

How Global and Why Governance? Ambivalences, Blind Spots, and Challenges for a Critical Global Governance Literature

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Global governance has been defined in many ways. From the politics of powerful states to the influence of civil society on international decision-making processes and to the role of intergovernmental organisations and transnational corporations in world politics, a plethora of phenomena have recently been addressed as manifestations of global governance (Biermann and Bauer 2005; Levy and Newell 2005; O'Brien et al. 2000). In the analysis of world politics, global governance is commonly used to denote a broad set of phenomena, extending beyond merely "international relations" or "politics among nations".¹ In some cases, global governance is used in very encompassing ways – see for instance James Rosenau's (1995: 13) often-quoted definition of global governance as including "systems of rule at all levels of human activity—from the family to the international organization—in which the pursuit of goals has transnational repercussions", or the Commission on Global Governance's (1995) definition of global governance as the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their affairs.

While many have asked 'What is global governance?', few have raised the complementary question 'What is not global governance?'. By asking this question, we aim to critically comment on the contemporary global governance debate. More specifically, we wish to point out three important blind spots that are closely related to the conceptual foundations of the global governance debate. First, the current global governance literature assumes globality where there is none. Second, the current debate about global governance sees too much governance and fails to adequately take account of non-governance. Third, the global governance debate incorrectly portrays efforts at transboundary regulation as post-political.

1 Non-Global Governance

The term global governance has two logical alternatives, namely non-global governance and global non-governance. This section deals with the first alternative; the following section will then address the second alternative. So, how global is "global governance"? Or, stated differently, how global are the phenomena that are subsumed under the concept of global governance? To answer the question, it seems useful to follow Robert Latham's distinction between two different uses of the attribute "global".

In its first use, global governance refers to "governance that is global" – that is, the coordination of activities that, at least in its aspiration, spans the globe (Latham 1999: 28). In this usage, the term global governance suggests a level of homogeneity

¹ For a discussion of recent usages of the term global governance, see Dingwerth and Pattberg (2006).

that far transcends contemporary realities. Dieter Senghaas' (2003) work on world analyses gives a good impression of the fact that the rule-based coordination of activities across borders rarely reaches a global scale. Wondering with which world(s) we are dealing in reality and hence also in our analysis of the world, Senghaas distinguishes between four "partial worlds" ("Teilwelten der Welt").

Beyond the OECD world, in which the dense, transboundary and mostly symmetric integration of politics, law, economy and civil society constitutes a "postnational multi-level system", the "new second world" of EU enlargement candidates and a few (South) East Asian societies can also be considered as capable of actively and passively participating in transboundary governance.² This is different for the "third" and "fourth world". In the "third world", the centres are integrated, if only asymmetrically, in the "transnational club" of the first and second world, while the periphery is structurally dependent on its own centres (and hence largely incapable of effectively participating in transboundary, let alone global, governance). Finally, in the "fourth world", societies no longer dispose of regulatory capacities because the state has either failed or been usurped by private actors (Senghaas 2003: 118-133).

This careful analysis of partial worlds is a provocative challenge to well-intended notions of "one world" that are prevalent in the global governance literature. It also represents a fundamental challenge to the very idea of global governance itself:

The problematique in view of implementing the concept of global governance is primarily linked to worlds III and IV. They lack, in particular the latter, elementary prerequisites for global governance regimes to be actually operative and effective at the local level (...). Since world III concerns approximately two thirds of humanity (...), and world IV about another 15 per cent of the world population, this means that approximately four fifths of humanity lack important and in some cases all prerequisites for the buildup of global governance regimes and their reliable operative translation into concrete politics (compliance). This elementary fact is often not even registered in discourses about global governance" (Senghaas 2003: 145, our translation).

What is usually labelled as global governance is therefore rarely global in a literal sense. This first conception of global governance is therefore subject to the same fallacy that Senghaas (2003: 119) already notes for the globalization discourse: The very specific experience of the OECD world is de-contextualized and "blindly generalized" in its application to the whole world.

As Thomas Risse (2006) has recently pointed out, this generalization is problematic for at least three reasons. First, the dominant governance paradigm is based on a clear distinction between public and private, state and non-state and formal and informal as major analytical categories. Yet, these categories are developed on the basis of experiences of modern and developed statehood and hence imply descriptions that are characteristic for only a small part of today's political world. Second, inherent to the governance perspective is the distinction between hierarchic

² Active participation refers to the capacity to participate in setting global norms and rules. In contrast, passive participation refers to the capacity to effectively implement such norms and rules at regional, national and local levels.

and non-hierarchic modes of governance with hierarchic steering closely associated with the state. This ideal type typology however fails to acknowledge the realities of weak or failed states, where the state is often incapable of hierarchic steering and where, at the same time, hierarchic steering is not necessarily limited to the state and its agencies. Finally, the implicit focus on the intentional provision of the common good makes the governance perspective unsuitable for the analysis of phenomena such as the provision of public security by the mafia or by warlords.

Despite its global label, the global governance discourse thus perpetuates the insensitivity of mainstream conceptions of international relations to the “third” and “fourth” world. The very concept of global governance is thus ultimately marked by an ambivalence: On the one hand, it presupposes, in a naivety that is most surprising, a homogeneity in terms of “global problems” dealt with (or to be dealt with) through coordination based on effective global rules. On the other hand, the debate about global governance is confronted with its global claim whenever authors take note of the fact that “global governance” is in fact less than global. In the globalization literature, this tension has been recognized earlier on. For instance, Michael Zürn (1998) suggested substituting the catchy, but imprecise term “globalization” for the less popular, but more precise “denationalization”. Even as a similar differentiation for the global governance debate – for instance “governance beyond the state” – fails to attract authors (cf. Zürn 2005: 397-414), at least a minimal sensitivity for the possibilities and obstacles to global governance is thus implied by the concept of global governance itself: As long as we talk about global governance the question about the actual globality of the processes we analyse when using the term can hardly be evaded. In the end, the global governance debate is thus marked by a tension between a danger to blindly generalize and an inherent minimum level of sensitivity to the fact that our rhetoric is more global than the governance systems we observe.

We obtain a slightly different picture if we conceive of global governance not as governance that is global, but as “governance in the global”, that is, as the coordination of activities at all levels of social interaction up to the global level (Latham 1999: 28).

On this understanding, the rule-based coordination of social activities is not global only when it does not have transboundary effects. Since this is, as Latham correctly notes, a plausible assumption only for very few cases, the range of phenomena that are excluded by the concept of global governance becomes very small. Is any rule-based social interaction thus part of global governance? If we accept Rosenau’s broad definition cited in the introductory section to this paper, then this seems in fact to be the right conclusion. While we might intuitively reject such a broad understanding of global governance as analytically meaningless, Hewson and Sinclair (1999: 6-7) see precisely the breadth of the concept as a central contribution of Rosenau’s work on global governance. By emphasizing the micro-foundation of world politics and analysing the latter as a “sociology of global life”, they argue, Rosenau not only radically points to the multi-level character, but also to the omnipresence of global governance.

Yet, Rosenau's broad concept of global governance also implies a loss of analytical power since it necessarily covers very heterogeneous phenomena. A broad understanding of global governance would thus encompass issues that are highly regulated at the global level – for instance, the use of violence in the international system – as well as issues that remain largely unregulated at the inter- and transnational level such as, for instance, animal rights, the protection from the consequences of unemployment or the legality of abortion. A perspective that builds on Rosenau's conception would see governance in all these cases, constituted essentially in the sum of national and regional rules plus a range of more diffuse inter- and transnational norms. As proponents of this perspective could merely point to different forms of global governance, the ordering function – usually seen as the most fundamental function of a concept – of the term “global governance” would then be greatly reduced.

2 Global Non-Governance

The term global governance not only suggests that governance is actually global, but also that the globe – or a substantial part of it – is actually governed. As in the previous section, it can be reasonably questioned whether concepts such as “governance” or “steering” come anything but close to the realities of world politics. On the one hand, the field of global governance is commonly divided into specific issue areas such as global economic governance, global environmental governance or global health governance. Yet, for most of these areas, “global governance” does not go beyond the sum of the relevant steering mechanisms that exist in relation to the respective issue area in the world. A more coherent regulatory framework rarely exists. Accordingly, attempts to describe a specific field of global governance commonly start by establishing an inventory of regulatory mechanisms relevant for the respective field. As an obvious consequence, global governance research primarily sees regulation. In contrast, the absence of regulation – or “non-governance” – is systematically excluded by the global governance lens. For instance, critical scholarship on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the new regulatory forms associated with it conclude that, although voluntary CSR regulation has become omnipresent, governance is fragmented and piecemeal. Moreover, and more importantly, voluntary CSR initiatives can in fact be interpreted as intentional efforts of quasi-regulators to prevent the global governance of corporate social responsibility (Doane 2005, Vogel 2005). Now, we are wondering: Does it make sense to label efforts to prevent governance as governance given that these efforts are both coordinated and rule-based? Or are they best described as something else – maybe as pseudo-governance? We do not have a clear answer. But the CSR case illustrates very well that by labelling any rule-based coordination as ‘governance’, the global governance literature overestimates the magnitude of (global or non-global) transboundary steering and the degree of order generated by such steering. At the same time, it fails to take adequate account of non-governance and disorder.

In her genealogy of the governance concept, Renate Mayntz (2004) points to the problem-solving bias of modern governance theory as one of its major blind spots. As

many conceptualizations of governance imply for example “that private actors are involved in decision-making in order to provide the common good” (Héritier 2002: 3), such a perspective runs the risk of wrongly assuming that existing institutions have emerged to effectively solve a given problem, rather than acknowledging the role of particular interests in the formation of governing institutions. As a result, the governance perspective is not empirically and normatively biased towards rule-based coordination, but also makes ungrounded assumptions about the cause of its emergence.

That the governance lens leads one to see rules, but not their absence is, again, not a specific feature of the global governance literature. Thus, the literature on international regimes has neglected a similar bias until very recently, when so called “non-regimes” have begun to be addressed in the regime literature (cf. Dimitrov 2002). The governance literature has yet to solve the problem of how to adequately incorporate the absence of governance into its perspective. The previous section already pointed to the question whether, globally, we are witnessing mostly homogeneous regulation marked by pockets of non-regulation or whether we are dealing with pockets of regulation in an – at least globally – largely unregulated world. This section not only further substantiates the need to ask this question, but also adds a second and third one: In concrete cases, are we actually witnessing governance or non-governance? And what means do we have to distinguish the two?

Ultimately, the governance perspective lacks a clear answer in particular to the latter question. It lacks a clear criterion for deciding which processes and structures are within the confines of “governance” and which fall outside of its analytic spectre. If we follow the abovementioned conceptualization of global governance as “systems of rule at all levels of human activity” (Rosenau 1995: 13), the threshold for the existence of a “rule system” remains open. As in the previous section, this openness has ambivalent implications. On the one hand, the danger of dissolving the conceptual borders challenges the usefulness of the governance perspective. Moreover, the predominantly functionalistic logic of the governance perspective makes the concept of global governance largely insensitive to dysfunctionalities in world politics, although the latter are clearly a relevant part of the reality we are facing (see also Latham 1999: 36). On the other hand, the lack of a clear threshold for defining an activity as ‘governance’ may serve to sensitise analysts to search for governance where they would not otherwise do so and to thereby broaden our understanding of world politics.

3 Governance v. Politics: Is Governance Post-Political?

The second question in our title – Why governance? – has a further dimension. It can be summarised in two simple questions: Why does the discourse about global governance prefer “governance” over “politics”? And what are the implications of this preference?

Here, the use of the new term seems to go along with a new rhetoric that stresses techniques of “steering” and “management” and, by and large, conveys a depoliticized image of world politics. It is obvious that the social practices summarized by the concept of global governance are not less political than those that fall under the heading of “international politics”.³ Yet, the governance discourse not only responds to real world transformations, but also portrays governance as non-political or post-political. This critique is best exemplified in terms of the linguistic connotation of the term governance itself. Thus, governance is etymologically linked to *kybernetes* and *kybernan*, which are themselves related to the concepts of navigation and steersman (Schneider 2004). Granted – we find such metaphors in the language of everyday politics, as well – the state as a ship, the statesman as a captain, and so on. In this sense, the governance literature may simply be challenged for uncritically transferring these metaphors into academic discourse. For it is clear that when using images of steering, central questions about political goals (i.e., the “course of the ship”) or the selection of decision-makers (the “captain”) usually remain open (Latham 1999). In this sense, the governance discourse is post-political because it neglects (or negates) what is commonly considered as the essence of the political – namely, the process of deciding about collective goals and setting collectively binding rules. Accordingly, Latham (1999: 43) emphasizes the administrative and depoliticized nature of ‘governance as planning’:

One way to understand the relationship between governance and politics is to conceive of governance as essentially postpolitical. Governance is always proximate to politics, but it is something that takes place after goals are set and deliberations, argument, struggle, contest, and competition have played out. (...) In some respects, the relationship between governance and politics resembles the relationship articulated between politics and planning at mid-century.

The abstract emphasis on steering reveals a closeness of the governance perspective to technical-administrative concepts prevalent in older versions of functionalism (cf. Mitrany 1946).⁴ However, different from those older debates, the current usage of the term governance is rather blind to the difference between the subject and the object of governance (Mayntz 2004). Whereas the older theory of steering (*Steuerungstheorie*) never lost its connection to politics (i.e. the question of legitimate decisions for the public good), the emerging governance theories are far more focused on the effects of different structures and mechanisms of governing. As a consequence, the governance perspective lacks the analytical tools to adequately address the question of governability (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the concept of governance is itself culturally embedded in so far as it implies a specific view of politics. Jörg Friedrichs (2005) exemplifies this in relation to the (in-)translatability of the term:

³ For a similar argument, see Friedrichs (2005). Friedrichs argues that global governance oscillates between *parapolitics* – the extension of politics into societal affairs – and *metapolitics* – the allocation of roles to the fields of politics and the economy.

⁴ The work of Karl W. Deutsch documents that this is by no means an analytical necessity; see in particular Deutsch (1963).

Given its difficult translatability into languages other than English, it is reasonable to assume that the term 'global governance' is culturally not neutral. Indeed, 'governance' as opposed to 'government' transports the very optimistic and typically Anglo-American belief that things can happily 'work out' as the result of polycentric interaction, rather than being always the result of power relationships.

As in the previous cases, different interpretations are possible. On one reading, global governance as the sum of all rule-based coordination in the world becomes essentially synonymous with the orderly part of politics.⁵ In the end, we could thus read Rosenau as an author who continuously reminds us that global governance is indeed omnipresent – an idea that does not seem far from Foucault's notion of "governmentality". In sum, the implications of this last question – why governance, not politics? – are again ambivalent, with interpretations of global governance ranging from technologically connoted and de-politicized ideas of societal steering to the critical theory-minded acknowledgment that the "totality of human existence" (Latham 1999: 27) is increasingly becoming the object of transboundary, intentional and rule-based 'governance'.

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⁵ The term politics naturally remains broader as it includes an orderly or rule-based dimension (here termed as governance) and a dimension in which political activity is not guided by rules and hence more spontaneous.

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