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**Meta-Governance: A Critical Realist Re-Articulation of Social Ontology
for the Study of Global Governance Systems**

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Global governance research has been one of the most innovative and powerful new research agendas in International Relations (IR) since the early 1990s. It reflected on the raising number and changing forms of international institutions after the Cold War. Some research groups focused on the general processes of producing order at the global level (Rosenau & Czempiel, eds., 1992) and some focused on the operation of institutions on some specific issue area (Young, ed., 1997). Even though there are many differences in these two basic approaches the basic question is the same: how governance operates beyond the state in the absence of centralized government?

The focus of this paper is more on the issue specific approach to global governance. Since these studies deal with the institutions of global governance it is a bit surprising that researchers in this field have not paid more attention to the agent-structure debates in IR. In one sentence the agent-structure problem focuses on the way how activity and agency are shaped by social circumstances and how these in turn are reproduced and transformed by activity (on this debate see Wight, 2006). Questions concerning agents and structures are often left implicit in concrete empirical research. In the conduct on “normal science” meta-

theoretical concepts are not reflected upon, since the focus is on the production of new knowledge about the subject matter¹. But this doesn't mean that meta-theoretical questions can be escaped; it only means that they are applied dogmatically. In order to make frameworks and theories more open to criticism and development one must be explicit about their ontological, epistemological and methodological presuppositions. This is not only a matter of analytical development, but it also includes reflection of the relationship between analysis and wider society. Meta-theoretical and conceptual choices determine not only how we define the objects of enquiry and proper methods for their study, but also how we see the relationship between research and its objects.²

In this paper I will develop a Critical Realist (CR) approach to the study of global (or international, or transnational) governance systems. Using insights from the agent-structure debates I will articulate a possible social ontology upon which an approach to research can be developed. This paper is based on CR in two ways. First, on a more basic level, the focus on ontology instead of epistemology or methodology – which in IR are normally considered to be the basic and fundamental questions – is part of the CR approach. This doesn't mean that epistemological and methodological questions do not matter. It only means that “[a]ny discourse on epistemology or methodology is bound to be more or less arbitrary without a prior specification of an object of inquiry” (Wight, 2006: 25), which is a matter of ontological investigations. The basic argument is that the way we define for example ‘society’ determines what we can know of it and how we can come to know it. (See also Patomäki, 2002: ch. 4) Second, on the more specific level, it uses a form of CR social ontology as an approach to the agent-structure problem and shows how it can be used to develop an approach to the study of global governance. This social ontology was first introduced by Roy Bhaskar in his *Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) and it has been further developed by for example Margaret Archer (1995), Bob Jessop (2005), Heikki Patomäki (2002) and Colin Wight (2006). In this paper I will apply and develop it in relation to global governance research.

My paper will proceed in three sections. In the first, I will introduce the research agenda of global governance research focusing especially on the way how the object of

¹ Cf. Kuhn, 1970. In IR for example Robert Keohane has made explicit statements in this regard, Keohane, 2000.

² See Guzzini 2005. Interestingly enough in comparison to Thomas Kuhn's use of the terminology Edmund Husserl described the lack of reflection and loss of a meaningful connection between science and life as the crisis of European sciences, see Juntunen & Mehtonen, 1982: 14-16.

inquiry has been defined in some key text of this tradition. Then I will proceed to the existing ontological discussions on power and nature of agents and their relations in global governance. In the third section I will discuss these views in relation to the CR approach to the agent-structure problem. I will show how this approach can be used to better understand the working principles of global governance systems. The purpose of this ontological investigation is not to assert dogmatically a view of what the world must be like. The purpose is to articulate one specific approach to the agent-structure problem, argue for it in relation to other possible solutions and by doing so open the research framework for a new – more fundamental – set of criticisms.

Defining international/transnational/global governance

Etymologically the word ‘governance’ derives from the Greek word ‘kybernetes’ which is connected to navigation and helmsmanship (Stokke, 1997: 28). When the bi-polar balance of power of the Cold War era disappeared questions of ‘steering’ the world entered the agenda of IR in new forms. Some have argued that there was a shift from geopolitics and military force towards wide array of economic, environmental and other political issues and their global governance (for example Held & McGrew, 2002). Whether there was an actual change in world politics or just in rhetoric is a matter of debate. Researcher reacted very fast to this changing situation producing volumes on the structures and processes in which new norms and rules were produced to bring order into world politics (eg. Rosenau & Czempiel, eds., 1992). In recent years more attention has been paid to the possibility of democratizing these processes (eg. Patomäki & Teivainen, 2003). On the other hand some researchers have continued the tradition of research on international regimes, which focus on institutions and governance of a specific issue area of world politics. Even though some have argued that this has been the least innovative side of theorizing on global governance after the Cold War (Hewson & Sinclair eds., 1999: xi) I will focus on this strand and try to make it less so. These issue specific institutions are part of global governance in the wider understanding of the word and therefore also essential for its functioning. From a more detailed analysis of specific systems it is possible to get an understanding of the actors, processes and structures by and in which rules, norms and order are produced.

Studies of international regimes started to develop already in the 1960s from older research orientations focusing on international organizations (see Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1987). One of the most significant contributions to this tradition is a special issue of *International Organization* edited by Stephen D. Krasner in 1982³. In the opening article of the issue Krasner defines international regimes as “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors expectations converge in a given issue-area” (Krasner, 1982a). The approach developed by Krasner and others is based on behavioralist causal analysis. Regimes are treated as intervening variables standing between basic causal variables (power, interests, etc.) and outcomes of behaviour (ibid.: 189-194). The contributions studied the *international* level, meaning that the approach was very state-centric. Oran R. Young writes in his article that “[i]n formal terms, the members of international regimes are always sovereign states, though the parties carrying out the actions governed by international regimes are often private entities (for example, fishing companies, banks, or private airlines)” (Young, 1982: 277). In this regard the basic understanding of the main actors, ‘basic causal variables’ and philosophy of science are not much different from Neo-Realist perspectives (cf. Waltz, 1979: 88-94).

Friedrich Kratochwill and John Gerard Ruggie (1987: 764-766) have pointed out that this kind of positivistic epistemology which is based on the idea of the strict separation between the object and the subject of research is problematic since regimes have a strong intersubjective element⁴. The definition of regimes includes principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures, which are all intersubjectively defined and therefore not fit for positivist causal analysis⁵. In this sense the epistemology of regime studies fundamentally contradicted its ontology. As constructivist understandings of social reality and interpretative methods for its analysis started to become more popular in the early 1990s in the wider field of IR, these approaches were also introduced to the study of international regimes. For example the role of ideas and knowledge in regime formation became one of the topics of study (see

³ This special issue was published as a book in 1983 by Cornell University Press, but all the references in this text are to the original special issue.

⁴ In the 1982 special issue only Ruggie deals explicitly with intersubjectivity. See Ruggie, 1982.

⁵ But this doesn’t mean that it would be impossible to study them causally if the conception of cause is widened and deepened from the empirical and regularity-deterministic view of causal relations. See Kurki, 2006.

Haas ed., 1992). These developments brought the epistemology closer in line with the ontology of regimes.

On the definitional level there was a shift from regimes to the study of global governance systems. A decade after the publication of the 1982 special issue, Oran R. Young had become one of the leading researchers in the field of global governance research⁶. His group belongs to the issue specific approach in this research tradition, focusing mostly on environmental issues (Young, 1994; Young, ed., 1997). His definition of governance includes many elements from Krasner's definition of international regimes:

“governance involves the establishment and operation of social institutions (in the sense of rules of the game that serve to define social practices, assign roles, and guide interactions among the occupants of these roles) capable of resolving conflicts, facilitating cooperation, or, more generally, alleviating collective-action problems in a world of interdependent actors.” (Young, 1994: 15)

On the definitional level the biggest difference between regime and governance system studies is that the latter pays attention also to the ‘constitutive effects’ of governance systems. Institutions do not only affect behaviour but it also affects the way how practices and actors are defined. The idea that regimes could alter the interests of state actors was also presented in the concluding article of Krasner's volume (Krasner, 1982b: 504-506, 509-510) but its implications are not followed in the articles (except in Haas, 1982). In this regard analysis of governance systems abandons the view of interest maximizing actors already on the definitional level. Also in this regard the research tradition developed toward more intersubjective understanding of its objects.

Moving from the level of definitions to more concrete research agenda one of the main differences between the two traditions of issue specific studies of global governance is their understanding of actors of world politics. Studies of international regimes are based on state-centric view of international affairs even though they note that non-governmental actors can be part of the regime administration and implementation. This premise is abandoned in the studies of global governance systems. Governance systems involve different kind of regimes – which are often based on explicit rules and procedures – and their informal connections (Stokke, 1997: 31). Governance system is thus a wider and more open category than regime:

⁶ For an account of this shift, see Young, 2005.

“all regimes are governance systems and all governance systems are social institutions but not vice versa” (Young, 1994:26n40). If the development of regime studies meant a shift “from international institutions, toward broader forms of international institutionalized behavior” (Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1987: 754), then the development of global governance research meant a shift from international institutionalized behaviour toward broader forms of global institutional activity and the constitution of agency in these processes.

Based on this wider understanding of agency Young makes an analytical distinction between two types of regimes: *international* regimes are arrangements whose members are states and *transnational* regimes are made by non-state actors. These are just analytical types and Young notes that “real-world regimes are often (perhaps typically) mixed types” (Young 1997b: 284). In Young’s usage various kinds of regimes which are made up of different kind of actors creates a *global governance system* (Young 1997b: 284). If most of the actual regimes and governance systems are ‘mixed types’ one could question the analytical validity and usefulness of the distinction. This dichotomy replicates the division of actors into state and non-state actors which in many cases might distort more than clarify. I will return to this question later in this paper.

Another problematic aspect of Young’s typology is the use of the signifiers ‘international’, ‘transnational’ and ‘global’. His usage implies that all mixed governance systems are global in their scope. In a sense all arrangements are part of global networks, but some of them operate only regionally. For international regimes which have states as their formal members it is easier to point out the geographical scope of the system. Studies of mixed governance systems can not be defined as easily since its focus is more on the informal dimensions of governance. Even though a system may have international (meaning intergovernmental) treaties as their core, these treaties can be used by various actors in their operation in countries that are not formal members of the treaties. Governance research also studies the “spill over effects” of regimes to areas outside their formal scope, and it also studies their consequences for global governance in the wider meaning of the term (Young, 1997b: 291-297), but it should not imply that all ‘global’ governance systems are global in the sense that they would be equally available for actors and effective in different parts of the globe.

To sum up the development of the research on issue specific global governance it is possible to identify two general themes. First, the approach has all the time moved toward more intersubjective understanding of the object and methods of enquiry. Second, analysis has started to take non-state actors more seriously into account both, on the definitional level and in empirical analysis. These developments raise two related questions: how can we conceptualize the connections between governance systems and the more general processes of world politics? And how can we deal with different kind of actors involved in these processes and systems without unnecessarily exaggerating the role and power of some types of actors due to our theoretical choices?

Power of global governance

Speaking about the consequences and effects of regimes and governance brings power to the centre of analysis. In addition and in connection to ideas and knowledge, 'power' has been one of the topics of the most innovative conceptual works in the issue specific strand of global governance research (see for example, Barnett & Duvall, eds., 2005)⁷. In regime analysis power was still conceived of in Neo-Realist state-centric terms. It was one of the basic variables that were the 'real' causes of behaviour and the significance of regimes as intervening variable was discussed. Already in the 1982 special issue there are critical views of the significance of regimes. Susan Strange wrote in her *Cave! hic dragones* article that regimes are only surface phenomena and focus on them could actually make researchers unable to analyze the deeper structures and operations of power at work in international relations. Her view of power was not the limited neo-realist conception of state, mostly military power. One of the 'dragons' which Strange identified was the state-centeredness of the regime studies paradigm, which leaves much of the international bargaining between governments, corporations, labour organizations and the like outside the analysis. (Strange, 1982) The Neo-Realist approach is unable to conceive the power of these other organizations. Since then there have been significant developments in the analysis of power in global

⁷ The title of 1992 special issue on epistemic communities is: "Knowledge, Power, and International Policy Coordination" (Haas ed. 1992).

governance. Various researchers and groups have presented new conceptualizations that better enable researchers to grasp the dynamics of power in global governance.

The early regime studies were based on an agential conception of power and structures were understood as constraining, intervening variables. Stefano Guzzini pointed out that “if structures are just seen as constraints, then structural power is a contradiction in terms” (Guzzini, 1993: 470). When structures are depicted also as enabling and facilitating conditions, ideas of structural power become meaningful. Guzzini suggested that the concept should be divided so that *power* refers to an agential ability and capacity and *governance* to the capacity of intersubjective practices to effect. (Guzzini, 1993: 471). With a focus on governance one can move beyond the conservative bias of Neo-Realism, which sees agents, their identities and interests as given and thus treats them as basic premises on which further theoretical work is based. The focus can be shifted to the ways in which regimes and governance (in the wider meaning of the term) are “being continually reshaped by the historically constituted and intersubjectively reproduced societal biases” (Guzzini, 1993: 475).

These calls for a wider understanding of power and agency in studies of global governance have been accepted to some extent in the main-stream global governance research. James N. Rosenau has written extensively about the changes in the units of analysis in world politics after the Cold war. The cumulation of anomalies against the state centric paradigm made it necessary to start building new approaches. Rosenau articulates the post-Cold War approach as follows:

“[T]he new ontology requires us to focus on those political actors, structures, processes, and institutions that initiate, sustain, or respond to globalizing forces as they propel boundary-spanning activities and foster boundary-contracting relations. ... [i]nstead of initially posing a world dominated by states and national governments, the new ontology builds on the premise that the world is comprised of spheres of authority (SOAs) that are not necessarily consistent with the division of territorial space and are subject to considerable flux. Such spheres are, in effect, the analytical units of the new ontology.” (Rosenau, 1999: 295)

Instead of the exclusive focus on constitutive or legalistic conceptions of authority one should focus on both how authority flows vertically through hierarchical structures and horizontally through networks (Rosenau, 2005: 133-135). Because these networks involve many different

kinds of actors, issue specific governance systems are a complex phenomenon; not to speak of the more general view of global governance.

Even though Rosenau's approach captures well some aspects of the changing ontology of world politics after the Cold War, its conception power has also received criticism. Ole Jacob Sending and Iver B. Neumann argue that the full potential of wider conceptions of power, and its implications for understandings of agency in world politics, has not been realized in Rosenau's approach. According to them, contrary to Rosenau's stated aim, his view is still informed by "a particular view of power wedded to the concept of sovereignty that makes authority the analytical core of the concept of global governance" (Sending & Neumann, 2006: 653). Therefore he is not able to transcend the state-centric paradigm; he has only started to use it 'negatively' by analyzing to which actors power has moved from the state. The approach is still informed by dichotomical, zero-sum logic in which claiming that non-state actors are now more powerful than before means that states have lost power. This approach studies power in global governance in terms of what actors are (which actors have authority/power) rather than in terms of what actors do and how they are able to influence the processes of global governance (Sending & Neumann, 2006: 655).

In their article Sending and Neumann propose an alternative approach for the study of governing processes that is better able to deal with the dynamic interplay between state and non-state agencies. They build their framework on Michel Foucault's views on governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality is a specific form of power that operates through the governed. "Government is for Foucault thus defined in terms of the "conduct of conduct", involving a range of techniques and practices, performed by different actors, aimed to shape, guide, and direct individuals' and groups' behaviour and actions in particular directions" (Sending & Neumann, 2006: 656). Governmentality was developed as a tool for studying the interactive process of governing. In this way it replaced the focus on institutions – what actors are – with a focus on practices – what actors do (Sending & Neumann, 2006: 656-657). The aim of empirical studies is to investigate the particular 'mentality' or political rationality used in governing and technical means appropriate for it (see also Merlingen, 2003). This means that the division into state and non-state actors is blurred. Non-state actors or civil society is "redefined from a passive object of government to be acted upon into an entity that is both an object *and* a subject of government (Sending & Neumann, 2006: 651).

These studies focus on the ways how political power operates through non-state actors rather than on them.

From this Foucauldian perspective it is possible to trace the ways in which state and non-state actors together perform governing tasks in the processes of global governance. Sending and Neumann developed their framework in contrast to view that was biased towards analysis of institutions, sovereignty and authority. They created an agency and practice centred approach ‘bracketing’ structures as irrelevant for their framework⁸. All agency and practices are situated in some structural context which must be brought back in for a more comprehensive approach to the study of global governance systems.

Agents and structures of global governance

The early formulations of regime theory and later conceptions of governance systems and spheres of authority all have an explicit ontology of the basic units of analysis. As noted above there has been a clear shift from state-centric to wider understanding of agency that takes into account various kinds of non-state actors. These ontologies have been created in connection to earlier approaches to governance and more general theories of IR. To be able to communicate with the “main-stream” these approaches use its language⁹. Therefore they also rely in their own ways on the dichotomy of state and non-state actors and they are not able to conceptualize the relationship and merging of the two. In order to be able to transcend this dichotomy one must, in my view, base it on more abstract political and social theoretical discussions. Sending and Neumann approach these problems through the Foucauldian notion of practice. In the rest of the paper I will approach them through more abstract ontological investigations about one possible way of conceptualizing the structural relations between different kinds of actors. In the next section I will present a Critical Realist view on social structures in which practices take place and then turn to its implications if applied to the study of global governance systems.

⁸ For a more general criticism of post-structuralist’s flat social ontology, that can’t account for deeper structures see Joseph, 2004.

⁹ For example, Raymond Duvall and Alexander Wendt justify state-centric approach on these lines in Wendt & Duvall, 1989:70-71n24. See also Jackson, 2001.

Critical Realist social ontology

The version of Critical Realism adopted in this paper is developed from the philosophical “under-labouring” work of Roy Bhaskar. On a basic level Bhaskar sees science as the movement from knowledge of manifest phenomena to knowledge of structures that create them. For this kind of movement to be possible in empirical studies one must have some kind of basic conception of the objects of inquiry. Without this kind of conception any discussion of possible methods is arbitrary. If we for example want to study the meanings produced and circulated in society with linguistic methods, we must first have a conception of society that depicts social reality as pre-interpreted, inherently meaningful and communicative. Therefore the main question of Bhaskar’s study on the philosophy of social science is: “*what properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?*” (Bhaskar, 1979: 17).

As an answer to this question Bhaskar proposes a Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA). In this model: “Society is both the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is, conscious *production*, and (normally unconscious) *reproduction* of the conditions of production.” (Bhaskar, 1979: 43-44.) The Aristotelian paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is a sculptor at work, who makes a product out of the material with the skills and tools available. In society the main difference is that the ‘material’ only exists in virtue of human activity. There is thus a dual character to both society and human praxis. Society is a necessary condition for all meaningful and intentional activity and this activity reproduces or transforms society, even when people are not really aware of the structural conditions and consequences of their activity. “People do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to sustain the capitalist economy. Yet it is nevertheless the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is a necessary condition for, their activity.” (Bhaskar, 1979: 44).

In Bhaskar’s conception society is an articulated ensemble of social structures. These structures are only relatively independent and their interrelations are also subject to change. Since structures exist only in virtue of what people do and have done there must be some kind of contact point between structures and agents. For Bhaskar this mediating system is that of the “*positions* (places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc.) occupied (filled, assumed,

enacted, etc.) by individuals, and of the *practices* (activities, etc.) in which, in virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and vice-versa), they engage” (Bhaskar, 1979: 51). These positions can only be individuated relationally. Most important structural relations are internal relations which define the meanings of social phenomena. Two actors or phenomena are internally related if they would not be what they essentially are unless they were related to each other the way they are. The classical example is the relation between master and slave, in which both positions would be meaningless without an understanding of the relationship.

To put it bluntly one could say that people only occupy slots in social structures and these slots – and the relations on which they are based – can be understood without an understanding of the characteristics of the people¹⁰. Empirical study of structures is more difficult than what these straight forward conceptualizations might imply. On the one hand, people always occupy multiple positions. For example a list of my most obvious relatively enduring positions would include (in alphabetical order) brother, employee, father, goalie, husband, midfielder, researcher, review editor, son, student, supervised, etc. All these positions are based on different kinds of (family-, work/academic-, and sports-) relations to different people, which enable and constrain my activity in specific contexts.

On the other hand positions, relations and their meanings are never clear and unequivocal (Patomäki, 2002: 102-105). Social positions are communicated and their meaning depends on the ‘theories’ lay actors have about their social relations. “The condition of ‘entry’ to this field [society] is getting to know what actors already know, and have to know, to ‘go on’ in the daily activities of social life” (Giddens, 1984: 284). Social scientists try to understand how lay actors understand the world and what kind of beliefs and theories structure their perceptions and visions. Giddens called this double hermeneutics. This is only the condition of entry and researchers might end up concluding that the theory lay actors have is in some ways limited or false and leads to unwanted outcomes. We can criticize these discursive formations if we have – in our judgment – a better theory of the subject field and an explanation of why this discursive formation is nevertheless supported. In order to become

¹⁰ This statement has clear Waltzian connotations which are justified in a sense that his theory of international politics is also based on a positional understanding of structures (see Dessler, 1989), but the view of structures presented here is more social than material.

effective, academic criticism must be connected to emancipatory action. This is the basic logic of explanatory emancipation. (Bhaskar, 1986: 171-188; see also Patomäki, 2002: 152-155)

This relational view of social structures stays on a very high level of abstraction and as such is of very little use for concrete empirical research. It must first be articulated as a more concrete approach to a specific problem field. What does this kind of approach to the agent-structure problem mean for the study of global governance?

Social ontology of global governance systems

Governance systems can be understood as one form of social structures that affect the daily conduct of world politics. Definitions of regimes and governance are to some extent based on the relations between various actors and positions. In Young's definition "governance involves the establishment and operation of social institutions ... capable of resolving conflicts, facilitating cooperation, or, more generally, alleviating collective-action problems in a world of interdependent actors" (Young, 1994: 15). This definition works with a rationalist model of agency and politics. Governance institutions reconstruct the relations between certain actors in a way that make them better able to deal with rational-choice problems like prisoners dilemma and the problem of the commons. But this is only one aspect of agency and governance. Some regimes – human rights regimes being the most obvious example – rearticulate certain issues which have been traditionally viewed as 'domestic' as 'matters of legitimate international concern'. In these governance systems norms of appropriate behaviour are redefined for certain fields even though they might not create the traditional collective action problems that would need to be overcome with the help of new international institutions. Governance systems as social structures not only reconstruct the relations between the parties involved in the construction of the system (as the earlier definitions of regimes and governance imply), but also, and maybe most importantly, between the parties and the people who are involved with the field for which the system has been created (as the governmentality approach tells us).

Discussions of the parties involved and affected by global governance have used the dichotomy of state and non-state actors. At the heart of this division is the question of how to conceptualize the state? This division can be used to clarify some points about the CR understanding of agents and structures. From this perspective state can be understood as a

collection of structures rather than as a unified actor. These structures define relations between various institutions and people working in them as well as relations between ‘politicians/state officials’ and ‘the people’. Even though it might be possible to view state representatives as collective actors and there might be almost a consensus on for example foreign policy in relation some other states, the state is still not a real subject but a structure in which various people hold different positions and engage in different practices. As Bob Jessop has put it: “It is not the state which acts: it is always specific sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state system. It is they who activate specific powers and state capacities inscribed in particular institutions and agencies.” (Jessop, 1990: 367)

The special role of the state in various context of world politics is not derived from the idea that “states are people too” (Wendt, 1999: 215-224) but from the special role state institutions have in wider society. Understanding the special role of state institutions requires a theory about their relation to other institutions. Jessop has suggested the following definition of the state: “The core of the state apparatus comprises a distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their common interest or general will” (Jessop, 1990: 341). State institutions are institutions among others in wider society, but their defining feature is that they are supposed to work for the unity and common interest of this society. Representatives of states interact with the representatives of other states, transnational non-governmental organizations and firms, and domestic pressure groups, each promoting – in addition to their own interests – their understanding of the ‘common interest or general will’ of the wider society. Governments can agree to create new international regimes, which can become the core of transnational and global governance systems, which, if successful, affect the way how state institutions are able to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society.

Different institutions and organizations create a network of relations and positions in which various agents interact and are to some extent constructed. If we take the traditional focus on state representatives this field becomes a more complex version of Robert Putnam’s two-level games (Putnam, 1988). In Putnam’s model government representatives had to play two bargaining games at the same time: domestic and international. These two games set the limits of possible agreements in specific issues. In the framework I’m proposing here there are

more than two levels and behaviour is not only a rational choice game of two or more players. In addition to Putnam's two levels there are for example different kinds of transnational networks and more general systemic structures¹¹. What these networks and structures are, how they have been constructed and in turn construct agency, and how they enable and constrain activity can not be discovered with ontological investigations but are a matter of empirical research. Ontological framework only presents the network of relations and positions as possible objects of inquiry. In this framework the field of research changes from two level games to multi-level plays.

It is hard to articulate what interpenetrating relational structures could mean in IR and governance research if one stays at the level of theory and social ontology. Therefore an example is in place. I have studied earlier international governance in relation to Latvia's minority politics, especially with regard to the amending of citizenship legislation in 1996-98 (Juttila, 2003). These processes took place within and were a part in the reproduction of more general post-Cold War European politics which were to a large extent structured by "East-European countries' return to the West" and the transformations related to it (see for example Moision, 2002). As ethnic conflicts replaces super power confrontation at the top of the European security agenda, a system for international governance of minority rights was created to deal with this new threat. Minority issues had been consider an internal affair of states after the Second World War but in the early years of 1990s they were again considered to be a matter of legitimate international concern (for example, CSCE, 1990; UN, 1992)¹². This re-articulation changes the relations between certain positions. New institutions and positions related to them were also created. For example in the Helsinki Summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) a post of High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) was created (CSCE, 1992) and new conventions and charters were drafted in the Council of Europe (for example, CoE, 1995).

¹¹ Systemic structures can be conceptualized in different ways, Waltzian structural realism (1979) or Wendtian cultures of anarchy (1999) being maybe the most obvious examples. Even though these theories rely on state agency it is not impossible to translate their main point into the conceptions of human agency of state representatives.

¹² During the inter-war years there was a system for minority protection that worked in the framework of the League of Nations, but during the Cold War minority issues were approached through general human rights. See Jackson Preece, 1998.

In themselves these new institutions are rather weak. For example the HCNM can offer consultation and advice but it is very hard for him (or maybe in the future her) to pressure governments to change their policy against their will. They are not the significant others whose acceptance and recognition is essential in the construction of national (state) identities and they don't have material incentives at their disposal. The most significant positive others and suppliers of material assistance for the representatives of Latvia after it regained independence have been the representatives of the "Western" states. In 1993 the European Union drafted the Copenhagen Criteria for the new applicant states (EU, 1993). The EU did not have its own standards and monitoring mechanisms for minority rights, but the inclusion of minority rights in the political criteria changed the relations between other positions in significant ways. HCNM's recommendations became in practice the standard that had to be met in order to qualify for EU membership in this regard. The Copenhagen criteria also strengthened the status of many NGOs. For example Open Society Institute began an independent monitoring process of the political criteria for membership. Country reports were written by representatives of local minority NGOs (Open Society Institute, 2001). This network of transnational NGOs became one of the subjects of government in European minority politics.

If we look at this multi-level network from the position of the government of Latvia, it is obvious that the transnational governance system for minority rights affects the way how the government and its institutions are able to define and enforce collectively binding decisions in the field on minority policy. In the general level European politics was structured by the EU's relation to its applicant states and the latter's desire to "return to the West". Membership in the Western organizations was the prime goal of Latvia's foreign policy from early on and support for this policy was wide and persistent. EU included minority right in its membership criteria and in practice let the C/OSCE and CoE to set the standards and monitor their implementation together with transnational minority rights NGOs. This network created positions from which it was possible to monitor Latvia's minority policies, support domestic pressure groups, and give recommendations which, if backed by EU, easily turned into ultimatums. This network was also a significant part in the recognition of Latvia's national identity as a properly European country; a group in which the representatives of Latvia wanted their country to belong to. Transnational governance system for minority rights functioned within this more

general structural frame European politics, and practices of minority protection were a significant part in its reproduction.¹³

To conclude

Approaches developing Foucauldian ideas of governmentality show how global governance processes work in the level of practices and how agency is constructed in them. They are able to show how the distinction between state and no-state actors becomes blurred in the everyday functioning of governance. But their framework is unable to do this on the level of positions and relational structures, in which the practices take place. For this I have suggested a Critical Realist approach to agent-structure problem. The relational approach to structures offers a conceptualization of states and other organizations with which the connections between various actors can be investigated. These positional structures enable and constrain practices of governance – which can be approached in Foucauldian terms – which in turn are responsible for the construction, reproduction and transformation of different kinds of structures.

The view presented in this paper is an ontological basic view of the way how activity is shaped by social circumstances and how these in turn are reproduced and transformed by activity. This view is then used to build a framework for the study of global governance systems. To paraphrase Jessop (1990: 349), any attempt to theorize global governance in abstraction from governance projects is bound to lead to formalism and essentialism. Ontological investigations are only the first step in developing a framework for analysis and from them there's still a long way to go to concrete research. This paper has been an attempt to define the object of enquiry for global governance research in order to make discussion of the proper methods for its study meaningful.

¹³ More detailed analysis of the case would need to include views about Latvia's domestic politics and more investigation into the practices that take place in these structures, but the purpose of this example was to illustrate what transnational governance system understood in terms of relational structures could mean.

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