Change and Continuity in Global Governance

Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson

Why, despite well-established and well-publicized intergovernmental processes that date back to the early 1970s, have we been unable to put in place effective mechanisms to combat climate change? Why, despite the existence of extensive global human rights machinery, do we live in a world where mass kidnapping, rape, torture, and murder continue to blight the lives of so many? Why, despite a great deal of effort on the part of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and nonstate actors, have we been unable to make much of a difference to the lives of the ultra-poor and attenuate the very worst aspects of growing global inequalities? Most fundamentally, why have the current international system and the outcomes that it has produced remained so inadequate in the postwar period?

Our aim is to encourage us to think differently about our immediate answers to these questions. In so doing, we seek to contribute to an emerging body of literature designed to push forward the study of global governance.[1] We venture further into the internal constitution, character, dynamics, and processes of global governance—as well as the kind of world orders to which it is connected and responds. We interrogate what drives change and what encourages continuity with a view toward making concrete adjustments to the system of global governance that we actually have. In short, we seek to move beyond merely lamenting that existing mechanisms do not generate meaningful solutions to such problems as climate change and mass atrocities.

Our purpose is thus unabashedly normative. We take some steps toward making more rigorous an analytical endeavor that has for far too long been derided for its wooliness.[2] Yet this scholarly undertaking should not only help us to understand better how to correct the mismatch between the demand for and supply of particular global governance mechanisms in the current order. It should also

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frame bigger questions that deal with where we have come from and where we are going; and it should help prescribe course corrections and formulate strategies for a more stable and just world order.

There are good reasons for asking the questions posed here. Debate about what drives change and what encourages continuity in global governance has been surprisingly limited, with discussion tending to focus on change and continuity as functions of the distribution of relative power capabilities among states. War is taken to be the primary marker of triggers and transitions in global governance regimes. And intergovernmental organizations have been conceptualized as either limited and ineffectual or "sticky" and tenacious.[3]

In large measure, this debate has been constrained because global governance has all too often been treated as virtually synonymous with the study of international organizations,[4] rather than with the study of a wider constellation of actors, institutions, and mechanisms that together lend more order and predictability to the world in which we live than one might expect in the absence of any overarching authority. The dominant focus of debate, in turn, has resulted in the application of existing methods in the study of international relations to global governance phenomena,[5] rather than encouraging the development of new, specific, and tailored analytical tools that look beyond what states and their intergovernmental agents do. We have remarkably few insights into how the world is ordered and governed, or about what drives change and continuity therein.

To be clear, we are not pointing to an absence of value in the way that change and continuity have so far been discussed in mainstream international relations literature. It has been useful to document changes in relative power capabilities, the content and consequence of peace settlements, and the tenacity (or not) of institutions and various organizational structures. Clearly, material and military power remain dominant variables in world politics, and the state remains the predominant actor. But comprehending change and continuity in global governance requires looking beyond interstate cooperation and taking seriously all aspects of political life that play a role—independently or in concert—in ordering the world. This more panoramic view helps suggest a path toward making progress in answering two questions: "How and why does change occur in global governance?" and "What causes some forms of global governance to endure but not others?" Equipped with better answers to these questions, we are hoping to formulate a more effective way for thinking about how best to tackle the transboundary problems of our time.

Ultimately, we are interested not only in identifying and tracking what causes grand departures in existing ways of governing the globe (what traditional international relations theory argues arises from wholesale transitions in global power relations) but also the smaller incremental steps that often go unnoticed but may pave the way for a transformative outcome or signal significant disruptions underway. We are also concerned with the relationships between different systems of global governance and the world orders that they produce; how particular systems enable given orders to endure or fade away; and how and why those orders generate longevity in, or the withering away of, systems of global governance. Pursuing plausible answers to these questions should enable us to understand better why the world is organized and governed the way that it is; what the consequences of that organization and governance are; and how change was and (more crucially) how it can be brought about. Ultimately, we seek to understand how to harness this knowledge for thinking about more stable, progressive, and just world orders. As the late economist Kenneth Boulding often quipped, "We are where we are because we got there."

In pursuit of these admittedly ambitious aims, we first offer what we believe is a preferable understanding of "global governance" so that we are better able to frame questions about change and continuity that focus on more than merely its intergovernmental aspects. We then consider briefly who and what is involved in the governance and organization of the globe, and explore what is "global" about global governance in a way that rescues it from a simple association with the arrangement of world affairs in the post–cold war era. These efforts then permit us to explore what we mean by change and continuity as well as what might drive change and encourage continuity in the overall shape of global governance (what might be called its "grand arrangement") and the resulting regimes, including the various parts therein.

Given the space available, our task is not to provide definitive answers or short-circuit debate. Rather, we continue a conversation that has just begun. For us, it is important not only to identify the forces that generate adjustment and endurance but also what precisely a (dis)juncture might look like that would delineate a clear departure from existing patterns of governance and order.

What Global Governance Is, and Is Not

All too often, global governance is taken to be a synonym for international organization—the process by which states come together in cooperative arrangements

when it is in their perceived self-interests to do so[6]—and especially in IGOs (global, regional, or subregional). Yet clearly global governance is constituted by much more than patterns of cooperation among states and the intergovernmental bodies that they establish and fund. Scholars have long pointed to the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society movements, multi- and transnational corporations, private military and security companies, philanthropists, credit-rating agencies, organized labor, transnational criminal networks, financial markets, and myriad other actors. They contribute—individually as well as in concert—to shaping aspects of the world in which we live.[7]

Yet, restricting the study of global governance to the actions of a small set of actors (states and IGOs) prevents us from truly appreciating the role of any number of agents, alone or in combination, as well as particular processes and mechanisms in shaping world order. Could we, for instance, understand the international human rights and refugee regimes with reference simply to UN bodies but not the legion of nonstate actors active in this arena? Equally, is it possible to comprehend how security and insecurity result simply by looking at what states and IGOs do and do not do without taking account of private military and security companies as well as secessionist, fundamentalist, and terrorist movements? The way that we have asked these questions clearly suggests a negative reply.

Casting the analytical net widely has important ramifications for thinking about change and continuity in global governance, not only in terms of satisfying our intellectual curiosity but also, and more importantly, in prescribing what—and setting out how—change could and should be pursued. Understanding these processes in such intergovernmental organizations as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization is crucial. However, in isolation it tells us little more than the particular evolutionary trajectory (or, in many instances, pathology) of an individual IGO and imbues us only with a limited capacity to reflect upon the general character of international organization as a process. Equally, thinking about possible IGO reforms is useful and even essential, but it does not tell us anything about the broader system of global governance.

Instead, we should focus on specific examples of change and continuity in the general patterns of global governance. Such analyses should help pinpoint those moments of endurance or inertia and those of discreet adjustments involving all the actors, agents, and mechanisms governing the world. We should also be looking at everyday adjustments and incremental changes that may in isolation appear to be little

more than quotidian occurrences, but that may in combination be harbingers of or amount to significant change—or, conversely, be forces that impede change.

Additionally, global governance manifests itself differently across time. The constellation of actors involved in governing the globe in the early decades of the twenty-first century, for instance, and the manner in which they affect the shape of world order are distinct from those that resulted in the post-Napoleonic, interwar, post–World War II, and other orders. Equally, we need to be sensitive to those fine-grained developments in the arrangements of these actors, which may have been obscured by the broad passage of time.

Defined in this way, global governance is not bound to, or even necessarily associated with, the post–cold war moment, although that is when the term was coined and the moment with which it is most commonly associated. As we have argued elsewhere, too closely associating global governance with the easing of East-West tensions beginning in the late 1980s robs it of both historical and future-orientated purchase.[8] E. H. Carr viewed history as an "unending dialogue between the past and the present,"[9] but the plea to examine a past that is older than the last quarter century should resonate beyond historians.[10]

The premium that international relations scholarship places on parsimonious theories and simple causal explanations perhaps helps to explain the ahistorical quality of too much social science.[11] Yet dealing with the messiness of history is preferable to achieving elegant theory at the expense of understanding. Done well, history should make fundamentals clearer.[12] Andrew Hurrell reminds us to eschew the "relentless presentism" that afflicts political science and international relations,[13] a sort of inverse Alzheimer's disease: short-term memory is retained while the contexts that crafted these memories have slipped away. Coming to grips with what constitutes continuities or changes requires the longest possible historical perspective.

In making this temporal stretch and thereby linking global governance to wide varieties of world order, we are able to make better sense of the purpose—consciously constructed or otherwise—of governance on a global scale. We also should be able to stretch our geographical understanding of what is "global" about contemporary global governance by looking at historical moments that were not, unlike our own, bound together in overlapping and crosscutting networks, communications, and linkages across the planet.

One facet of work in the area that has robbed global governance of analytical purchase beyond the moment in which we live is the insistence that "global"

must also be "planetary." The tendency here is to assume that because only in our era do we have institutions and technologies that touch every corner of the world, only now are we actually able to speak of governance that is truly *global*. What is truly distinctive about the current global order is that it is the first defined by total human domination of the planet (that is, it is anthropocenic).[14] But global governance was not absent in previous epochs. Prior governance formations merely produced world orders that physically encompassed less than the entire planet.

If the *global* in global governance does not necessarily mean planetary, what then might be its analytical value? One of the assets of the adjective in *global* governance is that it infers the "big," the "macro," the "total." To break the linkage with the notion of "the planetary" does not rob global governance of analytical traction if one considers that it remains concerned with humanity in totality, but not necessarily the planet as a geographical unit.

The resonance of such a worldview should be wide among students of global governance. A growing number of historians argue persuasively that the history of any epoch cannot be properly understood merely in terms of separate national or even regional narratives, but necessarily must encompass a wider perspective and context.[15]

We consistently have argued that analyzing global governance from the earliest of human systems to the present day has a utility in helping us understand how and why we have ended up with today's world order.[16] We agree with Craig Murphy, who notes that "no social scientist or historian is yet able to give a credible account of global governance over those many millennia."[17] It is, nonetheless, high time that we try.

Too few international relations scholars have been interested in the history before the twentieth century, and the vast majority have focused only on the European era since Westphalia. Yet it is precisely a dynamic interpretation of historical change that would lead to understanding the forces giving rise to particular patterns of governance (including Westphalia and before) that are historically unique and result from mutations in those forces over time. We do not advocate a crude Darwinism, but rather an enhanced sensitivity to evolution that sees the progression of time as the foundry in which global governance (international relations and world order) is forged.

Our claim is not that states and the institutions that they have founded are marginal, or that they do not play an essential role in shaping world order as well as in creating and maintaining systems of global governance—as the European powers

did after the Napoleonic wars, and the United States did after World War II.[18] Rather, as Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach suggest, a narrow focus on states fails, even more obviously now than in the past, to capture the multifaceted nature of contemporary world politics. In normative terms, in particular, too few analysts ask questions about alternative systems of governance—historically or contemporarily—and their role in shaping past and the present world orders. To quote Ferguson and Mansbach, "The frontiers of Westphalian states never demarcated political life as theorists imagined."[19] Nor, we might add, did they singularly determine the evolution of past, present, and future systems of global governance.

Comprehending Change and Continuity

How precisely can we better comprehend what drives change and what favors continuity in global governance? A partial answer comes by extending the historical time frame beyond Westphalia and back to the earliest settled forms of human interaction by including factors with less than planetary coverage, by taking seriously the agency of nonstate actors, and by understanding that world order and its systems of governance have not been forged by Western endeavor alone.

Our quest is more plausible now than earlier in at least three ways. First, we have a much richer empirical terrain to study the various manifestations of global governance and earlier world orders. Second, we can match more accurately the consequences of particular forms and formations of global governance to instances of change and continuity. Third, and most essentially, we can begin to distinguish changes *of* global governance—that is, in its grand arrangements producing different world orders—from changes merely *in* global governance—that is, modest adjustments within a recognized form.

We need to analyze more than just what causes change in the general arrangement of governance patterns, or else what encourages them to endure. We also need to appreciate what is produced when these changes occur and, by extension, what is left out. To put it another way, if we conceive global governance as the sum of all systems of rules at all levels of human activity that have "transnational repercussions," as James Rosenau has suggested,[20] then global governance is both responsible for and the product of the world order in which we live. Moreover, because global governance understood in this way comprises myriad actors, institutions, and mechanisms, it makes sense to talk—in a loose sense—of "systems of global governance." We then should ask questions about how a system is

internally constituted, and how different systems compare with one another. We also need to understand how particular instances of global governance have produced orders that are to greater or lesser degrees coherent, distinct, and discernible; or, alternatively, as has been the case at numerous junctures, how they have produced more fluid and chaotic orders with little that is identifiable as a regime. Equally, we need to understand why particular world orders have generated systems of global governance that are highly rigid, formalized, and apparent; or, alternatively, ones that are more nebulous, indistinct, and opaque.[21]

This analytical approach has consequences for thinking about fundamental changes or even transformations in world order, for formulating incentives to avoid cataclysmic events that are the usual stimulus for experimenting with alternative institutions. How do we proceed? Recent work by Maximilian Mayer and Michele Acuto offers one avenue for thinking about the complexity of global governance by importing conceptions of large technical systems from science and technology; John Boli and George Thomas's work on world culture and world polity offers another; Claire Cutler, Virginia Haufler, and Tony Porter's edited volume on private authority in global governance offers another still.[22] We should take advantage of the insights from these works and confront global complexity more concertedly and develop ways of framing the evolution of global governance over time and space.

By comparing the nature of systems of organization and governance across time, we should be better able to determine the distinct character of particular world orders, to detect elements of change and continuity, to assess the scale of change, and to identify pressures for change. The forms of global governance have varied over time, as have the world orders that resulted. Yet, what has remained constant—not in their identity, but certainly in their existence—is a variety of actors and human institutions established to improve governance. In terms of how this knowledge might be applied, such an enquiry should be able to highlight areas in which change is required, understand why a particular situation has arisen, and work out how more comprehensive and desirable change can be brought about. Sample questions include:

- What are the overarching organizational principles and ideologies?
- How are systems of rules at all levels of human activity arranged in relation to these principles and ideologies?
- Which actors, institutions, and mechanisms are involved in the organization and governance of a world order?

- How are those actors, institutions, and mechanisms arranged one-to-another?
- What are the consequences of organizing and governing the world in this way?

Probing these questions properly requires resisting the temptation to examine only the most obvious and significant events. Mundane, technical, and below-the-radar ones are an essential part of finding insights about how the world is governed, what causes forms of governance to change and endure, and what we might do to manipulate those forces of change and continuity to produce a better and more just world order.

Conclusion

Global governance, if it makes sense at all, is not merely a descriptor for a post–cold war pluralistic moment but rather a legitimate set of questions about how the world is governed and ordered at all levels and in every historical period. We have asked more questions in this essay than is customary, even for academics, but our aim has not been to provide definitive answers. Global governance as an analytical endeavor is at too early a stage to accomplish such a feat. Rather, we are concerned at this juncture with developing the means to detect what drives change and what produces continuity—that is, what it is that we should be studying so that we are able to work out how it has evolved.

Ultimately, of course, we would like to be in a better position to prescribe how we could make global governance work to improve the prospects for a more stable and just world order. A valid inquiry about global governance—one that includes asking the right questions about how the world is organized, how power and authority are exercised, and how adjustments (incremental, wholesale, or otherwise) can be made to make the world a better place—should enable us to do just that.

NOTES

[1] Good recent examples are Tom Pegram and Michele Acuto, eds., "Forum: Global Governance in the Interregnum," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015), pp. 584–705; Jamie Gaskarth, ed., *Rising Powers, Global Governance and Global Ethics* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2015); Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, "Rethinking Global Governance? Complexity, Authority, Power, Change," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2014), pp. 207–15; Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, "Global Governance to the Rescue: Saving International Relations?" *Global Governance* 20, no. 1 (2014), pp. 19–36; Juanita Elias, "Davos Woman to the Rescue of Global Capitalism," *International Political Sociology* 7, no. 2 (2013), pp. 152–69; Jan Aart Scholte, "Poor People in Rich Countries: The Roles of Global Governance," *Global Social Policy* 12, no. 1 (2012), p. 3–23; and Peter Dauvergne and Jane Lister, "The Power of Big Box Retail in Global

Environmental Governance: Bringing Commodity Chains Back into IR," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2010), pp. 145–60.

[2] Lawrence S. Finkelstein, "What is Global Governance?" *Global Governance* 1, no. 3 (1995), pp. 367–72; and Robert Latham, "Politics in a Floating World: Toward a Critique of Global Governance," in Martin Hewson and Timothy J. Sinclair, eds., *Approaches to Global Governance Theory* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 23–54. For commentaries, see Matthias Hofferberth, "Mapping the Meanings of Global Governance: A Conceptual Reconstruction of a Floating Signifier," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015), pp. 598–617; and Klaus Dingwerth and Philipp Pattberg, "Global Governance as a Perspective on World Politics," *Global Governance* 12, no. 2 (2006), pp. 185–203.

[3] See, for instance, Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stephen D. Krasner, "Sovereignty: An Institutional Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 21, no. 1 (1988), pp. 66–94; and Ted Hopf, "The Logic of Habit in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2010), pp. 539–61.

[4] Brian Frederking and Paul F. Diehl, eds., *The Politics of Global Governance: International Organizations in an Interdependent World*, 5th edition (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2015); and Margaret P. Karns and Karen A. Mingst, *International Organizations: The Politics and Processes of Global Governance*, 2nd edition (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2010).

[5] For an overview, see Alice D. Ba and Matthew J. Hoffmann, eds., *Contending Perspectives on Global Governance: Coherence, Contestation and World Order* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2005).

[6] Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Swords into Ploughshares*, 3rd edition (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 4.

[7] For accounts of key actors, issues, and perspectives in global governance, see fifty essays in Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, eds., *International Organization and Global Governance* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2014).

[8] Weiss and Wilkinson, "Rethinking Global Governance?"

[9] Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Pelican, 1961), p. 62.

[10] Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Random House, 2009).

[11] Exceptions include Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "The Global Transformation: The Nineteenth Century and the Making of Modern International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2013), pp. 620–34; and earlier Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[12] Andrew J. Williams, Amelia Hadfield, and J. Simon Rofe, *International History and International Relations* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2012).

[13] Andrew Hurrell, "Foreword to the Third Edition," in Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. xiii.

[14] Frank Biermann et al., "Nagivating the Anthropocene: Improving Earth System Governance," *Science* 335, issue 6074 (2012), pp. 1306–307.

[15] Akira Iriye, ed., *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[16] Weiss and Wilkinson, "Global Governance to the Rescue."

[17] Craig N. Murphy, "The Last Two Centuries of Global Governance," *Global Governance* 21, no. 2 (2015): 189.

[18] Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992), pp. 561–98.

[19] Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, "History's Revenge and Future Shock," in Hewson and Sinclair, eds., *Approaches to Global Governance Theory*, p. 213.

[20] James N. Rosenau, "Governance in the Twenty-First Century," in Rorden Wilkinson, ed., *The Global Governance Reader* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2005), p. 45.

[21] On the nebulous aspects of global governance, see Robert W. Cox with Timothy Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 301.

[22] Maximilian Mayer and Michele Acuto, "The Global Governance of Large Technical Systems," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015), pp. 660–83; John Boli and George M. Thomas, "World Culture in the World Polity: A Century of International Non-Governmental Organization," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 2 (1997), pp. 171–210; and A. Claire Cutler, Virginia Haufler, and Tony Porter, eds., *Private Authority in International Affairs* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1999).