

**Jamie Martin**, *The Meddlers. Sovereignty, Empire, and the Birth of Global Economic Governance*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Martin's engaging research book is a well-documented analysis on the birth of international economic institutions since the end of the Great War. The devastating clash between the longest-ruling imperialistic states caused a deep trauma in the European society. This war led to a reshaping of the political and social order that influenced the new economic order. The 1920s world would not be the 1910s world. The newly-emerging "dangerous classes"<sup>1</sup> were now well-determined to not sustaining the economic pre-war order. The rise of left and right wings parties was a result of this social transformation which made politics less related to elitist parties but closer to mass mobilization. The principle of the pre-war capital accumulation was put into question by those "dangerous classes" on the basis of the new economic and political claims posed by this emerging social groups. Broadly speaking, after the war the major European states could not ignore the social, economic and political claims made by those who fought the bloody war.

Martin's thesis is based on the assumption that the newly-born institutions were influenced by this social turmoil and by the forces of the accumulation of capital. He underlined the fact that "The first international economic institutions were designed to defend capitalism and stabilize a Europe-dominated international order that the First World War had thrown into turmoil. Their powers were shared according to the prerogatives of a few European governments and central banks".

The League of Nations is described by the author as an institution representing the new order and was hailed as a sort of *panacea* for keeping the capitalist order safe. If Britain was the main interested country, the US, too – just for a brief period of time – played a leading role.

This first wave of institutional-building process (the second one starts with the Bretton Woods agreements) was characterized, for instance, by the formation of international institutions which worked alongside private international cartels and business lobbying groups. This emerging order legitimized the "international intervention in economic process [...], global markets were embedded in new legal and institutional framework, underwritten by a handful of powerful states, empires, and banks".

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses: A Paris pendant la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Tempus, Paris 2007.

The aim of these institutions was to offer advices to sovereign states if the international economic order would be put at stake. Even though coercion was condemned and cooperation sustained, the loans (conditional lending) negotiated to Greece and the financial aids to Germany and Austria proved the contrary. Based on the examples of many international receiverships imposed by private borrowers to many indebted States in the nineteenth-century, these institutions used their control on capital to impose their terms to the indebted states. Institutions were aimed at reassuring the capitalist social order by removing as much as possible the risk of economic destabilization. The “policy of order” was represented by the adherence to the classical economic principles such as monetary stability – or adherence to the international gold system – budget stability and fair trade. However, these rules often sounded as an informal imposition to semi-peripheral states.

The creation of the League of Nations and the Bank of International Settlement, which played a leading role in promoting independent central banks cooperation, served as a fitting example for the founding of the International Monetary Fund. Though the League was backed by Britain to sustain and legitimize its hegemonic control in the world economy, IMF was forged to promote mainly the new US’s goals in the global economy. The latter institution, indeed, represented the *longa manus* of the rising American power but at the same time the power of its capitalist class represented the Wall Street interests. Thus, “its demands for an inquisitorial IMF were being realized. The institution gradually readopted international lending practices similar to those pioneered by the League over two decades before”.

Martin’s work proved that the formation of the international economic institutions reflected the worldwide capitalist class willingness, and its ability to influence the political power, to control the world economy by guaranteeing the principles of capital accumulation at the expenses of the national political sovereignty of many second-rank semi-peripheral states.

In conclusion, *The Meddlers* is an outstanding research based on a massive archival research the author made for proving his analysis. Following Polanyi’s thesis of social countermovement, a deeper bottom-up scanning of the social reactions to the policies pursued by these institutions would be interesting to read. However, the book responds effectively to the research questions underlined in the introduction. Opinion-makers, political élites and interested academics should read this book to dispel the myth that the international institutions are profoundly neutral in their acting. Martin’s book proved they are wrong.

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