

Inken von Borzyskowski, Felicity Vabulas, *Exit from International Organizations: Costly Negotiation for Institutional Change* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2025). ISBN: 9781009532310.

*Exit from International Organizations* is a comprehensive study written by two specialists in international relations and international studies, examining the phenomenon of states departing from international institutions. The book provides a systematic analysis of both voluntary withdrawals and forced suspensions from international organizations, exploring their causes, processes, and consequences. Through an empirical examination of numerous cases spanning from 1913 to contemporary times, the authors map out patterns of institutional exits across different types of organizations, from universal organizations to regional bodies, from security alliances to economic institutions. The volume is structured around the fundamental dichotomy between voluntary withdrawals (where states choose to leave) and involuntary suspensions (where states are expelled or have their membership suspended), offering detailed case studies, statistical analyses, and theoretical frameworks to understand this increasingly prevalent phenomenon in global governance.

In the eyes of international lawyers, the topic is undoubtedly timely. International lawyers commonly see themselves today as experiencing dark times in which vandals of the international legal order are roaming the globe with the ambition not to be bothered or hampered by international organizations in their attempts to capture natural, human, and financial resources as much as possible without having to care too much for social and environmental justice and other problems deemed to belong to the left of the political spectrum. Most interestingly, *Exit from International Organizations* does not provide support for international lawyers' bleak narratives about international institutionalism. This book repeatedly takes issue with this proclaimed timeliness of the question of exiting international organizations and demonstrates, in a quantitative and qualitative fashion, that populism and fascism have nothing to do with current withdrawals from international organizations. According to the authors, today's withdrawals from international organizations seem part of some kind of normality, a phenomenon that has repeated itself regularly since 1913. This book thus shows us that the practice of exiting is nothing but part of a *déjà vu*.

Notwithstanding such divergences of views on the period global institutions are going through, there is no doubt that international lawyers, holding this very well-documented and thorough study in their hands, will be usefully reminded that they do not have a monopoly on the study of international

organizations, contrary to common representations they may have of their expertise. This is because, too often, international lawyers, who, for all kinds of reasons,<sup>1</sup> have put international organizations at the centre of their universe, have come to think they are the exclusive experts on the subject. They obviously are not. And *Exit from International Organizations* even shows that legal expertise may not be necessary to provide a detailed and very compelling account of withdrawals and suspensions.

What may also strike international lawyers perusing this impressive study is the latter's distinctly scientific ambition. This book aims to provide explanatory frameworks for both causes and effects of institutional exits, seeking to establish causal relationships and predictive models. In the eyes of international lawyers, such scientific ambition is remarkable, for it is rarely seen in contemporary international legal scholarship these days. Critical legal scholarship has done its work in the international lawyers' epistemic community, and few still believe in studying law in a scientific manner, having long recognized the contingent, political, and interpretive nature of legal as well as factual phenomena. In that sense, the confidence of the authors of *Exit from International Organizations* in identifying clear causal chains and measurable effects stands in marked contrast to the epistemological humility that has now come to characterize much of international legal thought. International lawyers, to their credit, have nowadays come to appreciate that causalities are always very precarious narratives, contingent on perspective, frameworks of intelligibility, and interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

Another contrast between this book and how international lawyers have treated the very topic of states' departure from international organizations must be mentioned. In the 2018 special issue of the *International Organizations Law Review* on 'Exiting International Organizations' (edited by C. Brölmann, R. Collins, S. Droubi, and R. Wessel), there is not only no trace of the above-mentioned political scientists' focus on causation and systemic effects but there is also a marked preference for questions related to the intersection of treaty law and institutional law, the protection of individual rights affected by exits, and the procedural complexities of disentanglement, issues which are hardly discussed in *Exit from International Organizations*. The same goes for legal scholars' concerns

1 Jean d'Aspremont, 'The Love for International Organizations' (2023) 20 *International Organizations Law Review* 111.

2 For an early contestation about causal laws and the demonstration that causality is always very precarious, see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2011) (originally published 1739–1740). More recently, see Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Gallimard, 1969) 34; Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, Tome 1 (1954–1975)* (Gallimard, 2001) 607, 824; Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité* (Editions du Seuil, 1955) 33–34; Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Editions du Seuil, 1971) 195.

about whether exiting states have a “blank slate” regarding the obligations of the institution they leave, how to handle the complex web of agreements concluded by organizations like the EU, and the implications for individuals who may lose citizenship or other rights. While the political scientists seek to establish patterns, test hypotheses, and build predictive models, the lawyers are preoccupied with normative questions, like the rights and duties of exiting members, the legal position of affected individuals, and the implications for the future of multilateralism. The political science approach treats exits as data points in a broader analysis of institutional effectiveness and state behavior, while legal scholarship sees each exit as a multidimensional juridical event raising fundamental questions about the nature of international legal obligation.

Interestingly, such disciplinary divergences extend to the very concept of exit itself. *Exit from International Organizations* employs a broad notion of exit that encapsulates both voluntary withdrawal and forced suspensions of membership (though not suspensions of other rights). The volume is structured around this fundamental dichotomy, dedicating separate sections to each phenomenon. This is where legal scholars and specialists in international relations also differ starkly. For legal scholars, suspension is very alien to the concept of exit and is often approached as a reaction to a breach, as a reactionary measure, or as a signal of wrongfulness. This conceptual difference is well-illustrated by the fact that the abovementioned study on ‘Exiting International Organizations’ focuses almost exclusively on voluntary withdrawals, treating suspension as a fundamentally different category of institutional practice subject to different normative frameworks.

Yet despite all those conceptual differences and sensibilities, one commonality emerges across these two distinct epistemic communities after reading *Exit from International Organizations*. It seems that frowning at exits is shared across disciplines. Everyone, whether in international law, international relations, or international studies, finds it detrimental. In fact, there is no one to claim that exiting an international organization is a good thing. This is a position that is taken by the authors of *Exit from International Organizations* and which is buttressed by solid data. As far as international law is concerned, it is hard to imagine anyone rejoicing at news of an individual or collective withdrawal from an international organization, leaving aside the opportunity of having “some raw practice” about which legal scholarship can be produced. This is remarkable because it cannot be excluded that membership of some specific international organizations that participate in the destruction of the planet or help oppress, silence, or exploit people should be resisted, or, on the contrary, that termination of membership of some toxic member States to an international organization that does good for the world should be promoted. Obviously, given the current

cross-disciplinary consensus, such questions are never asked. It is noteworthy, however, that the reasons for the above-mentioned shared disapproval of exiting practices differ. Political scientists worry about institutional effectiveness, cooperation failures, and the breakdown of multilateral governance structures. International lawyers, on the other hand, are concerned with the integrity of the international legal order, the sanctity of treaty obligations, and the protection of individual rights that may be compromised by institutional exits.

Whether the practice of exiting international organizations is approached through the frameworks of intelligibility of political scientists or through those of international lawyers, a question remains about the very idea of exit. One may particularly wonder whether one exits an international organization at all. After all, an international organization is not a train station hallway where one walks in and one walks out. In other words, there is no delineated space that one leaves. On the contrary, even exiting states continue to inhabit a space that is configured, shaped, filled, textualized, occupied, imagined by international organizations, whether they like it or not. International organizations, even those they have left (or, according to the book under review, those from which they have been expelled or suspended) will remain in their close vicinity whether in textual, discursive, normative, regulatory, material, or imaginary terms. Isn't exit, in the end, simply a theatrical, self-deceiving, self-aggrandizing, masculinist, and empty performance? International organizations live on.

*Jean d'Aspremont*

Professor of International Law, Sciences Po Law School and University of Manchester, United Kingdom

*jean.daspremont@sciencespo.fr*