

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The global politics paradigm: guide to the future or only the recent past?

Robert O. Keohane

School of International and Public Affairs, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA
Corresponding author. E-mail: rkeohane@princeton.edu

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Abstract

Michael Zürn's *A Theory of Global Governance* is a major theoretical statement. The first section of this essay summarizes Zürn's argument, pointing out that his Global Politics Paradigm views contestation as generated *endogenously* from the dilemmas and contradictions of reflexive authority relationships. Authoritative international institutions, he maintains, have difficulty maintaining their legitimacy in a world suffused with democratic values. The second section systematically compares Zürn's Global Politics Paradigm with both Realism and Cooperation Theory, arguing that the three paradigms have different scope conditions and are therefore as much complementary as competitive. The third section questions the relevance of Zürn's argument to contemporary reality. Great power conflict and authoritarian populism in formerly democratic countries generate existential threats to multilateralism and global institutions that are more serious than Zürn's legitimacy deficits.

Keywords: global governance; international institutions; Constructivism; Realism; cooperation theory; multilateralism

In *A Theory of Global Governance*, Michael Zürn develops a sophisticated and thoughtful theory, which I would call a theory of endogenous contestation, in which contestation of institutions emerges from their combination of considerable authority and weak legitimacy.¹ This is an original and ingenious theory, which sees institutions as quite authoritative but views them as weakened by their lack of legitimacy. Its emphasis on the role of ideas in politics, and the ways in which social actors re-imagine and construct social reality, makes it classifiable as a form of Constructivism.² Like much other work in the Constructivist tradition, Zürn's theory also has the considerable merit, as Jan Aart Scholte (2020) points out, of taking values seriously, both on their own terms and due to their effects on action in the world. As a result of its sophistication and scope, *A Theory* is a major contribution to international relations theory.

¹Zürn 2018.

²I accept the conventional view that Constructivists see actors and interests in world politics as shaped as much by values, ideas, and social norms as by material structures. See Onuf 1989; Barkin 2003.

In the second section of this commentary, however, I argue that Professor Zürn pays too little attention to the scope conditions of his ‘global politics paradigm’. His theory has different scope conditions to those of its Realist and Cooperation Theory counterparts. In some ways, therefore, these theories are as much complementary as competitive. In the third section, I sketch some major changes taking place now in world politics, to see how they affect the relevance of each paradigm. World politics is changing with bewildering speed, and they raise issues with Realism, Cooperation Theory, and Zürn’s world politics theory.

Michael Zürn’s theory of global governance

At the center of Zürn’s theory is the concept of *authority*, as distinct from power. Following Aristotle and Weber, Zürn distinguishes authority from power; for him, authority revolves around ‘deference as a form of power’.³ In an authoritative relationship, neither coercion nor persuasion is crucial in inducing conformity of A’s behavior to B’s desires. On the contrary, A defers to B because of A’s beliefs about B’s qualities or about the appropriate relationship between A and B. Zürn believes that states often defer to international organizations.

In world politics, with independent states, why should one state obey the rules or directives of an international organization, such as the guidelines of the World Health Organization on vaccinations or the judgments of the World Trade Organization on trade barriers? These organizations cannot compel compliance and do not wield traditional or charismatic authority. Zürn’s answer revolves around the idea of ‘reflexive authority’. Reflexive political authorities issue requests, not orders. States follow these requests ‘because they feel that the authority is doing a good service, not because they feel a strong duty to oblige’.⁴ Vincent Pouliot cogently summarizes Zürn’s argument as emphasizing ‘epistemic authority’, which rests on ‘expert knowledge and moral integrity’.⁵ Judith Kelley and Beth A. Simmons show that Zürn’s conception of epistemic authority provides a cogent theoretical framework with which to explain the increases in the number and importance of global ranking systems in the contemporary world political economy.⁶

Values are at the heart of this theory of deference. The inclination to follow these rules, according to Zürn’s theory, derives from widespread agreement with three principles of global governance: the assumption that there is a common good; the agreement that individuals have rights; and the belief that international authority can rightly override national sovereignty.⁷ If these assumptions are accepted, then states owe deference to the measures proposed by a legally structured and technically competent international authority, pursuing a common good such as world health or open trade.

In Zürn’s theory, the authority of international institutions rests ultimately on the values of those subject to that authority. If the agents subject to international

³Zürn 2018, 38.

⁴Zürn 2018, 48.

⁵Pouliot 2020.

⁶Kelley and Simmons 2020.

⁷Zürn 2018, 36.

authority are democratic states whose leaders, supported by their publics, have cosmopolitan values, they will accept the authority of international organizations on substantive grounds, since they will agree that there are common goods, individuals have rights, and sovereignty does not trump global welfare. Zürn worries, however, that states may resist international authority on procedural grounds.

Although many 'legitimation narratives' are in principle available to would-be authorities, only the legal and technocratic narratives are readily available to international organizations. They lack traditional authority and they do not have sufficient resources to apply a 'fairness narrative' of redistribution. 'Most importantly', Zürn writes, 'inter- and transnational authorities can hardly use the participatory narrative'.⁸ There is no global polity with democratic institutions and policy debates with public involvement. Yet, Zürn believes that 'democracy with the participatory legitimation narrative at its core is, according to available survey data, accepted worldwide as a desirable political order'.⁹ In his emphasis on narratives – stories that we tell ourselves – Zürn has much in common with Constructivist work in political science.

In Zürn's theory, the driver of 'politicization' and delegitimation of institutions is the contradiction between global democratic values, on the one hand, and international institutional practices that do not meet democratic standards and that therefore fail to be seen as legitimate, on the other. His 'major claim is that the features of the current global governance system have endogenously produced contestation of international authorities'.¹⁰ Although the system produces a degree of hierarchical authority rooted in acceptance of certain normative principles, it also generates struggles over the legitimation of such authority. Institutionalized authority suffers from legitimacy deficits. It cannot rely on democratic legitimacy since international organizations are not democratic, and it cannot rely on traditional sources of legitimacy or nationalism for obvious reasons. International authority therefore relies on the relatively narrow basis of legality and technocratic competence. The very success of institutionalized authority at the level of global governance generates legitimacy challenges.

Zürn makes his argument in several steps. In Chapter 5, he offers an historical-institutionalist account of the 'rise of the global governance system'. During the 1990s, he claims, the normative principles embedded in global institutions became more widely asserted, conferring more authority on the institutions. The political and epistemic authority of specific institutions, from WTO to the OECD or the European Union (EU), increased as they received increasing deference from states. States created new institutions to cope with climate change or human rights violations – such as the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. Zürn provides graphs to show increases in institutionalized political authority between about 1920 and 2015 along several dimensions, from agenda-setting to norm interpretation to rule-making.¹¹ However, as Michael

⁸Zürn 2018, 78.

⁹Zürn 2018, 81

¹⁰Zürn 2018, 11.

¹¹Zürn 2018, 126–27

Barnett writes, Zürn focuses heavily on processes rather than effectiveness, making the significance of increased institutionalization, as Zürn measures it, unclear.¹²

These global authorities, although hierarchical, were only loosely connected, and lacked clear boundaries delimiting separation of powers, unlike national democracies. Zürn argues that their embrace of neoliberalism, over time, weakened their authority. Contestation of their decisions led to politicization of their institutional legitimacy. The discontented actors on whom Zürn focuses wanted to reform these institutions rather than to abolish them. In the process that Zürn describes, a degree of hierarchy, based on limited acceptance of global authority, endogenously generates discord, which can lead to counter-institutionalization or institutional decline. However, the sovereignty protections within the system limit the willingness of rising powers to disrupt institutions.

Zürn discusses cases of deepening of global governance, in which legitimation challenges based on rights claims led to reforms in NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, the EU, and the United Nations. For Zürn, the central political processes of global governance revolve around challenges to the legitimacy of international organizations, politicization, and attempts, successful or not, at reform. Often, he argues, consistently with Constructivist theory, that contestation leads in a dialectical process to norm deepening.

The scope conditions of theories of world politics

Zürn embraces a new paradigm in the study of world politics, which he calls the ‘global politics paradigm’. He claims both that the global politics paradigm ‘complements’ the cooperation under anarchy paradigm and that it ‘goes beyond it’.¹³ He is certainly correct that his argument is distinct from both Realism and the Cooperation under Anarchy paradigm since it explicitly views contestation as generated *endogenously* from the dilemmas and contradictions of reflexive authority relationships. In reflexive authority relationships, those who are expected to defer to authority can question it. In contrast, Realism and Cooperation Theory depend more heavily on distributions of material power, distributive conflict over resources, and attempts to solve collective action problems or ‘free-ride’ on them. Each paradigm has its own internal logic, and advocates of all three can point to situations in the history of world politics that seem to fit their assumptions and support their inferences. The key question for students of contemporary world politics is to ascertain the relevance of each theory to the present age. That is, we need to identify the *scope conditions* of each theory and assess their connection to present conditions.

For realism the key puzzle of world politics is the recurrence of war despite its destructiveness, or what John Mearsheimer calls ‘the tragedy of great power politics’.¹⁴ Realists point to conflicts of interest among independent states, but such conflicts are not a sufficient explanation, since wars destroy value and typically damage state interests. Sophisticated realists therefore emphasize uncertainty and the inherent difficulty of making credible promises and threats in an anarchic environment.

¹²Barnett 2020.

¹³Zürn 2018, 248, 258.

¹⁴Mearsheimer 2001.

Difficulties of credibility generate dangerous strategic tests of credibility, which can lead to misperceptions and spirals of conflict.

Realists also have a theory of change. Robert Gilpin famously held that power shifts favoring challengers destabilize world politics.¹⁵ Declining hegemony seek to maintain the order that they created to benefit themselves, while states with rising power seek to overturn the order and eventually to replace it with their own rules, norms, practices, and institutions. According to this 'theory of hegemonic stability', hegemonic war frequently results.¹⁶

Cooperation Theory identifies and addresses a different puzzle. Why is there substantial institutionalized cooperation in world politics, and how do institutions facilitate such cooperation? Cooperation Theory begins with the assumption, shared by Realism, that discord, not cooperation, is the default position of world politics and that 'cooperation should not be viewed as the absence of conflict, but rather as a reaction to conflict or potential conflict'.¹⁷ Cooperation Theory also shares with Realism a game-theoretic perspective, but, unlike Realism, examines what happens when opportunities exist for Pareto-improving cooperation. Cooperation Theory does not assume efficient outcomes, since it is well aware of power issues and obstacles to successful bargaining, although it does argue that well-designed institutions can facilitate bargaining success. Institutions in this theory are not always efficient, but they 'are *relatively* efficient institutions, compared with the myriad of unrelated agreements' that Cooperation Theory views as the alternative.¹⁸

Cooperation in this view derives from bargaining involving reciprocity, which itself implies the threat or actuality of conflict. With a sufficiently long future to consider, and a sufficiently low discount rate, reciprocity facilitates rational cooperation.¹⁹ Issues of uncertainty and information, and of transaction costs, continue to exist, but states make the bargaining situation less inefficient by creating appropriate international institutions. Zürn's ambition, as described in the Introduction (p. 3), 'to demolish the seemingly unbreakable elective affinity between institutionalism and a cooperative reading of world politics', is a little bit odd in view of the fact that Cooperation Theory dismisses harmony and embeds its analysis firmly in the concept of discord.²⁰

Realism seeks to explain the behavior of states toward one another under conditions of severe existential uncertainty. Its key scope condition is that state interests are in conflict, not necessarily zero-sum but close to it, so there is little room for sustained or institutionalized cooperation. In terms popularized by Stephen D. Krasner, the relations of states are already near the Pareto frontier so there is little room for mutually beneficial cooperation.²¹ Cooperation theory, in contrast, is most relevant when uncertainty is moderate, security threats emanating from

¹⁵Gilpin 1981.

¹⁶Keohane 1980.

¹⁷Keohane 1984, 54.

¹⁸Keohane 1984, 97.

¹⁹Axelrod 1984.

²⁰Zürn 2018, 3.

²¹Krasner 1991.

potential partners are relatively mild, and the potential exists for long-term joint gains from cooperation.

The scope conditions of Realism and Cooperation theory are almost mirror-images. Given a set of conditions, each theory relies on assumptions of strategic rationality to reach its conclusions in a logically rigorous way. The notion that one must make a choice at a theoretical level between Realism and Cooperation theory is therefore mistaken. The relevant choice is not between these theories as abstract or stylized theories, but between their applicability to a given set of historical circumstances. When leaders of states fear one another and find security only in economic and military superiority, the predictions of Realism will be closer to the mark. By contrast, under conditions of 'complex interdependence', where military force plays a minor role and states seek absolute rather than relative economic gains, cooperation theory will provide a superior framework for analysis.²²

Michael Zürn's theory of global governance is profoundly ambitious since he seeks to explain institutionalized authority, increasing contestation, and limits on that contestation with a unified theory, emphasizing, as in Constructivist theory, values and narratives. Zürn brilliantly identifies some of the sources of increasing contestation as generated by the legitimacy deficits of institutionalized global authority. Yet, the relevance of Zürn's theory also depends on specific scope conditions. His Global Politics Paradigm applies to the behavior of institutions, states, and non-state actors and movements *only* when multilateral institutions are quite authoritative.²³ Under these conditions, he argues that the central aspects of contestation arise endogenously from the interactions of states, non-state actors and movements, on the one hand, with authoritative institutions, on the other.

In other words, the scope conditions for Zürn's theory include the assumption that international institutions have considerable authority. Not only (as with Cooperation Theory) must there be the *potential* for Pareto-improving cooperation; institutionalized cooperation must have taken place. Institutions with weak authority don't matter enough to generate the contestation that Zürn's theory of global governance seeks to explain.

It seems that the EU, at the height of its prestige, is the model for Zürn's theory. The EU was authoritative and its members were strongly committed to its norms and principles; yet, its activities generated legitimacy issues and contestation since the EU, like all institutions based on ideals, failed fully to fulfill its principles. Yet, recent challenges to the EU, and also to other international organizations such as the World Trade Organization, have gone well beyond accusing them of failing to live up to their cosmopolitan and democratic ideals. Populist and nationalist governments have challenged these ideals themselves, demanding either major change in the institutions or deciding to exit them altogether, as in Britain's 'Brexit' referendum on leaving the EU. The significance of populism in the current plight of the EU illustrates the strength of Zürn's approach, and Constructivism more generally, in emphasizing the role of values and social movements in world politics. Yet, Zürn's reliance on the EU is also a source of weakness, since the EU has been a uniquely authoritative international organization and Zürn did not anticipate the

²²For a discussion of complex interdependence, see Keohane and Nye 2012, ch. 2.

²³Zürn 2018, 154.

stresses that it would experience, not from legitimacy deficits but from authoritarian populism.

The relevance of theory in light of radical change

All social science theories have scope conditions. Social science theory is only relevant when real-world conditions fit the scope conditions of the theory. To understand the relevance of the three paradigms considered here, we need to understand how the world is changing. Realism, with its emphasis on conflict, is undergoing a revival as China rises to great power status and has begun explicitly to challenge the United States in a variety of domains – from military control of the South China Sea to economic competition in a vast arc ranging from China to Europe, and exemplified by the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. Realism’s focus on great power competition deprived it of an active subject for its theories in the 1990s; but it is now clearly relevant again. For an understanding of global contestation, we may need to re-think Realism once again – to develop a new form of ‘modified structural realism’.²⁴

Realism’s over-ambitious advocates often forget its scope conditions and lapse into the language of inevitability, which finds little support in history or theory. Even when carefully formulated, Realism is not sufficient as a basis for understanding, since it leaves out institutions and fails to explain cooperation. Yet, these difficult times make us recognize the importance of great power competition and the analytical power of the theory of hegemonic stability.

Cooperation Theory has long been associated with transnational relations and interdependence, or in contemporary terms, globalization: the intensification of political, social, and economic linkages among societies. Culminating in the 1990s, strong upward trends were evident in measures of economic globalization, such as trade, foreign investment, and the extensive growth of networks such as corporate value chains; and in measures of political institutionalization, such as the number and size of intergovernmental organizations. Migration was substantial but only rarely became a sufficiently important political issue to generate party realignments. Furthermore, since the United States was strategically as well as economically dominant, power conflicts among great powers were subdued. In general, therefore, globalization seemed to be generating a positive-sum game that facilitated institutionalized cooperation. Cooperation Theory not surprisingly seemed to account for much of the observed international political activity.

Since 2000, the world has changed in ways that challenge Cooperation Theory. One such development is the increasing fragmentation of international regimes and the growth of what is called ‘complexity’ in world politics.²⁵ Even more challenging to the theory is what appears to have been the end, around 2000, of what had been a steady rise in the number of intergovernmental organizations in world politics.²⁶ Two other anomalous developments appeared in the 2008–09 financial crisis and in its wake. This crisis led to a dramatic reduction in global trade, and to greater

²⁴Keohane 1982.

²⁵Alter and Meunier 2009.

²⁶Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020.

caution about financial integration. In political terms, it dramatically illustrated the operation of what Nicole Deitelhoff and Christopher Daase refer to as ‘rule’, since the US Federal Reserve System, which could print unlimited quantities of dollars and distribute them with full discretion, became the arbiter of the fate of economies around the world. Between December 2007 and August 2010, the Fed lent a total of over \$10 trillion to central banks deemed worthy of support.²⁷ After the crisis, world trade has suffered, even before President’s Trump’s protectionism. World trade peaked at 60% of global GDP in 2008, and has never reached that level since.²⁸ Accounting for these developments requires a theory of financial crises and a theory of the use of financial power by hegemonic states.

In Chapter 7, Zürn discusses challenges by rising powers to prevailing international institutions, dubbing this process ‘counter-institutionalization’. For Zürn, these challenges are endogenous to the procedures and practices of multilateral institutions, confronting institutionalized inequality. Indeed, ‘the global governance system and international authority as such are hardly challenged by rising powers’, which act as ‘conservative globalizers’. What Zürn does not take seriously is contestation that is *exogenous* to authoritative institutions, generated by changes in domestic politics, combined with rising capabilities. Yet, such contestation is what we are seeing now, as China seeks to gain influence worldwide with its Belt and Road Initiative, and achieve a dominant position in emerging technologies, including the 5G internet and Artificial Intelligence. Such exogenously produced conflict could destroy global institutions such as the WTO. To understand the impact of China’s rise on world politics, we have to go beyond the endogenous contestation, generated by the combination of authority and bias of established international organizations, discussed by Professor Zürn.

Other changes in world politics also challenge the premises of both Cooperation Theory and Global Governance theory. Neither Cooperation Theory nor Zürn’s Global Politics Paradigm would have prepared their readers for Brexit, which seems propelled more by nationalism, fear of foreigners, and desire to maintain sovereign control than by any calculus of economic and political gains and losses from economic integration. Few Constructivists have the distinction of having predicted this malign turn of values; but Constructivism at least has the strength of focusing on values and interpretations, which seem at the heart of contemporary populism.

As pointed out in the first section of this essay, Zürn’s account of reflexive authority and legitimation has highly demanding conditions for its operation, since it rests on the assumption that his three principles of global governance are deeply rooted and widely shared. People in his world agree that there is a common good; that individuals have rights; and that international authority can rightly override national sovereignty. Yet, Donald Trump and his fellow populists would-be autocrats disagree explicitly with all of these assumptions. In other words, the stronger opposition to global institutions today comes not from those who accept cosmopolitan principles and seek to expose the shortcomings of global institutions, but from those who never accepted these principles in the first place. Unfortunately,

²⁷Deitelhoff and Daase 2020; Tooze 2018, ch. 8.

²⁸The World Bank DataBank. Accessed 6 December 2019.

anti-democrats are strong in today's world, undercutting Zürn's assumption of widely shared democratic values. In its report for 2018, Freedom House lists only 39% of the world's populations as living in countries that are free, as compared to 37% in countries that are not free and 24% in countries that are partly free.²⁹ Furthermore, the Freedom House index has registered 12 consecutive years of declines in global freedom since the peak in 2006. In practice, democracy does not have the globally dominant status that Zürn seems to assume.

These adverse trends continue. China keeps veering more strongly toward totalitarianism. Authoritarian, populist movements have gained power not only in countries that were at best tenuously democratic earlier, such as Turkey and Russia, but also in the United States, Italy, Hungary, and Slovakia. These regimes reject the normative basis of global governance as Zürn has outlined it. They reject the notion of a common good – the Trump Administration even rejects the view that preserving a healthy climate is a common good worth pursuing collectively. They reject or limit conceptions of individual rights. Finally, populists elevate national sovereignty above international norms. In other words, they reject all three principles of Zürn's theory of global governance.

The animosity generated by authoritarian and populist regimes is stronger and more dangerous than the criticisms of international institutions on which Zürn focuses. Zürn looks backward toward the Seattle demonstrations against the WTO of 1999, organized by groups that viewed international organizations as illegitimate because they failed to live up to cosmopolitan or egalitarian principles. He criticizes how international institutions cope with legitimacy concerns from the Left. Today, however, the more powerful threat comes from the populist Right. It comes not from cosmopolitans who want more participatory global governance but from nationalistic and ethnocentric populism, fueled in particular by opposition to, and fear of, immigration.

In a way, the Global Politics Paradigm seems trapped in the 'bubble' of the 20 or 25 years after 1990 – a period in which great power rivalry had virtually vanished and much contestation was generated by civil society within democratic countries. During this heyday of international cooperation, it was easy to believe that these trends would only intensify or even that democracy would be universal.³⁰ However, it turns out that this period was exceptional. Alas, the events of this century are not so far moving in a democratic and cosmopolitan direction. Michael Zürn's theory of global governance would be a brilliant guide to a world of authoritative international organizations based on liberal democratic principles, but it seems less helpful for understanding our contemporary political predicaments.

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²⁹Freedom House 2018.

³⁰Fukuyama 1989, 1992.

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