


BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Global governance in the age of epistemic authority

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### Abstract

Today's global governance is qualitatively different from the past, according to Michael Zürn's penetrating analysis. With the rise of epistemic authority, reflexivity, service, and request have come to surpass command and control as key modes of global governance, leading to new forms of legitimation and contestation. I engage with this rich and thought-provoking argument on three counts. First, it remains doubtful that states defer to international organizations because the latter 'know better'. There exist many gaps in epistemic authority and politics often trump rationality in global governance. Second, it is not clear how global hierarchy, which Zürn equates with 'pockets of authority', could emerge out of demands and requests, precisely because epistemic authority is so fluid and prone to contestation. Third, as historically young and increasingly based on service authority as it may be, contemporary global governance still rests on a body of inherited practices whose legitimation principles seem closer to tradition than to reflexive justification.

**Keywords:** global governance; international organizations; authority; hierarchy; practice

How different is global governance today compared to earlier times? More specifically, what characterizes the exercise of authority beyond the state at the outset of the third millennium? Despite the centrality of this problematique, there is a puzzling dearth of scholarship trying to make sense of the time-bound specificities of contemporary global politics. This is surprising given that, if history is to teach us anything, it is that nothing ever stays exactly the same: the logic of politics, and especially the practical forms that collective action takes, are ever-changing human dynamics that ought to be studied dynamically if we are to capture their contingency.

Michael Zürn's *A Theory of Global Governance* (henceforth, *A Theory*) addresses this challenge head-on, starting from the observation that 'authority in the global governance system is special'.<sup>1</sup> Not only does the book demonstrate the mounting significance of politicization by civil society organizations and counter-institutionalization by states, it also documents an epochal transformation in the working of global governance: global authority is increasingly 'epistemic' in nature.

<sup>1</sup>Zürn 2018, 8.

In a fascinating diagnostic of our times, Zürn shows that international organizations (IOs) and other global agencies ‘produce interpretations with behavioral implications, but not necessarily decisions to which actors defer directly’.<sup>2</sup> This is a rather radical proposition for a scholarly field primarily concerned with regulation through hard or soft law. On the contrary, argues Zürn, in 21<sup>st</sup> century global governance, authority functions differently, in that it is ‘carried out in a reflexive manner’.<sup>3</sup>

My commentary focuses on what I take to be central question raised by Zürn: what is it that makes authority so ‘special’ in today’s global governance? I start by accepting the book’s key observation that epistemic authority has been lately, and continues to be, on the rise. I then raise three critical questions about this trend. First, do states really defer to IOs and other epistemic authorities because the latter ‘know better’? I argue that politics generally trump rationality in global governance, making this optimistic scenario rather implausible. Second, what kind of hierarchy do the demands and requests made by service authorities generate? Epistemic authority seems too fluid and prone to contestation to produce robust inequality in global governance. And third, what is the role of tradition and practice in epistemic authority? A child of modernity as it may be, global governance rests on a host of established practices whose authority need not be justified on a daily basis. Ultimately, my criticisms are not meant to refute the centrality of epistemic authority in 21<sup>st</sup> global governance, but rather to further problematize its sources, mechanisms, and implications.

### The rise of epistemic authority

*A Theory* provides a penetrating analysis of global authority today. For its author, authority in global governance is ‘loosely coupled’ with a ‘weakly established separation of powers’.<sup>4</sup> Zürn’s most distinctive contribution is in documenting a trend toward ‘epistemic authority’ in the post-Cold War era. Historically, he argues, international institutions have mostly relied on technocratic (expertise) and legal (formal procedure) narratives in order to legitimize their authority. The problem, though, is that both of these legitimation narratives tend to be self-undermining, leading to contestation of IOs ‘as servants of a global (neo)liberal elite that hides its power with legal expertise and a technocratic knowledge order’.<sup>5</sup> And since alternative narratives are hardly available for global governors, writes Zürn, they have come to abandon ‘commands’ to turn instead to ‘demands or requests’.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, this epistemic form of authority rests on the provision of interpretations, as opposed to the top-down making of decisions.

Zürn documents the rise of epistemic authority, starting in the 1990s, in a number of ways. Anecdotally, he notes the multiplication of monitoring functions by IOs (e.g. the OECD), the rise of (quasi-) judicial bodies (e.g. the International

<sup>2</sup>Zürn 2018, 9.

<sup>3</sup>Zürn 2018, 8.

<sup>4</sup>Zürn 2018, 56ff.

<sup>5</sup>Zürn 2018, 84.

<sup>6</sup>Zürn 2018, 8.

Accounting Standards Board), the growth in reporting by NGOs (e.g. Human Rights Watch), the emergence of public–private partnerships (e.g. the Roll Back Malaria Initiative), and the advent of private certification systems (e.g. the Forest Stewardship Council). More systematically, he relies on an intriguing dataset, the International Authority Database (IAD), to document ‘strong growth rates from the 1990s on’ when it comes to what he calls ‘politically assigned epistemic authorities’ (PAEAs).<sup>7</sup>

The importance of this argument can hardly be overstated. In a field slightly obsessed with the domestic analogy, Zürn encourages us to consider the *sui generis* character of global governance. Authority takes many forms, and we should not reduce this complexity, as is often the case in International Relations (IR), to rule-making, regulation, and legalization. Here Zürn joins a number of recent studies that have highlighted the inherent fragility (and politics) of expert authority in global governance.<sup>8</sup> The exact articulation between expertise and the provision of interpretations remains partly unclear, however, to the extent that, according to Zürn, ‘[e]pistemic authority is based on expert knowledge and moral integrity’.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to expertise, then, ‘making demands’ seems to describe a mode of operation in contemporary global authority (i.e. how it works) as opposed to one of its sources (i.e. where it comes from).

Furthermore, in practice the distinction that Zürn draws between ‘the authority to make decisions and the authority to provide interpretations’ is much less clear-cut than it seems.<sup>10</sup> In the judicial field, for instance, court decisions rest on interpretations of the law (or precedents). True, compared to their domestic equivalent, international courts lack the coercive power of police to back their interpretations/decisions. Yet, in many instances, interpreting what a given principle means in a concrete case (e.g. the Responsibility to Protect in 2011 Libya) often amounts – or at least comes very close – to deciding how to act (e.g. via a Chapter-7 Security Council resolution). Zürn acknowledges that PAEAs often make ‘very consequential interpretations’ and he even concedes that in some cases ‘interpretations become *de facto* decisions’.<sup>11</sup> Where exactly should scholars draw the line between epistemic and decision-making authority, then? Beyond this basic problem of operationalization, I now want to raise issues with the sources, mechanisms, and implications of the rise of epistemic authority in today’s global governance.

### The politics of ‘knowing better’

In order to explain the rise of epistemic authority, Zürn turns to a competence-based argument: ‘All the classical figures of authority – the theological father, Hegel’s master, or the modern judge – have a cognitive component that can roughly be described as “knowing better”’.<sup>12</sup> Building on Joseph Raz’s ‘service conception of

<sup>7</sup>Zürn 2018, 30.

<sup>8</sup>E.g. Steffek 2003; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Widmaier 2004; Avants *et al.* 2010; Weaver 2010; Best 2014; Nay 2014; Seabrooke 2014; Sending 2015; Litzo-Monnet 2017.

<sup>9</sup>Zürn 2018, 52.

<sup>10</sup>Zürn 2018, 50.

<sup>11</sup>Zürn 2018, 130, 264.

<sup>12</sup>Zürn 2018, 43.

authority', the author argues that deference is 'based on actors recognizing their limits of rationality and, therefore, the need for third parties or specific expertise'.<sup>13</sup> The demand for epistemic authority, in other words, rests on actors' acknowledging their own limitations. In contemporary global governance, argues Zürn, 'states have delegated the competence to gather and interpret political relevant information'.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, then, '[i]t is neither the quality of a specific argument nor a manipulation of the subordinate's preferences through incentives that leads to deference, but the recognition of the authority as worth observing'.<sup>15</sup> This new phenomenon of our times Zürn calls 'governance by reputation'.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, do states really defer to PAEAs because the latter 'know better'? I see three main reasons for skepticism here. First, to assume that political actors are 'enlightened and critical' in their pursuit of self-interest sounds like a rather heroic move to me.<sup>17</sup> Sure, we may find such instances of reflexivity and rationality here and there, but I observe no cross-cutting empirical pattern – a new Age of Reason, so to speak – susceptible of being conducive to the kind of macro-change that the rise of epistemic authority describes. Zürn argues that 'the recognition of external authorities is based on the knowledge about the limitations of one's own rationality and information base'.<sup>18</sup> Yet, this assumption flies in the face of the agonistic nature of politics, including in the global realm, according to which certainty about one's ideas prevails far more often than self-doubt. As Hurrell perceptively notes: 'The political challenge is that the world is full of people who have all too clear a view of what the universal moral order ought to be; who are all too certain that their own moral vision is founded on some absolutely secure foundation; and who believe that their vision of the world should be extended and imposed onto others'.<sup>19</sup>

Second, it seems equally implausible that states defer to PAEAs because they 'offer either a superior or an impartial perspective, or both'.<sup>20</sup> To begin with, if the interpretations provided by international institutions were so looked up to by their constituents, they would not spark the trail of contestation that they consistently do. Even when they speak the language of so-called 'universal values', in promoting sustainable development or human security for instance, IOs inevitably generate serious challenges from segments of their constituencies.<sup>21</sup> What is more, it is doubtful that member states would construe PAEAs as neutral providers of knowledge, which conditions impartiality. As Zürn acknowledges, 'the lack of impartiality in the exercise of authority' is a central legitimation problem in global governance.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, 'the more an IO exercises authority over states and societies, the more it depends on the resources of its most powerful members'.<sup>23</sup> Why, under

<sup>13</sup>Zürn 2018, 46, 60.

<sup>14</sup>Zürn 2018, 9.

<sup>15</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

<sup>16</sup>Zürn 2018, 52.

<sup>17</sup>Zürn 2018, 46.

<sup>18</sup>Zürn 2018, 46.

<sup>19</sup>Hurrell 2007, 291.

<sup>20</sup>Zürn 2018, 46.

<sup>21</sup>Pouliot and Thérien 2018a.

<sup>22</sup>Zürn 2018, 63.

<sup>23</sup>Zürn 2018, 86.

such circumstances, should states defer to IO interpretations as epistemically superior?

Third and finally, I would also dispute Zürn's assumption that 'there is a common epistemological framework that makes it possible to ascertain knowledge inequality' in contemporary global governance.<sup>24</sup> For epistemic authority to be in demand, the argument goes, actors need to evaluate the quality of interpretations and knowledge provision along similar lines. Yet globalization notwithstanding, I doubt that we have reached such a shared epistemology on a worldwide basis. Many reasons explain why people around the globe do not evaluate knowledge claims in the same way: cultural diversity is one<sup>25</sup>; positionality – that is, the effects of one's structural location on one's worldview – is another; and so is the high variation in historical experiences.<sup>26</sup> Uniform deference to those who 'know better' seems unlikely to obtain under such circumstances. In fact, when states resort to third parties to adjudicate their disputes, it seems more plausible that they do so because of a lack of alternatives (war not being an option anymore) rather than because they adhere to a global epistemology that puts international institutions on a pedestal.

In fact, recent research along the corridors of IOs suggests that no seasoned global actors, whether they be diplomats, senior civil servants, or else, would construe the role of knowledge as a flow of data that aspires to neutrality, accuracy, and objectivity – despite all pretense to the contrary that knowledge providers may publicly make.<sup>27</sup> It is of course true that, for the sake of legitimation, PAEAs ought to present their interpretations as neutral and based on facts; such is the logic of expertise. Yet, it does not follow that this is also how their constituencies perceive and receive their knowledge claims. Global governors are likely to interpret the information provided by IOs not as superior or even neutral knowledge, but rather as variably useful resources depending on their circumstances. This is a more plausible reason why they resort to epistemic authority in the first place. And indeed, the significant politicization that accompanies the publication of any report in global governance would seem to attest to the view that such knowledge is fundamentally political.

Ultimately, then, I see a number of reasons to doubt Zürn's claim that '[t]he views and positions of an authority are adopted because they appear to be both knowledgeable and non-partisan at the same time'.<sup>28</sup> Given the author's own diagnostic of global governance today, according to which 'the necessary component of all successful legitimation – impartiality – is violated due to institutionalized inequality in a context of weak separation of powers', it seems much more likely that constituents are led to doubt, at every step of the way, that global governors actually 'know better'.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, this point is compatible with Zürn's argument that international institutions are 'permanently under observation'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, it deals a

<sup>24</sup>Zürn 2018, 52.

<sup>25</sup>Reus-Smit 2017.

<sup>26</sup>Philips and Sharman 2015.

<sup>27</sup>E.g. Pouliot 2016.

<sup>28</sup>Zürn 2018, 52.

<sup>29</sup>Zürn 2018, 86.

<sup>30</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

blow to the book's optimism about the underlying role of rationality in the rise of epistemic authority.

### A hierarchy of demands and requests?

In his book, Zürn locates contemporary global governance authority somewhere between anarchy and a constitutional system: 'the current global governance system can now be described as one in which different spheres of authority are only loosely coupled and in which the separation of powers is only weakly developed'.<sup>31</sup> The few world governing councils that exist, such as the Security Council and the G7/G20, do not qualify as the kind of 'meta-authorities' that would be able to make final arbitrations in global governance.<sup>32</sup> For that reason, IOs and other global authorities resort to epistemic authority, which rests on 'requests to consider Y' as opposed to 'commands to do x'. In Zürn's example: 'When the WHO directly requests a new vaccination, states do not take this as a command'.<sup>33</sup> Because demands and requests are legitimated by the provision of 'secondary reasons', justification in epistemic authority rests less on *what* is being asked than on *who* asks it.

In a way reminiscent of Lake, Zürn argues that epistemic authority leads to pockets of global hierarchy.<sup>34</sup> When PAEAs 'objectivize' and 'institutionalize', he argues, '[t]he voluntariness of subordination' is 'reduced'.<sup>35</sup> Objectivization occurs 'when the knowledge order that underlies the authority relationship becomes a dominant worldview or ideology that reaches beyond the immediately involved actors to external audiences'.<sup>36</sup> For its part, institutionalization obtains 'when the decisions and interpretations are a priori delegated or pooled'.<sup>37</sup> To the extent that the judgments provided by epistemic authorities conform to dominant discourse and are the default option for constituents, then, a global hierarchy may be said to emerge.

I see empirical and theoretical problems with this argument. First, empirically, it is hard to find convincing examples of PAEAs that have significantly objectivized or institutionalized in Zürn's book. The epistemic authority of NGOs such as Amnesty International, private actors such as ICANN and partnerships such as GAVI clearly do not make the cut. Of course, the Security Council does generate hierarchical relations, but these would seem to owe to formalized inequality rather than to the body's epistemic authority.<sup>38</sup> In any case, the provision of secondary reasons is not the best explanation for states' compliance with the Council's resolutions.<sup>39</sup> Is it only a matter of time, then, until existing PAEAs grow stronger with objectivized and institutionalized authority? The jury is still out, but there are reasons to doubt that such a development is in the offing.<sup>40</sup> After all, as Zürn notes: 'While

<sup>31</sup>Zürn 2018, 55–56.

<sup>32</sup>Zürn 2018, 57, 80.

<sup>33</sup>Zürn 2018, 47.

<sup>34</sup>Lake 2009.

<sup>35</sup>Zürn 2018, 49.

<sup>36</sup>Zürn 2018, 49.

<sup>37</sup>Zürn 2018, 49.

<sup>38</sup>Hurd 2007.

<sup>39</sup>Voeten 2005.

<sup>40</sup>Keohane 2020.

states at times accept that they need guidance by IOs, they observe the IOs very closely'.<sup>41</sup> Put differently, it is in the very nature of epistemic authority that it remains fluid, if not 'liquid'.<sup>42</sup> How much authority does one actually have, when 'judgment' about them 'doing a good service' always remains suspended?<sup>43</sup>

Which leads me to my theoretical objection: just how could a socially organized system of domination – a hierarchy – emerge out of demands and requests?<sup>44</sup> There seems to be some conceptual incongruence here.<sup>45</sup> Can we really speak of hierarchy when the exercise of epistemic authority is subject to the judgment of subordinates? This sounds like a very weak form of domination. If following the authority (or not) is a matter of choice, then we are operating in a logic that is closer to that of the market than hierarchy.<sup>46</sup> The kind of voluntary compliance that Zürn observes in global governance today does not create a socially organized system of stratification. It rather leads, as he observes himself, to 'forum-shopping' and selective compliance – that is, market-like patterns of action that suggest the *absence* of hierarchy not its presence.

Zürn's confusion, which is widespread in IR, probably stems from his equating authority with hierarchy. This is a problematic move, especially given that he is dealing with a particularly fluid form of authority. Can service authority really lead to hierarchy in any meaningful sense? In an alternative conception, hierarchy is not coterminous with authority: as socially organized domination, hierarchy need not rest on deference at all.<sup>47</sup> Instead, hierarchy often involves more or less coercive modes, including formalized inequality in terms of social positions, decision-making power, and institutional influence.<sup>48</sup> In other words, once we take its weight seriously, hierarchy is not something that inherently 'feels good' or is consented to – quite the contrary in fact. In most instances, it does not rely on the choice of the subaltern.<sup>49</sup> So long as subordinates are free to exit, as is the case in epistemic authority, it seems quite confusing to speak of a hierarchy worth its name.

## Tradition and practice in global governance

*A Theory* does not stop at documenting the rise of PAEAs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; it also claims, somewhat provocatively, that 'authority relationships in the global governance system are *mainly* reflexive'.<sup>50</sup> Put differently, service authority, that is, demands and requests based on knowledge generation and the provision of interpretation, are said to play a larger role than alternative forms (which Zürn calls contracted and inscribed authority, i.e. delegation and tradition). Building on insights from practice theory, I want to suggest that Zürn is overstating his case here – empirically, methodologically, and theoretically.

<sup>41</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

<sup>42</sup>Krisch 2017.

<sup>43</sup>Zürn 2018, 48.

<sup>44</sup>See also Deitelhoff and Daase 2020.

<sup>45</sup>Zarakol 2017.

<sup>46</sup>Sharman 2013; see also Barnett 2020.

<sup>47</sup>Pouliot 2017.

<sup>48</sup>See Scholte 2020 on 'deeper structures', and Leander 2020 on material processes.

<sup>49</sup>See also Barnett 2020.

<sup>50</sup>Zürn 2018, 53. Emphasis added.

Let us start with empirics. Zürn argues that ‘current authority relationships in global governance do not reproduce long-standing practices’.<sup>51</sup> The main reason why tradition and practice play such a little role, according to him, is that ‘the global governance authorities are young’.<sup>52</sup> Of course this claim is relative: in terms of human civilization, surely global governance is a recent phenomenon. At the level of action, however, it rather feels like existing international institutions have been around for a long time. For example, Mitzen convincingly shows that global governance was born more than 200 years ago in Vienna.<sup>53</sup> Looking in particular at functional agencies, Murphy dates it back to industrialization and the spread of capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup> Historian Pedersen shows very vividly that many contemporary dynamics of global governance, including civil society activism and international bureaucracy, were already present in the League of Nations.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, no matter the reference point we use, several generations of statespeople, diplomats, and civil servants have been involved in global governance. As a result, Zürn’s claim that ‘[s]tates are not born into a pre-existing authority practice of global governance’ seems inaccurate.<sup>56</sup> First, more than half of existing countries were, indeed, born *after* the founding of the United Nations 75 years ago. Former colonies were brought into existence through a well-oiled governance system which they did not choose. Second and more importantly, if we shift attention away from corporate entities (states) to the actual practitioners who speak and behave on their behalf on the global stage, then clearly *all* of contemporary statespeople and diplomats were, actually, born in an already existing system of global governance. The ways of doing things on the global stage, including intricate diplomatic practices, predate them and, as such, they form a more or less axiomatic ‘order of things’.

Which leads me to methodology. Zürn argues that the traditional narrative of legitimacy builds on ‘references to the past’.<sup>57</sup> These may take one of two forms: ‘First, something that has worked for a long time is good. Second, since the whole thing is complex, it is unlikely that single improvements can be produced without producing undesired side-effects that may undermine the system as a whole’.<sup>58</sup> Yet, are such explicit references to the past the best empirical indicators of established practices? This is very unlikely: by its very nature, tradition need *not* be invoked in order to justify its practices. In fact, open references to the past are needed *only* when tradition is being questioned or challenged. Most of the time, it is precisely the distinctive trait of established practices that they impose themselves without justification. The authority claim that inheres in tradition – ‘this is how we do things around here’<sup>59</sup> – is generally left implicit.

<sup>51</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

<sup>52</sup>Zürn 2018, 39.

<sup>53</sup>Mitzen 2013. See also Pouliot and Thérien 2015.

<sup>54</sup>Murphy 1994.

<sup>55</sup>Pedersen 2015.

<sup>56</sup>Zürn 2018, 39.

<sup>57</sup>Zürn 2018, 74.

<sup>58</sup>Zürn 2018, 75.

<sup>59</sup>Neumann 2002.



Here, we are confronted with a case in which the absence of evidence is no evidence of absence: the weight of established practice is at its heaviest precisely when it is least visible. Established practices tend to fly under the scholarly radar as a kind of second nature or self-evident social reality. In order to greet someone, ‘of course’ we shake hands – despite the fact that this is a historically and culturally contingent practice. Unless our methods specifically target the practical knowledge that we take for granted in order to operate in society, it is all too easy to dismiss the weight of established practices. After all, their authority precisely stems from their capacity to push alternative ways of doing things out of sight – a process that often occurs ‘behind the back’ of reflexivity and consciousness. The fact that many global governance practices are never justified by reference to the past in no way implies that tradition plays no role – quite the contrary in fact.

In this context, the fact that Zürn finds few empirical traces of explicit justification based on tradition does not imply that established practices are absent from global governance. While Zürn is correct that global governors generally do not *choose to explicitly* legitimize their rule via tradition, this does not mean that their authority has no basis in established ways of doing things, such as the creation of international secretariats, the organization of multilateral conferences, or the building of transnational advocacy networks. This is because the weight of the past does not hinge on the kind of explicit argumentation that he is looking for. For instance, Zürn’s IAD explicitly stops short of measuring instances of traditional authority or established practices: ‘The data is retrieved from a careful analysis of legal documents such as IO founding treaties, their amendments, and procedural protocols starting with 1948’.<sup>60</sup> One is unlikely to find traces of tradition – which is akin to custom – in such formal artifacts of institutional design. As a result, in his statistical analysis Zürn found what he was looking for, and reversely, he did not find what he could not operationalize.<sup>61</sup> And since his dataset does not measure the presence of non-reflexive authority, it is difficult to conclude with him that ‘reflexive authority is the major mechanism by which global governance plays out’.<sup>62</sup>

A third and final objection to the claim that epistemic authority trumps practice in contemporary global governance has to do with theory. Zürn charges practice theory on the basis that it ‘underestimates [the] degree of instability and contestation’ in global governance.<sup>63</sup> It is certainly the case that many practice works do not primarily focus on strategizing, justifying, or arguing. But, this is simply a matter of emphasis, in reaction to a perceived bias, in the social sciences, in favor of representational knowledge.<sup>64</sup> There seems to be a misunderstanding at work here. The point of practice theory is emphatically *not* that global actors go about their trade blindsided, unable to reflect and aimlessly. On the contrary, the argument is that, when they strategize, talk and act, practitioners *start from* established practices, which form the infrastructure of social and political interaction.

<sup>60</sup>Zürn 2018, 108.

<sup>61</sup>Deitelhoff and Daase 2020.

<sup>62</sup>Zürn 2018, 60.

<sup>63</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

<sup>64</sup>Pouliot 2008; see Autesserre 2014 and Best 2014 for fascinating empirical applications.

Contingent as practices may be, their patterned nature also makes them relatively stable and even predictable within a defined context. Of course, in making rules global actors argue reflexively; but they do so in reference to existing practices – including when they seek to innovate.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, from time to time global governors do experiment with untrodden ways of doing things, and as a result new practices emerge, such as multistakeholders partnerships for example.<sup>66</sup> But, these transformations are heavily path-dependent and they continue to rest on, and coexist with, more traditional modes of action. Global governance practices, from multilateral conferences to high-level panels of experts, through treaty-making, NGO coalitions and public–private partnerships, serve as precedents and focal points when new problems surface, often without explicit justification. Raymond, for example, shows how this combinatorial process structures the global governance of the cyber domain.<sup>67</sup> In sum, it is on the basis of established practices that global governors innovate and reflect. The reflexive authority relationships that Zürn describes would be impossible without the bedrock of practice.

By implication, it seems unproductive to construe global governance practices as *either reflexive or axiomatic through and through*. Ways of doing things are always, and inevitably, both at the same time.<sup>68</sup> When actors make requests, or demand justifications, they do so on the basis of a stock of unspoken assumptions, in the same way that, when we follow a direction, we go in the direction of the arrow's point not its feathers.<sup>69</sup> In that sense, epistemic authority rests on historically inherited practices, which are socially meaningful and recognizable, ranging from the creation of panels of experts to the publication of annual reports by international secretariats through the delivery of keynote addresses in institutionalized settings. These sedimented ways of doing things do not nullify Zürn's argument about the rise of epistemic authority and the importance of reflexivity. On the contrary, I would suggest that they provide it with a much thicker social context.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, I certainly agree with Zürn that '[d]eference to reflexive transnational and international authorities is often not internalized, but permanently under observation'.<sup>71</sup> This is an important point and it touches on a key development in contemporary global governance. As I argued above, it is certainly noteworthy that constituents are always on the lookout to criticize the interpretations made by IOs and other global governors. Yet, the presence of reflexivity does not mean the absence of practice. It is worth stating again that practice is less about 'internalization'<sup>72</sup> than it is about coping with the social world.<sup>73</sup> People do not act in line with established practices necessarily because they are blindly habituated, but primarily because deviating from dominant ways of doing things is socially costly and

<sup>65</sup>E.g. Best 2014; Pouliot 2020.

<sup>66</sup>Pouliot and Thérien 2018b.

<sup>67</sup>Raymond 2019, ch. 5.

<sup>68</sup>Adler 2019.

<sup>69</sup>Taylor 1993.

<sup>70</sup>Scholte 2020.

<sup>71</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

<sup>72</sup>Zürn 2018, 45.

<sup>73</sup>Pouliot 2016.

sometimes even impossible. Global governance is made of well-established ways of doing things, which serve as the platform for politics beyond the state. *In fine*, and *pace* Zürn, the rise of epistemic authority does not reduce the role of established ways of doing things, but rather transforms it.

## Conclusion

*A Theory of Global Governance* opens a whole new research program in which regulation, rule-making, and formal decision-making take the backseat in favor of much more subtle forms of politics. Global governance authority is, indeed, very ‘special’: it does not work in the same way as domestic institutions, and it increasingly rests on processes that lack the formality of international law. Making requests and providing interpretations are key pieces in the global governors’ toolbox today.<sup>74</sup> The three objections that I raised above – the demand for epistemic authority cannot stem from reflexive rationality alone; service authority is unlikely to generate a robust hierarchy; and the prevalence of justification does not suppress the room for established practices – do not vitiate Zürn’s contribution to IR scholarship, but rather cast it under a different light.

In closing, I want to raise a question that is lurking throughout the book: is epistemic authority *inherently* self-undermining? That is to say, how sustainable is global governance through requests, services, and interpretations? It seems useful to locate *A Theory* in terms of Best’s argument – building on Max Weber – about the ‘paradox of expert authority’, which stems from ‘the need for expertise to ground itself on methodological foundations which themselves are fragile and prone to contestation’.<sup>75</sup> Scientific knowledge, by its very nature, should always acknowledge its own limits and transparently open the door to refutation. Best concludes that, because of this paradox, expert-dominated global governance is likely to evolve into a ‘provisional’ style of governance that is quite self-defeating in the longer run. One could read Zürn in a similar way and conclude that epistemic authority, self-undermining as it is, will crumble before it can ever institutionalize or objectify. The implication should be clear: so long as global governance moves toward demands and requests, it will foster ever more contestation in the form of politicization and counter-institutionalization. In fact, one could argue that we currently observe similar developments at the domestic level, where several established democracies, which are also moving toward ‘service authority’, are facing an acute crisis of legitimacy. This bodes rather badly for modern governance in general. Thinking about alternative forms, as Zürn begins to do toward the end of his book, thus seems all the more urgent.

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<sup>74</sup>Kelley and Simmons 2020.

<sup>75</sup>Best 2014, 7.

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