the negotiation of the UN Charter (e.g. Hurd 1999; Simpson 2004), or of large-scale historical transformations such as decolonisation (e.g. Hobson and Sharman 2005; Reus-Smit 2011). Again, this approach stands in contrast to sociological theories which emphasise the habitual, repetitive micro processes through which social inequalities are produced, reproduced, and challenged. As we will elaborate in the next section, a recent debate in the sociology of inequality that has great potential for IR but that has been completely ignored here revolves around different micro *mechanisms* of inequality (re)production and transformation. Existing approaches to global inequality have largely avoided the question of how inequalities are generated in such micro processes. At the macro level, the creation of hierarchical order has been studied mostly through a discourse analytical lens, emphasising processes of identity formation that legitimise hierarchical orders. Such discourses are undoubtedly an important, but not the only mechanism through which global inequalities are reproduced. In their effort to delineate themselves from "crude" realist theories of international structure, sociological IR theorists have for the most part avoided any discussion of how discursive processes and material redistribution processes interact.

As we argue in the following, the macro focus of an international political sociology of inequality is neither unavoidable nor logical. Existing IR debates about the creation, design, functioning and effects of *international organisations* already provide an elaborate heuristic of micro processes that shape and channel state interactions. While these have rarely been related to theories of international society and stratification, a merger of these micro perspectives with existing macro perspectives on global inequality promises to bring inequality research in IR a step forward.

In summary, the task at hand is to develop an integrative sociological framework of inequality research in IR that can account for the inequalities in wealth, economic development, military capability, domestic political structure, legal and informal rights, and social recognition among states

[11] Also see Thomas Müller's paper Statusbasierte Institutionen: Umgang mit Status-Unterschieden auf dem Wiener Kongress, 1814-15.

and non-state global subjects that have been discussed in various existing IR theories. The framework must be designed so as to overcome artificial divisions between material structure and political order, while also taking into account the complexity of multiple, overlapping manifestations of inequality in geographical and functional sub-fields of international society. Furthermore, the perspective needs to remain open towards the possibility of contingency, that is, it takes as open-ended the processes that can lead to (more) inequality or, conversely, more equality between the subjects of global affairs.

## 3. Institutional Mechanisms of Inequality (Re)Production

In our approach, social inequality in the international system is understood as resulting from a process of institutionalisation, and as being constantly reproduced, but also potentially transformed and reduced, through social mechanisms that are peculiar to international organisations and their broader social context of global order(s). In the following, we develop this argument in three steps. First, we review existing sociological work on social inequality, highlighting the importance that sociologists attach to *social mechanisms* of inequality production. We argue that the different mechanisms described in the existing literature can be roughly grouped into discursive and distributive mechanisms, and that formal social organisations play important – if still under-theorised – roles in both types of mechanisms. In the second step, we link this reflection on inequality reproduction in international organisations to existing research in International Relations. IR scholars have identified various types of "institutional mechanisms" that are embodied in, performed by or in, international organisations, but for the most part, they have failed to relate these to the macro question of inequality (re)production and change in international society. We argue, however, that this is possible and indeed necessary. In our conception, many of the "mechanisms" described by scholars of IOs are specific institutional processes that function according to the logic of one of the more abstract, larger categories of inequality-generating mechanisms identified by sociologists. This argument enables us, finally, to construct a heuristic that that distinguishes between discursive and distributive mechanisms of inequality reproduction, and various sub-types of each, and relates different types of social processes in which IOs play a role to these mechanisms.

### 3.1 Social Mechanisms

As the brief overview given in section 2 already indicates, it is impossible to summarise the wealth of the sociological literature dealing with social inequalities, to reconcile the vocabularies used by different authors that talk about similar phenomena and to position the different social processes of inequality-generation that they describe in terms of consistency with others. The aim of the following section is a more modest one: to explain the general idea, shared by different theoretical

approaches, that social inequality is constantly (re)produced and transformed through social *mechanisms*, and to propose a rough distinction between discursive and distributive mechanisms of inequality-generation. We draw on two sets of ideas in developing our heuristic tool. First, we account for the general idea of social mechanisms. Mechanisms can be seen as outcomes of human social interaction that systematically structure comparisons required in order to structure societal relations. Comparing, in this sense, is a social practice that helps to understand the relative position of individuals or groups vis-à-vis others. The metaphor of mechanisms points to specific social processes that routinely structure and solidify relations between subjects and result in similar outcomes. Second, we specify this idea with regard to the emergence and persistence of social inequalities. Going back to sociological classics such as Max Weber or Karl Marx for instructions on how to conceive of social inequalities, contemporary sociological authors have not only tried to explain how and why inequalities come about but have also described and systematised the mechanisms through which mere differences are turned into inequalities. This, it needs to be stressed, is a vital point – inequalities are invariably differences that *matter*, that is, have an influence on how people live, on their well-being and so on. Translated to the international realm, inequalities are those features of subjects that decide how they fare in international relations compared to (all) others. The reason why we speak of mechanisms here is that we try to understand patterns of inequality reproduction in a systematic way; mechanisms – in a broad understanding – are one way of ordering analytically the processes that lead to the emergence (and persistence) of inequalities.

What do sociologists *generally* refer to when they speak about "social mechanisms"? A variety of different understandings of social mechanisms exist. Seen as the inside of a black box between two events or outcomes, mechanisms are expected to give generalizable information on the processes that connect them. *Mechanismic* approaches (Diewald and Faist 2011) are often rooted in causal perspectives, or more to the point, methodological individualism (Hedström and Swedberg 1998: 13), but need not be restricted to this logic. More generally, mechanisms – as said above – reflect social outcomes of all kinds of social interactions.

With regard to inequality-generating mechanisms more specifically, both Charles Tilly and Göran Therborn aggregate abstract mechanisms (with various sub-mechanisms) from the literature on inequalities. For our endeavour, these mechanisms are particularly helpful because they establish a common vocabulary for the various processes that have been described as mechanisms and systematise them according to the functions they have.

A first set of mechanisms is proposed by Charles Tilly, who looks at broad historical patterns of inequality production (Tilly 1998, 2001). Abstracting from observations of how inequalities are produced, Tilly identifies three types of mechanisms, namely 'environmental', 'cognitive', and

'relational' (2001:24). The first set of mechanisms, 'environmental mechanisms', refer to life-conditions in a larger sense, while 'cognitive mechanisms' refer to conceptual underpinnings. 'Relational mechanisms', finally, operate between people and influence their relations. These are obviously very abstract descriptions, most apt for studying long term processes and events. While all three types of mechanisms matter, the latter form in particular is seen as relevant for the (re)production of inequalities (Tilly 2006:104). *Relational mechanisms* in the context of inequality, Tilly explains, are particularly pertinent because they account for societal behavioural patterns beyond individualistic beliefs. We tie in with the idea of relational mechanisms here because accounting for inequalities in the international system of states and non-state groups is less about individual motives than interaction between subjects and groups, i.e. relations.

In Tilly's perspective, relational mechanisms can be typified as 'exploitation, opportunity-hoarding, emulation and adaptation' (ibid), pointing to processes of social closure and boundary-making. Both refer to what have otherwise been called 'ascriptive' – or in our vocabulary: discursive (see below)– processes and tie in with the establishment of historical-institutionalist trajectories. Emulation refers to processes of translating established models of interaction to new contexts (e.g. in organisations). Adaptation refers to the routinisation of practices (e.g. rituals, symbols, mundane tasks) that reproduce the categorisations prevalent in their organisational context. These mechanisms can concern both discursive and distributive processes that give preference to one group over others. Exploitation and opportunity-hoarding encompass a variety of practices that disenfranchise certain groups and benefit others. All four mechanisms refer to the ways inequalities are shared and defended, e.g. in order to protect special rights or goods that are unequally distributed.

Similar to Tilly, Göran Therborn also identifies four relational mechanisms of inequality production – as well as four counter-mechanisms that have the potential to transform inequality into (more) equality. Thus, the question of whether interaction leads to inequality or reduces it remains open to empirical observation, while the patterns of interaction can be potentially reversed (Therborn 2006). For Therborn, the central question is how some specific heterogeneity markers from the variety of differences that characterise individuals and groups, that is, characteristics of individuals or groups such as gender, sexual orientation or class origin, are made into unequal relations between them, so that relations can be framed as comparisons between superior and inferior units. The central argument in Therborn's account is that inequalities are inherently connected to (uneven) distribution and distributive actions (2006:14). Furthermore, human interactions that (re)produce inequalities work in combination with systemic dynamics that can have effects independent from social interaction. The processes that account for inequalities refer to relations between individuals, groups or whatever their referent objects may be. The four mechanisms are not of the same kind but they

can be seen as similar in being functional equivalents of relations between unequal subjects and groups.

Particularly the structuring effects that mechanisms have on social relations are of interest here. 'Distanciation' refers to the stable or even growing established distance between those who gain and those who lose. 'Exploitation' refers to extremely asymmetric relations between two groups, which are beneficial to only one side at the cost of the other; particularly in the distribution of scarce goods, exploitation can refer to a zero-sum game that distributes goods only to one group, while utilising the other to get them. A third mechanism, 'exclusion' can be understood as a variable for all processes of discrimination (as us vs. them), for attempts at closure and for obstacles that deny access to goods (Therborn 2013: Ch. 6). Finally, the fourth mechanism is 'hierarchisation', most explicitly related to institutionalised/organisational contexts, social order and formal organisation. Societal segregation, for instance according to knowledge or taste (in a very Bourdieuan take on the matter), would result from this social mechanism.

As counter-mechanisms, processes which potentially reverse inequality and lead to (more) equality have also been identified and show that processes of inequality production, while powerful, may be countered. In Therborn's account, to all mechanisms that establish inequalities there is a potential counter-move, i.e. 'catching-up' vs. distanciation; 'inclusion' vs. exclusion; 'institutional flattening' vs. hierarchisation; 'redistribution' vs. exploitation. Stressing the political contingency and potential contestability of inequalities, the identification of counter-mechanisms is empirically and conceptually valuable. Particularly in the context of organisations that may have been designed to overcome relational problems (such as cooperation or conflict), expectations to mitigate inequality can be expected to play an important role.

As Diewald and Faist remark, differences between Tilly's and Therborn's attempts to formulate abstract mechanisms can be seen in the role of categorisation (for lack of a better term). They point to the fact that "[m]ore explicitly than Therborn, Tilly's relational approach already includes boundary making between different population categories as a precondition of unequal relations that at the same time serve to legitimise inequalities. Therborn, on the other hand, factors the structuring of positions much more clearly into the generation of social inequalities relatively independent of their allocation to certain individuals from different categories" (Diewald and Faist 2011: 11). Thus, beyond the (re)distribution of goods, Tilly's approach stresses the importance of conceptual underpinnings – or categorisations –as part of inequality production.

With regard to inequality, we take from this discussion the identification of 'ascriptive' mechanisms (Reskin 2003), namely those forms of categorisations or claims making that turn heterogeneities into (potential) inequalities and that logically precede distributive mechanisms. Several approaches point

to conceptual boundary-making or, more broadly speaking, the discursive processes that define groups in certain ways that allow for unequal relations between them. As mentioned above, heterogeneity markers such as age, colour of hair or sexual preferences need not result in inequality; if heterogeneity (or difference, pluralism, diversity) is addressed in a way that makes it relevant for relations between groups and for the distribution of (limited) goods this can be seen as the discursive construction of inequality criteria – a necessary precondition for unequal distribution. For instance, Charles Tilly describes the way in which inequalities are produced on a very general level, claiming that '(…) parties interact repeatedly, transferring resources in both directions, bargaining out provisional agreements and contingently shared definitions of what they are doing. That interaction responds in part to available scripts, but interaction modifies the scripts themselves and only works at all because participants improvise incessantly` (2006: 107). The importance of discursive processes ('shared definitions') for outcomes is clearly stressed in this account. Additionally, inequality needs to be legitimised not just once but regularly; thus *discursive mechanisms* do create the categories on which unqual distributions of goods are based but also legitimate these unequal distributions. Up until this point, we have distinguished a range of discursive and distributive mechanisms of inequality reproduction, but have not said anything about specific *institutional mechanisms* of inequality reproduction, that is, inequality-generating processes that work through formal social organisations. While such institutional mechanisms do not constitute a central point of discussion in the existing sociological inequality literature, they are nevertheless touched upon by a number inequality researchers, suggesting a need for further theoretical elaboration and integration. First, there is a (small) research strand that deals explicitly with 'organisational mechanisms' of inequality generation (Reskin 2003; Stainback et al. 2009), but which focuses exclusively on the context of labour, i.e. on organisations in the sense of firms and companies that organise employer-employee relations. Of course, the logic of these particular types of organisations may differ vastly from those of international organisations, for instance in the sense that the IO policies need not follow a managerial logic of economic gain, and may thus limit the usefulness of this literature for our analytical purposes. However, some or perhaps even many of the identified patterns concerning (labour) organisations may also be applied to international organisations. "More generally, organisational-level mechanisms influence levels of ascriptive inequality by the extent to which they explicitly treat members of different ascriptive groups differently; (…) and the extent to neutral organisational practices have a different effect on members of different ascriptive groups" (Reskin 2003: 14). Particularly in combination with the observations mentioned above, we assume that we can generalise certain groups of similar mechanisms that are relevant in organisational contexts. Yet, whereas sociological studies treat organisations as only one of many social contexts of inequality

reproduction, we are interested in the role of organisations as inequality generators within a larger institutional context.

Quite evidently, organisations are embedded in a social environment that influences them – and that they influence in return. How heterogeneity is turned into inequality depends both on society and its organisations. At a more abstract level, this point is also taken up by Tilly, who more explicitly discusses the role of formal organisations for the reproduction of inequality in a larger social context. Two points seem particularly relevant for our project:

1) Categorisations underlying the production of inequality are established more strongly when organisations are involved in the process. According to Tilly, "when many/or influential organisations adopt the same categorical distinctions, those distinctions become more pervasive and decisive in social life outside those organisations" (Tilly 2006: 106). A related argument is that "emulation (transfer of existing organisational forms, representations, and practices from one setting to another) generally lowers transaction costs of exploitation and opportunity hoarding when transferred forms, representations and practices install paired unequal categories at the boundaries between greater and lesser benefits" (105).

2) Organisations are focal points in the reproduction and change of social inequalities. Tilly holds that "changing unwarranted beliefs about categorical differences has little impact on degrees and direction of inequalities, while organisational change altering exploitation and/or opportunity hoarding has a large impact" (106). Organisations, accordingly, can be seen as stabilisers of conceptual frameworks, as reproductive agencies, and as involved in the distribution of goods. Most importantly, the processes that have been identified as mechanisms of (in)equality production.

### 3.2 Institutional mechanisms in IR theory

The mechanism approach developed in sociological inequality research, we argue, constitutes a promising, if thus far underexplored, avenue for understanding the (re)production and transformation of inequalities not only in national, but also international society. To identify how the different mechanisms of inequality generation described by sociologists manifest themselves at the international level, and in international organisations in particular, it is useful to look to the roles that *international organisations* (IOs) play in managing and shaping relations among states and non-state actors in the global realm.

IOs – a category we understand to encompass all formalised international agreements, whether or not they have legal force or physical attributes such as budget and staff – are an obvious entry point

for global inequality studies for two reasons.[12] First, they are important (albeit not the only) sites of international society's collective organisation, so we would expect them to occupy a central place in processes of inequality generation and transformation. Second, they are the subject of an extensive IR literature which has already produced a rich heuristic of "institutional mechanisms". As we discuss below, this term has been used inconsistently in existing work about international organisations, and debates about what these mechanisms *do* have revolved predominantly around functionalist claims of institutional efficiency, accounting for the separation of these discussions from "macro" debates about unequal order in the global system. Nevertheless, there are a number of aspects in which existing research and theorising on IOs already touches on questions of global inequality. Building and expanding on these ideas, we suggest that the diverse types of institutional micro-processes characterised as "institutional mechanisms" of cooperation by IO researchers can be systematically related to the inequality-generating mechanisms observed by sociologists to generate a detailed analytical heuristic for global "inequality studies". Since the claims made in sociology about social (inequality) mechanisms are the analytically broader, we will subsume the empirical identification of micro-mechanisms in IR under the above framework.

A web search on the terms "international" and "institutional mechanism(s)" yields a high number of results, pointing to a wide range of theoretical contributions on international organisations. In some contexts, the term is used to delineate cooperation through formal "institutional mechanisms" from cooperation through informal and more complex "regimes" (e.g. Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986). Other texts refer to formalised processes within institutions, such as dispute settlement, as institutional mechanisms (e.g. Busch 2007). A more causal understanding of institutional mechanisms underlies formulations that describe IOs as a "coordination mechanism" which helps states to resolve cooperation problems and "sustain equilibria" (Thelen 1999). Similarly, many contributions refer to specific design features of international organisations, such as membership size, delegation of decision-making, or escape clauses, or to specific institutional tasks, such as issue-linkage, monitoring, or sanctioning, as "mechanisms" *through* which IOs facilitate cooperation (e.g. Koremenos/Lipson/Snidal 2001a, b; Simmons and Martin 1998).

Beyond the functionalist cooperation paradigm, scholars also identify other effects that IOs have on their memberships and/or environment as "mechanisms", for instance, "agenda setting" at the international level (Tsebelis 1994), the diffusion of norms, ideas and policy models (Simmons et al. 2008), or the socialisation of current or future members (Kelley 2001). Critics of rational choice

[12] Whilst the common distinction between institutions and organisations, particularly in mainstream sociology, also holds in the case of international relations, both forms can be relevant in the context of inequalities. More even, the variety of forms in the different fields of international politics, especially where the dimension of formality/informality is concerned, is central to the main questions of our project. As is discussed below, informalisation can itself function as a mechanisms of inequality generation.

approaches to IOs also point to various "mechanisms" that can account for the dysfunctionalities of many IOs; historical institutionalists identify feedback loops as key "mechanisms of reproduction" (Thelen 1999), whereas organisation sociological approaches highlight the bureaucratic mechanisms through which IOs gain power and autonomy vis-à-vis their state creators (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Lastly, inter-organisational strategies such as "forum shopping", "regime shifting", or "chessboard politics" (Alter and Meunier 2009) are also termed "mechanisms" (Helfer 2009: 40).

Neither of the above contributions systematically links the specific institutional mechanisms it is concerned with to the macro debates about hierarchical order and global inequality discussed in the preceding section. And yet, a closer look reveals many potential, if underexplored, points of contact between the two research strands. For instance, theorists of "rational institutional design" discuss IOs' membership rules as a potential "mechanism for excluding non-cooperators" (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001: 1056). Within the functionalist framework of this approach, such an exclusion effect is interesting primarily as an efficiency-enhancing enforcement mechanism (ibid.), but its potential to work as a "social closure" mechanism in the sociological sense is obvious. Similarly, rational design theory treats "power asymmetries" among cooperating states and "distribution problems" (i.e. uneven distributions of gains from cooperation) as key variables that affect institutional design features, for instance member states "control" over institutional decision-making or escape clauses. Again, their functionalist predisposition leads "design" theorists to understand these institutional features as "resolving" problems relating to power and outcome inequalities, whereas a sociological perspective would be interested in understanding how they contribute to stabilising, reinforcing or indeed weakening those very inequalities. These questions are addressed more head-on by a number of – still broadly rationalist – contributions that discuss how powerful states benefit more than weaker states (under certain conditions) from specific institutional mechanisms such as standard setting (Mattli/Büthe 2003), forum shopping (Drezner 2009), or informalisation (Abbott and Snidal 2000).[13] While such micro dynamics are of an obvious relevance to a global sociology of inequality, they have not been linked to such a perspective.

Unequal effects of IOs are also addressed by contributions that question the functionalist assumption of institutional pareto efficiency. For instance, Lloyd Gruber (2000) points out how the negative externalities of institutionalised cooperation can force outsiders to join IOs which run counter to their interests (something he terms 'go-it-alone power'). Scholars influenced by the ideas of historical institutionalism argue that international institutions may "lock in" unequal power relations (Ikenberry 2000) and that feedback effects may reinforce existing asymmetries between actors (Pierson 2000, 2004). However, the same perspectives *also* highlight the potential for IOs to

[13] These arguments, in turn, build on early studies that emphasise the importance of distributional conflict "on the pareto frontier" in institutionalised policy coordination (Krasner 1976; Grieco 1988).

"constrain" power (Ikenberry 2000) and to develop in "path dependent" ways that run against the interests of powerful states (Pierson 2000, 2004). Ultimately, these approaches thus remain agnostic as to the inequality-related effects of institutional mechanisms.

In summary, existing discussions on the institutional mechanisms anchored in IOs already touch on questions of inequality (re)production and transformation in many respects, but there are conceptual obstacles to linking these insights to macro discussions of unequal global order. In particular, the debate between functionalists and their critics that dominates IO research fixates attention on the questions of whether or not institutions are efficient cooperation mechanisms and of whether or not they can be explained with reference to state interests. Against this background, inequality-related effects of institutional micro processes are mainly interesting as an argument against institutional efficiency and as a potential explanation for the choice of specific institutional rules, not so much as subject of investigation in its own right that relates to larger patterns of global order. Sociological and historical institutionalist approaches to IOs are open in principle to such an integration of micro and macro perspectives, as both stress IOs' "embeddedness" in a larger social (institutional) context (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Thelen 1999). And yet, the inequality-enhancing or –reducing effects of institutional micro-processes have constituted a rather marginal topic of reflection within these perspectives, again reflecting the focus of the debate on functionalist/anti-functionalist divisions. The dominance of this debate may also account for the fact that some processes discussed prominently in the IO literature, such as socialisation, diffusion, or bureaucratic "pathologies" have hardly at all been analysed with a view to their inequality-enhancing or –reducing effects.[14]

In the following section, we therefore propose an integrative heuristic that systematically relates institutional mechanisms identified in existing IO research to theoretical concepts developed in the sociology of inequality. This heuristic allows us to re-frame oft-discussed mechanisms of "cooperation", "coordination", "institutional change", or "institutional interaction" as mechanisms of inequality (re)production. This proposal should not be misread as suggesting that IOs do *not* do such things such as facilitating cooperation, enhancing efficiency, or protecting their autonomy. However, our shift of perspective allows us to see an additional role they play in the maintenance (or transformation) of an international society constituted and defined by multiple sets of unequal relations. Furthermore, it allows us to integrate insights from *competing* theoretical approaches under one overarching framework of inequality. How this synthesis of different approaches from the two disciplines can be achieved will be detailed in the following chapter.

[14] For exceptions, see Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990) and Towns (2012). Both approaches, however, do not pay much attention to the specific roles of international organisations in the hierarchical socialisation and norm diffusion processes they describe.

## 4. Bringing it together: Institutional mechanisms and inequality (re)production in international organisations

To recap what we have learned so far and to lead into some first empirical examples, we will now summarise our main tenets and describe how we assume inequality is (re)produced in international society. In line with sociological theory, we assume that inequality is a fundamental structural feature of all societies, including international society. Unless we conduct historical studies of the *longue durée* to trace the origin of certain forms of inequality (for instance, the birth of imperialism and colonialism, the emergence of modern statehood and so forth), we have to assume that a host of inequalities already characterise relations between subjects of international society today. Processes of inequality production, thus, are always repetitive to a certain extent because they tie in with an unequal order between states and non-state groups, which may become more equal or unequal or reconfigure the forms of (in)equality between them.

Equally building on sociological models, we contend that inequality among states and other global subjects is the product of a complex social process with several elements that can be thought of as successive stages, but which are likely to occur simultaneously in reality: binary social categories are formed that allow for the division of states and non-state subjects with certain distinctive features (heterogeneity markers) into groups; membership or non-membership of these categories is discursively ascribed to individuals; and specific categories are selected as relevant for regulating access to social rewards (economic and military resources, status, participatory rights…), and these rewards are (re)distributed accordingly. The result of the distribution process, in turn, may affect subjects' chances of gaining membership of privileged social categories. In this process, different kinds of discursive (ascriptive) and distributive social mechanisms are at work which, we assume, are likely to be anchored in – albeit not limited to – the practices of international organisations.

Analytically, we can think of inequality production, catalysed in international organisations, as a process in three stages: (stage 1) the response of organisations to existing inequalities in the international system, i.e. by acknowledging/ignoring/selecting them; (stage 2) the reproduction of these inequalities/the production of new inequalities/the transformation of inequalities to equality; and (stage 3) the effects of organisational policies on the constellations within international society, i.e. a reconfiguration of international order. At least analytically, it makes sense to conceptualise inequality (re)production processes as having these interrelated stages. Empirically and even conceptually, it remains difficult to separate the phases and to discern what inequalities are at stake and what mechanisms produce them. In order to be able to identify what happens in these processes we need to clarify what constitutes an *inequality in contemporary world politics*, what processes

function as *mechanisms* in the production of these inequalities and where in international society these processes take place.

Inequalities can have material and immaterial dimensions. As discussed above, inequalities that have been identified as such in IR include unequal military capabilities, disparities in economic power, unequal access to decision-making processes or unequal social recognition. However, there is no systematic list of the variety of inequalities encountered in international affairs, most likely because the common idea of an 'anarchical system' is so pervasive and inequalities are seen as secondary phenomena of international relations. Phrased differently, the difficulty of recognising systematic inequalities in international society follows from the lack of a common conceptual framework. While sociologists have accepted Marxian, Weberian, Bourdieuan etc. definitions of inequality as social facts that characterise (all) societies, IR scholars do not agree on inequality as a defining feature of the international system. Thus, seeking to identify inequalities beyond issues that have been explicitly addressed as such is a difficult endeavour. However, if we rely on the perception of issues as inequalities to identify them we tie their identification to their politicisation – and ignore those issues that have been silenced or accepted as inevitable. Despite obvious differences between national societies and international society, analogies can be made in many ways; inequalities in sociological terms also refer to groups and collectives, the goods concerned in distributive processes are not a priori restricted to any particular items, and processes of inequality production can take various forms. In short, a sociological inequality frame is conceptually open enough to also accommodate international society.[15] Thus, in the broadest sense, inequalities in international society are those differences between subjects that matter in the distribution of those goods that have an impact on the (power) relations between them. With this definition, it becomes clear that inequalities relate to the vital questions of power, conflict and cooperation in international society.

Since sociologists also teach us that habitualisation and institutionalisation are processes that establish certain routines of societal interaction, including the production or reduction of inequalities, we follow them in their conceptual push towards explaining inequality by pointing to (causal) mechanisms. Mechanisms are primarily analytical tools that help to account for persisting inequalities and the emergence of new inequalities in society. Even though considerable discordance remains over what exactly constitutes a mechanism, how mechanisms function and how they interact, the metaphor of social mechanisms is useful because it addresses the systematic ways in which inequalities are constantly reproduced or challenged. Since inequalities are neither naturally given nor tied to any self-evident features of subjects and groups, they need to be socially constructed. Accordingly, mechanisms of (in)equality production have at least two general

[15] Therborn explicitly means for his four mechanisms to be applied to global sociological phenomena (2006).

dimensions that are closely related. Mechanisms serve to 1) identify criteria and subjects in a way that allows for 2) an unequal distribution of goods. We summarise the various processes of (in)equality production under two larger sets of mechanisms, namely *discursive mechanisms* and *mechanisms of distribution*.

Following both Tilly and Therborn in their condensed versions of mechanisms, the distinction between two types of mechanisms entails further distinctions of singular mechanisms that can be analytically separated with as regard to their respective function. Loosely enumerating several of the processes identified in studies of sociology, we count among discursive mechanisms the processes of categorisation, ascription, emulation, and adaptation. All of these mechanisms refer to the processes of identifying, establishing and justifying inequality. The number of mechanisms of (re)distribution is considerably higher, possibly owing to the trajectories of sociological inequality research. Among the mechanisms known to sociology we find closure, opportunity hoarding, [resource pooling], hierarchisation, and exploitation– which mostly point to the dominance of some groups over others and their attempts to maintain or improve their status quo. Generally speaking, each mechanism can produce or reify inequality between various kinds of subjects (e.g. even the in-/exclusion of non-state actors can be part of in/equality politics, but with potential consequences for the institutional context), but usually we will find an interplay between different mechanisms at work. Each mechanism may also be reversed to decrease the level of inequality among subjects, e.g. hierarchisation may be transformed into a flattening of hierarchies.

We now have a general idea about the overall processes that involve social mechanisms. As those authors we consulted to identify mechanisms stress, there is usually some degree of overlap between the different mechanisms. In our rough model of inequality production we can imagine the interplay between discursive and distributive mechanisms as follows: certain features (or heterogeneity markers, as we referenced them above) are selected and linked to issues of distribution, for instance in the allocation of resources (e.g. voting rights, participation in decision-making etc.), which in turn may lead to an unequal distribution of goods (e.g. trade agreements, armament etc.), which needs to be legitimised and justified towards both the groups immediately concerned and society at large. This highly schematic model depicts processes that result in either inequality or equality, albeit to varying degrees. Not each process is a mechanism, though. Potentially, many social processes can function as inequality mechanisms, but they can only be identified as such if their outcomes are higher or lower levels of inequality. With regard to our level of observation, namely international society, these outcomes can, for instance, affect the relative status of subjects and their conflict and cooperation behaviour. Since most goods that have been

recognised as relevant in this context are contested, we assume an important role of organised arenas, i.e. international organisations, where these issues are addressed.

IR literature points us to a number of different institutional processes that have been observed to have an influence on the constellations and actions of subjects in international organisations (e.g. issue-linkage, informalisation etc.). While not explicitly situated in the context of (in)equality, many of these institutional processes correspond to the mechanisms we know from sociology and could be seen as institutional mechanisms of (in)equality production. Processes within organisations are particularly interesting because they embody several expectations that also link up to (in)equality concerns, for instance how gains are disseminated between members or how capabilities and prerogatives are related to each other. Beyond the famous "opening of black boxes" to understand the mechanisms that connect causes and effects, however, it is equally important not to "blacken out" the space in which the boxes are situated – in other words, to understand organisational processes as embedded in a social environment/institutional context, that is, international society. This environment is not only characterised by the different inequalities developed in the interactions between subjects over time but also by the existence of many other international organisations, which are also involved in the politics of (in)equality. As we summarised above, these constellations make up what we could call international or global order. The simultaneity of organisational processes that may produce or reduce inequalities is an observation that guides our analysis, particularly when it comes to the third stage or our assumed inequality production process. Even though organisational politics may only narrowly affect the members of the organisation, they can have a further impact on (in)equality in international society at large. These effects are harder to observe, since they take place outside the organisations; yet, both the distribution of goods and the discursive processes of ascription or diffusion reach beyond the confines of organisations. As Tilly states, the interaction between organisations that contribute to cementing ascriptive categories or emulation influence relations between subjects in international society and, in turn, feed into further organisational processes. Similarly observed by IR scholars, some of the mechanisms described above, most clearly forum shopping, refer to the behaviour of subjects both within single organisations and in the institutional context that may offer different organisational mechanisms to increase, balance or reduce inequalities. As a consequence, inequalities in international society are never stable but remain potentially challenged by outcomes of organisational politics. Thus, stage 3 of the modelled inequality production process always already ties in with phase 1 of the next, different organisational process, and so on.

Table 1 summarises the different inequality-generating mechanisms described by sociologists, summarising Tilly's and Therborn's slightly different typologies, and relates them to processes that IR

scholars discuss to take place frequently within or between international organisations. Quite evidently, the list is not exhaustive, but constitutes a first attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of mechanismic approaches and the applicability to studies of organisational politics.

**Table 1: Mechanisms of inequality reproduction in IOs**

| Stage | Inequality Mechanism | Intra- and interorganisational processes |
|---|---|---|
| | *Discursive mechanisms* | |
| Boundary-making/social group formation and legitimisation of unequal distributions | Categorisation: definition of (binary) categories | Agenda-setting |
| | | Norm-setting |
| | | Issue-linkage |
| | Ascription: assigning subjects to categories | Socialisation |
| | | Stigmatisation |
| | | Norm diffusion |
| | Emulation: transfer of categories to other organisational settings | Inter-organisational learning, inter-organisational competition |
| | Adaptation: maintenance of categories under conditions of environmental change | Standard Operating Procedures, bureaucratic politics, roles, methodologies |
| | *Redistributive mechanisms* | |
| Allocation of rewards | Closure/Opportunity hoarding: exclusion of outsiders from rewards | Membership closure, membership conditionality |
| | | Stigmatisation |
| | Hierarchisation: redistribution of rewards among insiders | Voting rules, veto rights |
| | | Centralisation of decision-making |
| | | Informalisation |
| | | Institutional layering, forum shopping |
| | Exploitation: cooperation at the expense of outsiders | Sanctions, negative externalities |
| | Distanciation: increasing the distance between „winners“ and „losers“ | Path-dependency, feedback effects, lock-in effects |

Instead of discussing each line of the table in great detail, we will use the following paragraphs to give examples for how some of the intra- and inter-institutional processes identified in the table can contribute to reinforcing global inequalities. We begin with a short case study and go on to offer some further, cursory examples of how an inequality perspective might lead us to ask new questions about and appreciate in new ways the things that international organisations do for global order.

***Case Study: Banning "inhumane" weapons technologies***

The Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel landmines and the Oslo Convention banning cluster munitions have often been celebrated as landmark treaties – not only because they promise to eliminate two sources of widespread human suffering but also because they were negotiated outside of established UN arms control frameworks in free-standing forums of "like-minded" states and because they were adopted over the opposition of the United States and other powerful states. It was particularly US scepticism via-à-vis the processes that preceded both treaties and the US failure to amend central clauses of both that led some to celebrate them as manifestations of a "new diplomacy" or "non-hegemonic diplomacy", which overcomes a paralysing great power vetoism through "leadership from below" (Cooper, 2002: 1-4; see also Bolton/Nash 2010).

On the surface, the two cases thus seem to exemplify the emancipatory role that IOs can play in overcoming global inequalities. And yet, the story is not quite so simple if we take seriously the sociological argument that international society is marked by multiple, overlapping inequalities that are constantly being reproduced or transformed through institutional mechanisms. Applying our heuristic framework to the Ottawa and Oslo Processes, we can see a number of institutional mechanisms at play in both organisational contexts that jointly contributed to reproducing and reinforcing pre-existing inequalities.[16]

The first of these mechanisms is *agenda-setting*. As has often been highlighted, a crucial precondition of the success of both the mine ban campaign and the campaign against cluster munitions was their ability to re-frame the subject of negotiations. Initially, both mines and cluster munitions were still widely regarded as useful weapons – with negative humanitarian consequences that needed to be weighed against their military utility. The mine-ban and anti-cluster-munition campaigns effectively de-legitimised such considerations of military utility and established both issues as primarily "humanitarian problem" which could only result in a total ban of both weapons (Price 1998; Bolton/Nash 2010: 179). The official agenda of the Ottawa and Oslo Processes was set in a way that reproduced this framing in aiming at the "ban", rather than the stricter regulation, of both military technologies. In both cases, the result of this seeming clarity and simplicity was a fierce battle over definitional distinctions. The question of what counts and what does not count as an "anti-personnel mine" and as a "cluster munition" was a central point of debate within each negotiation, with producers and users of various subtypes seeking to defined their respective systems "out" of the banned category (Lawson et al. 1998; Nystuen/Casey-Maslen 2010; Wisotzki 2013). And indeed, the compromises eventually adopted excluded a range of controversial mines and cluster munition

[16] According to our definition, both the Ottawa and Oslo Treaties as well as the negotiating forums that were specifically established to enable their conclusion and that became known as "Ottawa Process" and "Oslo Process", respectively, can be classified as IOs.

systems – mostly those with advanced technological features that were argued to reduce their unintended humanitarian effects.[17] Thus, the *agenda-setting* underlying both conventions served as a mechanism of *categorisation*: it effectively established a binary *categorical distinction* between weapons systems that were in fact closely related – and, by implication between the producers and users of the different systems.

This categorical distinction, in turn, had a number of manifest distributive consequences for states that found themselves in the two categories. First, the two conventions, if universally implemented, would redistribute economic profits from the production of mines and cluster munitions from the producers of simpler weapons – most notably China – to Western – most notably European – producers of more technologically sophisticated systems.[18] Second, they would allow countries that already dispose of or are financially able to shift to advanced technologies to employ certain categories of "area-denial" weapons while denying poorer countries access to this type of military capability. The latter effect, in particular, was criticised by experts who warned that "many developing countries may not join a cluster munitions ban because they are unable to upgrade their arsenals with expensive high-tech munition" (Aktionsbündnis landmine.de 2008 [translated by the authors]). Thus, the definitional distinctions adopted under the Ottawa and Oslo Processes threatened to reinforce existing economic inequalities by allowing for *opportunity hoarding* (in economic and security terms) on the part of the members of the privileged social category (the producers and owners of weapons systems conforming to the new norm). While it is true that the *United States* failed to push through exemptions for a number of its own weapons systems, other Northern producers and users in fact benefitted.

This observation, of course, raises two follow-up questions: How could a definition with such unequal distributional implications be adopted in the first place? And did its redistributive potential actually materialise? To answer these questions, it is useful to bring in two additional institutional mechanism of inequality reproduction. First, both the Ottawa and Oslo Processes were explicitly designed to exclude potential "spoilers" from the process, by limiting participation to "like-minded states" that subscribed to a pre-defined set of negotiating aims. This procedure worked as a mechanism of *social closure* that barred access to the negotiations for potential losers – unless they changed their preferences. In this context, it is also interesting to note that both the Ottawa and the Oslo process were invented primarily to circumvent the restrictions of the more inclusive but consensus-based

[17] For instance, such as light anti-vehicle mines that function like anti-personnel mines, "anti-handling devices" attached to anti-vehicle mines, or remotely controlled mines, as well as cluster munitions with fewer that 10 sub-munitions, advanced goal-finding technologies and a number of additional specifications were excluded from the two "ban"-treaties.

[18] In the case of the mine ban treaty, former mine producing companies in the West that had turned to producing de-mining equipment profited even more than the producers of high-tech substitute for anti-personnel mines (Beier/Denholm Crosby 1998).

established forums such as the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) (Lawson et al. 1998; Bolton/Nash 2010). In other words, they were the results of a process of *institutional layering* that benefited some members of the pre-existing regimes more than others by allowing them to "forum shop" for a process more likely to produce their preferred outcomes. This mechanism, again, reminds us of the importance of situating inequality reproduction in individual IOs in a larger institutional context.

Why then would these losers be at all impressed by the rules agreed in the exclusive Ottawa and Oslo forums? Could they not simply avoid potential distributional effects by refusing to join these treaties? Indeed, it is striking that both conventions thus far lack the support not only of the United States but also of a number of important producer and user states for both weapons technologies. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that the latter remain unaffected. Supporters of both conventions have always argued that both could act as catalysts for *norm diffusion* even beyond their immediate membership by *stigmatising* the use of anti-personnel mines or cluster munitions as immoral – if not illegal – behaviour that is rejected by an overwhelming majority of states (Rappert 2008; Wexler 2003). By imposing reputational costs on Ottawa's and Oslo's non-members, both IOs thus arguably contribute to a decline in the production and use of certain weapons systems even beyond their own membership – already measurable in the case of the older Ottawa Treaty – and to reinforcing existing economic and military inequalities. At the same time, they contributed to reproducing existing *immaterial inequalities*: stigmatisation, from a sociological perspective, is a discursive mechanism that redistributes *social esteem* based on categorical distinctions between "good" and "evil".

None of the above, it must be stressed, is to belittle the positive effects of both conventions in facilitating inter-state cooperation on important problems and alleviating human suffering. Still, caution is warranted regarding interpretations of both negotiations as "counter-hegemonic", as they both *also* resulted in cementing other, pre-existing inequalities. Indeed, the celebratory rhetoric of the "new diplomacy" can itself be viewed, through the lens of inequality research, as a discursive strategy aimed at legitimising the closure of the negotiating process, as a strategy of inequality reproduction.

***Further Examples for the Study of Institutional Mechanisms of Inequality Production***

From the variety of organisational processes many could be chosen to demonstrate the applicability of our framework and how this perspective changes the outlook on processes of international negotiations. In the following, we will loosely point to different fields of global politics that could be studied for the sake of learning more about processes of (in)equality production.

For instance, the expansion of the G-8 (or G-7) to the larger group of G-20 has been legitimised by stressing the inclusive nature of an institution that grants membership to such states as Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Indonesia and India, which were formerly less globally represented. At the same time, massive criticism has focused on the negative effects of forming the G-20, including the criticism of disproportionately excluding African states, non-EU member European states or the general illegitimacy of such a process (e.g. Slaughter 2012). Obviously, the question of unequal treatment of states concerning membership has already been a major concern in studies of G-20. However, since our overall argument would be to not just focus on either the outcomes of G-20 policies (e.g. on global capital markets or financial regimes) or intra-organisational processes with regard to a specific policy decision, we would broaden a study of G-20 to include further considerations: What effects does the definition of membership criteria have on the global order, i.e. does the inclusion of some states according to certain characteristics, for instance, lead to more inclusion of states from the Global South – or does it lead to a stronger exclusion of all non-G-20 states? Has the foundation of G-20 opened the global order to a broader discussion of inequality or has it effectively silenced these discussions by co-opting some the major critics? Has it thus created new path dependencies in global decision-making? How has the G-20 challenged other international organisations, e.g. the General Assembly of the UN, as decision-making organs? Many more questions in this context would concern the reproduction of existing inequalities, the ascription processes taking place before the foundation and in further politics, and the outcomes of G-20 policies with regard to the distribution of goods. Taking our heuristic, we would identify, for example, mechanisms of *opportunity-hoarding* (i.e. exclusion, membership closure) and *distanciation* (i.e. lock-in effects) as well as others when studying the evolution and work of the G-20 in more detail, i.e. looking at all three phases as a comprehensive process.

A perhaps less evident example of (in)equality production would be the adoption of principles within international organisations that favour a certain group of states over another by stressing capabilities and goods not necessarily part of the organisational profile. As stated above, the processes of (in)equality production are often supported by functionalist arguments, stressing the inevitability of introducing measures due to the pressure of externalities. For instance, over the last decade, the International Monetary Fund has introduced environmental measures, linking financial support to conditions far beyond its traditional scope of competence.[19] Most obviously, *issue-linkage* can be seen as a mechanism of inequality production in the sense that it imposes further burdens on states that already strive to cope with poverty and meeting IMF demands, effectively increasing inequalities. While these measures possibly do not create new inequalities between the states of the world, they strengthen the distance between states able to implement measures and those unable to

[19] See http://www.imf.org/external/np/fad/environ/ for a comprehensive list of measures.

achieve these goals in the near future. Here, a variety of mechanisms from *agenda-setting* (as a form of categorisation) and *diffusion* (i.e. emulation) to *stigmatisation* and perhaps *opportunity hoarding* could be at work – but again, this would be up to a closer inspection of the case (and many similar ones).

A third example could be a closer study of organisational politics involving the participation of non-governmental groups. NGO literature has, of course, pointed to the imbalance of representation within the global community of groups (e.g. McKeon 2009), particularly between groups from the Global North vs. the Global South, but many studies have not paid attention to the variety of mechanisms that enforce or mitigate these (and other) inequalities. Whilst it is clear (and has been evidenced by ample research) that equality between state and non-state representatives has been illusionary at best, the mechanisms set up in organisations are often more complex than simply in- or excluding groups. It is not simply *inclusion* when membership is extended – at least temporarily – to non-governmental groups; and neither do we face (only) *exclusion* when NGOs are not permitted to join the process on equal footing. On the contrary, the intended and unintended effects of such processes as *formalisation/informality* (on the exclusionary effects of informality see Dany 2013), or *hierarchisation/organisational flattening* can add up to a picture that supplements existing studies of NGO participation in organised processes.

## 5. Conclusion: What the inequality frame reveals

Before we turn to the open questions that remain for us to be tackled in future research, we will briefly reiterate and underline what the inequality frame reveals. At the most abstract, we would describe the global order as characterised by the structural feature of inequality. Quite evidently, subjects of international society are endowed with very different economic, military and other capabilities, different weight in international negotiations, different status, and so on. Yet, our point is not to simply single out inequalities – many of them are rather obvious anyway. Inequality in international society does not just imply relations between great/middle/small powers, the First, Second and Third World or states with different capabilities. Observing inequality means pointing to social relations that are characterised by various forms of inequalities, which affect how subjects fare in the international system and how they are positioned to each other. As we argue in line with sociologists of inequality, inequalities concern the unequal distribution of goods that, at the most general level, structure power relations between subjects in international society. As forms of capital that states or non-state actors have access to or are denied, these goods are contested – which we tried to show by referencing IR literature that deals with cooperation and conflict over some of these goods.

The processes of inequality production we are interested in take place in organisational contexts, that is, in forums and arenas of negotiating international relations. Opening the proverbial black box, we trace how existing inequalities are addressed in organisations and how relations between members are affected by organisational politics. Changing inter-linkages of certain forms of capital that are defined as relevant for the distribution of goods, for instance, the regulation of access to certain kinds of weapons based on certain characteristics of states, make it very hard to overcome overall inequality and to achieve (more) equality. Furthermore, inequalities are often justified by framing them as functional necessities, for instance, as geared towards a common good like health or justice, and thus difficult to challenge. Since inequalities have been so persistent over time, the idea of (in)equality mechanisms, that is, of recurring processes causally linked to inequalities, has been an analytical response to accounting for their systematic (re)production. We link up to the proposition of social mechanisms and bring together observations from IR with inequality mechanisms described in sociology. As several examples and a short case study suggest, many of the intra- and interorganisational processes diagnosed in IR research correspond to the mechanisms suggested identified by sociologists.

While not yet explored in depth, we would hold that further research can build on our heuristic of inequality-generating mechanisms. In the analysis of cases of organisational politics, it is possible to identify processes that function as mechanisms of inequality production, e.g. exclusion or opportunity hoarding. From our point of view, the analytical shift to conceiving of international relations in the light of inequality/equality represents a new perspective on the social generation of international social order. This perspective links up to recent calls for an international political sociology, both in translating a framework highly pertinent in sociology to IR and in framing international relations as societal, including the role of organisations and their relations towards their environment/social context. The research frame allows us to see many of the things that international organisations do, namely contributing to the production or transformation of social inequality in the global realm (as opposed, for instance, to “cooperation” in a functionalist perspective).

Striving for a consistent research program that unites scholars from different theoretical and empirical corners of IR, we have come across some challenges that will need to be addressed in the course of our ongoing research. Here, we would like to briefly discuss some of these issues in order to give an outlook on this future research.

One important issue we currently have no definite response to are the methodological implications of our proposition. The examples we gave were based on doing in-depth case studies in frameworks of what could be conceptualised as process-tracing (e.g. Bennett and Elman 2006). The dual nature

of inequality mechanisms, their distributional and discursive dimension, also calls for research approaches that make it possible to study justifications and categorisations beyond the distribution of goods, but these approaches are usually compatible with process-tracing (e.g. George and Bennett 2005). Whether only certain kinds of methods are suited to analyse organisational processes of inequality production and others are excluded is not clear. For example, the applicability of statistical, quantitative methods has been proven in social-structure analyses of sociology, although mainly in pinning down inequalities and less the mechanisms that produce them. Generally, we assume that looking for social, causal mechanisms does necessitate some degree of common understanding of the relations between outcomes and the processes that enable or obstruct them, but does not call for a unitary research methodology. What alternative methods to process-tracing could be suited to identify mechanisms in the context of international organisations thus remains to be seen.

A second challenge will be the development of a common and consistent vocabulary; as we experienced when trying to bring together the different insights from within sociology, from IR and its various theoretical strands, it is not easy to relate concepts and ideas to each other, to know how compatible they are with each other and how to reconcile them under one perspective. Sociology offers some structured attempt at a similar vocabulary (e.g. by talking about 'class' or 'status'), but only to a limited extent; while some of this has been translated to IR, there is no readymade vocabulary for inequality research in international society. Moreover, it makes some difference whether we talk about domestic society or international society. This is a challenge we will address in our further research.

Thirdly, with regard to the three analytical phases, we will have to explore how to further define outcomes or effects of organisational policies. One question in that context concerns the relevance of membership: how do organisations relate to members/non-members? Can effects be discerned that are tangible beyond the realm of organisational politics? We assume, as stated above, that politics within one organisation can also affect non-members, that is, subjects within international society at large – but it needs to be scrutinised how this relates to mechanisms of (in)equality production. Following from that, a second question is also interesting for further considerations, namely how inter-organisational relations come into the processes of (in)equality production. Interactions with or at least communication among organisations could be part of the processes, both with regard to certain policy issues and with regard to larger issues of status and relative positions of states within global affairs (e.g. the economic order). In order to respond to these sets of questions, to reinforce our methodological argument, a comprehensive perspective – including an analysis of all three phases – would be vital so as not to miss any information.

Finally, a question so far underexplored in our paper is whether and how equality can be achieved in the course of organisational politics. Following Therborn, who proposes 'inclusion', 'catching-up', 'redistribution' and 'organisational flattening' as logical counterparts to inequality mechanisms, we can assume mechanisms to potentially work both ways. How they actually work, however, and whether all inequality mechanisms can also function as equality mechanisms has not always been spelled out in the theoretical accounts we reviewed and needs to be examined empirically. Since our examples are somewhat biased towards identifying inequalities, the question remains whether the above questions are theoretical in nature or, indeed, empirical.

Despite some remaining challenges, we believe our research agenda for the study of international relations that frames them as societal relations and thus pays attention to inequality as a structural feature can make an important contribution to the emerging field of international political sociology, to IR in general and to the study of international organisations.

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