

Proclaiming a prophecy empty of substance? A pragmatist reconsideration of global governance

Journal of International Political Theory

2022, Vol. 18(3) 312–335

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DOI: 10.1177/17550882211028778

journals.sagepub.com/home/ipt



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Abstract

In 1995, the UN Commission on Global Governance published their “Our Global Neighbourhood” report and the academic journal “Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations” was launched. Both events in retrospect play a significant role in the emergence of global governance thinking and practice in world politics. Despite inherent ambiguities, this idea since then gained massive traction and became both a modality and a heuristic of world politics. Advancing a pragmatist framework, we unpack global governance in terms of the beliefs which underline and guide it. These beliefs are important since they, as rules for action, define the scope of global governance as a theoretical and a political concept. Reconstructing these beliefs directly from the 1995 report, the article highlights the inherent confluences of normative and analytical commitments indicative of global governance. As a projection surface of all kinds, we believe such a reconsideration of global governance is important to (a) reveal the baselines of its thinking and practice, (b) indicate how its normative and analytical ambitions overlap and conflate, and (c) contribute to a more reflective discussion on the idea which explicitly considers its inherent normativity. At the same time, we hope to show the value of a pragmatist framework on beliefs for the study of world politics.

Keywords

American Pragmatism, beliefs, global governance, reconstruction, rules for action

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Introduction

In 1995, the *UN Commission on Global Governance* published their report on *Our Global Neighbourhood* and the academic journal called *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* was launched in association with the Academic Council of the United Nations System (ACUNS). Twenty-five years later, global governance, as a political program and an academic discourse, continues to influence thought and practice of world politics in a deep and sustained manner (Murphy, 2014). At the same time, since its very conception, much has been written about the need to intellectually and practically improve global governance. In fact, the criticism of ambiguity is just as old as the notion itself (Finkelstein, 1995; Latham, 1999).¹

As a projection surface of all kinds, we struggle academically and in conceptual terms to define and make sense of global governance, while delivery in practical terms remains inefficient, lacks accountability, and represents patchwork or gridlock (Hale et al., 2013). Nevertheless, despite its inherent ambiguity and its continuing failure to provide a legitimate and effective order beyond the nation-state, global governance has gained massive traction in International Relations (IR) and beyond and developed from an inchoate to a more mature discourse over the past 25 years (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019; Zürn, 2018b).²

Current discussions in global governance reflect past trajectories as well as “points of analytical transition and legacies,” trying to move the discourse toward a more mature stage (Coen and Pegram, 2018: 107). In order to do so, we contend in this article, both the scholarship and the practice of global governance needs to reflect upon its implicit yet rather strong and far-reaching assumptions. In analytical terms, for example, global governance has challenged IR meta-narratives such as anarchy and hierarchy (Baumann and Dingwerth, 2015) and has been framed, at least by some, to come to the rescue of a discipline otherwise confined in its commitment to be(come) a precise and non-normative science (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014). At the same time, its relation vis-à-vis IR theory has never been quite defined. In political terms, global governance, much like globalization as the macro process it responds to, has been framed as being “without alternatives”—with states around the world assumingly having little choice but to embrace multilateralism *and* multistakeholderism as guiding principles. In other words, global governance has become a compelling paradigm for some and even the *sine qua non* for thinking and doing world politics for others. The concept will, however, remain incomplete, contested, and subject to immediate criticism, in particular in populist-nationalist disguise, if its advocates do not critically reflect and provide better justification for their underlying assumptions and implicit value commitments (Zürn, 2018a).

Twenty-five years after receiving its name and intellectual framing, we propose a critical reconsideration of global governance based on the pragmatist concept of *beliefs as rules for action* (James, [1907] 1975; Peirce, [1878] 1992). Elaborated in detail below, we contend that practices and academic reflections of global governance are based on assumptions and normative ideas—beliefs—of how one conceives the world and should act in it. As rules for action, these beliefs represent the underpinnings of global governance and explain both its ambivalence and prevalence as an idea. They constitute the normative core of the idea and define the scope of practice and thought. It is thus important to (a) reveal these rules for action as baselines in and of global governance, (b)

reconstruct how they are both analytical and normative in nature, and (c) contribute to a more reflective discussion on global governance which adequately reflects its normativity. To advance our argument, which connects to interpretive work on governance (Bevir, 2013; Neumann and Sending, 2010), the paper is structured as follows. First, we offer a contextual overview on how global governance emerged as an idea. Second, we introduce the pragmatist concept of *beliefs as rules for action*. Third, we illustrate the value of beliefs as rules for action in a global governance context by offering a close reading of the *1995 Commission Report*. This foundational document constituted in many ways how practitioners and scholars, at least initially, thought of global governance, and, even though a dynamic discourse emerged and broadened our understanding, the Report's definitions and assumptions continue to be prominently referenced and discussed today (Karns et al., 2015: 2). Against the rules reconstructed from this document, we contend that the core axiom of global governance (i.e. global problems are tractable and solutions feasible when different actors collaborate) rests on both normative *and* analytical commitments at the same time. We further conclude that such conflation needs to be explicated and justified in global governance thinking and practice for the concept to remain meaningful in the future. A reconstruction of underlying beliefs thus not only indicates the potential of pragmatist thinking in IR (Kratochwil, 2009). It further opens a path, in which the need to cooperate in a complex world can be met with more reflective and better justified global public policies.

Global governance—contexts of emergence

International organization, multilateralism, and multistakeholderism, that is the involvement of so-called “non-state actors” in global affairs to manage complex issues and provide collective order, have been discussed in IR for more than 50 years now (Kaiser, 1971; Mansbach et al., 1976; Rosenau, 1969). Prominent approaches who picked up on this include the English School (Dunne, 2005), regime theory (Hasenclever et al., 1997; Krasner, 1983), and transnational relations (Risse-Kappen, 1995). According to its proponents, however, it was the emergence of global governance as the “more encompassing concept,” which turned these “predecessors” (Rosenau (1992: 1) into subsets and fundamentally changed how we perceive and explain these issues within world politics. “[P]recipitated by a blend of real world events and developments in the academy” (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019: 21), new norms *and* new theoretical language games emerged in world politics. As Baratta (2004: 534–535) concludes, “the new expression ‘global governance’ emerged as an acceptable term in debate on international organization for the desired and practical goal of progressive efforts.” Substituting for the notion of world government, as will be discussed below, the publishing of *Governance without Government* (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992), the *Commission on Global Governance* report, and the first issue of the new academic quarterly *Global Governance* all coincided within a matter of years in the early 1990s. In other words, to understand the origins of global governance and why it took off as an idea, despite its inherent ambiguities, to become a new meta-narrative and leitmotif to make sense of our time requires considering (a) real-world developments, (b) disciplinary developments, and (c) how they reinforced each other and left us with the shortcomings we face in global governance today.

Real world developments

Likely to be the single most-referenced event in the discipline, the end of the Cold War still is of major importance to many IR theorists. This is also true for the emergence of global governance, which is frequently framed as a “post-Cold War moment.” Rosenau (1992: 1) himself contributed to this framing when he wrote in his opening chapter:

“At a time when hegemons are declining, when boundaries (and the walls that seal them) are disappearing, when the squares of the world’s cities are crowded with citizens challenging authorities, when military alliances are losing their viability – to mention but a few of the myriad changes that are transforming world politics – the prospects for global order and governance have become a transcendent issue.”

While indeed a critical juncture, this narrative downplays other developments. One of those constitutive for the emergence of global governance is the very dynamics of the multilateral order established after World War II. At around that time, it became obvious that the order manifested in and through the UN, the Bretton Woods institutions, and other regional organizations remained limited, unable to bind states in meaningful ways to address, let alone solve, global problems (Cox, 1997). Against this perception of traditional multilateralism failing, the end of the Cold War was eagerly associated with hopes to move beyond the paralysis of intergovernmentalism. This hope was explicitly expressed by the Swedish government, which, in 1995, launched the policy-oriented *UN Commission on Global Governance* co-chaired by Shridath Surendranath Ramphal, Guyana’s Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1972 to 1975 and Commonwealth Secretary-General from 1975 to 1990, and Ingvar Carlsson, Sweden’s prime minister from 1986 to 1991 and from 1994 to 1996. Tasked with providing new ideas how to approach world politics, this report, as will be outlined in detail below, drew from and further expanded the notion that the end of the Cold War marked a fundamental turning point. Together with assumingly increased and rapidly accelerating globalization, contemporaries expressed the need to search for new approaches (Fukuyama, 1992).

In this light, global governance can be considered as the political and intellectual response to globalization—if borders deteriorate and states lose their monopoly of force, new actors (have to) step in and provide new modes of governance beyond the state (Held and McGrew, 2002). Intellectually and in practical terms, notions of globalization, the end of the Cold War, and global governance thus became deeply intertwined as neo-liberalism, perhaps best embodied in the Washington Consensus, became the dominating political rationality (James and Steger, 2015; Neumann and Sending, 2010).³ The desperate need to make sense of these challenging developments and provide order in a changing world brought things together in a simple narrative of increased globalization to which global governance became the “obvious” response (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019: 22–23). In dialectic fashion, the events and dynamics of the 1990s and their perception thus shaped the emergence of global governance which embodies the hopes and fears of practitioners and scholars of world politics in light of new challenges (Cerny and Prichard, 2017). More specifically, global governance gave both the practical and analytical means to project the narrative that *change is happening* and that the multilateral order that exists needs revision. This sense of urgency, together with real-world power of

the Global North backing these ideas, potentially pushed practitioners to quickly and holistically embrace the notion (Murphy, 2014).

Disciplinary developments

Three disciplinary developments throughout the 1980s and 1990s influenced why and how global governance captured IR's attention so quickly. First, the rather limited and somewhat unproductive debate between neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists perpetuated the discipline's focus on the state and thus superimposed innovative thinking outside the box (Schmidt, 2002). Featuring prominently in both approaches, state-centrism and sovereignty were the conceptual specters against which global governance emerged. Stated over and over again by those involved in the making of the new paradigm, these concepts should be abandoned in light of an ever-more complex reality of world politics (Rosenau, 1997; Ruggie, 1993). However, it was not just the fact that prevailing IR theories seemed to be inadequate to grasp a changing reality. Disappointment also arose from the fact that they deliberately engaged in paradigm wars (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999; Walt, 2002) driven by the hubris that one's own approach was in a position to subsume the other (Keohane, 1989; Mearsheimer, 1994). Desperately searching for a new approach outside mainstream IR, global governance became refuge for those who felt at odds with conventional IR and their theoretical arms race (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014, 2019).

Second, the emergence of global governance was influenced by, and benefited from, the simultaneous consolidation of constructivist thinking (Checkel, 1998). Both shared an optimistic, liberal viewpoint and, overlapping in terms of scholars involved, became "accomplices" in moving IR beyond rationalist, state-centric approaches. Together, the two approaches created intellectual space to open up the discipline in terms of what, how, and why we study (Barnett and Sikkink, 2008). In doing so, global governance scholars, for the most part, did not engage in meta-theoretical or methodological discussions. This proved to be a blessing and a curse for the newly emerged research program. On the one hand, it allowed global governance to focus on world order in substantial terms. On the other hand, the lack of methodological and socio-theoretical reflections sustained ambiguities surrounding the concept. Cultivating its self-image as practice-relevant, global governance "got away" without discussing its theoretical foundations or methodological commitments. In other words, it never developed a position vis-à-vis other IR paradigms in terms of whether it is a theory or "just" a perspective of world politics (Hofferberth, 2015: 602–603).

Third, mainstream IR during the 1990s was, for the most part, driven by commitments toward rigorous analytical theorizing. Still mortified by any potential "glide into policy science" (Hoffmann, 1977: 59), IR mainstream entertained and required scientific ideas and standards of how knowledge should be derived. This provided yet another opening for global governance: As IR "increasingly drew back from matters of international policy and instead became a vehicle for the development of rigorous academic theorizing" (Sinclair, 2012: 16), global governance allowed scholars to pursue normative commitments. In fact, openly discussing shortcomings in global policies and engaging with questions such as "what forms of organization and governance should prevail, how

scarce resources should be allocated, and what kind of policy ought to be put in place” became signature moves within global governance (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014: 29). In other words, while IR became more and more reluctant to discuss normative questions, questions of order and collective action were prominently picked up in global governance, which made it even more attractive to a broad range of scholars otherwise alienated by their own discipline.

Taken together, these developments created an opening for global governance to quickly become an important narrative in the discipline of IR. At the same time, ambiguities remained whether global governance was a new contender within or a game-changer beyond IR (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014). For years to come, scholars attempted to relate global governance to IR theory while recognizing the need to develop new theories to transcend it (Hoffmann and Ba, 2005). While exciting, scholars projected all sorts of ideas onto global governance. Put bluntly, it was the very shortcomings of mainstream IR that generated a “yearning of some sort” to study world politics in different ways without providing guidance on how to (Sinclair, 2012: 1). As with every yearning undefined, global governance became lost in its own “oceanic feeling,” remaining “open and diffuse, if not a little noncommittal” (Latham, 1999: 23–24). From an intellectual history of global governance within IR, its main success thus became its greatest shortcoming: The much-needed move beyond mainstream quickly became popular but remained ambiguous and never generated a mature and clear-cut analytical notion.

Appraising global governance

As a “marriage [. . .] between academic theory and practical policy” (Weiss and Wilkinson (2019: 21) both dimensions of global governance mutually reinforced each other. From this angle, changes in world politics lead to new theories of world politics, which in turn provide space for new policies. In a nutshell, global governance thinking and practice became their own echo chambers. The excitement, hopes, and fears, which pushed global governance practitioners and scholars alike, fostered a discourse which, welcomed by many, no longer separated political commitment and analytical research. Unfortunately, however, sustained confusion came along with this as core global governance assumptions such as involving more stakeholders to achieve better governance represented both starting point *and* conclusion. However, this did not stop the concept from gaining intellectual space. Despite not elaborating its socio-theoretical foundations nor reflecting its functionalist and managerial biases (Sinclair, 2012: 19–22), global governance still set the scene for thinking and doing world politics.

Overall, the theory and practice of global governance ambitiously addresses global issues in the absence of global government. As this takes place without solid socio-theoretical foundations and a consolidated research agenda, ad hoc supplementing from other theories and reflection upon underlying normative commitments is required. More specifically, with only a few “constitutive features of current global politics” elaborated, global governance remains an undefined projection space for practitioners and scholars of world politics alike (Keukeleire and Schunz, 2015: 63–64). In other words, the emergence of global governance in real-world and intellectual developments leaves us with

different approaches and ambiguities which no longer warrant any teleology or coherence. In light of this, our intention is not to distill a “pure” version of global governance but rather come to terms with its influence on world politics thinking and practice despite all its inherent ambiguities and weaknesses. We propose to do so by reconsidering global governance in a pragmatist light by reconstructing beliefs as rules for action at its core. While this does not provide an explanation why global governance emerged in particular in the 1990s, our analysis will outline which beliefs were expressed and thus influenced this constitutive document of global governance and informed the discourse for years to come.

Reconsidering global governance from a pragmatist perspective

American Pragmatism, widely regarded as the first genuine contribution to Western philosophy originating in North America (Joas, 1993), has informed IR explicitly in different ways over the past 20 years (Cochran, 2012).⁴ Whether as epistemology, ontology, or transcending such dualistic separations between theories of knowledge and theories of action in the first place, the thinking of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), John Dewey (1859–1952), and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) as key authors for its Classical and Richard Rorty (1931–2007) for its Neopragmatist version have been advanced frequently and, representing a rather diverse pluralistic approach, in different ways in the study of world politics. More specifically, sharing a commitment to the importance of action, interaction, and practice, pragmatist thinking has been invoked to challenge positivism and move beyond in epistemological and methodological terms (Abraham and Abramson, 2017; Bauer and Brighi, 2009; Cochran, 2002; Franke and Weber, 2012; Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009; Grimmell and Hellmann, 2019; Kratochwil, 2007; Ralston, 2013; Rytövuori-Apunen, 2005; Schmidt, 2014; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010; Sundaram and Thakur, 2019; Zaiotti, 2013). In ontological terms, Pragmatism has been advanced to explain action beyond the dualism stemming from the logic of consequentialism versus logic of appropriateness in IR (Franke and Roos, 2010; Hellmann, 2009; Hofferberth and Weber, 2015; Jackson, 2009; Pratt, 2016; Schmidt, 2014). Finally, in substantial terms, pragmatist ideas have been applied to various and diverse contexts such as human rights and sovereignty (Lamb, 2019; Schmidt, 2014), foreign policy analysis (Franke and Hellmann, 2018; Roos, 2015), inter-organizational relations (Franke and Koch, 2013), multinational enterprises (Hofferberth, 2017), and private military companies (Avant, 2016), to list but a few.⁵

Despite increasing influence of pragmatist ideas in the study of world politics, to our knowledge, an application to global governance is still missing. This is noteworthy since William James and John Dewey, among other pragmatists, explicitly wrote on international relations and governance (Cochran, 2012). The latter, arguably in a take on global governance without calling it as such, discussed the state, sovereignty, pluralism, and the notion of collective action and concluded that “the state remains highly important, [. . .] but its importance consists more and more in its power to foster and coordinate the activities of voluntary groupings” (Dewey, 1920: 204). Picking up on these themes, we propose a reconsideration of global governance by drawing broadly on pragmatist

thinking in terms of social action, habit, routine, and crisis broadly, as well as the concept of beliefs as rules for action more narrowly.

Beliefs as rules for action

Central to pragmatist thinking and its efforts to explain human conduct is action (Dewey, 1922; Putnam, 1995). Humans permanently find themselves in specific situations that require them to do something. Pragmatists see this “inevitability of individual as well as collective action” as “the necessary starting point of any theorizing” (Hellmann, 2009: 639). Understanding action in sharp contrast to merely reactive behavior, they go beyond “stimulus-response behavior” and focus on “concrete, meaning-oriented activity of an agent” (Goddard and Nexon, 2005: 14). Unlike individualistic and overly voluntaristic frameworks of action, pragmatists grasp actors as always already socially embedded. Unlike holistic and socially deterministic frameworks, however, they think of actors as able to situationally adapt and potentially modify what they do through their capacity for creative action (Joas, 1996). Furthermore, from the standpoint of pragmatist social theory, there is no categorical distinction between talk and action or thought and action. Thought is action, talk is action, and any action is guided by rules since the social sphere—sociality—consists entirely of rules. Of all rules for action available for an actor, those that bring about a concrete act are termed beliefs. It is them in which an actor had believed most strongly when he or she did what he or she has done in a given situation. According to Peirce ([1878] 1992: 129), a belief thus “is something that we are aware of,” that “appeases the irritation of doubt,” and that “involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action.” As rule for action, a belief “is a stopping-place” and “also a new starting-place for thought”; it is “thought at rest, although thought is essentially an action” (Peirce, ([1878] 1992: 129).

Given that sociality is a rule-based domain, the existence of rules precedes the adoption, reflection, and modification of these rules by actors as society precedes individuals. Consequently, pragmatists do not conceive of human actors as unconnected and preexisting monads, around which a social bond must first be laboriously laid. Such a social bond always already exists. It manifests in “the logical universe of discourse” or “the general system of universally significant symbols” (Mead, [1934] 1967: Section 34). From the perspective of actors, this universe of social meaning precedes and connects them with significant others, past and present. In creative ways, actors draw on it as a “pool” of potential action from which they, in light of social expectations and shared interpretations, actualize particular meaning through particular action in a particular situation (Joas, 1996). As actualizations unfold over time, new meaning is created and boundaries of what rules an actor follows and which beliefs he or she is guided by in a given situation change. In other words, social horizons against which human beings realize their course of action change as they act and thereby either reaffirm or revoke beliefs (Abbott, 1995; Jackson, 2003: 234–239).

We can further theorize rules for action to operate at the interplay of crisis and routine. As solutions to problems of action (Dewey, 1927), rules can be habitualized and routinized so that actors are no longer immediately aware of them (Dewey, 1922; Hopf, 2010). In fact, since their lives take place in collectives with specific histories and social

dynamics, many beliefs as rules for action have been inscribed to humans in processes of socialization, that is, through interaction with parents and other family members, teachers and classmates, colleagues, fellow citizens, or else and are thus taken for granted. As James ([1907] 1975: 80) put it, beliefs work “on a credit system [. . .] and pass, ‘so long as nothing challenges them’.” In this light, beliefs are the foundation for and beginning of habits. In crisis, beliefs are tested and eventually condensed again into new habits to be challenged once more in the future, explaining both routine and change over time (Hopf, 2010, 2018). Against this background, humans constantly make use of and thereby reproduce a plethora of pre-existing rules for action as they draw on them as guiding beliefs and come out with habits. Most of the time, these beliefs turn out to be stable. Due to the obstructiveness of reality, however, beliefs and the habits they sustain are also frequently challenged, destabilized, and need to be reconsidered, reformulated, or even modified and replaced in moments of crisis, that is, when routines no longer work. In other words, in crises, beliefs as rules for action turn out to be dynamic.

Facing the inevitable need to respond to problems of action, what humans do is guided by beliefs as rules for action. Rule-guided action takes place within a universe of meaning, into which actors are socialized and which they constantly expand and collectively transform in complex and dynamic social processes. It is thus not the single actor who owns or determines the meaning of individual action. Rather, meaning equally lies with those who respond to an act and ultimately emerges from interaction. In other words, beliefs are of an intersubjective, social quality as they transcend individual action (Mead, [1934] 1967: Section 7). As humans act upon crisis, they (have to) create new beliefs in order to continue to act and translate their beliefs into new routines. In this sequential unfolding between crisis and routine, it is in the end the task of the researcher to reconstruct which beliefs remain mostly stable (as routines more or less continue to work) or which have to be modified entirely (as the actor faces a profound crisis). In conclusion, beliefs as rules for action constitute the dynamic core of this unfolding as they connect individual actors and their capacity for creative action to the social sphere of sedimented rules and meaning.

Beliefs as rules for action in global governance

As the foundation of human activity, beliefs as rules for action allow us to study how individuals realize their potential to act, be it professionals or laypersons, politicians or citizens, scholars or practitioners. Reconstructing the beliefs advanced and articulated by scholars, in particular, provides one promising avenue to pursue when trying to understand global governance. Whenever IR scholars discuss world order, global governance and globalization, power relations, interests, preferences, and norms, they are discussing human action and its manifestations. These phenomena have been brought about by beliefs as rules for action and are composed of and refer to social structures of meaning (Bell, 2009). Reconstructing the beliefs advanced and articulated by practitioners on the other hand also provides important insights into global governance. As global governors, these practitioners act on behalf of collective entities such as national governments, international organizations, groups of states, or firms which provide them with the power to make a difference. Understood as “structures of corporate practice” (Dewey, 1927;

Franke and Roos, 2010), these globally effective collectives and the institutionalized relations between them form “clotted” rules for action. They have been formulated and created to deal with problems of action individuals cannot cope with alone. As part of the universe of meaning, structures of corporate practice and the various rules for action they are made of constitute the scope of action for those who act on behalf of them but can also be modified by these actors.

Against this backdrop, we can think of global governance as action sustained through the continuation of certain beliefs about world order and the management of related problems of collective action. In light of the ambiguities of global governance discussed in the previous section, any world order theorized in its core beliefs remains visionary and descriptive by definition as rules for action rest on “facts” and “values” (Hellmann, 2018: 7–8). Explicating these beliefs, then, becomes an exercise of structuring global governance and making it less susceptible to criticism. In IR terms, core beliefs in and of global governance respond to basic questions such as (i) what overarching principles and world order visions organize cross-border interaction (i.e. the *nature* of world politics); (ii) which actors, institutions, and mechanisms are involved in the construction and contestation of said principles and world order visions (i.e. the *pieces* of world politics), and (iii) how do different principles and visions at different levels relate to one another and reproduce or challenge the existing order over time (i.e. the *trajectory* of world politics; Weiss and Wilkinson, 2015: 404–405; Jackson and Nexon, 2013: 550–551).

From this angle, global governance as collective action is characterized by guiding beliefs that sustain an order until its latent uncertainty and complexity produce a crisis in which core beliefs have to be modified or replaced. Beliefs emerge from crises, enable cross-border action, and have to stand the test of time—until they break down again. We can thus think of the very emergence of global governance as multistakeholderism throughout the 1990s as such a crisis. Likewise, the recent populist challenge the concept is experiencing marks a similar (at least partial) breakdown of beliefs that emerged prior (Zürn, 2018b). In both crises, beliefs as rules for action enable practitioners of global governance as well as scholars reflecting on those how to respond to and act in the specific situations in which they find themselves. Operating at the nexus of explaining and doing world politics, beliefs serve practitioners, pundits, and academics of world politics and foreign policy alike to make sense of, contextualize, and explain human activity taking place between and beyond nation-states.

Certain beliefs about world order in this context seem to be very influential (i.e. more actors equals better cooperation), while situational disagreement remains (i.e. which precise actors are included in the governance of a specific problem). Reconstructing these beliefs as rules for action is thus of particular importance since it provides us with insights into change and continuation of global governance as actors either remain loyal to their beliefs or develop new ones (Roos, 2015). Consequently, examining social dynamics and change at the global level following the creation of new beliefs in crises allows us to answer the following questions: How has global governance become a dominant practice and theory of world politics? What horizons of action does it open and close? How might it change in the future? In other words, a pragmatist reconsideration of beliefs in global governance contributes to the very political project of a concept that is constituting the public in an age of planetary governance (Abraham and Abramson,

2017: 39–42). The next section outlines the role of the report of the UN Commission on Global Governance in this and discusses why it is important to reconsider this document.⁶

Analyzing the 1995 Commission on Global Governance Report

Assuming “that international developments had created a unique opportunity for strengthening global co-operation to meet the challenge of securing peace, achieving sustainable development, and universalizing democracy” (Commission on Global Governance, 1995: 359),⁷ former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt in January 1990 brought together high-ranked individuals from several UN commissions, including the *Independent Commission on International Development Issues*, the *Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues*, the *World Commission on Environment and Development*, and the *South Commission* to discuss global cooperation. Ingvar Carlsson (then Prime Minister of Sweden), Shridath Ramphal (then Commonwealth Secretary-General), and Jan Pronk (then Dutch Minister for Development Co-operation) took the lead in preparing an initial report and inviting a larger group of public figures and senior politicians to meet in Stockholm in April 1991. This new *Stockholm Initiative on Global Security and Governance* proposed not only the “establishment of an independent International Commission on Global Governance” but also a “World Summit on Global Governance [. . .], similar to the meetings in San Francisco and at Bretton Woods in the 1940s” (The Stockholm Initiative on Global Security and Governance, 1991: 45). While the summit never came to be, after assuring the support from then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the *Stockholm Initiative* transitioned into the *UN Commission on Global Governance* in September 1992. Under co-chairs Carlsson and Ramphal and with a total of 28 members, the commission was tasked to “contribute to the improvement of global governance [. . .] by analys[ing] the main forces of global change, examin[ing] the major issues facing the world community, assess[ing] the adequacy of global institutional arrangements and suggest[ing] how they should be reformed” (Commission on Global Governance, 1995: 368).

In addition to a small secretariat established in Geneva, the Commission met through a series of 11 meetings between September 1992 and October 1994. Four working groups on different topics (Global Values; Global Security; Global Development; and Global Governance) contributed toward the final report to be disseminated in 1995. Published as a standard UN report (and thus available online) and a monograph with Oxford University Press, it was well-documented and understood that the Commission’s discussions on global governance were meant to provide foundations for both policy and theory of world politics. Due to its seminal definition and compelling nature, the report became highly influential within the UN, was widely quoted, and still marks a standard reference for global governance today (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019: 23–24). Notwithstanding dynamic and productive research on global governance over the next 25 years, we consider the report to be crucially important for the ensuing and at this time rather inchoate discourse on global governance, influencing how politicians from early on understood

the policy notion as well as how academics picked up on the concept. Considered from within our framework, the report expresses core beliefs in what the Commission perceived to be “a time of profound, rapid and pervasive change in the international system – a time of uncertainty, challenge and opportunity” (Commission on Global Governance, 1995: 366). While the notion of global governance surely matured over time, we think of this report responding to a crisis, ripe with opportunities *and* challenges, in which old and new beliefs on world politics are measured against each other and adapted to explore an order that can better address new global problems and withstand future challenges. Hence, while being a historical document today, the report nevertheless provides the best starting point to consider beliefs as rules for action and normative foundations in and of global governance.

Methodological explication

In order to reconstruct beliefs from the Commission’s report, we applied a “sequential analysis” (Maiwald, 2005; Oevermann, 2000). Through this analysis, researchers reconstruct structures of meaning from written and non-written expressions in which beliefs as rules for action become manifest. By means of their own socially generated competence to act, sequential analysts relate back the beliefs expressed to social rules and meaning that brought them about in the first place. A logged manifestation of meaningful action such as the 1995 Commission on Global Governance Report is not only taken as an expression of its authors’ dominant beliefs on world politics but also as a concatenation of sequences, that is its smallest particles of meaning. Each of these sequences is defined by a scope of possible action, the choice for a particular one, and therefore the closing of others no longer available in the next sequence. The choice of one sequence leading into another is based on the structure of meaning that the author operates in, representing his or her dominant beliefs. In its sequential unfolding, a text thus reflects a deeper structure of beliefs that manifest themselves in certain choices to be reconstructed backwards through careful reading. Following the sequential interplay of possibilities and actualizations thus reveals the beliefs an actor holds (Oevermann, 1991, 2000).

Asking what beliefs were expressed in and sustained over a stream of text, we specifically proceeded in three steps: In a first step, we explicated conditions under which the given sequence—a few words or a part of a sentence from the report—potentially make sense following “phonetic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of which the tacit knowledge is acquired in socialization” (Maiwald, 2005: 10). These rules were made present by pondering what sequences could meaningfully follow. This allowed us to develop different meanings that might have been present at the time the author chose particular wordings. In a second step, the meaning of the sequence that actually succeeded was considered—and considered in light of the readings that followed from the preceding sequence. The third and final step was to explain the realized choice in light of alternatives and to condense these choices into patterns of beliefs. With every new sequence, promising readings that hitherto appeared plausible failed. The concatenation of actual choices, on the other hand, defined the specificity of the interpreted text and the manifested beliefs. Proceeding sequence by sequence and considering

each under the double aspect of closing and opening scopes of meaningful action, we thus reconstructed a concise and characteristic case-structure of establishing and expanding practices and thoughts of global governance. The following discussion presents condensed beliefs reconstructed from four excerpts of the report, selected in line with our methodology which favors opening and contrasting text segments (Oevermann, 2000: 97–100). The selection includes (a) the title, (b) the opening of chapter 1, (c) a definition of global governance from the same chapter, and (d) the opening of chapter 7. Taken together, our findings reveal the core beliefs as rules for action that brought the report about.⁸

Findings

(a) Captured in its title, “Our Global Neighbourhood,” the report from the beginning refers to a collective of indefinite size. The inclusive personal pronoun “Our” begs the question who had legitimized the authors to speak for this collective. Taken literally, the adjective “Global” refers to the largest collective possible and the unusual combination of “Global” and “Neighbourhood” stresses the size of the collective and the need to define it even further. This collective does not necessarily encompass the globe but refers to processes of integration in some form at least. That said, while the authors seem to be aware of overarching, challenging questions of representation, authority, and legitimacy, at least in the opening sequence, do not engage with them. Geographical distance is qualified, if not negated, and unity is emphasized but it remains unclear under which conditions and whose rule(s). As “The Report of the Commission on Global Governance” (entirely in capitals), the following sequence points to an authoritative presentation of important content, which simultaneously increases the speakers’ obligation to address questions of legitimacy and authority while at the same time implying that both are present. In other words, the authors empower themselves to speak authoritatively on the subject.

The “Commission” and its “Report” further suggest perceived challenges, the need for extraordinary measures to respond to these, and an aura of authoritative expertise to do just that. Along these lines, “global governance” is reified and the necessity to politically respond to it is created. More bluntly, an idea is named and without further explanation or justification taken for granted. The authors must be aware that practices of “Global Governance” already exist because otherwise a “Commission” to spell out rules for this practice would make no sense. At the same time, “The Report” assumes the authority to define this new reality, produce new knowledge, and lay the foundations for further clarification and the creation of consciousness on behalf of this phenomenon. This can be condensed to the following rules for action guiding the document and its authors:

- Envision a collective without broaching it while reifying practices how to govern it;
- Avoid a discussion of the basis of your legitimacy and remain silent on the issue;
- Increase your own authority by creating an aura of expertise and commitment.

(b) The opening of Chapter 1 consistently refers to the novel character of the world and the need to govern it from within the new framework proposed by the Commission.

While this framework is rhetorically linked to principles of democracy and “the collective power of people,” precise conditions under which these can be realized remain unspecified. At the same time, the report expresses a strong sense of optimism. Overall, the speakers proclaim an unprecedented and exceptional moment in the collectivization of human action. While the success of future action remains uncertain, they distance themselves from history and entertain the prospect of a climax in the development of humankind. Further bringing in a heavy and charged rhetoric reminiscent of a manifesto, collective power through global governance is pitched against established traditional politics. Such concepts and political ideas do not apply to future world politics. Not addressing the controversial nature of such claims, contestation of the idea is preemptively struck down. With adequate justification of the speakers’ position and authority still lacking, the report thus can be critically read as reflecting rather strong ideological qualities and a sense of historical determinism. Suggesting to set the course for the future in that fashion, the authors fall into the trap of presentism and exaggerate their own role to ensure there can only be one vision of global governance in future world politics. To claim decision-making competence in such a comprehensive and committed fashion reveals a logic of self-elevation and maybe even hubris, spurred on by assumingly unique historical conditions. The consistent use of flowery catchwords which otherwise remain undefined makes the report and its non-justified claims to legitimacy even more problematic.

To illustrate our readings, the following sequences frame the promised delivery of a new form of governance as “the foremost challenge of this generation.” By means of this mode of exacerbation and dramatization, the authors further engage in political vision and prophetic speech. In fact, the main sequence explicitly states that “the world needs a new vision.” Once again, the prophecy however remains empty of substance. The fact that “the world” is introduced as the most global unit possible indicates that the authors believe the whole to be at stake. Accordingly, they raise their voice for what they see as a unified whole. Unfortunately, their claim to truth and unity remains only a claim as they continue to speak as authorized and legitimized without providing evidence or justification. Despite inherent contingency at the global level, the potential of a “new vision” alone is what seems to drive global governance applicable to everyone around the world. This would represent “higher levels of co-operation” and thus is to be preferred over past world politics characterized by competition and rivalry. Referring to “areas of common concerns and shared destiny,” the report remains vague as the authors leave out not only the purpose of cooperation, but also the mode. Taken together, the sequences represent an infinite recourse of non-justification and assertion as they string together generic terms which, instead of providing justification, each demands further explication. The final justification stems from a profession of faith in global governance and hence the Commission thereof. In terms of rules for action, the second excerpt of the report examined contains:

- Ignore the political (i.e. conflicting positions) in politics and instill a unifying vision of one future, presenting your beliefs as an expression of faith without any discussion;

- Express commitment to “the collective power of people to shape the future” but continue to leave out details and avoid further justification of your authority and legitimacy;
- Contend that new global issues do not imply fundamental changes, but only more of what already exists in better cooperation and unity with more stakeholders involved.

(c) The third extract analyzed from the report focuses on defining global governance. This occurs in an inclusive and open-ended fashion and elucidates the ongoing striving for authority over the subject matter. Featuring many different layers and actors, both institutions and individuals, everything is considered as constitutive for global governance and nothing can be left out. This defining happens in yet another attempt to objectify global governance and determine the scope of the phenomenon. This is done by maintaining a distinction between the public and the private and by connecting them both in global governance, suggesting a dialectical yet productive unity between them. Global governance is further thought of in managerial and processual terms as global commonality and dependency are restated. From the authors’ point of view, there never seems to have been anything other than governance and it becomes a matter of better spelling out and implementing the notion in our time. This, interestingly enough, can be achieved through managing common affairs and bringing together conflicting interests (rather than engaging in political discussion). Instead of an analytically precise definition, we are thus left with an expansive and integrative policy statement.⁹

More specifically, the beliefs expressed throughout this extract revolve around a notion of diverse interests indicating a pluralistic global society. At the same time the authors reveal their instrumental understanding of politics. In their view, politics is about interests that must and ultimately will be accommodated. In other words, conflicts can be mediated and resolved because all human beings are held to share common interests. That said, the process of governance remains indeterminate and vague, more a vision, a hope, and a yearning than an actual policy formulation. A universal expression of dependence and connectedness, global governance and the institutions it entails refer to all domains of international politics. Global governors, inclusively and broadly defined, are empowered in an absolute manner, simply by the conditions and potential of our time. Put bluntly, in the eyes of the Commission, global governance just is and it does not matter by whom it is done as long as it is delivered collectively. In their words, the public interacts with the private and the informal stems from the formal. Starting from a formal-legal understanding of institutions, these come first but are necessarily deformed through and in global governance. One could describe this as the end justifying the means as the authors clearly think broad instead of smart and managerial instead of analytical. Translated into the rules for action guiding the report, the sequential analysis of the third extract yields the following results:

- Define global governance in seemingly objective but ultimately vague terms, waiving analytical sharpness in order to create and sustain a broad, all-inclusive container concept of governance;

- Embrace an apolitical, visionary understanding of interest and conflicts which can be mediated and managed as all institutions act and cooperate in the interest of the people;
- Portray global governance as inclusive and expansive as possible to include all kinds of institutions and individuals, from public to private, from formal to informal, without further specifying their role or competencies within the overall order.

(d) Finally, we analyzed the first three pages of chapter 7, in which the authors summarize their report. In this excerpt, the authors do not make a stable and coherent distinction between governors and the governed with regard to their addressees. To all inhabitants of the polity, which they, by means of an overstretched metaphor, call “global neighbourhood,” the authors advise a “global civic ethic.” This remains unspecific, but is supposed to give global governance vitality and enable humans to control their own lives, not least with the help of a diverse set of so-called non-state actors such as “non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citizens’ movements, transnational corporations, academia and the mass media.” Well-known ethical core values, rights and responsibilities are postulated of which it is not clear how they relate to existing institutions and at which political decision-making level they are to be anchored and made justiciable. What seems to make the difference from the authors’ point of view is simply that *they* are the ones making these proposals. In connection with this latent self-overestimation, the authors do not explicate who has commissioned them in the institutional environment of the UN nor what their mandate covers. Nevertheless, the authors call upon “the world community” to act without considering it necessary to distinguish between governors and the governed anymore.

In the authors’ view, “[e]ffective global governance” does not need much more than “a new vision” to challenge ineffective approaches from the past in which “governments and intergovernmental institutions” were sufficient. By declaring “that there is no alternative to working together,” the authors underpin their prophetic speech with technocratic ideas, which are also reflected in the assumption of a universal conception of how life in the global neighborhood should proceed. References to democracy, which the authors do not care to define further, are thus accompanied by its technocratic undermining. Global governance becomes a necessary reaction to the increasing interdependence among the inhabitants of the global neighborhood and a question of their ethos, flanked by negating the difference between governors and the governed. The authors call for action without making sufficiently clear who should act and why. They speak for all—for all inhabitants of a global neighborhood, but in doing so they neither reflect on the normative foundations of their demands nor sufficiently legitimize their own postulates. Their worldview is guided by a technocratic understanding of democracy: effectiveness (output) is considered so relevant that legitimacy (input) need not be further discussed. In terms of rules for action, the fourth excerpt of the report examined contains:

- Abolish the distinction between governors and the governed in an attempt to promote humans’ control of their own lives by means of an unspecified global civic ethic;

- Speak for the world community and call upon it to act without being too clear about who exactly has commissioned you with what exactly;
- Be guided by a technocratic understanding of democracy and governance with a focus on effectiveness instead of legitimacy.

Discussion

By and large, the beliefs reconstructed from the report can be consolidated into three broader *topoi*, namely, (i) how the authors of the report see themselves and their time; (ii) how they conceive of politics in general; and (iii) how they see and define global governance in particular. From their perspective, the development of humankind and its very history has reached a climax. Utilizing a rhetoric of presentism to their best advantage, the members of the Commission on Global Governance frame their time as unique while they remain silent on the basis of their legitimacy. Presenting their beliefs as an expression of faith, they take the role of prophets but do not tell their audience who had sent them. To compensate their lack of legitimacy they increase their own authority in two ways. First, they bestow themselves with an aura of expertise and reiterate the authority seemingly surrounding them. Second, they conclude the imminent need to act upon the time as it presents itself to them, suggesting there is no other course of action conceivable. Their understanding of their time is thus one of historical determinism as their prophetic vision allows no alternatives.

As to politics in general, the authors express commitment to “the collective power of people to shape the future” but do not specify the conditions under which such principles of democracy and the presumed collective power of people can be realized nor do they detail who the governors and who the governed are in global governance. They refrain from addressing questions of representation, authority, and legitimacy, and imply that their fundamental postulates about the state of the world need no further justification. For the authors of the report, it suffices to rely on more of what already exists in better cooperation and unity. Instilling a unifying vision of one future, they ignore conflicting positions and interests in politics and embrace an apolitical understanding of human life. Expressed in a rather pragmatic approach, politics is about conflicts which can be mediated and managed. More broadly, all institutions, formal and informal, act in the interest of the people and can realize those through cooperation. Taken together, the members of the Commission express a rather instrumental understanding of politics, which is primarily about managing common affairs and solving conflicting interests by bringing them together.

The authors’ general understanding of politics is also fully reflected in their particular concept of global governance. From their point of view, the provision of collective order through global governance, precisely because there is no alternative to it, has always already been there. Against the belief that global governance simply is (and has to be), it does not matter to the authors by whom it is done. More specifically, the authors describe and argue for global governance which is as inclusive and expansive as possible, ranging from institutions to individuals, from public to private, from formal to informal. Any global governor is welcome, as long as they meet in the spirit of accommodating conflicting interests. Collective power through cooperation is

pitched against established politics, which is believed to fall short to address novel global challenges. At the same time, the envisioned new processes of governance remain indeterminate and vague and the *modus operandi* of cooperation unclear. Global governance thus resembles an end which justifies its means. Even the borders of the polity in which it is taking place need not be designated. Global governance is portrayed as something one has to have faith in, just as in the prophets who proclaim it. The authors waive analytical sharpness in order to create a container concept of governance in which everything can be included but that can still be expressed as a vision. Their prophecy, however, remains empty of substance, at least the way it is stated throughout the report.

Conclusion

This article sought to provide a reconsideration of global governance through a pragmatist perspective. We did so because we share the criticism that global governance remains vague and incomplete in its current form. At the same time, we recognize the need to provide governance in a complex world. As individual global governors—be it states, intergovernmental organizations, or non-state actors—are unable or unwilling to address pressing problems on their own, we are in need of more reflective and better justified global cooperative public policies. Such policies need a more mature and self-critical academic discussion to provide a defense against unapologetic unilateralism and populist disregard for rules as we have seen over the last few years. To provide better governance, we conceive global governance as the attempt to respond to transnational dynamics of economic and cultural globalization. From the political practitioner's perspective in the mid-1990s, this response was consequentially no less than a globalization of politics, a concept of governance, political regulation, and problem-solving deemed for the political sphere beyond ever fewer sovereign nation-states. In IR, this idea met with a particularly receptive ear among so-called moderate, liberal constructivists, who had become an influential current within the discipline after the end of the Cold War. The perceived uniqueness of this situation and the enthusiastic optimism to do things differently explain to a large extent why global governance developed such a compelling hold of our imagination in so little time (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2019).

As we have argued in the context of this contribution, however, academic thinking and political practice of global governance both suffer from a lack of reflecting the concept's overlapping and conflating normative and analytical ambitions. This lack of reflection can be traced back to the 1995 report by the Commission on Global Governance. Its authors took the role of prophets and proclaimed global governance as a container concept into which anything you want to put could be put. Most importantly, they embraced a managerial vision and replaced politics by turning conflict into cooperation. Echoing Sinclair (2012), global governance has been deeply based and framed in a functionalist logic right from the start. On the level of core beliefs, the authors of the report of the Commission on Global Governance follow the rule for action: *Promote a most unspecific concept of global governance as panacea to realize the liberal tenet of an eternal harmony of interests*. Instead of providing an encompassing, instructive, concise, and well-reflected concept and spelling out its political implications, the authors

delivered an expansive and charged policy statement in their report. Given the nature of the document, this comes as no big surprise. However, the fact that the academic discourse eagerly picked up on the report, its definition, and its core beliefs explain why contemporary discussions about global governance remain limited. Whether this was cunningness on behalf of the authors or desperation on behalf of the scholars remains to be seen. What is clear is that a rather controversial understanding of world politics was strongly and in a sustained matter reified through an academic discourse continuing to stew its own ambiguities and imprecisions.

The irony is that with the twofold lack of reflection in both political and theoretical discourse, more than a quarter of a century after the Commission on Global Governance's report, there is arguably more dire need to enable politics on a global scale to compete with the forces of economic and cultural globalization (Hale et al., 2013). The question of how to effectively and legitimately address cross-border issues in the absence of global government is still pressing, exacerbated by continuing inequalities and injustices on a global scale in line with the over-consumption of resources, imposing immense burdens on the environment and thus extremely impairing life chances of future generations on the whole planet. Add to this an immediate sense of crisis and growing populism arguing to put the needs of one people before the needs of others and it becomes clear that humankind is in desperate need of better arguments to advance the debate among policymakers, scholars, and all other constituents of the global public on how to politically regulate global issues. A change of ideas with respect to the core beliefs guiding world politics is required. Pragmatism, we believe, can help illuminate the existing rules for action in their historical emergence. Having established the nature of those beliefs that, dominant throughout the 1990s, led to the Commission's Report of 1995, future research, in dialogue with practice, will hopefully find new ones in more conscious, reflective ways than what emerged during the early days.

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Notes

1. Note that Finkelstein (1995) raised his critical remarks in the editorial of the very first issue of *Global Governance*.
2. Arguably, the very concept's elusive nature provides the narrative which has a strong hold on the imagination of scholars and practitioners alike (Dingwerth and Pattberg, 2006; Hofferberth, 2015; Hofferberth and Lambach, 2020).
3. It is important to note that neither globalization nor its neoliberal underpinnings simply parachuted into existence and that the "end of history" narrative following the end of the Cold War is heavily contested. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pushing us to consider the dominant political rationality of the time in more explicit terms.
4. We contend there is explicit influence if Pragmatism is directly referred to or pragmatists are referenced. Arguably, given that Pragmatism is a wider philosophy engaged with social issues, there has been an implicit influence on IR for much longer.
5. As with any list of references, we do not claim that this is comprehensive. However, it features enough meta-theoretical, methodological, and substantial applications of American Pragmatism to indicate a sustained, growing influence. Arguably, the best proof for such

- influence is that there has been a series of review articles discussing a “pragmatist turn” in IR (Cochran, 2012; Kaag and Kreps, 2012; Ralston, 2011).
6. Following Dewey (1929: 67) and his notion of theorizing as an action in and of the empirical world, we can further consider global governance as practice and theory and can, in fact, overcome this dualism as both constitute world politics.
 7. The information presented in the following is mainly drawn from the Commission’s Report Annex as well as additional research to shed some light on how this commission came to be and how it approached its mandate.
 8. Sequential analyses do not rely on examining large amounts of text. Rather, the underlying research logic follows a *pars pro toto* approach, assuming that dominant beliefs are expressed throughout each sequence or at least each series of sequences. Committed to research ethics, it is important not to select sequences that might correspond to one’s own views and prejudices, but those that are most challenging or particularly important for the document, such as the beginning or end of a text (Oevermann, 1991, 2000). Also, note that the following discussion only captures major insights and does not represent the careful reading we engaged in. A long version exists in keywords and can be shared through the authors. Both the long version and its condensation presented in this contribution have to be taken as a first exploration into the report and we gladly consider and discuss alternative readings to ours.
 9. Against its lack of analytical precision, the noteworthy fact that this definition became seminal for the global governance discourse will be discussed further in the conclusion.

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