A View of Global Governance From an “Invisible Man”

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In _Invisible Governance: International Secretariats in Global Politics_, John Mathiason details the often overlooked role played by the secretariats of international organizations—the important but often “invisible” public servants of the global community. Having served in the UN Secretariat from 1971 to 1996, Mathiason is well placed to address his concern about the limited number of insider accounts of the secretariat in action. However, _Invisible Governance_ is not a discussion of Mathiason’s personal experiences, like Brian Urquhart’s (1987) _A Life in Peace and War_. Rather, _Invisible Governance_ is an effort to address the lack of attention to international secretariats by international relations scholars generally.

Mathiason laments the lack of attention to public administration in the international organization literature (although he cites Barnett and Finnemore 2004 as one of the exceptions), and he seeks to fill that void. Moreover, he takes international relations theory in general to task, arguing that “Much of the dominant international-relations theory lacks a place for international secretariats, and observers who are conditioned by that theory will not find them important” (p. 6). Mathiason concludes that “a return to the functionalist approach is probably the best way to explain what secretariats do” (p. 18), and he uses this argument as the rationale for organizing the majority of _Invisible Governance_ around a discussion of five functions. These functions—regime creation, mobilization of information, norm enforcement, direct service provision, and internal management—are outlined in the opening chapter (pp. 18–23), and the engagement of the secretariat in these functions is detailed in chapters 4 through 11.

Although the structure of _Invisible Governance_ thus reflects a functionalist approach, the exact theoretical basis for and implications of this approach are tenuous. Mathiason claims that realism and functionalism are “essentially [the] two competing theoretical trends that constitute alternative views of the nature of international organizations and their role,” with regime theory seen as a “synthesis of both” (p. 6). These theories are presented in a fairly basic manner and other approaches to international relations theory are not considered—although liberalism is briefly covered within the section on realism and similarly discounted as “not find[ing] a place for international secretariats” (p. 10). Mathiason also references public administration theory, for example contrasting the “closed system” and “open system” organizational models (p. 72), but he does not try to make public administration theory a basis for his study. Indeed, although some scattered references to theory appear across the chapters, Mathiason makes no consistent effort to articulate clear linkages between the theory and the other material presented. Thus, readers interested in a broader overview of the relationship between international relations theory and international organization will be better served by looking elsewhere—for
example, in works by Clive Archer (2001) or Margaret Karns and Karen A. Mingst (2004).

Given his approach, Mathiason does not provide direct support for either functionalism or regime theory. Nor does he disprove realism. Rather, he seems focused simply on raising the visibility of the international secretariat and on describing its role in international governance. He introduces this goal in the preface, noting in particular the increased public engagement of international civil servants. “Clearly, something has changed,” he asserts. “But,” he continues, “has it been recognized, and what does it mean” (p. xiv)? Mathiason’s answer to the first part of this question is reflected in the first chapter’s title (Why Are Secretariats Invisible?), which he explores through a discussion of finances, tasks, and staffing—as well as his critique of the gap in the literature. Thus, Invisible Governance on the whole is not intended to explain why the international secretariat is invisible. However, the second part of the question (what are implications of this lack of visibility) is linked to several sub-questions that are also raised in chapter 1. Specifically, “what do these public servants actually do besides occupy offices and do good deeds? And what effect do they have on world politics” (p. 6)? And, if we “conclude that international secretariats are still invisible … do they [none the less] provide governance” (p. 15)? In this way, Mathiason sets up his review of the evolution of international public service in chapter 2 (which includes details of what Mathiason refers to as the four “generations” of the UN secretariat) and his discussion of the questions posed in the title of chapter 3 (What Do Secretariats Do? Does Leadership Matter?).

In chapters 4 through 11, Invisible Governance provides a range of interesting information, but it is not always completely apparent what argument Mathiason is attempting to make. In his discussion of regime creation (pp. 101–120), Mathiason ends the chapter with several “specific stories.” However, he does not make a clear connection between these stories and any arguments in the first half of the chapter. The other chapters do not contain similarly detailed case reviews, although they do weave related descriptive material into the chapter discussions. The cases addressed vary across the chapters, but there is little discussion about whether the variation in the cases is related to the differences in the functions addressed in the chapters. Finally, even though Mathiason’s goal is to describe how the secretariat is involved in the various functions and global problems on which these chapters focus, at times the secretariat seems to disappear from the broader story being presented.

Nonetheless, certain themes do consistently emerge across the book. “Visibility” of the international secretariat is obviously one such theme. Mathiason makes particularly pointed arguments about the invisibility of the secretariat in the process of creating and enforcing regimes versus, for example, the more visible role that the secretariat plays in the area of peace and security. At one point, he questions whether being too visible could be problematic, linking visibility to another core theme: “accountability.” Specifically, Mathiason asks, “Would a more public international civil service be more accountable? Or would it become less effective” (p. 253)? He also consistently returns to the notion that the secretariat can be made more “effective and successful.” In doing so, he is not simply trying to make the secretariat more visible; he wants it to be more visible in positive ways. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of “legitimacy” as a cornerstone of secretariat power. He also stresses the differences between national and international administration, although each chapter leads off with quotes from the British television show Yes Minister, which suggests that domestic and international administration may not be so completely different after all. The importance of “precedence” is also a recurring theme that is linked to promoting success through reputation, experience, credibility, and prestige. Precedents
set by each generation of the secretariat are discussed in chapter 2, although, if any precedents have been set by the fourth generation, they are not identified.

Finally, the theme of “leadership” emerges throughout the book. Given that the UN Secretary General is the most visible leader in the secretariat, Mathiason directly links leadership to that position, although he refers to leadership by other individuals throughout the book as well. The examination of the Secretary General’s leadership could, however, have been made more clearly. Mathiason claims that the Secretaries General have possessed “different leadership style[s]” (p. 64), but he does not explain the styles or their impact (for an example, see Kille 2006). Discussion of the leadership of the Secretaries General often appear in scattered references instead of direct comparisons, which would have shed greater light on the impact of their different styles. For example, Mathiason argues that “each generation of secretariat staff” was shaped by the Secretary General (p. 36), and he follows this with a comparison of the first Secretary General Trygve Lie and his immediate successor Dag Hammarskjöld. However, he does not follow through with the comparison for the other two secretariat generations. Although a gap does exist in the international organization literature with respect to the international secretariat, the literature on the Secretary General is more extensive (see, for example, Ask and Mark-Jungkvist 2005; Gordenker 2005; and Chesterman 2007), but Mathiason does not engage it. Invisible Governance could have made a distinct contribution to this literature by paying closer attention to the leadership provided by the secretariat as a collective body.

Mathiason does point to potentially important connections across the themes, which could serve as points of reflection. For example, the discussion of norm enforcement links invisibility, legitimacy, and precedent (pp. 142–144). However, the relatively limited conclusion does not fully draw these themes together. The conclusion primarily focuses on where “the evolution of international secretariats go from here” (p. 257). Mathiason notes that “an effort must be made to answer some of the questions raised in this book that are yet unanswered” (p. 260), but he does not specify what those questions are or indicate how scholars should pursue answers to them. Instead, he emphasizes three “tools to succeed,” which are presumably critical for the future of the secretariat: a focus on results over rhetoric, management tools such as strong financing and staff, and greater accountability of the secretariat to the public (pp. 260–261).

In the end, Invisible Governance contains helpful details of the international secretariat’s engagement with global problems. This material will be very useful for the general reader and does help fill the gap in international relations scholarship. Yet, the book is not as useful for specialists who are well versed in the literature on international secretariats. They will already be familiar with much of the “story” that Mathiason tells.

References

CHESTERMAN, SIMON, ed. (2007) Secretary or General? The UN Secretary-General in World Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

