Informal Governance in World Politics. Edited by Kenneth W. Abbott and Thomas J. Biersteker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 319 p. £25.99 paper.

Ian Madison, *Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine*
Ian.Madison@lstmed.ac.uk

Guy Maddin's film "Rumours" (2024) depicts a pillar of global governance taken to an absurd, apocalyptic extreme. G7 leaders meet at a forest retreat in Germany to produce a 'draft provisional statement' regarding an unspecified crisis. Fuelled by wine and personal squabbles, the result—an anodyne non-statement, the making of which they all clearly relish—contrasts sharply with a much more proximate issue: they have been abandoned by their handlers and are now being stalked by mummified Iron Age zombies. Things only get odder from there. The point? A thinly veiled allegory for climate change, "Rumours" articulates a widespread perception: our leaders, and their institutions of global governance, are incapable of confronting contemporary crises. They fiddle as the world burns.

The authors of *Informal Governance in World Politics* seek to correct this perception, to a degree. They see the G7 as part of a hitherto neglected phenomenon in global governance: the growing tendency of states to rely on informal cooperation at the expense of formal alternatives. Since the 1980s there has been a dramatic growth of what the authors identify as informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs) and transnational public-private governance initiatives (or TGIs). Both have outpaced the older, better known (and more widely studied) formal intergovernmental organizations such as the UN, WTO, and IMF. What are these informal modes of governance, why are they expanding, and what is their impact? This volume tackles these questions. In the process, it makes a compelling contribution to an expanding field of research.

First, the 'what'. Any consensus on what 'informality' means and how we know it when we see it remains elusive. Definition by negation is common. Informal blurs into 'non-formal', lumping together 'missing', 'invisible', 'private', and 'irregular' across a range of social, economic and political domains. Previous work on informal international institutions—a relative newcomer to 'informality studies'—helps the authors sidestep the challenge by identifying factors specific to their field, such as the absence of treaties or secretariats highlighted by Charles Roger (*The Origins of Informality,* 2020). But the emphasis remains negative. Informal governance is whatever is not "enshrined in formally constituted organizations or in their constitutions" (p. 5). Equating 'informal' with 'unwritten' still casts a wide net, so the authors narrow their scope to informal arrangements that include a state as at least one participant. The G7—a club of rich states lacking both treaty and secretariat—thus counts as an IIGO, while the Kimberley Process, which includes private business and NGOs alongside states, counts as a TGI. The exclusion of purely non-state configurations is reasonable, if somewhat ironic, given the associations of informality with working around, beneath, or beyond the state altogether.

Where can we find informality? A central contribution of the volume is a descriptive typology that helpfully identifies three options: the informality *of* institutions like the G7; informal norms and practices that occur *within* existing institutions, such as the 'knowledge guardians' that help NATO learn from its mistakes; and the informal networks and communities that operate *around* institutions. This tripartite division structures the book, albeit unequally. Five chapters are devoted to examining the informality *of* institutions. Not all of this is a contemporary phenomenon, as Koremenos and Carlson's chapter on secret agreements between 19th Century monarchs makes clear. But most take the recent proliferation of IIGOs and TGIs as their starting point. The section on informality *within* institutions gets only two chapters. Informality *around* institutions is limited to Biersteker's analysis of the loose networks of expertise that incubated the UN Office of the Ombudsperson.

The typology is clearly useful, even if, following Douglass North (*Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*, 1990), more could be done to distinguish the informal rules of the governance 'game' from its organizational 'players'. The chapter by Michaelowa et al., for example, takes on the issue closest to that haunting our G7 leaders in the film: international cooperation on climate policy. That there are more 'players' is evident. Initiatives like The Major Economies Forum, the Clean Energy Ministerial, the Group on Earth Observations, and the Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum, not to mention the 'G-groups', all exemplify the growing informality *of* institutions clustered around the global climate regime. However, this informal proliferation has neither altered nor influenced—let alone challenged—the formal bedrock of the UNFCCC. To adopt Gretchen Helmke and Stephen Levitsky's well-known typology, they are "complementary" institutions, rather than "competing" or "substitutive" ("Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda." *Perspectives on Politics* 2(04): 725). More optimistic is their assessment of informality *within* the UNFCCC's 'rules' of the game—its negotiation processes. Here we encounter corridors, hotel bars, side events and conference venues, loosely interpreted procedural rules, and the power of seating plans as lubricants of diplomacy. Still, the efficacy of these practices largely depends on the skill of the individual COP Presidents using them.

Herein lies a valuable contribution. A powerful, if implicit theme running through the volume is that informality is *strategic*. This endows the concept with more affirmative content. States *choose* informality, whether for reasons of flexibility, agility and confidentiality, or to exercise power beyond the constraints of formal procedure. States use informality to guard their sovereignty and avoid the principal-agent problems associated with formal organizational bodies. Developing states use IIGOs to coordinate politically behind closed doors, away from domestic scrutiny; developed states prefer TGIs, throwing open the doors to a range of non-state actors less from a

normative commitment to transparency than to share out the risks of failure. Absolute monarchs use secretive 'gentlemen's agreements' as a way of supporting their respective regimes. American administrations use informal influence over the World Bank to achieve foreign policy goals—but only when an oppositional congress mean that doing so bilaterally would pose unacceptable domestic costs. Much of this has to do with what Viola's chapter calls "negative liberty benefits"—that is, the avoidance of costs and obstacles associated with formality. But she also illustrates the "positive liberty benefits" of strategic informality. Particularly among developing states, informality builds capacity, and it builds coalitions.

The book thus offers a glimmer of hope about the dynamics and prospects of international cooperation. It is notable that three of the four leaders portrayed on the book's cover—Emmanual Macron, Olaf Scholz and Joe Biden—are, or were, representatives of what Gary Gerstle (*The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, 2022) identifies as a fading political order, one built on a liberal consensus and centred on the industrialised West. As Kahler's chapter outlines, the pessimistic alternative may come to entail a retreat from globalization and international cooperation. The farcical politics of "Rumours" might come to be seen as quaint in hindsight; a feeble G7 is perhaps better than nothing. But it may also usher in a more equitable multilateralism. The kinds if informal governance alternatives explored in this volume offer new possibilities for innovative, experimental, and collective approaches to unprecedented global challenges like the climate crisis. In any case, this volume does an admirable job of mapping out the nuances of informal governance and provides a strong intellectual foundation for future research in this field.