




4-25-2017

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Recommended Citation

Andregg, Michael (2017) "Joseph E. Schwartzberg, *Transforming the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World*. Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press, 2013.," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 76 : No. 76 , Article 26.
Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol76/iss76/26>

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Reviewed by Michael Andregg

This was among the last books published by the UN University Press before it went out of business due to chronic funding shortages at the United Nations. That is testament both to this book's importance to the UN system, and to the profound challenges that the UN faces today fulfilling its ideal missions with an organizational structure created in 1945 by the major powers that won the largest and costliest war in human history.

That noted, Professor Schwartzberg (an emeritus geographer at the University of Minnesota who has devoted his life to promoting fairer, and more functional forms of international governance) did the best any scholar could to address both obvious flaws in the current system. It would include the five vetoes on the Security Council, and more obscure problems such as how tiny island and municipal nations like Nauru, Monaco and Singapore have the same weight in General Assembly voting as great powers like China and the USA.

He starts with the General Assembly where he introduces his most comprehensive reform idea, a weighted voting system to replace the archaic one state one vote principle in place today. Simply expressed, Dr. Schwartzberg suggests adding measures of national populations and state contributions to the UN budget to one state one vote, and grouping the world into regions. Populations and budgets obviously change every year, so this would be a dynamic way of scoring actual votes on issues under consideration. That is complicated, but it would also match much more closely the actual power of states to influence events at the UN and elsewhere.

Then, Schwartzberg suggests creating an entirely new body of parliamentarians selected by nation-states, a World Parliamentary Assembly whose fundamental and ultimate purpose would be representing people instead of just nation-states. Schwartzberg envisions a three-step process going from an advisory body with MPs selected by existing governments to a body with real powers elected by actual people of the world, according to the one person one vote principle. That would be change of a truly transformational nature at the UN. If, of course, the dominant powers of the existing UN would allow and fund this new World Parliamentary Assembly. Which they probably will not unless battered by new existential threats. Those come.

Prof. Schwartzberg is well aware of such obstacles, which he notes explicitly in many chapters and in great detail. But he is not deterred from asking how things could be made better anyway. His fourth chapter deals with that pesky veto in the UN Security Council, which alone is empowered to act on life-and-death security challenges. But since the five permanent members of that Council all have vetoes (the USA, China, Russia, Great Britain and France) little if anything can be done about dozens of conflicts and issues that bedevil the world, from Chinese expansions in the South China Sea to nuclear issues involving Iran

and Israel to what to do about Syria, if any one of those five legacy nations with vetoes objects. They often do. Meanwhile, much of the world wonders why Britain and France still have such power, when much larger countries in the 21st century like Japan, Brazil, India and Germany are excluded.

Schwartzberg is very thorough. He marches on through weaknesses in environmental protection (Ch. 5 on reforming ECOSOC) human rights (Ch. 6 to create a credible human rights system instead of the sad and sometimes morbid joke that now exists) and reform of the international judicial system (Ch. 7). In every case he is searching for solutions to daunting problems that he tends to see very clearly. Along the way he provides as much education as space allows on how the UN system evolved to where it is today (or was in 2013). The ossified UN bureaucracy we all observe changes more slowly than glaciers today, so that is just another problem to be solved.

But Prof. Schwartzberg is not done. Subsequent chapters outline the many great things that UN functional agencies have done, and continue to do despite such obstacles, like the World Health Organization eliminating smallpox and almost polio, rationalization of global air travel protocols and international postal regulations. In Chapter 10 he calls for greater engagement with tens of thousands of NGOs and other civil society groups. And in Chapter 11 he takes on the perennial problem of UN funding which is chronically held hostage to the desires of major powers.

In Chapter 12 he takes on the porcupine of UN Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding operations, and in Chapter 13 the daunting challenges of creating more sustainable economies as globalization, technology, and emergent phenomena like climate change tear existing institutions apart.

Every one of these problems has stimulated many books searching for solutions in isolation. Dr. Schwartzberg is exceptional in trying to tackle them all together in an integrated effort focused on helping the UN to better do the jobs it was created for.

Chapter 15 is devoted to the obvious elephant in the room, how to get from here to there. He does the very best he can. But here, publisher's constraints have the greatest impact. He had to reduce his magnum opus by almost half to meet the constraints of the soon to close UN University Press. Anyone who has written such books knows how painful such reductions can be. I think Dr. Schwartzberg felt his careful explanations of how to fix existing structures required the detail he gave them. How to get publics that seldom see the UN at work to care about improving those systems is another vast problem that he attempts in the last chapter, but in much less detail than elsewhere.

Schwartzberg ends with two extensive appendices loaded with data and a 14 page index. His work has been endorsed by a really stellar list of international thinkers and practitioners, like former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and former US Ambassador to the UN, Thomas Pickering, among 18 others.

So, in my final analysis Professor Schwartzberg's work is an essential reference for anyone serious about UN reform or concerned about the generally weak state of international governance institutions in the 21st century. Despite its daunting topics, the text is clearly and lucidly written for any general audience. It includes a long list of abbreviations of bureaucratic acronyms necessary to get a grip on the UN System as it exists today. He presents dozens of good ideas that might be implemented someday when circumstances allow, and provides dozens of maps, charts and tables to illustrate them, in addition to his big ideas about transformation. That might require an invasion of space aliens or another catastrophic world war to stimulate. My note is that if we wait long enough, nuclear and other WMDs will probably be used again.

So I say press on with the search for solutions to global problems in our time. And I thank Dr. Schwartzberg for his seminal contribution to that noble task. When he passes on as we all must, the world will be better for the path breaking work he created.