Unpacking Beliefs as Rules for Action in World Politics.
A Pragmatist Reconsideration of Global Governance

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Abstract: In 1995, the UN Commission on Global Governance published their Our Global Neighborhood report. In the same year, the academic journal Global Governance, serving as the Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations in association with ACUNS, was launched. These two events in retrospect are considered to mark the origins of global governance thinking and practice in world politics. Despite inherent ambiguities, this idea since then gained massive traction and has established itself as both a modality of world politics and a heuristic thereof. Connecting practitioners and academics, it has been argued that global governance marks an important departure from prior approaches to world politics. Advancing a pragmatist framework, we set out in this paper to 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 politics and thought of global governance, both as theory and policy notion. We reconstruct these beliefs directly from the 1995 Global Governance report. Echoing critical readings, the paper highlights the inherent confections of normative and analytical commitments indicative of global governance. As an otherwise ‘empty signifier’ and 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: Global Governance, Reconstruction, Beliefs, American Pragmatism
Introduction

Initiated by former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1990 and then later officially tasked by then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992, the Commission on Global Governance published their well-known Our Global Neighborhood report in 1995. Being quoted most frequently for its standard definition of global governance, this report is considered as the origin of global governance, both as a political program and an academic discourse (Murphy 2014a). Framed as such, global governance – despite its inherent ambiguity as the notion keeps flip-flopping back and forth between theory and practice – gained traction in IR and beyond. Twenty-five years later, the idea, in a deep and sustained manner, continues to influence how international organization and multilateralism are thought and practiced. At the same time, since its very conception, much has been written about the need to intellectually and practically improve our understanding and application of the notion. As an otherwise ‘empty signifier’ and projection surface of all kinds, we still struggle to define global governance as its very nature makes it elusive and difficult to understand and carry out (Weiss and Wilkinson 2019, Zürn 2018, Hofferberth 2015, Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006, Latham 1999, Finkelstein 1995).1

With the jury on global governance still out, the notion nevertheless enjoys unwavering ‘celebrity status’ within and beyond IR (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 1). In its ‘third generation’ now, current discussions reflect past trajectories as well as ‘points of analytical transition and legacies’ and consider these as progress towards a more mature concept (Coen and Pegram 2018, 107, Zürn 2018). In analytical terms, global governance challenges IR meta-narratives such as anarchy and hierarchy (Baumann and Dingwerth 2015) and might even 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). In political terms, global governance, much like globalization as the macro process it responds to, is equally framed as a discourse ‘with no alternatives’ as states around the worldassumingly have little choice but to embrace multilateralism and multistakeholderism as guiding principles.2 In other words, global

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1 Given that Finkelstein (1995) raised his critical remarks in the very first issue of Global Governance, the then launched new academic journal serving as the Review of Multilateralism and International Organization, the tradition to criticize global governance seems to be just as old as the idea itself.

2 The obvious exception in today’s world is the Trump administration, which misunderstood global governance as ‘control and domination’, Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York,
governance, despite all its ambiguities and unspecified associations, has become a compelling paradigm if not the *sine qua non* to think and practice world politics.

Twenty-five years after receiving its name and frame, we propose a critical reconsideration of global governance and its implications for thinking and practicing world politics based on the pragmatist concept of *beliefs as rules for action* (James [1907] 1975, Peirce [1878] 1992). Elaborated in detail below, we content that practices and academic reflections of global governance are based on assumptions of how one conceives the world as well as normative ideas of how one should act within. Reflecting creative action (agency) and sociality (structure), these foundational beliefs as underpinnings explain global governance’s ambivalence and prevalence. These rules for action not only constitute the normative core of the idea. They also define the scope of politics and thought of global governance, both as theory and policy notion. It is thus important to (a) reveal these beliefs as baselines of thinking and practice in global governance, (b) indicate how their analytical and normative nature conflate, and (c) contribute to a more reflective discussion on global governance in its third generation which considers its inherent normativity (Zürn 2018, Murphy 2014a).

In order to advance our argument, the paper is structured as follows. First, we offer a brief genealogy of global governance. This is intended as a critical state-of-the-art on global governance thinking and its practice as well as an elaboration of its origins and how it came to influence IR. Second, we introduce the pragmatist concept of *beliefs as rules for action*. We advance this concept to contextualize, make sense of, and ultimately explain human action. Third, we illustrate the value of beliefs as rules for action by offering a close reading of the 1995 Commission Report. Against the rules reconstructed from this document, we content that the core axiom of global governance (i.e. global problems are tractable and solutions feasible if different actors collaborate) rests on both normative and analytical commitments at the same time. We further conclude that such conflations need to be explicated and justified in global governance thinking and practice for the concept to remain meaningful in the future. A reconstruction of underlying rules thus not only indicates the potential of pragmatist thinking in IR (Kratochwil 2009). It further hopes to strengthen global governance against attacks, justified or unjustified, that question the need to cooperate based on the ambiguities inherent in the notion.

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Global Governance – A Brief Genealogy

While international organization, multilateralism, and multistakeholderism (i.e. involving other actors than nation states in global affairs to manage complex issues and provide collective order) had been discussed in different ways for a long time in IR (Rosenau 1969, Kaiser 1971, Mansbach et al. 1976, Ruggie 1975, 1980) as well as studied within different approaches – consider, among others, for example the English School (Dunne 2005), regime theory (Young 2005), and transnational relations (Risse-Kappen 1995)3 – the emergence of global governance fundamentally changed how we perceive and explain these phenomena 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. In other words, to understand the origins of global governance and why it took off during the 1990s, despite its inherent conceptual ambiguities, to become maybe the new meta-narrative and leitmotif to make sense of our time, one needs to consider (a) real world dynamics, (b) disciplinary dynamics, and (c) how they mutually affected each other at their time.

Real World Developments – Short and Long-Term

Likely to be the single most-referenced event in IR, the end of the Cold War figures prominently among many different developments and theories in the discipline. Consequentially, in a short-term perspective, the emergence of global governance is also frequently framed as a ‘post-Cold War moment’. Rosenau (1992, 1) himself contributed to this narrative 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 short-term event narrative runs the risk to downplay long-term developments. One of those constitutive for the emergence of global governance are the long durée dynamics of the multilateral order established after World War II. At around this time, unable to bind states in meaningful ways to address global problems, it became more and

3 All three 'predecessors', Rosenau (1992, 8) elegantly (and most likely strategically) judged, represent only subsets of global governance with this being the 'more encompassing concept'. Early but still rather sporadic uses of the term itself, according to Koenig-Archibugi (2019, 334), date back to the 1970s to be then used more frequently throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
more obvious that the multilateral order manifested in and through the UN, the Bretton Woods system, and other regional organizations remained incomplete (Cox 1997). Against this long-term failure of multilateralism, the end of the Cold War as a singular event was eagerly associated with the hope to move beyond the paralysis of intergovernmentalism. This hope, for example, was explicitly expressed by the Swedish government, which launched the policy-oriented *UN Commission on Global Governance* with Shridath Ramphal and Ingmar Carlsson as co-chairs in 1992. Tasked with providing new meaning to an otherwise confused moment in time, 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 for world order.

Another long-term development important and constitutive for the emergence of global governance was the notion of increased and rapidly accelerating globalization and the need to manage this. Understood as a set of political, economic and cultural processes of integration and growing together, globalization itself is often linked to the end of the Cold War and thus expresses a sense of urgency connected to the 1990s, at least in its popular interpretations (Fukuyama 1992). In this light, global governance was quickly understood as the political and intellectual response to globalization – if borders deteriorate and nation 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). As such, intellectually and in practical terms, globalization and global governance are indeed deeply intertwined (James and Steger 2015). However, just like the crisis of the multilateral post-war order, globalization did not parachute into existence. In that sense, the ‘end of history’ narrative and the notion of the 1990s being the first true decade of globalization are at least contested. More precisely and from a long-term perspective, it might have been more the desperate need to make sense of complex developments finally unfolding in their implications rather than actual causation that brought things together in a simple narrative of increased globalization to which global governance became the ‘obvious’ response (Weiss and Wilkinson 2019, 22-3).

Thinking of the 1990s in such long-term fashion and not reducing these years to their immediate events, global governance can quickly be reconsidered not as an immediate response to any single event such as the end of the Cold War. Rather, while “the complexities of the post-Cold War era are concrete expressions of global governance, [other] forms of world order have been and will be different in other epochs”, implying that manifestations of global governance
will always change over time (Weiss and Wilkinson 2019, 20). As such, global governance is a much longer story, which most likely does not have a single moment of emergence – in a historical perspective ‘over the long haul’, global governance has always been there (Murphy 2014b). Yet at the same time, in a dialectic fashion, events and dynamics of the 1990s and their perception matter for the genealogy of global governance simply because they embodied the hopes and fears of practitioners and scholars of world politics. More specifically, global governance gave them a focal point and the practical as well as analytical means to project and maintain the narrative that change is happening. This, most likely, best explains the unwavering attractiveness of global governance in light of all the criticism it faces for its lack of conceptual precision (Murphy 2014a).

**Disciplinary Developments within IR**

If one wants to understand why and how global governance captured IR’s attention so quickly, one needs to reflect the disciplinary developments the field experienced throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Three such developments in particular seem to have influenced and fostered the emergence of global governance. First, while maybe more mythical than real, the neo-neo-debate superimposed any development, at least in its mainstreamed fashion, within IR during that time (Schmidt 2002). Featuring prominently in both realist and liberal-institutionalist accounts, state-centrism and sovereignty thus were the dominant conceptual specters against which global governance emerged. Stated over and over again by those involved in the making of the new paradigm, both 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 adequate 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 paradigm outside mainstream IR and its petty ‘my theory is holier than thou’ mindset, global governance was meant to become refuge for those who felt at odds with conventional IR theories and their theoretical arms race (Weiss and Wilkinson 2019, 2014).

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4 We do not claim that the three developments to be spelled out mark the only developments occurring in IR. Such an understanding would presume that there is an essence of IR and everyone involved experiences the field in similar ways. Rather, we content that it is one disciplinary story of others but one that is relevant for the emergence of global governance.
Second, the emergence of global governance was influenced by and at least initially benefited from the simultaneous emergence of constructivist thinking. In fact, overlapping in terms of involved scholars, both became ‘partners in crime’ as constructivism and global governance together created intellectual space and opened up the discipline in terms of what, how and why we study (Barnett and Sikkink 2008).\(^5\) Moreover, in a division of labor neither explicated nor justified, it ‘saved’ scholars interested in global governance from engaging in methodological discussions. This, however, proved to be a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it allowed global governance to focus even more on the substance of world order and change. On the other hand, the lack of methodological reflections and socio-theoretical foundations further added to the imprecision haunting the approach. Cultivating and sustaining its self-image as a practice-relevant concept, the peculiar dynamics of the 1990s at least influenced global governance in such a way that it presented itself in practical and assumingly atheoretical, substantial fashion (Hofferberth 2015, 602-3).

Third and finally, despite the gather pace and influence of constructivist thinking, IR during the 1990s was for the most part still driven by commitments towards rigorous analytical theorizing. Still mortified by any potential “glide into policy science” (Hoffman 1977, 59), IR mainstream at least continued to entertain and demand scientistic ideas and standards of how knowledge should be derived. This obviously 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 maintain their normative commitments and concerns. In fact, openly discussing shortcomings in global policies and engaging with normative 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 picked up in global governance, which made it even more attractive to a broad range of scholars otherwise alienated by their own discipline.

\(^5\) It should be noted that we are mostly referring here to conventional constructivism later to be known as social constructivism. This ‘softer’ version of constructivist thinking at least directly shared not only similar assumptions with global governance, but was also marked by a similar enthusiasm and spirit of optimism to ‘do something else’ than conventional IR theory (Checkel 1998, Hofferberth and Weber 2015).
Taken together, these three disciplinary developments, arguably, left global governance in an awkward position vis-à-vis IR theory but also in one that was full of potential to move beyond. On the one hand, it remained unclear whether global governance was a new contender within IR or a game-changer beyond IR (Weiss and Wilkinson 2014). For years to come, scholars attempted in dialectical fashion to relate global governance to conventional IR theory and subsume it within while also recognizing the need to develop further theories which would go beyond (Hoffmann and Ba 2005). On the other hand, precisely this non-commitment to disciplinary standards and expectations as well as the perceived opportunities that came with such a break-away provided excitement and space for scholars to project all sorts of ideas into global governance. Put bluntly, it were the very shortcomings of mainstream IR that generated a “yearning of some sort” to do things differently (Sinclair 2012, 1). As with every yearning undefined, though, global governance became lost in its own ‘oceanic feeling’, remaining “open and diffuse, if not a little noncommittal” (Latham 1999, 23-4). From an intellectual history perspective on global governance within IR, its main success was at the same time its greatest shortcoming: The not-quite-fitting-in of global governance and the opportunities as well as the ambiguities it sustained.

**Bringing IR and Real World Developments Together**

Latham (1999, 24) argues that the (above-mentioned) openness and non-commitment of global governance were “attractive qualities in an era of ambiguity, uncertainty, and flux”. Bringing real-world and disciplinary developments together, the term itself in fact “was born from a marriage – neither shotgun nor arranged but precipitated by a blend of real world events and developments in the academy – between academic theory and practical policy” (Weiss and Wilkinson 2019, 21). In this marriage, academic theory and practical policy did not only come together but rather mutually reinforced each other, simply because both were perceived to be in dire need for new approaches. In this light, changes in world politics resonated in new world politics theories, which in turn provided new space for new policies. Such feedback loops promoted both practical and academic conclusions, maybe justified, maybe premature, that change was indeed happening. In a nutshell, global governance became its very own echo chamber. Precisely, the excitement, hopes, and fears, which pushed global governance practitioners and scholars alike fostered a discourse which did not clearly separate political commitments and sound analytical research. In other words, core global governance assumptions
involve more stakeholders to achieve better governance – became both starting point and conclusion, legitimation and outcome.

This inherent ambiguity has long been lamented by few scholars and practitioners. However, this has not stopped the concept from gaining intellectual space. Despite not elaborating its socio-theoretical foundations or ontological commitments nor reflecting its underlying functionalist and managerial biases (Sinclair 2012, 19-22), global governance managed to be considered both a non-political approach of IR theory and a practical policy notion at the same time. At the same time, framed as an unavoidable consequence of and response to globalization, global governance authoritatively set the scene for any discussion within. As such, at least in the eyes of critics, global governance quickly lost its normative potential for radical transformation and rather lost itself in technical debates on limited reform. Maybe even more so, due to its own ambivalence and hybrid status between political commitment and analytical theory, as well as its undecided stance on normativity, global governance potentially obscures the fact that it mostly served technocratic elites and reinforced neoliberal ideologies (Overbeek 2010).

Furthermore, other than assumptions on diversified agency and the emergence of a plethora of new global governors as well as the vague notion that issues can be solved through managing them, global governance came short of providing a full-scale theoretical alternative and remained in need of ad-hoc supplementing from other theories and normative positions. More specifically, with only a few and interconnected “constitutive features of current global politics” elaborated (Keukeleire and Schunz 2015, 63-4), global governance remains an otherwise empty signifier and a projection space for practitioners and scholars of world politics alike. To no surprise then, a plethora of different meanings and approaches – analytical as well as political – have made themselves comfortable in the rather open and welcoming intellectual home of global governance. In light of this, our intention is not to distill a ‘purer’ version of global governance but rather come to terms with its current and most likely lasting status of ongoing confusion by revealing its implicit commitments. In other words, the genealogy of global governance is best described by leaving us today with a simultaneity of different approaches which no longer warrant any teleology or coherence as we enter a stage of ‘post-governance’ (Hofferberth and Lambach Forthcoming). To realize the potential inherent in global governance then and to capitalize on the fact that scholars and practitioners embrace the concept,
albeit in different ways, we propose to reconsider its foundations in a different light by reconstructing beliefs as rules for action expressed within. While this will not overcome the ambiguity of global governance, it will at least explain more of it and allow for conscious reflection to further ‘mature’ the concept (Overbeek et al. 2010).

**Beliefs as Rules for Action**

In December 1950, fifteen months after ‘the Soviets’ had detonated their first atomic bomb, the Russian-born Nathan Leites (1912-1987) finished a study on *The Operational Code of the Politburo* for the RAND Corporation. Committed to making Soviet action predictable, he presented his view on “the rules which Bolsheviks believe to be necessary for political conduct” (Leites 1951, xi). Presenting a paranoid style of leadership and foreign policy outline, Leites (1951, 47) argued that: “all public statements made by outside groups are regarded as aiming to deceive” and concluded that, “if the Party does not use violence against its enemies, it lays itself open to violence from its enemies” (Leites 1951, 51). Some twenty years later, Alexander George (1920-2006) – also writing for the RAND Corporation at this time – reintroduced Leites’ concept of underlying beliefs to explain foreign policy (George 1969, 190). Although he favored the notion of ‘belief systems’ (George 1969, 191), he nevertheless drew heavily on Leites’ idea and engaged in its specification. For him, ‘a set of general beliefs about fundamental issues of history and central questions of politics … influences the actor’s perceptions and diagnoses of the flow of political events, his definitions and estimates of particular situations’ (George 1969, 191). Reconsidering Leites’ findings, he exemplified the idea that there is an ‘instrumental belief in the Bolshevik code’ by outlining the following rule: ‘Choose an optimizing strategy that pursues graduated objectives, but “avoid adventures”’ (George 1969, 209).

In a similar move but focused more broadly on European great power politics from 1815 to 1914, Morton Kaplan (1921-2017) – one of IR’s most adamant proponents of scientism – derived several ‘behavioral generalizations’ understood as ‘essential rules’ to maintain equilibria of bi- and multipolar systems applied by the five great powers of that epoch: ‘1. increase capabilities, but negotiate rather than fight; 2. fight rather than fail to increase capabilities; 3. stop fighting rather than eliminate an essential actor; 4. oppose any coalition or single actor that tends to assume a position of predominance within the system’ (Kaplan 1957, 23-4). We consider these approaches to be related since the concepts proposed and illustrated by
Leites, George and Kaplan share an identical grammar. They may be called operational codes, belief systems, behavioral generalizations or equilibrium rules, but what they do is telling people – in particular state leaders – how to go on in specific situations in which they find themselves. As such, they are meant to serve practitioners of world politics and foreign policy to make sense of, contextualize, and explain human activity taking place between and beyond nation states. More broadly, these beliefs operate at the nexus of academics explaining and practitioners doing world politics. At the same time, the beliefs advanced are not systematically reconstructed from practice nor presented as normative commitment of the academic observer. In other words, the beliefs Leites, George, and Kaplan advance, knowingly or unknowingly, ‘write the world’ as they speak to practice and academia alike (Bell 2009, 15-8). It is this dual use of beliefs that makes them important to study. In the following, we use a pragmatist framework to do so.

Beliefs as Rule for Action in Pragmatism

Writing from within a larger socio-theoretical approach, the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) referred to beliefs as rules for action. According to Peirce ([1878] 1992, 129), a belief ‘is something that we are aware of, that ‘appeases the irritation of doubt’, and that ‘involves the establishment in our nature of … a habit’. As a habit, beliefs guide our action and stabilize our agency in the world. Put simply, we rely on beliefs to be able to act. Instead of the primacy of doubt advanced by Descartes, Peirce’s philosophy thus relied on the primacy of action to explain human conduct (Putnam 1995). According to this primacy, “the inevitability of individual as well as collective action is to be thought of as the necessary starting point of any theorizing” (Hellmann 2009, 639). Applying this framework to global governance, we can think of it as action, both in academia as well as in practice. Such action, while inevitable and hence necessarily creative, is routinized. Due to the obstructiveness of reality, however, our routines are routinely challenged. As fellow pragmatist William James (1842-1910) put it, our beliefs work “on a credit system […] and pass,’ so long as nothing challenges them’” (James [1907] 1975, 80). Whatever the precise nature and content of the system, believes stronger than doubt allow us to continue to act and cope with the contingencies of life.

Beliefs as rules for action are thus to be understood and made sense of in sharp contrast to merely reactive, ‘unconscious’ behavior. Pragmatists are keen to point out that their social

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6 In Human Nature and Conduct (1922) Peirce’s student John Dewey (1859-1952) took up the concept of habit which has been discussed among constructivists and pragmatists in IR (Hopf 2010, Schmidt 2014, Pratt 2016).
theory cannot be reduced to “stimulus-response behavior” but rather emphasize “concrete, meaning-oriented activity of an agent” (Goddard and Nexon 2005, 14). Unlike individualistic and overly voluntaristic frameworks of action, however, the meaning of an act – both in the sense what goes in and what comes out – is socially embedded. Thus, it is not the actor who owns or determines the meaning of her or his actions. Rather, it lies with those in light of whom she or he acts and those who respond to her or his act: the social environment of a society as an intersubjective and thus objective capacity. In other words, socially mediated meaning precedes individual meaning. Individuals are able to develop choices, order them, and ultimately translate them into action and create subjective meaning because society surrounding them provides a system of signs and social meaning. As such, actors are not thought of as unconnected and preexisting monads, around which a social bond must first be laboriously laid. Rather, social meaning beyond the individual connects them with one another.

This social embeddedness is reflected in beliefs. As we act on beliefs and thereby either reaffirm or revoke them, we rely on this dimension of action that has been discussed as sociality, inter-subjectivity, and a universe of meaning (see, among others, Mead 1934 [1967], Oevermann 2001, Wagner 2001, Goffman 1959). As we draw on our sociality in creative ways, we think of sociality and its universe of meaning as a ‘pool of potential action’ from which the individual, in light of social expectations and shared interpretations, actualizes a particular meaning (Joas 1996). As the sequences of actualizations unfold over time, new meaning is created and boundaries of what defines an actor and an act as well as what is appropriate do change. In other words, the horizons against we determine our course of action keeps changing as we act (Jackson 2003, 234-9, Abbott 1995). Rules as beliefs for action serve as the nexus of this change as they connect individual actors and their capacity for creative action to social structure, meaning, and expectations. In other words, beliefs are held and exercised by individuals who can only develop, maintain, and change them due to their sociality: Since human lives take place in collectivities with specific histories and social dynamics, a plethora of pre-existing rules that guide action is ‘always already’ there. Linking structure and agency, these rules have been inscribed to actors in the process of socialization, as both constructivists and neo-realists in IR emphasize – be it by parents and other family members, by teachers and class mates, colleagues, fellow citizens, or else. As such, beliefs are stable. However, in action, we (have to) create new beliefs as rules for action (Franke and Roos 2010). This perpetual back-and-forth between routine and crisis is
possible because humans adapt as they choose to believe in one thing over another instead of allowing doubt to paralyze them. As such, beliefs are dynamic. In the end, it is an empirical question whether rules for action remain stable as routines continue to work or whether we have to constantly reinvent them as we face profound crises. Either way, we routinely act on our beliefs and we are able, when routines fail, to create new rules for action due to our sociality and creativity (Hofferberth and Weber 2015).

**Beliefs as Rules for Action in World Politics**

As the foundation for human action and superior to overly voluntaristic or structuralist accounts, the concept of beliefs as rules for action allows us to study how individuals — whether professional or layperson, politician or citizen, businessperson or bureaucrat — sustain their agency. Reconstructing the beliefs advanced and articulated by practitioners of interest thus provides one promising avenue to pursue. This is important to IR since when scholars in this field discuss world order, global governance and globalization, power relations, interests, preferences, and norms, they are discussing human action and the objectifications that result of it. All these phenomena have been brought about by beliefs as rules for action and are composed of and refer to structures of meaning. Conversely, beliefs can be related back to the meaning that brought it about (Wagner 2001, 40-2). In other words, rules for action are reconstructed from the very manifestations of social action they enabled in the first place. Put bluntly, human life is rules for action all the way down and their action are understood as (always already) socially mediated. Collective actors on the global stage such as states or bureaucratic units representing those such as governments in this framework represent ‘structures of corporate practice’ (Dewey [1927] 1954; Franke and Roos 2010). As ‘clotted’ rules for action beyond the individual, corporate structures act on behalf of individuals. They also provide (formal and informal) meaning from which socially embedded human beings (have to) choose to maintain their agency. The solutions to problems of action they provide — at least for now — have stood the test of time. Like the structure of the international system, they open and close possibilities for those who are surrounded by and embedded in them.

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7 As everybody knows who is experienced with depressions, doubts can lead to standstill and have the potential to lead us into inactivity because of very specific, self-defeating rules for action combined with bad luck in terms of biological and hereditary factors. In other words, doubts are not a category upon which a productive approach toward human life can be built upon.

8 Just as routine, crisis in a pragmatist framework has a different meaning compared to everyday use in common language. Notably, an actor might not be aware of herself being in crisis as creating new beliefs does not have to be a deliberate act.
In IR terms, beliefs respond to basic questions such as i) what overarching principles and world order visions organize cross-border interaction (i.e. the nature of the international system), ii) which actors, institutions, and mechanisms are involved in the construction and contestation of said principles and world order visions (i.e. the actors of the international system), and iii) how do different principles and visions at different levels relate to one another and reproduce or challenge the overall order (i.e. the trajectory of the international system). Consequentially, the reconstruction of beliefs as rules for action and whether different actors (can) remain ‘loyal’ to their beliefs helps to determine between continuity and change of large-scale ideas such as global governance and the international order (Weiss and Wilkinson 2015, 404-5, Jackson and Nexon 2013, 550-1). Beliefs thus simultaneously express commitment to current arrangements of what is as well as deeper normative assumptions of what should be (Hellmann 2018, Roos 2015).

Expanding on Leites’ operational codes and George’s belief systems, we think of beliefs as solutions to crises that have stood the test of time and enable cross-border action – until they break down again. The creation of new beliefs in crises bring about social dynamic and change at the global level. As such, reconstructing underlying beliefs as rules for action in global governance allows us to understand how it first became a dominant practice and theory of world politics, what horizons of action it opens (and closes), and how it might change in the future.

**Beliefs in Global Governance - The 1995 Commission 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)\(^9\), former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt during the early 1990s brought together members 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. Ingvar Carlson (then Prime Minister

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\(^9\) To emphasize the foundational character, Jackson and Nexon (2013) refer to beliefs in their aggregation as ‘scientific ontologies’, defining what makes the world hang together in terms of Ruggie (1998). As such, action conceived as guided by beliefs as rules for action are neither rational nor norm-driven. In other words, both the logic of consequentialism and the logic of appropriateness fall short to explain human action as the former assumes the existence of preferences outside the social context whereas the latter implies that the social context determines everything (March and Olsen 1998, Sending 2002).

\(^10\) The information presented here 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.
of Sweden), Shridath Ramphal (then Commonwealth Secretary-General), and Jan Pronk (then Dutch Minister for Development Co-operation) took the lead and prepared an initial report as well as invited a larger group of public figures and former politicians to meet in Stockholm in April 1991. Issued as a ‘Common Responsibility in the 1990’s’ memorandum on April 22, 1991, the 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, upon reaching out to the UN Secretary-General, the Stockholm Initiative in September 1992 transitioned into the UN Commission on Global Governance. Under the co-chairs Carlson 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 eleven meetings between September 1992 and October 1994. Four working groups on different topics (Global Values, Global Security, Global Development, and Global Governance) worked towards 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 global governance was meant to be both policy and theory. Equally important, due to its seminal definition, the report was widely quoted and marks still today the standard reference for global governance. Due to its compelling nature and exposed position in the discourse, we consider this report to be crucially important for the ensuing discourse on global governance, equally influencing how politicians understood the policy notion as well as how academics theoretically picked up on the concept. The report as such features core beliefs expressed 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). Within our framework, we can think of it as a crisis in which old and new beliefs are expressed, related, measured against each other, and ultimately, through creative recourse to social meaning, advanced to stabilize action in the future.
Methodological Explication

In order to reconstruct beliefs expressed in the Commission’s report and read them as rules for action in global governance, we draw on ‘sequential analysis’. This methodological approach, rooted in the philosophy and social theory of pragmatism, had been developed by a German sociologist and his collaborators since the late 1960s (Oevermann passim). In this framework, intersubjective structures of meaning exist and reproduce themselves when humans participate in social acts and capture those in ‘significant symbols’ or language (Mead 1934 [1967], chs 9-11). As outlined above, intersubjective meaning both precedes and stems subjective interpretations of meaning (i.e. acts). By means of the researcher’s very own sociality and competence to act, the beliefs motivating these acts can be examined, that is, reconstructed, in light of the rules and meanings that brought them about in the first place. In other words, (all kinds of) beliefs are fixed and manifest themselves in texts and other artefacts of social meaning structures which can be reconstructed through the acts that follow from it. In this light, the 1995 Commission on Global Governance Report is taken as a concatenation of sequences. The respective choice of one sequence leading into another is based on structures of meaning that the authors operated in. Simultaneously, each sequence not only opens a scope of possible action but also closes one, namely the scope of possible action that was still present in the previous sequence. From this perspective, each and every sequence that is looked upon at a certain point in time is the realized option out of a scope of possibilities available before. The reconstructive, pragmatist account of beliefs manifest in text documents is thus a dialectic interplay of possibilities and actualizations. The emerging pattern thereof reflect the beliefs expressed throughout (Oevermann 1991, 2000).

Against this background, the analysis of every sequence in a text proceeds in three steps: In a first step, the researcher explicates various pragmatic conditions under which the given sequence – a few words or a part of a sentence – might make sense and ponders what kinds of acts could follow on it. In doing so, it is important to create different readings that might have been present by the time the author chose the particular wording. In a second step, the meaning of the sequence that actually succeeds is considered and checked in light of the readings that were still available when just considering the opening sequence. The third step is to speculate on reasons for the realized choice in light of the alternatives created hypothetically in step one and to trace these choices back to specific patterns. In short, sequential analysis asks what could meaningfully follow in a stream of text, look at what actually follows as the author’s choice, and
reconstructs this particular actualization of meaning. With every new sequence, a promising reading that hitherto appeared plausible can fail. Conversely, readings are considered plausible when they have not been overthrown by consecutive sequences. The concatenation of choices makes up the specificity of the interpreted text and the practice of which it is a manifestation. Proceeding sequence by sequence and considering each under the double aspect of closing and opening possibilities for action, researchers thus reconstruct a concise and characteristic case-structure of meaning inherent in their object of study – in the present case: the establishment and expansion of practices and thoughts of global governance.

Rejecting the logic of large numbers of cases, short text extracts carry and thus reflect the particular structure of meaning that generated the text as a whole. Sequential analysis thus enables researchers, as in the present case, to answer far-reaching questions based on relatively small amounts of text (Oevermann 1991, 269-73). In other words, a careful and slow reading aimed at reconstructing what brought the text about in the first place can produce deeper and more authentic insights than an abstract, potentially theoretically driven approach. For the analysis at hand, we began with a) the title of the report and the introduction of its authors, b) one from page 1 and c) another one from page 2. The following analysis and discussion represents the summarized beliefs found in different sequences and thus characterize the structure of meaning under which the report emerged.11

Analysis & Discussion

a) Captured in the title, “Our Global Neighbourhood”, the document from the beginning refers to a collective of indefinite size. The inclusive personal pronoun “Our” begs the question who had legitimized the authors of the document to speak for this collective. Taken literally, the adjective “Global” refers to the largest collective possible and the unusual combination of “Global” and “Neighbourhood” emphasizes the size of the collective even further. This collective does not necessarily encompass the globe but represents processes of integration in some form at least. With this said, while the authors seem to be aware of the overarching and challenging questions of representation, authority, and legitimacy, at least in the opening sequence, they do not engage with them. Geographical distance is qualified, if not negated, and unity is emphasized but it

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11 Note that the analysis only captures major insights and does not represent the careful reading the authors were engaged in. Some of the interpretations seem far-reaching but still originate only from within the report as such. The long version of the sequential analysis is available from the authors.
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 also insinuates that both are present.

The “Commission” and its “Report” overall suggest a need for extraordinary measures and creates an aura of authoritative expertise to determine these. In doing so, “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 thereby taken for granted. Practices of “Global Governance” already seemed to exist for the authors 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 produce 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:

- 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 through staging and elevation of expertise.

b) Sequences on Page 1 of the document consistently refer 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. Nevertheless, the document expresses optimism. Overall, the speakers proclaim an unprecedented and exceptional moment in the collectivization of human action. With unspecified chances for future action 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 politics. Other concepts and political ideas for the future of world politics are negated as is the conflict of positions on global governance. As such, with adequate justification of the speakers’ position and authority still lacking, the document reflects ideological qualities and a sense of historical determinism and teleology. Suggesting to set the course for the future in that fashion, the
speakers fall in the trap of presentism and exaggerate their own role to ensure there can only be one vision of global governance and world politics. To claim decision-making competence in such a global fashion reveals a logic of self-elevation and maybe even hubris, spurred on by assumingly unique historical conditions. The consistent use of flowery catch words which otherwise remain open and undefined makes the report and its inherent lack of legitimacy even more problematic.

In the following sequences, the promised delivery of a new form of governance is framed as “the foremost challenge of this generation.” By means of this mode of exacerbation and dramatization, the speakers further engage in political vision and even prophetic speech. In fact, the next sequence explicitly states that “the world needs a new vision”. Once again, the prophecy however remains empty of content. The fact that “the world” is introduced as the most global unit possible indicates that the authors believe that the whole is at stake. Accordingly, they raise their voice for what they see as a unified whole. Unfortunately, their claim to truth and unity is their only 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 continue to speak in the mode of a specifying non-specification. Left out is not only the purpose of cooperation, but also the mode. In the end, the speakers create an infinite recourse of non-justification and assertion as they string together generic terms which, instead of providing justification, each demands further justification. The only final justification can stem from a profession of faith in global governance and hence the Commission thereof. In terms of rules for action, the following are expressed:

• Ignore the political (i.e. conflicting positions) in politics and instill a unifying vision of one future, presenting your beliefs as a confession 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 one’s authority and legitimacy;
• Establish connectivity and pretend that no fundamental debates about the world are needed, but only more of what already exists in better cooperation and unity;
• Dramatize your own position and the historical moment you find yourself.
c) The third and final extract from the document focuses around defining global governance, which occurs in an inclusive and open-ended fashion and through which the ongoing striving for authority over the subject matter becomes clear. Featuring many different layers and actors, both institutions and individuals, everything is 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 sphere and by connecting them both in global governance, suggesting a dialectical yet productive unit. Global governance is further thought of in managerial and processual terms as global commonality and dependency are restated. From the author’s point of view there never seems to have been anything other than governance and it becomes a matter of spelling out 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.\(^\text{12}\)

More specifically, the beliefs implicitly expressed throughout this extract revolve around a notion of diverse interests indicating a pluralistic global society. At the same time the speakers reveal an instrumental understanding of politics. In their view, politics is about interests that must be realized and hence will be accommodated. In other words, conflicts can be mediated and resolved through interests. That said, the process of governance remains indeterminate and vague, more a vision, a hope, and a yearning than an actual policy notion. An expression of dependence and connectedness, global governance and the institutions it entails refer to general or specific domains of international politics. These 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 simply is and it does not matter by whom it is done. In their words, the public interacts with the private and the informal stems from the formal. Echoing a formal-legal understanding of institutions, these come first but are necessarily deformedized through and in global governance. One could also describe this as the end justifying the means as the authors clearly think big instead of smart and managerial instead of analytical. Phrased as rules for action, the third extract from the document resulted in the following rules for action:

\(^{12}\) The fact that many academic publications to come used this definition shows (a) the cunningness of the authors to appear analytical as well as (b) the desperation of an academic discourse naively picking up this weak and imprecise definition.
• Define global governance in seemingly objective but ultimately ideological terms and think of it as inclusive and expansive as possible;
• Embrace an apolitical understanding of interest conflicts which can be mediated and managed as all institutions act and cooperate in the interest of the people;
• Dispense with 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.

In conclusion, the analyzed excerpts of the report of the UN Commission on Global Governance from 1995 reveal that its authors claim the authority to produce knowledge without clarifying the sources of both this authority and their legitimacy in general. In prophetic speech empty of specific content they suggest a need for extraordinary measures and diffusely pitch collective power through global governance against established politics. Following an instrumental understanding of politics the authors objectify global governance in managerial and processual terms while the meaning of governance remains indeterminate and vague. In a similar way, they refer to cooperation without clarifying its purpose and mode. Conceiving of the presence as a climax in the development of humankind, the authors fall prey to historical determinism, teleology and a logic of self-elevation.

Our findings are all the more striking since the intellectual history of global governance is closely related to the founding document we examined. We selected this document assuming that citing it in academic discourse not only is an effect of the report itself but also reproduces its underlying beliefs. For sure, the political practice of global governance potentially has diversified and moved beyond the beliefs expressed in the document (Hofferberth and Lambach Forthcoming, Paris 2015). In other words, current beliefs can be quite different and go beyond their original formulation. Be this as it may, however, the analyzed excerpts of the report reveal an immature discourse with far-reaching implications as the report has been quoted frequently in ensuing discourses. Its definition, so we assume, must have been taken over out of helplessness and lack of alternatives as the authors leave no room for political dynamics but essentialize their concept of global governance in a rather unreflected manner. Given the demand for global governance, practical and theoretical, however, it is high time to re-conceptualize global governance and explicitly engage in its normative foundations in a way that makes more out of it than technocratic Western fantasies of world domination and functionalist managing of affairs.
Conclusion

Summing up, this paper engaged in an intellectual history of the concept of global governance that had been heavily influenced by the report of the UN Commission on Global Governance. Based on a sequential analysis of the meaning of excerpts from this report we, echoing Sinclair (2012), conclude that global governance has been deeply based and framed in a functionalist and managerial logic. In addition, this normativity has not been reflected but rather concealed behind assumingly objective definition and seminal authority and legitimacy to do so. Whether intended as such by its authors or rather an unreflected expression of their own beliefs, practitioners and scholars alike were eager to pick it up and reproduce its ambiguity and vagueness if not outright ideological commitments. Against the immediate and ongoing need of governance, we explain the unreflected adaption of an unreflected document as an expression of hopelessness rather than a mature discourse ready to provide and study to improve a baseline to govern global issues.

We are of the opinion that global governance will remain incomplete as long as it keeps missing a solid socio-theoretical underpinning. In other words, only a reflective and self-critical discussion of global governance can provide the arguments needed to keep it alive at a time of unapologetic unilateralism and disregard for multilateral rules. Inspired by the writing of Charles Sanders Peirce, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, we think of American Pragmatism as a strong support for global governance. The core idea of this approach in an understanding of human action as being guided by beliefs as rules for action, which, consciously and unconsciously, have been created in critical or problematic situations. Less structuralist and less deterministic than other accounts but far from an individualistic and voluntaristic understanding of action, a pragmatist underpinning of global governance would not only help getting to grips with the essentialization of global governance but also with reconsidering potential for change.

Literature


Hofferberth, Matthias, and Daniel Lambach. Forthcoming. ""It’s The End Of The World As We Know It". World Politics in a Post-Governance World." 26 (4).


