

Multilateral Cooperation and Legitimacy of International Institutions: Old and New Challenges

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O Interesse e a Regra: Ensaios sobre o Multilateralismo

(Fonseca Junior, Gelson. 2008. São Paulo: Ed. Paz e Terra)

The book is an intellectual stimulus and a precious source of information for researchers of and participants in international life, be they diplomats, businesspeople, people connected with NGOs or interested citizens. The wealth of this work, grounded in the author's academic knowledge and, above all, in his political experience, is immeasurable.

Though not numbered in the index, the book has five chapters: the first is the most substantial and original, and the only one not previously published. It deals with multilateralism, international legitimacy and the UN System. The second chapter turns to the question of democratic governability and is co-authored by fellow career diplomat Benoni Belli. The third and fourth chapters deal with the possibilities for multilateral cooperation between the countries of the European Union and Latin America, and among the countries of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). The fifth chapter, although written previously, takes up again the deeper questions of the first chapter, and sets out the author's vision as to the future of the international system. It provides a critical analysis of how Rousseau dealt with international relations and reflections that are also present throughout the book, thus attesting to the influence of the philosopher's thought on the author.

Rather than structuring my comments per chapter, an impossible task in a brief review, I will discuss two central themes approached in the book: multilateral cooperation

and the legitimacy of international institutions. I hope this introduction to the author's approach to these themes instigates readers to enjoy the enriching opportunity of reading the full text in all its detail.

Multilateral Cooperation

Although the essays constitute, in the author's own words, a defence of multilateralism (p. 16), international multilateral cooperation is neither seen as a panacea, nor as easy to achieve. Hence the need to understand the limits and potentialities of multilateral institutions, especially of the UN System (p. 17), as well as how multilateral political will is formed (p. 49). On the question of multilateral political will, the author states that the greatest difficulty in consensus-building originates in the inequality between States, which is intrinsic to the international system. Here, institutions provide an important service to the international community, by forcing the exposure of the differences and contradictions between States in an organized and disciplined fashion (p. 54).

The role of international institutions and of multilateral cooperation in the international system is one of the main themes dealt with by political philosophers, as well as by International Relations theories. Although this debate cannot be reproduced in this brief review, Fonseca's perspective may be interpreted as eclectic, inasmuch as he recognizes the values of stability and order provided by the institutions, without slipping into utopian *naïveté*. As the author states, experience would lead one to validate contradictory analytical arguments, such as that the UN is simultaneously realist and Grotian (p. 15). Even so, the importance the author attributes to variables such as sociological context, common values, culture and history might lead readers to believe his worldview is rather close to that of constructivist authors (as Fonseca himself recognizes on page 15) and social and historical institutionalists. It is from this viewpoint that his theoretical reflections both on multilateralism — above all as dealt with by John Ruggie (item IV, chapter 1) — and on international cooperation (chapter 5) must be read. On international cooperation, the “analytical solution” developed by the author is interesting. It is presented as an alternative to realism in explaining what regulates the level of cooperation in the international system (p. 281) and links up short- and long-term problems (p. 289).

Lastly, in terms of current affairs, the author sets out an optimistic view as to the possibility of multilateral cooperation between the countries of Latin America and the European Union, and among the members of the CPLP. As for the changes in the international system, he states that “in the post-Cold War period, we have gone over to a peculiar situation, the prevalence of a single Superpower, the USA, though one much nuanced by the sociological context of globalization, among other reasons” (p. 282).

The hegemony does not generate cooperation and multilateralism automatically, but rather, behaviours such as those of the George W. Bush government that undermine the international legitimacy of the hegemon, its soft power, and even its capacity to protect its citizens, as Joseph Nye states in a quote reproduced by the author (p. 284). In Fonseca's eyes, therefore, there is a systemic tendency to a return to multipolarity, but "differently from classic multipolarity, which presupposed an international system with a much lower level of interdependence, multipolarity (like the current unipolarity) applies to a universe of relations marked by globalization" (p. 285). Another new factor would be the different attitudes of the new powers, such as India, China, Brazil and South Africa, in relation to the classic powers, for having "lived as developing countries and had reformist positions with regard to the international order" (p. 286). In spite of the challenges, the author maintains an optimistic reading, arguing that a major step has already been taken with the consolidation of a wide-ranging consensus about what the long-term problems are, even though the solutions have not been put into practice in effective fashion. However, he recognizes that controversies persist, such as different models of development, or the reach of the universality of human rights. The author's recommendation is that one must seek partial equilibria in international negotiations, which will not represent revolutions, but incremental gains (p. 293).

Legitimacy of International Institutions

The issue of legitimacy, already dealt with by the author in a previous book, is taken up again mainly in the fifth item of the first chapter titled *O interesse multilateralizável e as transformações da legitimidade* (p. 115) and in the second chapter on democratic governability.¹ Whilst he does not define it directly in this way, the author identifies two sources of international institutions' legitimacy: the so-called "input", i.e., the decision-makers, and the so-called "output", i.e., the results to be attained, presented as objectives in their founding documents.

Input legitimacy is linked with the members and the institutional design of institutions' decision-making processes, and is less controversial, given that in the case of the institutions of the UN System at least, the universality and egalitarian representation (one State, one vote) approximate them to the most evident parameter of contemporary legitimacy, namely, democracy (p. 31). Exceptions, like the Security Council, are justified by means of the recognition of the limits of international cooperation. But these have their costs, since the lack of synchronism between the distribution of power and democratic representation leads to a loss in the effectiveness of multilateralism and, consequently, in the output legitimacy of international institutions (p. 42). The theme becomes more complex when

one considers who the actors that participate in the decisions are, but here the author, though recognizing the importance of civil society (p. 126, 220, 225, 241), maintains that the origin of legitimacy in the international arena, before arriving at the citizenry, rests with sovereign States (p. 132).

Despite including input questions, the treatment given in the book to legitimacy focuses on the output component, i.e., the capacity of international institutions to solve problems in effective and satisfactory fashion, seeing to the interests of the States represented in them. As the author states, the concept of legitimacy is used as the link between the interests of States and the needs of the international community. In this context, Fonseca develops the idea of multilateralizable interest (p. 115-116).

In empirical terms, the author analyses the transformations of legitimacy in three areas of activity of the UN System: security (p. 131-173), decolonization (p. 173-185) and development (p. 185-203). The analysis is extremely rich, with the author demonstrating his deep knowledge of the institutions and political dynamics in question. Interestingly, changes in normative consensus are related not so much with the incorporation of new themes, but re-readings, new interpretations of “old themes”. As Fonseca states, open legality allows the ways of applying it to be constantly reinterpreted as a function of political circumstances (p. 131). Here one may cite examples of changes in normative consensus as regards the relationship between human rights and security (which has gone from one of opposition to one of ever greater compatibility, through the human security discourse) and the relationship between development and the environment (ditto, through the sustainable development discourse). With regard to the development issue, it is a pity that the author fails to include reflections on the absence of an international regime in the field of financial capital and investments. In the light of the current crisis and of the fledgling attempts at building new regimes in these fields, it would be interesting to know what Fonseca thinks. I leave this as a suggestion for the next edition — readers will certainly be grateful!²

Notes

- 1 This review deals solely with this book and does not take up questions raised in *A legitimidade e outras questões internacionais*. 1998. São Paulo: Ed. Paz e Terra.
- 2 Another suggestion — a technical one — is the inclusion of an index, which would be extremely useful.