

ABSTRACT

Global Governance has become a buzzword in the social sciences in general and in International Relations (IR) in particular. Many different phenomena, from the influence of civil society on international decision-making processes to the role of intergovernmental organisations and transnational corporations in world politics, are invoked as examples of global governance. However, upon closer inspection, there seems to be no commonly accepted definition of the concept and therefore disagreement about its nature puts severe limits to theory building. Consequently, this paper attempts to reconstruct global governance as a useful scientific concept for the assessment of large-scale transformations at the European and global level. I proceed in three analytical steps: first, I discuss the conceptual confusion generated by the different understandings of both ‘global’ and ‘governance’. Subsequently, I give a brief overview of the academic ideas that constitute the basis on which the current global governance research agenda is erected. The following section analyses three current and often contradictory uses of the term ‘global governance’. First, an analytical version that evokes global governance as an integrative term that captures many current transformations in world politics; second, a normative version that uses global governance to denote a political project towards greater multilateralism and international cooperation; and finally, a third version that analyses the current global governance debate as a hegemonic discourse. Subsequently, I propose a definition of global governance based on a triangular understanding of the concept as reflecting structure, process and outcome. The concluding section summarises the main findings and highlights the proposed definition of global governance as a useful social science concept.

Keywords: global governance, transnational relations, social science concepts

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Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicit or explicit, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things.... I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favour look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics. – (Rorty 1989: 9)

The last decade of the 20th century and the early years of the new Millennium are repeatedly described as an era of profound transformation (Gill 1997; Held et al. 1999; Mittelman 1997; Rosenau 1990, 2003). The end of the Cold War has altered the international system from bi-polar to one of multiple sites of power. Technological developments have changed the ways in which we process and distribute information, while economic globalisation constantly integrates an ever-increasing number of people into the structures of global capitalism. At the same time, it becomes apparent that humankind no longer predominantly alters its local and regional environment, but has entered into a phase of change of a truly planetary dimension. In this context of large-scale transformations, a growing number of scholars is concerned with the perennial question of governance, or in other words, the manifold ways in which humans regulate their affairs to reach common goals and react to a changing environment (Biermann and Bauer 2005; Cable 1999; Falk 1995; Rosenau 1997b). In particular, attention has been paid to processes of steering in political settings beyond the nation state (Albert and Kopp-Malek 2002; Fuchs and Kratochwil 2002).

But despite the abundance of global governance research, the concept remains highly contested and its actual uses reflect the divergence of approaches existing today (cf. Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006). As Lawrence Finkelstein (1995: 368) argues, “we say ‘governance’ because we don’t really know what to call what is going on,” and that “‘Global Governance’ appears to be virtually anything”. As a result, a definite and uncontested definition is currently not available. Hence, this paper attempts to reconstruct global governance as a useful political science concept. To achieve this aim, I first discuss the conceptual confusion generated by the different understandings of both ‘global’ and ‘governance’. Subsequently, I give a brief overview of the academic ideas that constitute the basis on which the current global governance research agenda is erected. The following section analyses three current and often contradictory uses of the term ‘global governance’. First, an analytical version that evokes global governance as an integrative term that captures many current transformations in world politics; second, a normative version that uses global governance to denote a political project towards greater multilateralism and international cooperation; and finally, a third version that analyses the current global governance debate as a hegemonic discourse. Subsequently, I propose a definition of global governance based on a triangular understanding of the concept as reflecting structure, process and outcome. In addition, the

possible ‘geographies’ of global governance are discussed as heuristic tools to order the many emerging modes, forms and mechanisms of governance according to their place of origin and effect. The concluding section summarises the main findings and highlights the proposed definition of global governance as a useful social science concept.

What is ‘Global Governance’?

From the influence of civil society on international decision-making processes to the role of intergovernmental organisations and transnational corporations (TNCs) in world politics, many different phenomena have recently been addressed as a manifestation of global governance (Biermann and Bauer 2005; Levy and Newell 2005; O’Brien et al. 2000). But what precisely is ‘governance’, and when is it ‘global’? The different understandings of ‘global governance’ in various contexts derive from disagreement about the precise meaning of both the terms ‘global’ and ‘governance’. While the attribute ‘global’ can at least refer to the top-level scale of human activity or the sum of all scales of activity¹, the term ‘governance’ is found to have a minimum of ten separate uses in the literature (Hirst 2000; Kooiman 2002; Rhodes 1996). The first main use of the concept of governance refers to the minimal state, redefining the nature of public responsibilities and private interests in the provision of public goods and services (Rhodes 1997). The second use, closely connected to the first, relates to the emergence of new public management strategies since the early 1980s, which have introduced commercial management practices to the public sector, taking up debates about cost and efficiency in the public domain (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Peters 1996). The third use is that of corporate governance, referring to ways large corporations are directed and controlled and including issues of accountability and the transparency of transnational business actors (Tricker 1984). A fourth use can be observed within the field of economic development, focusing on the good governance of administrations as a compliance condition for foreign and international aid, for example in the World Bank context; a fifth use of the term governance relates to qualitatively new processes of co-ordination and cooperation in decentralised networks, involving a wide variety of actors, from state bureaucracies to regional authorities and firms to advocacy networks and other non-governmental actors (Rhodes 1996). A sixth use of governance is reflected in the body of literature on European Governance with its focus on multi-level governance within the European Union (Albert and Kopp-Malek 2002; Börzel 1997). A seventh use of the term builds on the legacy of Michel Foucault under the heading of governance and governmentality (Hindess 1997). An eighth use is observable in the conception of participatory governance (Grote

¹ In the terms of discourse analysis, ‘global’ is understood as “an undetermined phenomenological totality framing everything happening (politically, economically etc.) and all the differences between things happening” (Albert and Kopp-Malek 2002: 456).

and Gbikpi 2002), while a ninth refers to governance as socio-cybernetic steering (Kooiman 2003). And finally, governance refers to an international order within the field of international relations, predominantly focusing on international institutions, most often international regimes, which cope with complex transboundary problems.

Etymologically, the term 'governance' derives from the Greek *kybernetes* and *kybernan*, relating to navigation and helmsmanship. The Latin expression *gubernare* and *regere*, both used to describe the steering of a ship as well as that of the state, are also linked to the current English, French and German word for steering: to "govern", "gouverner", and "regieren". Governance in the social sciences in general is understood to refer to the lasting process of steering a technical or social system through distinct mechanisms and components. In the context of political science, the term governance has risen to prominence in close relation to the – real or perceived – decline in the institutional strength of the modern nation state and the increase in societal interdependencies (Kooiman 2002; Pierre 2000). As a result of this transformation, interests are no longer either public or private, but frequently shared among public authorities of all levels and a wide range of non-state actors. With the dividing lines between public and private sectors becoming increasingly blurred, a growing awareness emerges that governments are only one of the many potential actors active in addressing societal issues. From this perspective, the question of governance centres on "what new instruments and new forms of exchange between state and society can be developed to ensure political control and societal support" (Pierre 2000: 2). In short, governance is first and foremost a political strategy under the conditions of the ongoing transformation of the liberal state. In a similar vein, the concept of global governance has also developed as a reaction to a fundamental transformation, in this case the restructuring of the Westphalian states system through the process of globalisation (Zacher 1992).

Various authors have defined governance in quite different ways. For Gerry Stoker (1998: 17), there exists a baseline agreement that governance "refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between public and private sectors have become blurred". Specifying these governing styles, Rhodes (1997: 15) refers to "self-organizing, interorganizational networks characterized by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state". For Ronnie Lipschutz (1997: 83), one of the "central issues facing human civilization at the end of the twentieth century is governance: Who rules? Whose rules? What rules? What kind of rules? At what level? In what form? Who decides? On what basis?", while the perennial question of governance for Christian Reus-Smit is: "How can human beings organize their social relations to enhance individual and collective security and physical well-being...?" (1998: 3). And in a similar

straight-forward manner, Kooiman (2002: 73) understands governance simply as “solving problems and creating opportunities, and the structural and procedural conditions aimed at doing so”. However, three key features that constitute the main characteristics of governance can be identified. First, governance is occupied with rules, organisation and the conditions for order in a broad sense. Second, governance stipulates the existence, to various degrees, of new processes and mechanisms of problem solving. Finally, it describes a qualitatively new relation between public and private actors and a broadening of governing capacities, often in the form of self-organising networks. To conclude, one reason for the current (pre)occupation with governance is its capacity to include a wide range of phenomena within its scope. However, this strength is also a weakness. The governance approach is an intellectual home for many scholars with considerably different research agendas and theoretical occupations. As we will see in the next section, transferring it to the international and global level makes it even more vague.

Historical Sources of the Current Global Governance Debate

Recent debates about the growing political influence of non-state actors, multiple interconnected policy levels and new functional mechanisms of steering beyond the nation state can all be subsumed under the headline of global governance. They have opened up space for a fresh perspective on large-scale transformations, which profoundly alter our understanding of ‘who is doing what for whom’ in world politics. Although there is neither an uncontested definition of global governance, nor a common understanding of what the term refers to in terms of structure and processes, the highly controversial debate highlights some empirical observations that go beyond traditional accounts of international relations. However, the current fashion of global governance research is firmly grounded in older debates within the discipline of political science and IR. In particular, the current convergence towards a global governance paradigm in IR must be seen as a new stage of the oscillation between state-centred and non-state accounts of the political order (cf. Nölke 2003).

Hewson and Sinclair (1999: 5-16) identify three literatures that have either served as influential intellectual sources of the concept of global governance or have developed in close relation to it. First, the literature on globalisation and global change that points to transformative processes as one important cause for increasing interest in the socio-political order beyond the state; second, the literature on transnational relations that provides an early non-state heuristic and essentially multi-actor perspective; and finally, the literature on the United Nations (UN) and its organisational reform that acknowledges the need for cooperative and multilateral solutions to a range of accelerating global problems.

Almost any account of the world at the beginning of the 21st century acknowledges that social, political, economic and ecological environments are fundamentally changing. Attempts to grasp the nature of this transformation along with the structures and qualities of the emerging new order make frequent reference to two central concepts: globalisation and global governance (Fuchs 2002: 1). Their relation, however, is less clear. One valuable approach to delineating the relation between the two phenomena understands the process of globalisation as creating the demand for global governance. As a minimum definition, globalisation may be thought of as the “widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual” (Held et al. 1999: 2). This interconnectedness is a key reason for government failures. As sovereign borders are getting porous and the frontier between national and transnational phenomena is becoming blurred (Rosenau 1997a), external effects gain a much greater impact on the responsiveness and problem solving capacity of nation states. In this view, global governance has emerged as the social, political and economic reaction to the process of globalisation, incorporating many of its ontological assumptions. In short, global governance is a distinct form of socio-political steering in the era of globalisation. However, the relation between the two concepts is less clear as it may appear at first sight. In particular, assuming a linear relation between globalisation as the cause and global governance as the systemic reaction is misleading for two reasons: first, as a process in flux, globalisation is constantly altering the conditions for effective socio-political response structures and problem solving capabilities. Second, global governance as the task of – at least partially – creating ordered rule at the global level changes the conditions under which globalisation progresses. In fact, critical accounts of globalisation have frequently highlighted the very political nature of the current transformation, in particular the economic policies of the ‘Washington Consensus’.

With regard to the academic debate, current global governance approaches resemble much of the key propositions found in the globalisation literature. The concept of globalisation is heralded as a new paradigm in IR (Mittelman 2002). Several key assumptions underlying such a paradigm have – on closer inspection – been incorporated into the current global governance debate. First, the appropriate perspective is global rather than inter-national. Second, globalisation constitutes a structural transformation in world order. And third, new ontologies are needed to accommodate the increasing number and qualities of actors in the globalisation process.

A second influential source of the current global governance debate can be found in the transnational relations literature that dates back more than three decades. Not only does politics

seem to be a dialectic process, but also academic debate. Whereas the 1990s and the new Millennium have brought considerable preoccupation with topics such as the end of the state, the transformation of sovereignty, the emergence of global civil society and governance without government (Ohmae 1995; Sassen 1996; Kaldor 2003; Rosenau and Czempiel 1992), the 1980s were dominated by state-centric approaches, especially Waltzian neo-realism. Turning back another ten years in time, the picture changes again. The 1970s were the time of transnationalism challenging mainstream IR. The two approaches — state-centric inter-governmental relations and transnationalism — represent two distinct heuristics that presuppose many scholarly assumptions about the phenomena being studied. As global governance theory and other trans-sovereign approaches draw heavily on the idea of transnational relations, I will briefly discuss how this stands in opposition to state-centric conceptions of world affairs.

According to Keohane and Nye (1971: xii), the concept of transnational relations refers to “regular interactions across national boundaries when at least one actor is a non-state agent”. In an early article, Karl Kaiser (1969: 96) highlights three important aspects incorporated in the concept of transnational relations: first, different national societies communicate across national boundaries; second, these interactions lead to changes within a given society; and third, as a result, these changes force governments to react, either towards their own society or towards other governments. Transnational politics can therefore be understood as a system of institutional inter-linkages between societies — including a wide range of non-governmental societal actors — affecting the realm of domestic politics without involving inter-governmental relations. The idea of transnational politics therefore “transposed pluralist theory to the level of international affairs” (Risse 2002: 258). As a result, research interests shifted from traditional topics of IR, such as democratic peace, non-intervention or cooperation under anarchy to transnational capital flows, coalitions of peace movements and transnational alliances of subnational governments. As early as 1962, Arnold Wolfers (1962: 23) noted that “the United Nations and its agencies, the European Coal and Steel Community, the Afro-Asian bloc, the Arab League, the Vatican, the Arabian-American Oil Company, and a host of other nonstate entities are able on occasion to affect the course of international events”. In addition to a multi-actor perspective, the theory of transnational politics also contested the traditional boundary between domestic and international politics, as well as the resulting demarcation of fields of study. Comparative politics on the one hand deals with national systems and IR, on the other, relates to the space between the units.

But the more transnational approaches diverged from traditional approaches, the less meaningful results they generated. As Thomas Risse-Kappen notes, “[t]o study the policy impact of

transnational relations becomes virtually impossible if the concept is used in such a broad way” (1995: 8). In addition to its broad conception, three factors further contributed to the quick demise of the transnational relations approach in IR during the 1980s: first, as the transnational relations concept generated few theoretical propositions, meaningful empirical testing proved difficult. Second, while state-centred approaches appealed through their lean methodological design and operated with few basic assumptions, the rather complex transnationalism could not compete. Finally, the fairly bold advocacy of the end of the state by leading transnational relations theorists was defied by most traditionalists as radically overstated. However, transnationalism serves as a central reference point to global governance approaches by providing a transnational heuristic that captures the structure of world politics as being fundamentally shaped by the existence of multiple political actors, rather than by governments alone.

A third source for the current global governance debate is provided by scholarship on the United Nations, multilateralism and its organisational reform. From this perspective, the UN system constitutes the organisational and normative core of any effort “to bring more orderly and reliable responses to social and political issues that go beyond capacities of states to address individually” (Gordenker and Weiss 1996: 17). Hence, it is analysed as the most ambitious institutional arrangement to date in terms of the multilateral management of global problems (Reus-Smit 1998). For many people, practitioners and scholars alike, the end of the Cold War and the bi-polar system it was rooted in signified a profound transformation in the structure of world politics. High expectations have been directed towards the international community for bringing about peace, development and a solution to the environmental crisis of modern societies. The fact that many of them have at least been addressed can be seen in the series of world conferences on issues ranging from the environment and sustainable development to the state and status of women (cf. Messner and Nuscheler 1996). In sum, the concept of global governance is closely related to debates about the UN and its reform for two reasons: first, as the only truly global organisation, including almost every state as a member, the UN commands a significant amount of the organisational resources required to govern world affairs. Second, through its encompassing web of specialised agencies, organisations and commissions it touches on the vast majority of current global problems. As a result of the transformation of the international system in 1989/1991 and the high expectations that were attached to a ‘new world order’ of cooperation, the early global governance debate consequentially focused on governments as the main actors, while cooperation, regimes, international organisations, in short multilateralism, were considered their main instruments.

Besides the three debates firmly grounded in the IR camp – globalisation, transnationalism and the UN system – the concept of global governance is also linked to renewed discussion of national and sub-national public policy-making since the early 1980s, implying new roles for a wide range of private actors in issue areas from urban regeneration to local economic development (Sellgren 1990; Harding 1990; Kouwenhoven 1993). The underlying causes of this state transformation can be attributed both to international and domestic sources. On the one hand, the 1970s world recession, deepening globalisation and the growing authority of the EU have triggered widespread reconstruction of the public domain (Krahmann 2003: 326). On the other hand, it is the unprecedented success of the welfare state itself, incorporating an ever-increasing portion of society within its range, that forces governments to privatise, outsource or co-produce the provision of public goods. In sum, global governance discourse is rooted in domestic debates about new steering instruments and innovative actor constellations, as well as in IR debates, including long-established views such as transnational politics and complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977, 1970) and the more current themes of globalisation and multilateralism.

Analytical, Normative and Discursive Understandings of Global Governance: One Phenomenon or Many?

This section seeks to clarify the different uses and meanings of the term global governance to bring order to a vibrant, but often confusing debate.² However, I do not stipulate that any specific reading, meaning or understanding of global governance is better than any other. On this question, I agree with an interpretation of the global governance discourse as an essentially pragmatic undertaking that derives its success and durability from its relative vagueness (Albert and Kopp-Malek 2002).

Three paradigmatic understandings of the concept of global governance can be observed in current academic and policy-oriented debates that differ according to the line of reasoning employed to justify the use of the new concept. The first understanding sees global governance in close relation to the phenomenon of globalisation, but in contrast to a political understanding, it presumes that global governance is an analytical concept to make sense of the current transformations in the socio-political realm. Consequently, it highlights distinct qualities of the governing process, such as non-hierarchical steering modes and the inclusion of private actors within that process. The second understanding focuses on the necessity and adequateness of political answers to the challenge of globalisation. In this perspective, global governance is first and foremost a political programme to regain the necessary (state-based) steering capacity for problem solving in the post-modern age. The third understanding highlights the discursive nature of the current global governance debate and

² For a more detailed account of the different conceptual uses of global governance, see Dingwerth and Pattberg (2006).

analyses the concept first and foremost as a hegemonic discourse to rhetorically conceal the negative implications of the neo-liberal economic and political agenda. I will discuss each understanding in more detail.

(1) The first understanding is that of global governance as an analytical perspective on the current transformations in political organisation and problem solving at the global level. From this perspective, global governance is generally believed to encompass different systems of rule at different levels of human activity as an organising social principle beyond hierarchical steering and the sovereign authority of nation states. Key features are the non-hierarchical nature of the governing process and the centrality of non-state actors in this process. Although the analytical approach to global governance is hardly monolithic – in fact, it displays considerable theoretical and methodological diversity – a number of central assumptions have emerged that depart from more traditional concepts in IR.³ Hence, as an analytical tool for making sense of the “crazy-quilt nature” of world politics (Rosenau 1995: 15) the concept of global governance (1) ascribes special relevance to non-state actors, (2) analyses multiple spatial and functional levels of politics and their interaction, (3) is concerned with new modes and mechanisms of producing and maintaining global public goods and (4) highlights the establishment of new spheres of authority beyond the nation state and international cooperation.

As we have seen above in the discussion about the intellectual sources of the current global governance ‘paradigm’, transnationalism has already highlighted the increasing importance of non-state actors in exercising political influence. An analytical understanding of global governance takes this notion further. In search of a new ontology of the current global order, Rosenau (1999: 287) explains:

“A depleted toolset suggests that understanding is no longer served by clinging to the notion that states and national governments are the essential underpinnings of the world’s organization”.

In fact, Rosenau counts at least ten new governance actors that are not instruments of states and governments, including transnational lobbies, epistemic communities, sovereignty-free actors and social movements (ibid.: 298).

³ The distinction between a traditionally state-centric ‘inter-national’ approach and global governance is naturally an exaggeration for the sake of argumentative clarity. With constructing this differentiation, I do not argue that all IR theories are based on an exclusively state-centric ontology. However, I assume that most ‘traditional perspectives within IR’ – most notably realism, neorealism and liberal institutionalism – share basic ontological characteristics different from those prevalent in the concept of global governance.

The second focus of the analytical global governance perspective is on the multi-level nature of current social interactions and resulting institutions of governance. In this view, the interconnectedness of different levels of the political process, different time frames and different geographical spaces call for a re-conceptualisation of the state-centric, two-level model of traditional international politics. The observation that the separation of domestic and international policy levels should no longer be accorded the central heuristic status it occupied for much of the history of political science, has been most strongly emphasized by Rosenau, who contends that “in a rapidly changing, interdependent world the separation of national and international affairs is problematic”; that “to probe the domestic as aspects of ‘comparative politics’ and examine the foreign as dimensions of ‘international politics’ is more than arbitrary: it is erroneous”; and that “we can no longer allow the domestic-foreign boundary to confound our understanding of world affairs” (1997a: 3f). As a consequence, the notion of ‘multi-level governance’ has gained currency not only among scholars of European governance, but also among academics addressing global governance. Recently, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2003: 241) have distinguished between two types of multi-level governance—a first type constituted by competencies in jurisdictions at a limited number of territorial levels; and a second type according to which governance is “splicing the public good provision into a large number of functionally discrete jurisdictions.”

An analytical perspective on global governance allows the third observation that governance beyond the state occurs in multiple modes utilising multiple instruments and logics. As Rosenau (1995: 9) argues,

“[t]here is no single organizing principle on which global governance rests, no emergent order around which communities and nations are likely to converge. Global governance is the sum of myriad—literally millions of—control mechanisms driven by different histories, goals, structures, and processes. (...) In terms of governance, the world is too disaggregated for grand logics that postulate a measure of global coherence.”

However, one central feature of the ‘new modes of global governance’ that researchers have identified is their fundamentally non-hierarchical nature. Unlike governing by governments, who possess, at least in theory, the necessary means of coercion to enforce compliance with existing laws, global governance has to rely exclusively on non-hierarchical modes of steering (cf. Risse 2004).

A fourth characteristic of the analytical global governance paradigm is the emergence, location and persistence of autonomous spheres of authority beyond the states-system (cf. Rosenau 2003: chapter 13). For Elke Krahmann (2003: 323), the key feature of governance is the fragmentation of political authority. Thereby, it is possible to distinguish governance as an ideal-type of fragmented authority from government as centralised authority. What follows from this perception is that authority is stripped from its two modern-day characteristics: territoriality and totality. The first characteristic refers to the ability of rule-makers (governments) to control a distinct territory within defined boundaries without external interference. The second characteristic describes the ability to control all aspects of economic, social and political life. A global governance perspective, however, analyses emerging spheres of authority as both geographically and functionally fragmented. Such a 'sphere of authority' (Rosenau 2002: 72) defines the range of a formal or informal rule system's capacity "to generate compliance on the part of those persons towards whom their directives are issued". As a consequence, and contrary to the preoccupations of much of the traditional IR literature, "[t]he core of the global governance argument concerns the acquisition of authoritative decision-making capacity by non-state and supra-state actors" (Fuchs 2002).

(2) The normative understanding of the term global governance is most visible in its use as referring to a political programme in a wider sense. It is based on the assumption that the plethora of disintegrative processes attributed to globalisation call for a political answer. Global governance is envisaged to bridge the gap between accelerating global transactions in goods, services, capital and people on the one hand and the territorially-bound steering capacity of national governments on the other. This mismatch of political capacity produces not only problems of effectiveness, but also a democratic deficit. As a result, high expectations are placed on new institutional arrangements such as global public policy networks with regards to their democratic legitimacy (Dingwerth 2005; Reinicke and Deng 2000; Witte, Reinicke, and Benner 2000). For example, the Study Commission "Globalization of the World Economy: Challenges and Answers" of the German Bundestag (Deutscher Bundestag 2002b: 67) states:

"As the world becomes increasingly globalized and economic activities grow beyond national regulatory frameworks, it becomes more necessary to politically shape economic, social and environmental processes on a global scale. How the global challenges can be democratically managed has recently begun to be discussed under the heading of 'global governance'".

In simple terms, “global governance means to steer the process of globalisation politically” (Deutscher Bundestag 2002a: 415, own translation), and hence refers to the “(...) orderly management of global affairs” (Held 1995: 91).

Another normative understanding of global governance can be found in the work of the Commission on Global Governance. This group of 28 eminent public figures, mostly former heads of states, international bureaucrats or corporate leaders, emphasises the crucial importance of building and sustaining a global civil ethic based on shared values (Commission on Global Governance 1995: 48-67). However, at this point in time, global governance is still more of a vision than a description of the actual state of the global system (Deutscher Bundestag 2002b: 74).

Nevertheless, a number of key characteristics can be attributed to the normative use of global governance as predominantly describing a political programme to regain at least part of the steering capacity that has been lost after the end of the ‘embedded-liberalism compromise’ (Ruggie 1982). The first recurring point is that global governance is not global government. Rather than a world-state, global governance envisages a confederation of independent republics, a vision already developed by Immanuel Kant (Nuscheler 2000: 310). Second, global governance rests on different forms of cooperation, coordination and decision-making at different levels of the international system. Third, global governance acknowledges the essential multi-polar structure of world politics. Hence it places considerable emphasis on developments of regionalisation from which strong impulses for further integration and cooperation as the cornerstones of normative global governance arise. Finally, global governance stipulates the incorporation of non-governmental organisations as an important prerequisite for increased democratic legitimacy and effective problem solving in the global arena. In sum, global governance is, in its normative understanding, frequently conceived as a long-term project of global integration that rests on traditional multilateralism, increasing regional cooperation and a multitude of actors.

(3) A third general use of the term global governance refers to it as a hegemonic concept. Global governance, in this view, is a discursive attempt to conceal the nature of the current neo-liberal agenda.⁴ In the words of Ulrich Brand (2003: 205), “[t]he discourse of Global Governance (...) serves as a means to deal more effectively with the crisis-prone consequences caused by [post-fordist-neoliberal social transformations]”. This understanding has been developed, in large part,

⁴ For a detailed theoretical and methodological criticism of the discursive-critical global governance concept, see Weller (2003).

within the theoretical confines of transnational historical materialism.⁵ From this perspective, fundamental criticism is in particular raised against normative understandings of global governance (Overbeek 2004: 1). First, global governance appears as a consensual process whose highest purpose is to cooperatively manage common affairs. Secondly, the focus on multiple actors and the resulting plurality of interests conceals the structural nature of social relations and the underlying hierarchical configuration of social power. And thirdly, global governance is criticized for being an a-historical concept that overlooks the pervasive nature of governance issues in human history. As a consequence, the protagonists of this critical version of global governance perceive the prevailing discourse on global steering mechanisms beyond the state as deeply embedded in a general political trend towards re-regulation of the world economy that conceals the negative tendencies of late capitalism. Consequently, global governance as an attempt to reclaim political influence to reshape the institutional landscape of world politics is not understood as a counterforce to globalisation, but as its ideological companion. In the words of Henk Overbeek (2004: 15):

“The concept of global governance thus has suffered the same fate of other initially progressive normative concepts ...: it has been hijacked by social forces that have emptied it of its counter-hegemonic content and redefined it in such a way that the concept in fact supports the further consolidation of the world-wide rule of capital.”

In sum, the current uses of the term global governance fall within the three broad categories of normative, analytical and discursive/critical understandings. The confusion, however, not only derives from the existence of three different uses, but also from the practice of using them interchangeably within one and the same argument. Hence, different uses should be made explicit and conceptual polysemy should be avoided. As neither a commonly accepted definition exists so far, nor seems to be desirable given the many divergent connotations the term governance carries, scholars should at least carefully consider their own understanding of global governance and attempt to communicate it as clearly as possible. Such a commitment to clarity would not only enhance knowledge accumulation within the discipline of IR, but also allow for bridges between the disciplines and between meta-theoretical orientations. The next section tries to deliver what I have just demanded.

⁵ For a discussion of transnational historical materialism as a theoretical approach to international relations, see Gill (1993), Overbeek (2000), Rupert and Smith (2002).

Approaching a Definition: Structure, Process and Outcome of Global Governance

The following section will approach a definition of global governance as an analytical concept by spelling out its dimensions, its key characteristics and resulting assumptions, as well as its conceptual boundaries.

As we have seen above, the concept of global governance is understood and applied in a range of different manners, from outlining a political program to re-embed the current global economic structures into a global political architecture to a critical view on global governance as a potentially hegemonic discourse, as well as an analytical perspective on world politics. In line with the latter general understanding of global governance as an analytical concept, I propose to use the term for a specific set of related observable phenomena—namely the sum of all institutions, processes and interaction between various actors at all levels of the socio-political system that address, in a non-hierarchical manner, a specific global problem by describing implicit and explicit norms and rules of behaviour, inducing at least some transnational repercussions. This definition contains five central elements: first, global governance as an observable phenomenon not only contains institutions, but also recurring processes and interaction between a wide variety of actors; second, and specifying the former claim, these actors within global governance are situated at all levels of the socio-political system; third, their relationship is formally non-hierarchical⁶ because a central authority is absent on the international as well as at the transnational level; fourth, the purpose of global governance is problem solving while, fifth the means are implicit and explicit norms and rules of behaviour; finally, the effects of governing global problems are border-spanning and transnational in nature.

This broad definition reflects the premise that global governance is constituted of at least three analytical dimensions: first, the procedural dimension of governance, emphasizing the activities of different actors, the policies pursued and the instruments applied; second, the structural dimension of governance, highlighting the distinct ‘architecture’ of a governance arrangement, including norms and rules, networks and actor-constellations, as well as formal or informal links to other areas of governance; and third, the functional dimension of governance, focusing on the material and ideational outcomes of a governance arrangement as a functional equivalent to other forms of political resource allocation. As a result, global governance as an overarching concept contains approaches that focus on the process of governing and the adequate instruments within that process

⁶ This understanding of relations between actors in global governance as ‘non-hierarchical’ does not stipulate that governance arrangements are free of conflict or that power might not play a role. However, the lack of formal authority on the global scale, both international and transnational, is a central characteristic of global governance because it explains the demand for organisation and the limits to it.

(e.g. Lafferty 2004). In addition, other approaches rather focus on the structure and quality of distinct governance arrangements, often under the headline of network studies (e.g. Betsill and Bulkeley 2004). The third analytical dimension is reflected in approaches that highlight the emergence of autonomous and non-territorial spheres of authority in world politics (e.g. Biersteker and Hall 2002). Hence, the distinct uses and understandings that fall within the analytical perspective on global governance will greatly depend on the questions a researcher sets out to answer and the empirical terrain he or she approaches.

When turning to the actual empirical phenomena of global governance, scholars often use the term ‘governance arrangement’ to describe “how the interaction between various actors pursuing common goals is structured“ (Koenig-Archibugi 2002: 50). To classify existing arrangements in global governance and to assess their institutional variation, three core questions can be posed that are in line with the threefold understanding of global governance as process, structure and outcome. The first question that relates to the process dimension is: Who is participating in global governance? The previous discussion has shown that a global governance perspective highlights the contribution of a wide range of actors to global problem solving and therefore includes “the activities of governments, but it also includes the many channels through which ‘commands’ flow in the form of goals framed, directives issued, and policies pursued” (Rosenau 1995: 14). What follows from this perception are two different ‘geographies’ of global governance. One is distinctly wide, encompassing those actions of states and non-state actors at the international level that involve non-hierarchical modes of steering, like intergovernmental or inter-organisational bargaining, and the other is more restricted, only including non-hierarchical modes that involve at least one non-state actor, such as global public policy networks.⁷ I take a middle ground, arguing that different modes and actor-constellations are positioned along a continuum from more traditional international negotiations, which already involve non-state actors in the process of rule-making and the resulting implementation of provisions, to hybrid public-private partnerships and fully private transnational co-operations, institutions and organisations.

The second question with reference to governance arrangements is: How is participation in the arrangement organised and how is the governance task shared among different actors? The main focus here is inclusiveness. In some areas of global governance, there might be a congruence of rule-makers and rule-takers, while in others decision-making power might be concentrated in a few hands or be exercised by similar and like-minded entities (Koenig-Archibugi 2002: 52). Consequently, global governance arrangements can be classified along a congruence axis that displays

⁷ See Börzel and Risse (Forthcoming) for an illustration.

both the scale of participation of affected actors and the quality of their inclusion. Examples range from decision-making in the UN context (security council resolutions or General Assembly votes) to rule-making by non-state actors, either among similar actors (business self-regulation) or between dissimilar actors such as NGOs and transnational corporations.

Finally, the third question to classify existing governance arrangements in world politics is: What functions do they perform? This perspective is focused on outcome and the related functional pathways of global governance. In general, two broad functions can be attributed to governance arrangements in world politics: first, policy-implementation and service-provision, and second, rule- and policy-making. Hence, governance arrangements can be situated on a continuum ranging from low autonomy (wherein the governance task is delegated to specific institutions or organisations) to high autonomy (wherein networks and organisations act on their own behalf and not as part of a principal-agent relation). Taken together, the three dimensions of institutional variation provide a descriptive matrix of transnational, socio-political steering.

In sum, the analytical perspective on global governance is best understood as a three-dimensional concept that includes the procedural, structural and functional dimensions of political steering beyond the state. As we have seen above, distinct governance arrangements can be classified along three broad conceptual continua: the first displays the publicness of governance and ranges from international to transnational and purely private governance. The second continuum displays the congruency of those governed and those governing, while the third continuum focuses on governance functions and ranges from a low degree of autonomy, as in the case of delegation, to a high degree, such as in independent rule-making bodies.

Conclusion: Towards Conceptual Clarity

In this paper, I have attempted to reconstruct global governance as a useful scientific concept in the field of IR. Based on an assessment of the current uses of the term governance and some historical remarks on its intellectual precursors, I have identified three broad understandings of the term global governance in the literature. Further clarifying the analytical use, I have consequently spelled out its different conceptual dimensions and the key parameters of institutional variation. Finally, I have argued that the term global governance refers to different ‘geographies’, depending on the theoretical and practical orientation of the individual researcher.

In more detail, I have proposed to use global governance as a concept for the assessment of large-scale socio-economic transformation and the resulting reorganisation of the political realm. From this analytical perspective the concept of global governance focuses on five key characteristics that describe the current nature and transformation of world politics. First, a global governance perspective stipulates no hierarchy between actors; the mode of steering is predominantly non-hierarchical and often based on arguing rather than traditional bargaining (cf. Risse 2004). Second, a global governance perspective ascribes a central status to novel forms of political organisation. Hence, new relations between organisational parts of the governance architecture as well as new relations between the actors of governance are of central interest. A third key feature is the equivalence of international and transnational decision-making procedures as well as the resulting norms and rules. A fourth key characteristic of the current global governance order is the emergence and persistence of non-territorial, post-sovereign forms of authority. Complementing and sometimes even contradicting well-established systems of rules such as governments and nation states, new mechanisms for aggregating societal choices emerge that are boundary crossing and highly flexible. Finally fifth, actors are also increasingly flexible in their roles and responsibilities within a distinct governance arrangement, thereby constantly altering the landscape of governance.

To conclude, the end of the Cold War has not only changed the 'territory' of international relations, but also the 'map' used to make sense of it. The discipline of IR has grappled with profound transformations of the international system and the accompanying reorganisation of the political order (Lawson 2002; Mittelman 1997). However, most of the vocabulary used to describe the process was still rooted in long-established certainties, while the world had become fundamentally more uncertain. Recently, global governance has emerged as an integrative concept that allows many different scholarly traditions and meta-theoretical assumptions to use one general language when it comes to understanding processes of change in world politics. Hence, it could well develop into a new paradigm challenging the more traditional and state-centred mainstream of IR. However, global governance is not a theory in its own right and we should be careful not to overload it with too many expectations. What an analytical understanding of global governance can deliver nonetheless is a fresh view on world politics that is becoming more complex and is changing at an ever-increasing rate.

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