
IN MEMORIAM

What Made John Ruggie's World Transformation Theory and Practice Hang Together¹

Emanuel Adler^a and Kathryn Sikkink^{b*}

^aDepartment of Political Science, University of Toronto, Toronto, CA

^bHarvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, USA

*Corresponding author. Email: Kathryn_Sikkink@hks.harvard.edu

With the untimely death of our colleague and friend, John G. Ruggie, the world has lost a brilliant international relations scholar and a global public servant who made enduring contributions to world politics. Ruggie was involved in developing some of the major concepts of modern IR: international regimes, constructivism, epistemes, multilateralism, and embedded liberalism. He had a direct influence on our work and the work of countless other students and scholars of international politics. Ruggie's intellectual trajectory was intimately linked to the journal *International Organization* because some of his most enduring theoretical contributions were published here. More than any other international relations scholar we have ever met, Ruggie combined scholarship about international organization with top-level involvement in international organizations, especially the UN. But he didn't just manage to do both scholarship and public policy at the same time: his public policy work drew directly on his theoretical conceptualization of the world. The successes of his policy efforts were due not only to his well-recognized collegiality and diplomacy, but to his astute application of theory to craft, diffuse, and legitimate new sets of norms.

John Ruggie was born in 1944 in Graz, Austria. He grew up in a one-room flat with minimal indoor plumbing. His early exposure to international relations came when his household received food packages as part of the US Marshall Plan. His family emigrated to Toronto, Canada in 1956. As an immigrant from a working-class background, he was steered toward a technical high school to learn a trade, but he later made his way to MacMaster University, and then to Berkeley for a Ph.D.² Ruggie thanked three key people in his life for putting him on his career

1. Our title echoes Ruggie's 1998b title, "What Makes the World Hang Together: Neo-utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge." We thank Beverly Crawford, Peter M. Haas, Mary Ruggie, and Steven Walt for their insights, and Martha Finnemore for permission to draw on some paragraphs of joint unpublished work (with Sikkink) for a preface to a never completed *IO* reader on constructivism.

2. From Mary Ruggie, "Biography," for memorial service program, 20 November 2021.

path: his grandmother, who first persuaded him that the “constraints and situational exigencies” into which he was born did not pose an impediment he could not overcome; his wife Mary Ruggie, a sociologist, for helping him realize his dreams; and his graduate school mentor, Ernst B. Haas, who first schooled him in the field of international relations, but never pushed his agenda on him.³ Ruggie worked first as an assistant professor in the political science department at Berkeley, where he continued his exchanges with Haas, and engaged with and commented on the work of another senior IR colleague, Kenneth Waltz.⁴ In 1978, Ruggie moved to Columbia University, where he later served as Dean of the School of International Affairs, then to UCSD, and finally to the Harvard Kennedy School.

International Organization published many of the seminal works now associated with the origins of social constructivism in the US, especially what Ruggie later called its “neo-classical” or modernist variant.⁵ Ruggie played a leading role in formulating concepts that became central to constructivism: intersubjectivity, norms, identity, epistemes, and legitimate social purpose. Although IR scholars did not use the concept “constructivism” before 1989 when Nicholas Onuf put it forward in *World of Our Making*,⁶ some of its key concepts were already present in early *IO* essays by Ruggie (in 1975 and 1982), and Kratochwil and Ruggie⁷ which were part of what he called “his intellectual journey towards constructivism.” In the early 1970s, Ruggie became increasingly concerned that the postwar aversion to idealism “had gone too far,” and was “responsible for the discipline’s poor grasp on the role of ideational factors of all kinds in international life—be they collective identities, norms, aspirations, ideologies, or ideas about cause and effect.”⁸

At the same time, Haas and his students were contemplating some of the fundamentals of constructivism, particularly the notion that knowledge structures international relations, and the importance of learning in international change.⁹ Together with Haas in the early 1970s, Ruggie adopted the concept of the international regime, which was already in use in international legal scholarship,¹⁰ as part of their joint project on international regimes.¹¹

Constructivism was only one constituent part, albeit one of the most important, of what made John Ruggie’s world hang together, by providing a general theory of

3. Ruggie 1998a, xii.

4. Kenneth Waltz thanked Ruggie in the acknowledgments to *Theory of International Politics*, writing that he had commented on the draft “with care and insight that would amaze anyone unacquainted with [his] critical talents.”

5. Ruggie 1998b, 881.

6. Onuf 1989.

7. Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986.

8. Ruggie 1998a, xi.

9. See, for example, Haas et al 1977.

10. See, for example, Goldie 1973.

11. Ruggie (1975, 570) defined regimes as “a set of mutual expectations, rules and regulations, organizational plans, energies, and financial commitments that have been accepted by a group of states.”

international transformation and institutionalization. Constructivism, international organization (as a verb), transformation, and institutionalization were some of the major pieces of the theoretical puzzle Ruggie wanted to solve. As Ruggie later described, the components of his theory consisted of

various aspects of institutionalization within the system of states; the cognitive basis of institutionalization in epistemic communities; the formation of international regimes as a means to institute cooperative behavior, a 'horizontal' rather than super-subordinate structure of international authority; intersubjective understandings as a major factor in sustaining international regimes; the role of multilateral organizing principles in facilitating peaceful change; [the system of states] as a living, not a sedimentary, thing; [and] processes that may be transforming the system of states today.¹²

Scholars familiar with Ruggie's opus will have no problem recognizing the venues, mostly in *IO*, where he published separately the various components of his theory. Put together, the whole is much larger than the parts. While Ruggie did not add the finishing touch to his general theory, one book, *Constructing the World Polity*¹³ came close to putting forward that whole.

In the 1975 *IO* special issue "International Responses to Technology," coedited with Ernst Haas, Ruggie presented two concepts that would later be important to constructivism: epistemic communities and international regimes. Borrowing a term from Michel Foucault, he defined epistemes as "a dominant way of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations, and mutual predictability of intention."¹⁴ Although Ruggie's definitions of international regimes and epistemic communities were somewhat different than those later developed in the *IO* special issue on regimes¹⁵ and the *IO* special issue on epistemic communities,¹⁶ his writing in the 1975 special issue represents an early effort to define and incorporate ideational factors, particularly intersubjectivity, in the study of international organizations. Robert Keohane wrote that this work "foreshadowed much of the conceptual work of the next decade."¹⁷

In a 1982 *IO* special issue, Ruggie and other IR colleagues worked together to explore what they, building on Ruggie's earlier definition, called international regimes. Ruggie insisted that scholars needed to explore not only the rules and procedures of international regimes but also the principles and norms. Ruggie wrote for the volume what would become his most cited article, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic

12. Ruggie 1998a, 2–3.

13. Ruggie 1998a.

14. Ruggie 1975, 569–70.

15. Krasner 1982.

16. Adler and Haas 1992.

17. Ruggie 1998a, 45.

Order.”¹⁸ Ruggie had been working on this article for many years; he had tested ideas with his students on the concept of embedded liberalism in Berkeley in 1975, seven years before it was published in *IO*.¹⁹

The 1982 “Embedded Liberalism” article is one of the six most cited articles in *IO*.²⁰ It is also the single most widely cited article in the IPE corpus.²¹ In it, Ruggie emphasized that regimes were social institutions with an intersubjective quality akin to language. He argued that the international structure of political authority was the result of a fusion of power and *legitimate social purpose*. Prevailing approaches to IR at the time focused on power but not on states’ legitimate purposes, and thus, Ruggie argued, could predict the form of the international order, but not its content. Ruggie proposed that changes in both power and social purpose could lead to change in international regimes, putting forth what would later be one of the bedrocks of constructivist thought: that changing ideas or consciousness is a major factor in constituting changes in the international system.

A year after *IO* published the special issue on international regimes (which later became a landmark book in IR theory), Ruggie added another piece to his puzzle by taking on Waltz’s 1979 book in a review article he published in *World Politics*. As he later claimed, Waltz’s theory was so parsimonious, powerful, and elegant that “the only viable way for me to advance my cause ... was through Waltz, not around him.”²² Ruggie relied heavily on Emile Durkheim, just as Waltz had done, but used his insights to shrewdly and strongly criticize Waltz’s theory. Ruggie borrowed the concept of “dynamic density” from Durkheim—the quantity, velocity, and diversity of transactions that go on within society—to show that by taking dynamic density factors at the level of process, Waltz overlooked how dynamic density would be able to generate structural changes at the highest level, namely anarchy.²³

By the mid-1980s, Ruggie continued to advance the constructivist cause by dissecting and criticizing the flourishing international regime literature that he helped to kickstart. In a critical survey of international organization theory in *IO*, Kratochwil and Ruggie showed that the international regime literature suffered from a major flaw, an inconsistency between ontology and epistemology.²⁴ While international regimes relied on norms, whose effects we can understand only by relying on an intersubjective ontology, most of the work on international regimes rested on positivist epistemology. Kratochwil and Ruggie argued, for example, that we could not understand compliance with norms only by looking at state behavior, but that it was also necessary to explore how states justified and explained their

18. Ruggie 1982.

19. We thank Beverly Crawford for this insight.

20. See <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/most-cited>>.

21. Seabrooke and Young 2017, Table 3, “Top cited works in IPE corpus, 1994–2015.”

22. Ruggie 1998a, 132. Later, Alexander Wendt, the leading constructivist, opted for a similar strategy. See Wendt, 1999.

23. Ruggie 1998a, 151–53.

24. Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986.

behavior, including their failure to comply.²⁵ They thus concluded that the discipline needed epistemology and methods capable of grasping the intersubjective nature of the subject matter. The article helped give theoretical and methodological arguments to the burgeoning norms literature within a constructivist approach.

Although Ruggie returned to the concept of “epistemes” in his seminal article on territoriality,²⁶ he confided that he paid little attention to the concept of epistemic communities, preferring to focus his attention on regimes.²⁷ In the meantime, Peter M. Haas and Emanuel Adler edited a special issue of *IO* on epistemic communities²⁸ that advanced theorizing about the role of knowledge of expert communities in policymaking, especially in conditions of uncertainty. Unlike Ruggie’s structurally based concept of episteme, the 1992 special issue on epistemic communities and the growing literature that it inspired emphasized the agential side of constructivism. Ruggie recognized the contribution of the epistemic communities’ special issue, saying that it was an early “major venue for constructivist explorations of the impact of causal beliefs.”²⁹ It equated knowledge with intersubjectively held causal and normative beliefs, considered epistemic communities as “cognitive baggage handlers as well as gatekeepers governing the entry of new ideas into institutions,”³⁰ and placed the concept of learning at the center stage.³¹

Spurred by the role of multilateral institutions in the demise of the Cold War, Ruggie chose to study them in depth, taking a more structural approach. Rather than considering “multilateral” to denote the number of members, Ruggie emphasized that multilateralism was more about “generalized principles of conduct” or constitutive intersubjective rules, which give meaning to—and specify the appropriate conduct of—their members.³² With this move, Ruggie not only wanted to show constructivism’s added value, particularly vis-à-vis neoliberal institutionalism, but also to draw attention to institutions’ generalized principles that were conducive to international cooperation and peaceful change and, therefore, to international transformation. When discussing multilateralism’s contribution to international stability as compared to hegemonic stability theory, Ruggie perceptively argued that not all hegemonies are alike, but rather it is their content and identity that make them matter.³³ Thus, comparing American postwar hegemony to what would have been German hegemony had the Nazis won World War II, he famously made an argument about the importance of understanding the difference between American *hegemony*, and *American* hegemony.³⁴

25. Ibid.

26. Ruggie 1993b.

27. Ruggie 1998a, 55.

28. Adler and Haas, eds. 1992.

29. Ruggie 1998a, 19.

30. Haas 1992, 27.

31. Adler and Haas 1992, 370.

32. Ruggie 1998a, 109.

33. See Keohane 1980.

34. Ruggie 1992, 568. See, also, Ruggie 1993a.

In 1993, Ruggie published “Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations” in *IO*.³⁵ In it, he put forward the idea that structural transformations go hand in hand with transformations in time and space. A large part of the essay concerns the emergence of modern territoriality as the combined effect of (1) material factors, such as demographics, relations of production, and relations of force; (2) the set of constraints and opportunities, such as the structure of property rights, within which social actors interacted; and (3) social epistemes, the mental equipment that people drew upon to imagine the changing world around them.³⁶ The article also explores a future possible transformation of the system of states, namely

in the practice of ‘unbundling’ territoriality as a means whereby states, from the start, have dealt with forces and factors that they cannot reduce to a territorial solution, and in what I describe as the ‘multiperspectival’ political practices to which it may lead over time. States do not wither away as a result ... not even in the ever-more integrated European Union, but they come to assume multiple identities, play diverse roles, and for some purposes act in different, more collectively legitimated, capacities than in the past.³⁷

Later, Ruggie wrote that the article took many years to write but that the work gave him “enormous pleasure.” He wrote that “More than any publication of mine it resonated with and has been taken up by specialists in other fields and abroad,” but conceded, however, that “the essay falls short of one initial aspiration: it does not contain a theory of system transformation.”³⁸ This may be true only to some extent. Ruggie was not after a predictive law-like theory of system transformation because as a constructivist he knew, as he said, that “contingencies are too great [and] the role of unanticipated consequences too perverse.”³⁹ Moreover, he was not after a mechanical theory, à la Waltz, in which one system entirely replaces another. Rather, we believe, Ruggie was after a theory according to which the current international system progressively becomes something else: a system with socially constructed changes in time and space, in which states would become partly “unbundled,” while territoriality would become differently organized and would be thickly internationally institutionalized (with a higher dynamic density), thus better able to confront economic, ecological, and security challenges.

Ruggie’s world transformation theoretical work was informed by a fervent normative drive based on values of international economic equality, safeguarding the biophysical resource bases and ecosystems within which life exists, protection of human rights, and peaceful change. In the early stages of his career, Ruggie was particularly attentive to the subject of closing the gap between the North and the

35. Ruggie 1993b.

36. Ruggie 1998a, 134–35, 172, 184.

37. *Ibid.*, 135.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

South and to the global interdependence between the world economic, ecological, and security problems. In 1976, together with Branislav Gosovic, a colleague and friend, Ruggie published an article on the New International Economic Order, an international initiative the Third World pursued to redistribute wealth between North and South and control multinational corporations' investments in Southern countries.⁴⁰ According to Gosovic and Ruggie, the 1975 Seventh Special Session of the UN General Assembly, which their article mainly dealt with, showed "the growing desire of countries to assert collective political authority over transnational economic forces [and] an emerging mode of international decision making."⁴¹ Gosovic and Ruggie admitted, however, that these processes could lead to disintegration. Nonetheless, the "collective measures may enhance individual self-determination, but the desire for individual self-determination may require further collective measures."⁴²

Around the same time, Ruggie published several articles on what he called the "global problematique," "the indivisibly related complex of processes and problems within the world system that is generated by the increasing scale of human activity, viewed in the context of planetary life-support systems."⁴³ These processes and problems trigger "a complex interplay of ecological, technological, social, economic and political factors."⁴⁴ Two factors make the global problematique unwieldy. First, its processes and problems

are systematically related to one another at both ends of the cause-effect chain; their commonality of cause has to do with the fact that they are in some considerable measure the products of a relatively small number of deeply rooted social forces; and their commonality of effect has to do with sustainability and limits, and the functional interdependencies and potential for mutual vulnerability that these produce.⁴⁵

The second factor is what Ruggie referred to as the complementarity between contradictory tendencies, namely holism and tribalism. This phenomenon is characterized by a dialectical relationship; while the increase in coordinated, collaborative behavior increases tribal nationalist tendencies, the increase in tribal behavior makes holism the only effective response to the problematique. Thus, Ruggie concluded, the direction of change was inconclusive and indeterminate.⁴⁶

Notwithstanding, at an early stage of his career Ruggie believed that international organizations, while constrained by the current system of states, would be able to use knowledge resources to advance the cause of "holism."⁴⁷ We can only speculate that

40. Gosovic and Ruggie 1976.

41. *Ibid.*, 344.

42. *Ibid.*, 345.

43. Ruggie 1980, 517.

44. *Ibid.*, 517, 520.

45. *Ibid.*, 526.

46. Ruggie 1978.

47. Ruggie 1980.

he later realized that the structure of the system of states, including capitalism, was stronger than the ability of international organizations to help move the world system toward holism and solve or at least reduce the scope of the world's interdependent set of economic, ecological, and security problems. This might have been one of the reasons why he turned to apply his theoretical knowledge about international organization to harness the UN's modest degree of international authority to advance human rights in practice, choosing to target transnational corporations whose human rights abuses were related to North-South inequality and to harm to natural and social environments.⁴⁸

As noted before, Ruggie was interested not only in studying the real world but in changing it, too. In the 1980s he became active in the UN Association and moved back and forth from Columbia University in uptown and the UN in midtown New York City with apparent ease, a pattern that would increasingly characterize his professional life. Ruggie's engagement with the UN went to a new level in 1997 when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed him UN Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Planning. He later recalled that the transition to the new job went "surprisingly smoothly" because "it quickly became apparent that creative leadership in international organization is social constructivism in action."⁴⁹ By this, Ruggie did not ignore that power and interests of states "circumscribe the range of the possible," but also was aware that the project of international organization is about how to stretch and transform states' interests and preferences.

Working closely with Annan, Ruggie first played a leading role in crafting the Millennium Development Goals, setting a new agenda for measuring the social impact of government policies that was later expanded into the Sustainable Development Goals. As he continued to put ideas into practice, he turned to the impact of corporations on human rights, labor, and environmental issues. Working with a colleague, he launched the UN Global Compact, an initiative designed to encourage corporations to align their strategies and operations with broader normative principles. When the UN Human Rights Commission rejected a draft treaty for transnational corporations and human rights, Kofi Annan asked Ruggie to serve as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Human Rights and Transnational Corporations. In this capacity, Ruggie was the architect of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPR) or the "Ruggie Principles," as they have become known. The principles were a textbook example of "norm creation," which Ruggie deliberately formulated as norms and not as law, in part because of the failure of the earlier attempt at a treaty. The Guiding Principles put forward three central pillars: (1) states have *duties to protect* human rights; (2) corporations have *responsibilities to respect* human rights; and

48. We thank Beverly Crawford for helping us think about Ruggie's academic evolution.

49. Ruggie 1998a, xii.

(3) victims of human rights violations have the right to an effective remedy.⁵⁰ Ruggie purposefully used different language for states and corporations, to stress new obligations for corporations, but ones that were different from those of states. He was also aware of the need to build multi-stakeholder buy-in for the new norms. Ruggie consulted broadly with states, corporations, and NGOs as part of the process of crafting the UNGP. This consultation process built the support that led the UN Human Rights Council to unanimously adopt the Guiding Principles in 2011.

After leaving the UN, Ruggie continued his work on implementing these principles through his writing and the Shift Project, a non-profit organization Ruggie founded with members of the UNGP “Team Ruggie.” It advises governments, companies, and civil society on business and human rights issues to advance the UNGP.

We can summarize the Ruggie legacy as a theory of international transformation and institutionalization, a constructivist approach to the study of IR with emphasis on the epistemic side of international life, and a contribution to codifying norms that commit states to protect and corporations to respect human rights. We were immensely lucky that Ruggie mentored and inspired us for most of our careers, and that he rendered what makes the world hang together more intelligible, and the possibility of change imaginable. We, the *International Organization* community, the entire IR community, and the United Nations community, are indebted to John Ruggie, and will miss him dearly.

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