



Book Review

Young, O. R., *The Institutional Dimensions of Environmental Change: Fit, Interplay, and Scale*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002.

How, and under what conditions, do institutions help reduce human impacts on the global environment? Do institutions explain quite a bit or very little about global environmental change when compared to other explanatory factors? How do we build on existing simple, and often simplistic, models of institutional influence to develop more complex, multi-causal, and contingent models that are likely to be more analytically accurate and more useful to those designing the next generation of international environmental institutions? In particular, how does the environmental influence of an institution depend upon its fit with the environmental problem being addressed; its interplay with other international, national, and local institutions; and the scale at which it seeks to operate? In his newest book, Oran Young fleshes out theoretically interesting and empirically challenging answers to these questions that he and others originally identified in the Institutional Dimensions of Global Environmental Change (IDGEC) Science Plan.

The role of institutions has been central to the study of international environmental politics since initial efforts by Professor Young and Peter Haas over a decade ago (Young 1989; Haas 1990). Institutional analysis has been a particularly vibrant part of the study of international environmental politics with numerous edited volumes, monographs, articles, and doctoral dissertations being produced on themes related to institutions, regimes, and their “effectiveness.” Although there are many exceptions, much of that literature consists of categorical claims regarding, and serial evaluations of, the effect of particular institutional and non-institutional variables on environmental behaviors and outcomes. This analytic approach is understandable, and even predictable, during this relatively early stage in this research program. Young’s book, however, poses an important and timely challenge to those authors and their followers, namely, to take the next step by developing more sophisticated and contingent models of institutional influence in which outcomes reflect the interactions among several variables rather than the variation in a single variable. While encouraging rigorous and essentially positivist research on these issues, Young rejects the notion that our analyses need be linear, uni-causal, and overly simplified.

Young starts by reviewing research on the influence of institutions, identifying key institutional questions related to causality (how much environmental

influence do institutions have relative to other factors?), performance (why do some institutions “succeed” more than others in terms of sustainability, efficiency, and equity?), and design (“how can we structure institutions to maximize their performance?”) (p. 11). He then introduces the three “analytic frontiers” or “cutting-edge themes” of fit, interplay, and scale as “particularly promising lines of enquiry” with respect to institutions (p. 20). The second chapter lays the theoretical foundation for subsequent discussions of fit, interplay, and scale, contrasting the implications of “collective-action” and “social-practice” models as paradigms for explaining the effects of environmental institutions. Although categorizing them in different terms, Young’s discussion largely serves to bring the broader recent international relations debate between rationalism and constructivism to bear on these issues (see, for example, the articles in *International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics* (Katzenstein et al. 1998)).

The most important and innovative contributions of this book lie in the third through sixth chapters in which Young develops sophisticated arguments regarding how institutional influence depends on fit, interplay, and scale. An institution’s influence depends on how compatible its design is with the characteristics of the environmental problem it addresses. Imperfect knowledge, institutional constraints, and rent-seeking behavior frequently cause a mismatch between regime attributes and various ecosystem properties that he categorizes as structures, processes, and linkages. Given that negotiators presumably have an intuitive understanding of the need for institutional “fit,” Young’s wide array of examples of such mismatches supports a compelling, if pessimistic, case that identifying institutional designs that “fit” a particular environmental problem proves quite difficult in practice. Since it contains few cases of success, the chapter challenges other scholars to identify the presumably few cases in which institutional designers have avoided the many roads to “mismatch” and found the one to “fit.”

The fourth and fifth chapters address vertical and horizontal interplay, i.e., how an environmental institution’s interactions with other international, national, subnational, and local environmental institutions can hinder environmental management efforts. In terms of vertical interplay, Young uses examples from both marine and terrestrial management to analyze how the structure of governance institutions at, say, the national level can either complement or complicate the efforts at environmental governance by local on-the-ground decision makers and by international negotiators. The allocation of authority and responsibility between local and national institutions and between national and international institutions involves an “inescapable tension” between the benefits of thinking about ecosystems and interdependencies that comes with higher levels of governance and the benefits of local knowledge and sensitivity to local conditions and concerns that comes with lower levels of governance. Young’s notion of horizontal interplay entails institutional linkages at the same level of governance, where the way issues are framed, the arena chosen for negotiations, and bargaining over institutional

scope and content have important implications for the linkages and overlap of one institution with other institutions. These linkages offer opportunities for institutions to combine resources and work together synergistically but also create conflicts among institutions themselves as well as among the norms and rules that different institutions create.

Issues of scale have become an increasing focus of many working on global environmental problems. Questions of how well, if at all, lessons learned from management of local environmental problems involving common pool resources can be “scaled up” to inform management at the national and international level are important if only because they could potentially provide so many additional sources of lessons (Keohane and Ostrom 1995). As with questions of fit and interplay, here too Young provides cautionary notes, suggesting that the structure of environmental problems, the “agency” of the actors involved, and the social context are sufficiently different at the international level that successful scaling up from local lessons or down from international ones requires considerable care.

Young concludes by urging scholars of international environmental politics to work harder to convert their findings into knowledge that is useful to practitioners. He critiques Elinor Ostrom’s widely-cited delineation of design principles for addressing common pool resources and similar efforts to identify universal propositions regarding the design of environmental institutions as potentially useful but more likely misguided (p. 175). He offers as an alternative an intriguing notion of “institutional diagnostics” which entails identifying “important features of issues arising from environmental changes that can be understood as diagnostic conditions, coupled with an analysis of the design implications of each of these conditions” (p. 176). This works nicely as the logical conclusion of Young’s argument. Essentially, Young argues that the obstacles of fit, interplay, and scale make it difficult for environmental institutions to be effective in resolving or managing environmental problems. Helping those institutions improve requires not categorical, “one size fits all” recommendations about the need for transparency, sanctions, or other features. I interpret Young’s final words as a call for a shift in (or, more precisely, an addition to) our collective analytic focus. Rather than acting exclusively as institutional “epidemiologists” who look for general trends that explain why some institutions work better than others, Young urges us to also consider being institutional “doctors” who help institutions design and redesign themselves so that they can become increasingly compatible with the environmental problem they seek to resolve, can work synergistically rather than conflictually with other institutions, and are responsive to how the scale of an environmental problem influences the correct response to it. This is a tall order. It requires a long-term commitment by a wide range of scholars to recognizing and trying to understand the complexity of forces involved in determining institutional influences in global environmental affairs. It also requires those scholars commit to stepping out of the comfortable, but often jargon-laden, world of excessively academic scholarship and library research to work with, learn from, and offer

advice to the policy practitioners who are negotiating, building, and working for the institutions that are making valiant efforts to protect the environment in spite of the many obstacles that Young has identified.

While Young poses this challenge, his book has also begun to point in the directions we must go to meet that challenge. Young's approach nicely balances the need to think in terms of complex interactions among, rather than variation in, the drivers of global environmental change while at the same time urging that such work be done in rigorous ways that produce findings that are sufficiently clear to inform policy. This nuanced view of where research on international environmental politics should go in the next decade means that both advanced scholars and graduate students will benefit greatly from reading this book before embarking on new research on institutional influence. Seriously engaging the issues raised by Young in this book will certainly make undertaking research more difficult and more complex but, ultimately, will also make it more rewarding and useful.

References

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