Although the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the first International Parliamentary Institution (IPI), was established more than a century ago and the current number of IPIs worldwide is around 70, surprisingly little effort has been made to set up a research agenda to explain and understand their emergence and role in the contemporary world. This is not to say that IPIs are unknown to scholars, but knowledge about these institutions is selective. On the one hand, only a handful of IPIs receive major scholarly attention; this is especially true for the European Parliament. On the other hand, the literature on the majority of other IPIs is scarce and largely descriptive. Most of the existing research on IPIs (with the exception of the European Parliament) focuses on topics related to their history, structure and formal powers. It gives much less attention to the environment in which IPIs operate, to the factors which influence their activities, and to the potential IPIs (may) have to become recognizable players in international affairs.

By using only methods of “measuring” the performance of IPIs through their formal powers, one considers only a small number of the IPIs that currently exist in the world, namely those that are part of international governmental organizations. However, the list of IPIs is much broader than that – from the European Parliament, arguably the most powerful IPI, to the IPIs that have little impact, if any at all. To study other IPIs, we must give up such measurements, and we must give up the idea of studying the “effectiveness” of these institutions. The work of IPIs does not always have an immediate and visible effect, and the wide array of their activities makes it almost impossible to generate data that could help us conclude how “powerful” or “effective” these institutions are. Different criteria based on a different approach must apply.

Insisting on a positivist approach places a heavy burden on developing IPIs as a topic of research, but this is not the only problem. Historically, research on IPIs has also been largely Euro-centric, in the sense that a great
majority of the literature has focused on European IPIs. Initially, this made sense, since until the end of the 1950s most IPIs were headquartered in Europe. Yet, as can be seen elsewhere in this book, the focus has changed with time, as IPIs also began to be established in other parts of the world. Thus, it is worth reiterating that to understand the development of the IPIs as a global phenomenon, it is important to undertake further analyses of IPIs beyond those that have been conducted in Europe. At the same time, we also need to understand the potential and limits of IPIs as international actors, which is the main objective of the present chapter.

So how are we to study IPIs and observe their performance in the international community? This chapter seeks to contribute to this debate by looking at IPIs as international actors that assume the role of norm entrepreneurs, i.e. those who try to persuade others to accept new norms and values. It suggests that IPIs – as norm entrepreneurs – should be studied in the context of the international community, which is ever more disaggregated and can no longer be explained solely through states as key actors, but rather through more or less formal institutions and networks that are involved in various policy and decision-making processes at both regional and global levels.

The chapter begins, in Section 2.1, with recalling earlier discussions about the role of IPIs in international affairs, stretching from the period after the creation of the IPU to the discussion in Europe after the Second World War. In the second part (Sections 2.2–2.4), the chapter turns first to Cosmopolitan Democracy, the only school of thought until the 1990s that at least indirectly addressed IPIs as international actors, and tried to project their role in the future. This debate has received further stimulus by Anne-Marie Slaughter’s research on transnational networks and case-studies such as Trine Flockhart’s analysis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Parliamentary Assembly, so they are discussed here as well. In Section 2.5, the chapter offers a framework of research with a view to understanding the role and potential that IPIs have in the contemporary international community, as well as the motivations and constraints that influence the activities of IPIs and their members. Final thoughts are presented in the conclusion.

2.1. Early plans on international arbitration and a federation

The search for the origins of IPIs and the rationale for their existence may go back to 1889, when the IPU, the oldest IPI, was created, although the idea of creating an international parliamentary institution is much older. William Penn was probably the first writer to use the term “parliament” in the international context, while conceiving a plan to address recurring conflicts in Europe. He argued that a “parliament” was needed in Europe, because only a democratic body that would assure greater representation of the interests of individuals that might be affected by the conflict, could serve as an arbitrator in disputes among states.