The Global, the Regional, and the Ugly

Theorizing Relational Configurations in World Politics

Abstract: With its emphasis on formal and informal governance, the ambivalent and notoriously vague narrative of global governance has brought renewed and welcomed attention to the study of international organizations. In particular, becoming aware of the fact that most, if not all, governance on the global scale today are characterized by multiple actors involved in dense and complex configurations of organizational overlap, the study of inter-organizational relations recently began to emerge as a new and proliferating field. The paper intends to take stock of the multiple and diverse theoretical commitments characterizing this field and argues against advancing this new research exclusively in substantialist ontologies. In a first step, the paper outlines substantialist and relationalist ontologies in terms of their basic assumptions. In a second step, the paper relates the study of international organizations to global governance in general terms, and discusses and structures in particular recent contributions to the study of inter-organizational relations. In a third step, and in order to outline the potential value of a relational ontology to the study of inter-organizational relations, the paper proposes the concept of relational configurations to theorize the interaction – either intended or unintended, either formal or informal, either cooperative or conflictual – between different entities facing overlapping mandates and responsibilities. While not providing empirical illustrations, the paper nevertheless concludes that applying a relational ontology to the study of inter-organizational relations within global governance offers new and important insights, as this allows scholars to consider the complex political dynamics of governance as well as trace how and why particular global governors emerged as such.

Keywords: global governance, inter-organizational relations, international organizations
1. Introduction

While not synonymous, the ambivalent and notoriously vague narrative of global governance provides a strong intellectual rationale to study international organizations (IOs) and consider them, among other entities, as *global governors* (Karns et al. 2015 (3); Weiss/Kamran 2009). As such, it comes as no surprise that, in addition to its established conceptualizations and analytical tools (Claude 1956; Archer 1992), the intellectual engagement with IOs recently received renewed attention thanks to discussions on the provision of order and governance beyond the state (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014b). In this vein, we can perceive a new research agenda in the making that explicitly no longer considers only the emergence and impact of single organizations, but rather the “interactions both among the various global governance actors and within specific organizations” (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 67). While such an interest may not be completely new to IR and its study of IOs (Jönsson 1986), nor to public policy and political science in general (Hanf/Scharpf 1978), the recent proliferation of contributions focused on inter-organizational relations at least suggests a perceived intellectual need to understand complex political realities of organizational overlap in a world of advanced globalization and interconnectivity (Welz 2016; Franke/Koch 2013; Koops 2012; Brosig 2011; Biermann 2011; Gehring/Oberthür 2009).

“Concerned with understanding the character and pattern, origins, rationale, and consequences of [inter-organizational] relationships” (Cropper et al. 2008: 4), the recent interest in studying interaction between different global governors, for the most part, is derived in empirical terms. Given that much, if not all, governance on the global scale today is characterized by institutional overlap, the argument goes, there is an immediate need to study interacting organizations and develop analytical and theoretical tools to make sense of such phenomena. Put simply, given their complex nature, global problems have created converging mandates and dependencies among and between roughly 300 self-standing IOs that exist today, as well as the countless non-state actors and the informal governance arrangements, networks, and partnerships between them (Volgy et al. 2008; Pevehouse et al. 2004: 106). Scholars of both world politics and regionalism, knowing somewhat little about the implications that stem from these overlaps, have to engage with this and spell out the consequences this entails for the provision of both regional and global governance as practitioners navigate this complex web of governance (Biermann

---

1 One cannot help but note the heavy involvement of German scholars in particular in this research agenda which might be a testimonial to the influence of regime theory in the landscape of German IR (Rittberger 1993).
Despite the perceived intellectual need and ambition to embrace the complexities of inter-organizational relations on a global scale, however, the ontologies advanced to study organizations in these relations for the most part conceptualize them as unified, bounded, self-directed and in that sense independent entities (Porter 2009: 89ff). While recognizing the need to consider increased interaction between organizations, current IO research advanced either within a global governance framework or drawing on traditional approaches follows an “add new actors and issues and stir” approach (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014c: 210). On that note, Finnemore (2014: 223, original emph.) rightfully argued that global governance contributions, for the most part, only notice and report the diffusion of agency and the consecutive emergence of inter-organizational overlap but do not probe into “the causes and character of proliferating new actors”. As such, contributions cast in substantialist terms in her perspective fail to consider dynamics which “create these new actors that are now populating the global governance scene” and interact within it. Following her lead, as will be shown below in detail, the paper contends that despite awareness of complexities and interaction, the majority of IO research within the global governance framework is conducted in “empirical studies of distinct institutions to solve particular governance challenges” and thus committed to reducing complexity despite organizational overlap (Biermann et al. 2009: 17, emph. added). Unfortunately, this critique to some extent also applies to inter-organizational research if it does not consider the conditions under which entities emerge as ‘global governors’ in the first place and the constitutive nature and implications of the interaction between them (Qin 2016).

Against this very short and hence admittedly non-objective account of global governance and IO research, the paper argues that by its very definition, governance on the global scale involves multiple actors who mutually reproduce, sustain, and limit themselves in their agencies. To better capture these complexities and intricacies, the paper proposes to embrace a relationalist ontology (Emirbayer 1997; Jackson/Nexon 1999; Powell/Depelteau 2013). Such a perspective situates agency, broadly defined as the ability to influence outcome, not within pre-defined actors. Rather, it assumes that agency originates from social relations between entities and argues that such a perspective promises important, new insights into global governance in general but also into IOs and their interaction between the regional and the global level in particular. On such scales, governance is never conducted by just one actor, at least if we broaden our notion of governance in terms of the activities that feed into it. Embracing complexity instead of reducing it (Rosenau 1992), global governance can be thought of as being constituted by and
reflecting myriads of interaction sites between an almost endless plethora of different entities. Moreover, since the interaction is never just between two actors but takes place in and between larger configurations, the inherent complexity of global governance instantly qualifies and ultimately limits any notion of actor autonomy as suggested in substantialist ontologies. Hence, substantialist ontologies assuming autonomous actors to be studied within choice-theoretic approaches lack the tools necessary to study how and which actors emerge within any issue area and then subsequently interact within it (Jackson/Nexon 2013).

Having laid out its main claims, the paper proceeds as follows. In a first step, the paper sketches the different ontologies of substantialism and relationalism and their implications for studying global governance. In a second step, the paper relates this discussion to how IOs have been discussed in the global governance framework as well as within the emerging paradigm of inter-organizational relations. In a third and final step, the paper proposes to expand our notion of agency within inter-organizational research to include different entities and frame their interaction as relational configurations. By theorizing ideal-type dimensions of this heuristic tool, the paper hopes to show that global governance and inter-organizational relations by their empirical interest lend themselves to such a framework. In this sense, the concluding section argues that the inter-organizational research agenda, when framed in a relationalist ontology, will help to better understand both regional and global governance as well as how particular actors emerged within them in the first place to then mediate and shift their engagement between them. Being able to capture the ambiguities, complexities, and conflicts of global governance, inter-organizational relations, when based in relationalist ontologies, then clearly has the potential to stimulate and contribute to the study of world politics, even if it is for the time being more about opening Pandora’s Box than offering full-scale examinations of it (Franke/Koch 2013: 99).

2. Substance vs. Relations – The Ontologies of Studying IOs

Not for the first time (Jackson/Nexon 1999), Jackson/Nexon (2013) recently argued again that different ontologies might well serve as a new line of contestation to organize the discipline in a post-paradigmatic era. They advance this claim simply because all contributions to the field by definition – implicitly or explicitly – rely on such commitments and draw on them one way or another. In this sense, ontologies broadly considered provide us with answers as to what “actors populate world politics, the contexts and environments
within which those actors find themselves, their relative significance to understanding and explaining international outcomes, [and] how they fit together, such as parts of systems, autonomous entities, occupying locations in one or more social fields, nodes in a network, and so forth” (Jackson/Nexon 2013: 550-51). As such, our ontological commitments determine our analytical focus and we base decisions made throughout our research on this foundation. Hence, reflected upon or not, ontological commitments can be considered as foundational to our research simply because they determine what we are studying as well as the parameters and results of our research, enable us to justify certain decisions in the process, and make them intelligible (or not) to others:

“Ontological commitments, whether philosophical or scientific, logically precede substantive claims, and serve as the often-unacknowledged basis on which empirical claims are founded. In this sense, ontological commitments are ‘foundational’ – not in the sense that they provide unshakable grounds that universally guarantee the validity of claims that are founded on them, but ‘foundational’ in the sense that they provide the conditions of intelligibility for those claims.” (Jackson 2011: 41)

Drawing on arguments advanced by Emirbayer (1997) in his ‘relational manifesto’ and further applied recently in sociology (Depelteau/Powell 2013) as well as adapted in various IR-related work (Qin 2016; Avant 2016; Abdelal 2015), there is a certain consensus, despite and aware of the simplistic either/or-logic of this distinction, that one can distinguish substantialist from relationalist ontologies. While the former “takes as its point of departure the notion that it is substances of various kinds (things, beings, essences) that constitute the fundamental units of all inquir” and thereby relies on notions of self-action, the latter argues that “the very terms and units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the changing functional roles they play within that transaction” (Emirbayer 1997: 282,287, original emph.).

Primary analytical focus in this perspective is given to dynamic and unfolding processes out of which new entities, interests, and action continuously emerge. Defined as “an integrated series of connected developments unfolding in conjoint coordination over time”, such processes reflect (or at least inhere) permanent change and fluidity of ‘things’ and their substances (Rescher 1996: 38). Consequentially, agency and actor dispositions do not rest within discrete entities but within relationships and their social contexts which shift over time

---

2 This basic distinction should already indicate that transaction in this context is understood in very different terms than our everyday language use influenced by notions expressed in microeconomics. To further expand on the terminology introduced here, the notion of “self-action” assumes that “entities do not change at all [while only] their preferences or norms shift, guiding them along different paths as they pursue their [...] ends” and hence constitutes the social theoretical framework drawn from in studies on single organizations and their impact on world politics (e.g. Do the UN matter?) (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 293).
To further elaborate on this distinction, while running the danger of getting lost in lofty heights of meta-theorizing, consider the distinction between interaction based on a weak notion of relationality on the one hand and transaction representing a strong notion of relationality on the other introduced by Dewey/Bentley (1949: 107-18). In the first understanding, serving as the foundation for individualist, choice-theoretic approaches, actors represent self-containing entities which bring fixed properties, dispositions, interests, and constituencies to the table whenever they interact with one another. In the context of global governance, this ontology assumes the existence of pre-defined entities – be it states, IOs, NGOs, or multinational enterprises – which each feature variable yet unique attributes such as specific interests and identities (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 293-5). In the latter understanding, actors and their relevant dispositions do not precede interaction but rather are constituted therein. Hence, properties, interests, and constituencies develop and continue to change within interaction rather than determining governance outcome. As such, individual action has to connect to embedded structures of social meaning independent of the individual actor in order to obtain its meaning and purpose (Franke/Roos 2010: 1065-8). In other words, actors and the contexts they are embedded in cannot be separated, as they constitute each other. Applied to global governance, such an ontology does not start with self-contained, self-action entities but rather offers a “pragmatic account of how new collective action [of providing order and rules] emerges” (Avant 2016: 331). More specifically, it is assumed that agency is constituted relationally and through performances as different actors advance their claims to become a global governors (Ringmar 2012: 9-12). Overall, such a perspective contends that global governors and the interaction they emerge out of and engage in are best described as “dynamic in nature”, implying that agency originates in “unfolding, ongoing processes rather than [...] static ties among inert substances” (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 289).

It is worthwhile to further spell out the major consequences such a perspective entails for the study of global governance in general as well as IOs and their inter-organizational relations in particular. Given that entities within such relations find themselves in ever-unfolding, ongoing processes – Shalin (1986) describes these processes themselves as being ‘in flux’ – intellectual attempts of grasping these processes and the entities within by definition have to be dynamic as well. Consequentially, the diffusion of agency and the constitution of new global governors have to be endogenized into our research instead of simply assuming them (Finnemore 2014).3 Instead of starting with a discrete and fixed

3 The biggest danger of exogenizing these questions in our study of world politics lies in blinding
range of actors, we can think of agency itself for any given problem in global governance as a consequence of situational dynamics of relationality. In other words, because of the inherent fluidity of social interaction, its very parameters such as who is involved and recognized as an actor are subject to change, even or maybe specifically in the realm of world politics recently characterized by the large-scale inclusion of formerly non-recognized entities (Lake 2010). As such, one of the priorities of inter-organizational research should be to determine the very emergence of “stable lineages”, establishing what “we call ‘actors’” in any given situation at any point in time since this bottom line itself “is something to be explained, not something to be assumed” (Abbott 1996: 863).

Obviously, given the complex histories and antecedents for any topic relevant to world politics, we immediately find a long list of actors (quite often states but also others) already pre-constituted as global governors prior to their interaction in a specific context. More specifically, while being challenged through processes of globalization, for the most part it is still ingrained in our thinking to assume the independence and legal authority of single state representations and then (a) look to them first to provide solutions, even for global problems, as well as (b) only slowly emancipate ourselves from the field’s state-centrism as we continue to cast its dynamics in state/non-state terms (Roos 2015). As such, formal-legal constitutions in the form of a contract or treaty might be considered as specifically strong claims to agency in this context. However, even those entities (e.g. states and their intergovernmental arrangements) in terms of their continuous and sustained engagement as global governors can become subject to process and change:

“[I]nteraction is not merely the actors’ way of reproducing themselves. This is the seductive assumption that fools both functionalism and rational choice theory into accepting a social ontology that by making stasis primary loses its ability to explain change. If we would explain change at all, we must begin with it and hope to explain stasis – even the stable entity that is the human personality – as a byproduct. Previously-constituted actors enter interaction but have no ability to traverse the interaction inviolable. They ford it with difficulty and in it many disappear. What comes out are new actors, new entities, new relations among old parts.” (Abbott 1996: 863)

These considerations play an even larger role in situations of organizational overlap and mutual dependencies, since such situations are by definition characterized by uncertain responsibilities and opportunities for actors involved to exercise and expand their agency. ‘Facts’ that assumingly determine how different actors should interact with each other are constantly advanced, negotiated, and contested as those involved attempt to establish

ourselves to the notion that “any given set of political relationships stem, not from natural necessity, but from contingent combinations of social agency” (Jackson/Nexon 2004: 338). More specifically, in the context of global governance, we tend to accept the emergence of new actors in terms of functional necessities while we do not challenge their claims to be global governors in the first place.
their own interpretations of how to organize and relate responsibilities and competencies (Knoke/Chen 2008: 442-43). Already indicating some of the potential of relationalist ontologies, the next section first reconstructs the study of IOs in and beyond global governance and relates it to the two sets of different ontologies. Before turning our attention there, though, it is important to clarify that the paper’s intention is not to ‘falsify’ or otherwise discredit approaches based on substantialist ontologies. Obviously, given the foundational character of ontologies and hence the commitments and choices that scholars make when they develop theirs, such an endeavor is futile to begin with. More importantly, given their commonsensical appeal and the elegance that stem from reifying certain aspects in the process of doing research, it becomes obvious why substantialist ontologies enjoy such widespread applications (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 299-300). In particular for the study of IOs, the legal-formal approach based on international law carries heavy weight and encourages scholars to study organizational overlap as it is framed in the very constitutions and charters of the different organizations involved. However, as with any perspective, there are limits and costs to it and the following section attempts to outline those by reflecting upon disciplinary trends and trajectories as well as conventions and tacit agreements which influence(d) the study of IOs in general and the emerging paradigm of inter-organizational relations in particular.

3. IOs in Global Governance and Inter-Organizational Research

Traditionally and not surprisingly, IR for the most part throughout the last century approached international organizations in terms of their relations to states (Franke/Koch 2013: 87-90). Within the paradigmatic debates of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, we saw realists and institutionalists debating why states decided to act through specific IOs and whether those then mattered in world politics (Abbott/Snidal 1998; Cortell/Davis 1996). While debating how much influence was exercised by and through IOs by entertaining different images of IOs with varying degrees of autonomy (Archer 1992), the concurrent frame of this debate implied that IOs were (a) conceptualized as singular entities and best studied as such, (b) defined through reference to international law and hence cast in formal-legal terms as well as (c) not considered as independent and purposive political actors (Barnett/Finnemore 1999: 702-3). Obviously, this limited focus on IOs came under attack in global governance which, albeit with varying degree, generally emphasizes their authority and influence as actors (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 12-5). However, as will be shown below, while trying to emancipate itself from established IR theories,
IO studies situated within global governance continued to emphasize the importance of single organizations and their respective contributions to the global order. As such, large parts of current IO research from within a global governance perspective is ironically still advanced through single or comparative case studies which analyze IOs “in isolation from each other” (Gehring/Oberthür 2009: 125). Illustrating examples of this practice can be seen in Weiss/Kamran (2009: 72-76) and their discussion on IO participation in global governance as well as in the textbook chapters of Davies/Woodward (2014) dedicated to individual IOs respectively.4

Against such approaches, one can argue that the notion of global governance as originally introduced by Rosenau (1992) and others was precisely defined by its multidimensional, polyarchic character resulting from the interplay of a range of different actors involved. IOs have always been prominently featured among this range of actors as governance problems in a globalized world are perceived to be too complex to be solved by individual states. Hence, we study the “architecture of global governance” in certain issue areas such as security, trade and finance, human rights and development, and the environment in terms of their institutional set-up and assume that for each, IOs play a foundational role (Biermann et al. 2009). Simply put, IOs (as well as other entities) in this line of thought became global governors because “others perceive[d] them as capable of achieving results” (Avant et al. 2010: 2). Also further concerned with decision-making within IOs (Barnett 2004; Reinalda/Verbeek 2004; Hawkins et al. 2006), global governance thus without doubt made important contributions to the study of these actors yet it still “remains conceptually unclear how various kinds of organizations and other constituents of world politics can be involved in examinations of inter-organizational relations” (Franke/Koch 2013: 92). Put differently, while global governance encourages us to think governance in terms other than government, we have yet failed to come up with alternatives to think agency within global governance in terms other than resting in the substance of individual, autonomous entities (Jackson/Nexon 1999).5

4 It is safe to assume in this context that, just as realism was allowed “to set the research agenda” for IO studies in the 1980s and early 1990s (Martin/Simmons 1998: 742), the inter-paradigm debates of the 1990s, their focus on state actors and their skepticism towards IOs, as well as their substantivist ontologies influenced and continue to influence global governance research on IOs today. The inclination to organize our syllabi around individual IOs and introduce them separately in our World Politics and Global Governance classes might be considered as another case in point.

5 In fact, one can argue that framing IOs in global governance, in order to emphasize their relevance and autonomy vis-à-vis nation-states, have only further established the practice of separating them from their environment and assuming them to act self-directed and independent. While opening the discipline in substantial terms, global governance did not – or at least not equally well – provide a theoretical framework to relate different global governors engaged in the provision of public goods (and
Against this background, and given the real-world perception of ever-increasing organizational overlap, the proliferation of research on inter-organizational relations recently does not come as a surprise. Also not surprisingly, different contributions to this new field draw from different theories and sources. More specifically, inter-organizational research remains as theoretically diverse and eclectic as the subfield within which it emerged. Different understandings of the very term ‘inter-organizational’ seem to exist, while different foundational commitments to different ontologies have not been spelled out in their theoretical implications, let alone been related or reconciled. As Biermann (2011: 174) argues, both the practice as well as the study of inter-organizational relations are still in their infant stages and “in a period of experimentation”. Hence, one task at hand (in addition to further empirical studies and theoretical concept development) is to take stock. Obviously, this is an endeavor that can be challenged on many terms.\(^6\) However, given the importance of explicating ontologies and engaging different commitments in debate as well as the implicit coexistence (or, better, non-relatedness) of different ontologies within the study of inter-organizational relations, I think it is worthwhile to take the risk and attempt to contribute to the debate by structuring different contributions in terms of their ontological commitments even though these, for the most part, remain implicit.

A good starting point to do so is by considering the diverse range of different theoretical orientations and approaches including inspiration drawn from organizational studies and network theories (Knoke/Chen 2008; Biermann 2008), transaction costs and resource dependence approaches (Hennart 2008; Brosig 2011), and even a pragmatist-inspired theory of agency and action (Franke/Koch 2013). These different theoretical foundations rely on different ontologies and, since they are advanced more vocally, allow one to infer on ontologies. As such, contributions differ in regards to (a) what kind of organizations should be considered in the first place and (b) how to conceptualize interaction between these organizations. While the first dimension reflects the traditional intergovernmental/transnational discussion of IR in terms of whether IOs should be defined narrowly or broadly (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 25-35), the second dimension more specifically reflects decisions in terms of what has been discussed in the previous section. As such, we see

\(^6\) The two most pressing dangers that I can think of is (a) doing injustice to individual pieces and ‘reading them the wrong way’ and thereby (b) unnecessarily disciplining and constraining research in such an early stage.
different stances as to whether analytical primacy should be given to organizations in interaction or whether the focus should explicitly be on the interaction between said organizations. Bringing these two dimensions together, we can roughly structure current inter-organizational research in IR in a 2x2 ideal-type matrix.\(^7\)

Starting with the horizontal dimension, Franke/Koch (2013: 93ff) and Biermann (2011: 173) remind us that, just as we can approach the broader field of international institutions in different ways (Keohane 1989: 3-4), we can think of inter-organizational relations in a narrow or in a broad sense. Taking the semantic meaning of *organization* seriously and defining IOs as formal entities with state members and permanent secretariats (Pevehouse et al. 2004: 103-04), we can conceive inter-organizational relations as the exclusive interplay between legally constituted and formally recognized *intergovernmental* organizations. Based in such a framework, inter-organizational relations are studied as “the links, relationships and modes of interaction between two or more [legally constituted] international organisations” which calls for a “research agenda that examines the origins, processes and outcomes of partnerships between [these intergovernmental] organisations” (Koops 2012: 72f). This perspective is often advanced when considering IOs (co-)operating in a specific world region (Panke et al. forthcoming) or when interested in determining how different IOs influence each other within a certain policy field (Jørgensen 2009).\(^8\)

Against this narrow focus on formal IOs, different authors have argued in favor of a more comprehensive approach which includes all kinds of entities engaged in, and contributing to, world politics (Karns et al. 2015 (3); Weiss/Wilkinson 2014a). Resonating with the intention of global governance to broaden our understanding that all kinds of different entities can and should be considered as global governors (Avant et al. 2010), it is argued that the range of entities which find themselves in organizational overlaps should not be limited to intergovernmental organizations. Rather, in a world increasingly charac-

---

\(^7\) As with any such matrix, the ideal types outlined do not take nuances and grey areas into consideration. In addition, the authors featured as well as others discussed below should be understood as illustrative examples only since their full arguments cannot be captured in the matrix which nevertheless provides some orientation and a starting point for further, more detailed systematizations.

\(^8\) Given the prominence of the EU in different policy fields and the ensuing “organisational overlap, dispersed competencies and mutual dependencies” (Brosig 2011: 147) caused by the parallel emergence and development of regional and global governance, we see this formal view of inter-organizational relations often advanced in European Union studies on interaction *with* and *within* the UN system (Lautikainen/Smith 2006) or in relation with other organizations (Jørgensen 2009; Galbreath/Gebhard 2010). For an example how such a perspective can be put into research practice by focusing on a particular policy area, see Law (2007) and its discussion of how different IOs (co-)operate in the security field.
Table 1: Ontological Approaches to the Study of Inter-Organizational Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considered Organizations</th>
<th>formal, intergovernmental organizations only</th>
<th>both formal and informal, state and non-state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>overlap between otherwise independent formal IOs (Brosig 2011)</td>
<td>overlap between all kinds of ‘global governors’ (Biermann et al. 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>actors in interaction</strong></td>
<td>constitutive effects on formal yet fully interdependent IOs (Weiss et al. 2005)</td>
<td>constitutive effects on all kinds of ‘global governors’ (Franke/Koch 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Focus</strong></td>
<td>interaction and its effects on actors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
terized by both formal and informal, state and non-state authority, “institutions [...] not based on international conventions and [...] not dispose[d] of a permanent secretariat” need to be considered as well when conceptualizing and theorizing inter-organizational relations (Franke/Koch 2013: 93). Adapting a terminology derived from organizational studies, organizations in this perspective are broadly defined as either “public, business, or non-profit and the relationships [between them] can range from dyadic, involving just two organizations, to multiplicitous, involving huge networks of many organizations” (Cropper et al. 2008: 4). Connecting to the intellectual tradition of transnational studies in particular (Keohane/Nye 1973), there is a strong emphasis on private, non-state authority in this perspective and organizational overlap between different entities such as states, NGOs and enterprises – often formalized in so called public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives – is equally considered as are IOs interacting with each other ( Büthe/Mattli 2011; Hall/Biersteker 2002; Cutler et al. 1999).9

In terms of the vertical dimension, the previous discussion on substantialism vs. relationalism immediately comes back in. As such, we can differentiate between approaches focused on entities involved in interaction and approaches focused on the interaction and its constitutive effects (Cropper et al. 2008: 4). In other words, contributions on inter-organizational relations might share an interest in theorizing external relations between different entities, or argue that it is the very between that defines and determines governance. Focusing on entities in interaction, either formal or informal, assumes their existence independent of the organizational overlap in which they find themselves. Simply put, actors precede interaction (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 293-296). However, given its inter-organizational focus, such accounts still go beyond the notion of self-action entertained in traditional studies on single IOs. Governance as an outcome is no longer explained by only considering a single IO such as the UN (Weiss 2009) or framing IOs exclusively in a principle-agent relationship with their member states and independent of other organizations (Abbott/Snidal 1998). At the same time, actions are perceived to take place among different entities which remain unchanged throughout the interaction (Emirbayer 1997: 285-286). As such, inter-organizational relations do not constitute the involved actors, but are rather the result of these actors working together or against each other. We can conceive of them as a function of the existence of independent organizations which, by

---

9 Following this broader understanding of organizations, usage of the term ‘organization’ from hereon in this paper implies a range of all sorts of actors engaged in global governance with some of them not meeting the requirements specified under the formal-legal perspective often entertained in IR. References to ‘IOs’ on the other hand should be understood as explicit references to formal and intergovernmental organizations in the narrow sense.
choice, chance or accident, overlap in their mandates and responsibilities (Brosig 2011). Consequentially, we can frame these approaches as “inter-action” approaches which posit “thing balanced against thing in causal interconnection” (Dewey/Bentley 1949: 108).

Contrary to such a perspective, we find approaches on the right hand side of the table (and vice versa to research in the top-left corner more likely on the bottom row) which argue that the relations between organizations are more important than the organizations themselves. In fact, approaches from this perspective challenge the notion of treating actors “as autonomous from their social, cultural, and material environments” and analytically distinguishing them “from the practices and relations that constitute them” (Jackson/Nexon 2013: 553). Global governance to them cannot be framed as solo acts only responding to others. Rather, since mutual dependencies are thick and fates are shared, global governors only perceive of themselves as such and determine their interests in sight and in relation to others. In other words, a ‘global governor’ hence by definition is always caught up in interaction. In fact, the very status is derived from the interaction they are engaged in and the governance activities they exercise (Avant et al. 2010: 8-9). Such a “trans-action” perspective (which I will refer to as relational from hereon) assumes that “systems of descriptions and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities’, ‘essences’, or ‘realities’, and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’” (Dewey/Bentley 1949: 108). Applied to global governance, there are no immediate and clearly defined thing as the UN and the EU interacting with each other. Rather, both are constantly in flux as we see new actors emerging within and representing each.

Concluding on this section, I argue that contributions to inter-organizational relations differ along the lines discussed above as they advance divergent ontologies of who should be considered and whether their agency exists independent of the interaction in which we study them. The dominant take on this sees the study of inter-organizational relations firmly in the field of studying formal relations between legally established inter-governmental organizations (Brosig 2011). In addition and in line with the discipline’s long-standing focus on single IOs, the majority of studies seem to be more committed to, or at least starting from, the organizations involved rather than focusing explicitly on the

---

10 Obviously, this perspective immediately connects to the notion of studying formal IOs which is why we find more research in the top left corner than in the bottom one. The edited volume of Jørgensen (2009) for example not only focuses on the EU but obviously also assumes that it exists independent of its interactions with other formal IOs.
relationships themselves (Cropper et al. 2008: 4-5). As such, it is fair to conclude that the reminiscence of traditional IO research influences the study on inter-organizational relations to rely, for the most part, on substantialist ontologies.\footnote{The fact that the majority of contributions appears to follow this line of reasoning as well as the empirical nature of many contributions might explain why the discourse settled on the terminology of ‘inter-organizational relations’ instead of using alternative descriptors.} The important addition of this research agenda then seems to rest in the emphasis of considering multiple distinct and formally recognized organizations rather than just focusing on one. A full embrace of a global governance logic (and the idea of increased interconnectedness on which it rests) as argued above, however, by its very definition qualifies the autonomy of actors involved and hence has to be situated in an ontology that privileges relations over substance. The study of inter-organizational relations in this context, if situated in the bottom right cell, allows research to go beyond the practice of \textit{a priori} assuming actors as “ontological primitives of analysis” and thereby reducing them to explaining variables for diverging outcomes (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 291). The next section outlines how such research framed in theorizing \textit{relational configurations} could potentially be advanced.

4. Theorizing \textit{Relational Configurations} in World Politics

The paper contends that situating the study of inter-organizational relations in a relational ontology promises additional insights. The rationale behind this is straightforward: Simply adding an \textit{interactive} dimension to a more traditional international organizations approach by considering two organizations, while at the same time continuing to essentialize their individual agencies does not holistically capture the \textit{transactive} dynamics that characterize inter-organizational relations. In addition, a relational ontology promises to connect more comprehensively to notions of global governance, stresses the processual and collective character of said governance, and thereby provides not only insights into which agencies are involved but also how they emerged as such. Hence, if “[t]he starting point is a relational one which gives analytic primacy to the links between organizations”, one cannot start research with a predefined list of organizations and then discuss their interaction (Biermann 2011: 173). Rather, a relational take on inter-organizational relations is problem-driven in the sense that it starts with a particular issue – be it regional or functional – to then reconstruct involved actors and their changing characteristics and properties as they emerge in the process (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 301-4)

Obviously, world politics and the issues it engages with do not have a clearly definable
starting point. Rather, they reflect complex “social interaction [in its temporal flow] with what is in part a soup of preexisting actors and actions” (Abbott 1996: 863). Instead of assuming these preexisting organizations, though, and than looking into their interaction, it is transactive processes which create them in the first place. Two short examples might help to sustain this claim. Consider first the issue of human rights violations and the operations of multinational enterprises. For the longest time, these actors were considered to be part of the problem and hence it was argued that they should be regulated. Against the continuous failure to provide regulation and improve situations such as those in Nigeria or Indonesia throughout the 1990s, however, global governance entertained the notion that business could also be part of the solution. Fast forward past the UN Global Compact (Kell 2005; Williams 2004), the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (Gillies 2010), the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (Hofferberth et al. 2011), multinational enterprises today are firmly established in global governance as regulatory actors and in fact are even called upon to extend their political authority (Ruggie 2004).

To provide a more focused example, consider the early beginnings of negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program. As early as 2006, the permanent UN Security Council members invited Germany to join the so called informal P5+1 negotiation forum. Until the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, Germany continued to serve in this capacity as the others continued to authorize Germany to perform as an actor derived from the improved chances of reaching a more favorable outcome (Litwak 2015). Research on both issues have to take into account that over time different new actors emerged within – just as a relational perspective reminds us, agency in global governance as well as collective outcome results from the links between entities rather than resting within them (Finnemore 2014; Avant et al. 2010).

Considering the transactive dimension of inter-organizational relations thus helps us to understand the emergence and development of such interaction. More specifically, it allows us to think of the involved actors and the processes that connect them as occurring within a particular relational configurations (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 304-7). Unlike within a principal/agent framework (Abbott/Snidal 1998), as will be outlined below, such configurations are not owned or even necessarily consciously designed by the actors involved nor do they imply a shared commitment to certain values and means of problem-solving. Rather, we can think of any configuration simply as a consequence of actors connected through a ‘shared fate’, so to speak, as they face the same common problem (although they do not have to perceive it as such). In other words, relational configurations are a heuristic tool which, utilizing the notion of being a stakeholder of the same problem, al-
lows the researcher to consider actors related to each other due to the nature of problems they deal with (Freeman 1984; Miles 2012). These pre-established actors bring with them certain “agent properties” and engage in the configurations (or consecutively emerge out of them) as “social entities” with the ability to make choices and exercise causal power” based on the recognition of others involved (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 307). Deliberately defined, however, in an open fashion, it should come as no surprise that the very properties of these actors involved change over time. However, more fundamentally, thinking of interaction in terms of relational configurations allows us to think of the very configurations themselves as constantly changing and shifting, as new actors emerge and others opt out, and the overall dynamics change (Qin 2011: 132-9). Such dynamics are captured by the notion of processes which reflect occurrences and events that continuously change the dispositions, interpretations, and beliefs of both the actors involved and the overall configuration (Rescher 1996: 42-50).

Taken together, we can thus define relational configurations by the actors involved or emerging from within as well as the processes (by choice or chance, see below) that connect said actors and affect their engagement with collective problems. In a complex world characterized by an abundance of such problems, which individual actors cannot solve, we see actors more often aggregate otherwise loose processes into configurations. Not unlike Matryoshka dolls, these configurations relate and contain actors and processes but at the same time can be thought of as yet another process or even an actor on a different level (Franke/Roos 2010: 1065-66). In addition and aware of the danger of getting lost in overwhelming complexity and infinite regress (Finkelstein 1995; Latham 1999), actors are engaged in an almost endless number of configurations interacting with other actors and even other configurations in different ways and with varying degrees of commitment. As such, different configurations themselves overlap with others which creates a new set of inter-organizational relations at a higher level. In a nutshell, whether we think of a particular configuration as a process of different actors engaging with an issue or as an actor itself engaged in higher-aggregate processes and thereby treat it as an “analytical primitive” within a specific context depends on research interest.12

More importantly and in order to not get caught up in the “fruitless search for the ultimate microfoundations of analysis” (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 305), awareness for the fact

---

12 To illustrate this point, we can think of two separate configurations situated on the same level of aggregation (e.g. two regional organizations consisting of different member states) becoming part of a larger configuration on another level (e.g. within the UN). Vice versa, the actors in any particular configuration represent configurations themselves in other settings (e.g. state delegations in the UN and the regional organizations).
that different types of relational configurations exist and that it constitutes only a heuristic tool allows us to theorize them as they “vary strongly, particularly in the density of ties, the number of partners in a given configuration and the degree of institutionalization” (Biermann 2011: 173). Against this background, I would like to suggest some preliminary ideal type distinctions that can be applied to most if not all configurations which differ in particular in terms of (1) their origin and focus, (2) their size and complexity, (3) their depth and quality, (4) their structure and relevance, and (5) their dynamic development over time. This list is by no means exhaustive. For the purpose at hand of showing the variety and breadth of relational configurations as well as theorizing their potential impact and role in world politics, these five dimensions seem to constitute a good starting point. The remainder of this section looks into these dimensions in more detail.

**Origin and Focus**

As to the first dimension, we can distinguish configurations which arise out of conscious and deliberate efforts of cooperation and problem-solving from those that are not. As argued above, social problems in a globalized world feature certain degrees of complexity and interdependence which make them appear intractable and unsolvable to the individual actors. Put differently, one’s engagement in any configuration can be a function of being consciously motivated by perceived reciprocal dependencies in problem-solving. Such dependencies, once recognized as such by involved actors, indeed obviously stipulate efforts to reach out and cooperate, making actors aware of each other and engage in inter-organizational relations knowingly in order to provide fully intended and purposefully organized configurations (Franke/Roos 2010: 1066). However, when not realized (yet), existing dependencies can still create configurations which are then characterized by unintended and potentially unwanted overlap. Consequentially, we can also perceive of configurations involving actors that are not aware of their mutual dependence, but nonetheless clearly influenced in their problem-solving ability by others dealing with the same issue. Hence, we need to think of relational configurations independent of conscious expressions or realizations of the actors involved and should perceive of them as ‘interesting cases’ since they are most likely characterized by conflict and competition rather than clear-cut divisions of labor (Gehring/Oberthür 2009: 127-132). Given that IOs such as the UN or the EU, for example, advance rather broad agendas and assume ‘universal’ responsibilities, we can derive an almost endless multitude of configurations of overlapping and converging responsibilities to be studied in terms of their conflictual dynamics.
depending on the issue area one is interested in (Brantner/Gowan 2009: 41ff).

Obviously, we should think of this dimension (and the other outlined below as well) as a continuum in which all-out conscious efforts vs. complete ignorance constitute only the two extremes. In-between, we can imagine configurations which are partially initiated through conscious efforts while at the same time fostering much more overlap and dependencies between different actors than they themselves are aware of. We can also imagine grudging and incremental realization of mutual dependencies over time as well as cautious ‘claim-staking’ as a response to this, instead of a full awareness and embrace of organizational overlap or tacit competition and rivalry between different actors. In most cases, however, we would expect involved actors to be somewhat aware of the fact that they find themselves in relational configurations and hence make conscious efforts to reach out to others to ‘synchronize’ collective efforts in order to accumulate resources and thereby solve problems more efficiently (Kolb 2013: 20). For theoretical purposes, though, we need not limit our analysis to include only deliberately created configurations, but can also perceive of them as unintended consequences of organizational overlap and enlarged responsibilities without conscious realization of such let alone deliberate efforts to improve cooperation. In this sense, we can think of configurations as either ‘owned’ or ‘unowned’ by the actors involved in them (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 302). Theorizing the implications of this, it obviously demands some conscious engagement to efficiently organize a relational configuration and its involved actors and processes through delegation and the principle of subsidiarity. Limited awareness on the other hand will most likely play out in ad hoc and informal solutions without much consistency over time as to how conflicts of converging responsibilities could be solved.13

Size and Complexity

In addition to their origin and focus, we can construct configurations involving only a limited number of actors tied together in dyadic ways (e.g. bilateral state diplomacy) all the way to the most complex and global systems, including an undefined number of actors which engage in “the entire spectrum of issue-areas in global governance today” (Biermann 2011: 173). In-between, we can conceptualize configurations pertaining and responding to specific issues or at least issue areas (such as security or welfare) and hence involving

13 It can further be assumed that despite some ground rules laid out, it is in practice where one will find a lot of grey area between these two ideal-types. In the UN, for example, we find general specifications how to relate to regional arrangements in chapter VIII of their charter yet interaction with these organizations oftentimes plays out in informal case-by-case decisions to which no standard procedure seem to exist (Herz 2014: 242f).
multiple actors with stakes in this particular field as well as configurations characterized by cross-cutting dynamics between various issues and hence relating different actors in new ways. Thus, based on research focus again, we can define configurations to vary significantly in terms of their size and thus in terms of the complexity of interaction that characterizes them internally (let alone think of all the external relations complex configurations are engaged in). While size obviously is a simple function of who is involved, complexity emerges from the fact that actors involved in any particular configuration are likely to be connected through other configurations at the same time as well. The more actors we thus have in any configuration, the more – almost to the point of exponential increase – we find said configuration related to other configurations making our analysis increasingly intricate and convoluted (Brosig 2011: 150-51).

In terms of implications, one cannot unambiguously theorize increased size and its consequence of nested complexity in terms of outcome and efficiency. In organizational studies at least, it remains disputed whether the transaction costs involved in larger configurations outweigh the additional amount of resources and information available within said configuration (Hennart 2008). Ultimately, it appears to be more a question of depth and quality of the interaction than sheer numbers of who is involved to what extent (see below). At least, one can imagine large configurations being able to mediate their complexities due to consensus and shared knowledge of the relevance of the configurations by all actors involved. What might be more promising to pursue as a research avenue is to relate overlapping and nested configurations to each other and determine how actors involved in this make sense and justify their commitments as they shift allegiances one way or another. Basically, do certain configurations within a larger, potentially global configuration (e.g. the UN) enjoy salience and become more relevant for an actor over time or do we see patterns of subsidiarity emerging (e.g. regional organizations)? How does this affect either configuration(s)? Answering these and other questions obviously remains a challenge. Becoming aware of the complexity stemming from overlapping configurations, not unlike opening “Pandora’s box”, however, at least allows them to be raised in the first place (Franke/Koch 2013: 99).

**Depth, Level of Agreement, and Quality**

As a function of both their origin and size, we can distinguish different configurations featuring different degrees of cooperation. Those range from short-term, *ad hoc* interaction to repeated and institutionalized exchange as they evolve over time (see below). Coop-
eration can be based in formal declarations or in informally shared understandings and conventions of conduct. However, as Biermann (2008: 161) argues, inter-organizational relations are more likely to reach a certain quality and maturity if they are based on “(1) regular, intense contact; (2) formal and informal rules of behavior; (3) regular channels of cooperation of varying formalization; and (4) long-term orientations as opposed to ad hoc cooperation”. Depth and quality in this context, however, should not be equated with intense contact and procedural rules since configurations which feature these items could still be characterized by competition and conflict rather than agreement and consensus. Put simply, realizing a state of mutual dependency and creating organizational structures to engage with it does not imply to accept or cherish it let alone find solutions for it. A brief consideration of the UN and its ongoing struggles to present solutions is the obvious case in point here. Hence, while certain configurations might be motivated by mutual interest and consent to cooperate, and feature a certain depth because of it, others might be characterized by high stakes and thus features intense yet nevertheless competitive and conflictual interaction (Cropper et al. 2008: 5f). In other words, both cooperation and conflict can follow from clearly defined and hence deep procedural terms. As such, it is both how much or how little contact and exchange exists within a configuration as well as the spirit in which these are conducted which determines the overall outcome. Cooperation in this sense includes a continuum ranging from loose information-sharing to liaison relations to coordinating action to joint-decision making. Conflict, on the other hand, can translate into non-compliance and adversarial action or even abandoning the configuration altogether (Biermann 2008: 165).14

As long as we perceive any particular set of inter-organizational relations as a configuration and do not frame this configuration as an actor on a higher-aggregated level, implementation and execution rests on the involved actors as “norms and standards [as well as decision-making] cannot spread across institutions without the action of someone” (Brosig 2011: 154). In other words, relational configurations influence and affect actors involved yet do not exercise independent agency since they ultimately represent a heuristic tool and not empirical reality. According to differences in their quality as to how much involved actors take them into consideration when making their decisions, we can think of them as relevant, independent actors on a different level of analysis (Archer 1992: 79ff). Against this background, we can distinguish configurations in terms of how much

---

14 Note that it stands to reason but is not conceptually determined that increased cooperation is based on awareness and deliberate engagement as discussed in the first dimension. Hence, the dimensions reinforce each other as more conscious efforts to cooperate are likely to lead to more cooperation.
they succeed or fail to influence actors to act accordingly within collectively established notions and courses of action. Consequentially, the depth and quality of cooperation or the lack thereof in any configuration is determined through situational decision-making of involved actors and whether their actions will further strengthen or diminish the autonomy of the configuration. Given that (a) one can assume a certain “self-centeredness of organizations”, meaning that organizational autonomy is perceived as a valuable asset in and of itself (which organizations are reluctant to give away by engaging in in-depth organizational cooperation (Biermann 2011: 176f)), while (b) different entities are connected through their dependencies, we can image configurations oscillating back and forth between cooperation and conflict. In other words, any assessment of the depth and quality of configurations is most likely only a snapshot of said interaction (see below).

**Internal Structure and Overall Relevance**

Relational configurations can be further distinguished in terms of their internal arrangements as well as their overall relevance. Due to the fact that different actors are involved, configurations by definition entail internal hierarchies based on different structural positions. These positions reflect different potentials to influence collective decision-making and the overall direction of the configuration (Franke/Roos 2010: 1068ff). They result from different actors bringing different capacities and resources ‘to the table’ which are held independent of the interaction, but are nevertheless relevant for the configuration. They are, however, also a function of the organizational set-up itself and the processes that keep the configuration going. This includes the granting of certain competencies to certain actors and not to others (e.g. a permanent vs. a non-permanent seats). We should, however, not reduce the internal structure to a function of material resources and formal arrangements, since individual commitment and long-term adherence to a configuration’s ‘mission’ also influences where individual actors stand. Consequentially, internal structures are subject to change in two ways. First, previously irrelevant capacities and resources might become more relevant to the configuration or the configuration decides to restructure itself. Second, different actors prove to be more committed in pursuing the objectives of the configuration, diligently follow its rules, and thereby ‘rise in the ranks’.\(^{15}\) Consequentially, configurations can be further distinguished in terms of their internal competitions as involved actors attempt to acquire strong(er) structural positions to better

\(^{15}\) One can think again of the role of Germany within the UN as a non-permanent Security Council member yet involved in the P5+1 negotiations due to its role as the ‘honest broker’ in this configuration.
influence collective outcome, either in formal or in informal terms. Whether it is institutionalized and fixed or implicit and potentially contested and subject to change over time, however, the structural set-up of any configuration constituted through different structural positions to a great extent affect its work and can be used to distinguish different configurations as they determine the roles of individual actors involved (Huxham/Beech 2008: 570ff).

In terms of their overall relevance, we can think of any configuration as reflecting a certain value from the perspectives of the involved actors vis-à-vis other configurations said actors are involved in. Put differently, for any actor there is a relative value to engage and commit to a particular configuration which is estimated and determined in comparison to other configurations. As such, actors perceive certain configurations to be more or less relevant than others, and thereby develop individual hierarchies of commitment to different configurations. The range of these individually ascribed values and the consequent willingness to engage, or the lack thereof, obviously determines the overall relevance of any particular configuration – if relevant stakeholders decide not to pursue cooperation on a particular issue, the credibility of the configuration representing the collective effort to solve this problem suffers. These dynamics have been described as “forum-shopping” and, for our purpose at hand, imply that actors are able to choose between different configurations close enough or even overlapping in their purpose (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 24f).

Determining factors for choices between different configurations include, among others, perceived chances of reaching a favorable outcome cast in short-term calculations whether any particular configuration could be the most efficient means to reach specific objectives at this point in time, past experiences of cooperating with certain actors in specific configurations and hence turning back to these as a habit, or historically established relevance based on long-term convictions and commitment towards particular configurations over others. As such, we can distinguish configurations that are relevant for actors, and hence overall important, from those which barely matter, both to the actors involved as well as in collective terms. Not unlike self-fulfilling prophecies then, the former will remain relevant for the time ebing while the latter will face scrutiny and skepticism.

Consequentially, there is competition and rivalry not only between different actors within any given configuration, but also between configurations vying for the ongoing support of their members. External competition between different configurations implies that actors involved in a particular configuration in which they believe in, will spend time and energy to present this configuration to others as the most efficient window to solve their collective problems. While the overall commitment of any particular actor in
its different configurations should not be understood in a mechanical, zero-sum fashion — more commitment to one does not automatically imply less commitment to another —, one can still expect certain configurations being the preferred choice for specific types of problems. Specifically, should conflict between two configurations arise, actors involved in both need to reconcile this and clarify where their ‘primary commitment’ lies. It follows from this permanent competition between different configurations that neglected configurations weaken over time to the point where they no longer play a role at all (Brosig 2011: 149).^{16}

**Development and Change over Time**

As outlined in the first section, a relational perspective emphasizes process over substance and conceptually emphasizes change over continuity. Consequentially, all dimensions outlined above play out in a temporal dimension. Put simply, all of the above characteristics — focus, complexity, quality, structure, and relevance — are dynamic, and hence, subject to change over time. As such, we can distinguish configurations in terms of how they evolve and change over time and theorize reasons for this. In methodological terms, this implies that relational configurations are moving and contingent targets and, hence, need to be treated as such (e.g. through process-tracing and with an emphasis on taking snapshots at particular moments in time through bracketing) (Zeitlin 2007). The question, whether change reflects progress or regress, in this context obviously depends on the expectations one holds against the respective configuration. Thus, the assessment of development itself becomes a political question and involved actors will advance different views ranging from denial to grudging acceptance to enthusiastic support for change. Taking these diverging assessments into consideration, one can study different configurations by estimating how content involved actors are with the overall development over time. Given that one is likely to find discontent in one way or the other, configurations by definition remain “incomplete entities” relating “larger sets of organizations” engaged in multiple configurations, as well as competing to determine the direction of future change (Lomi et al.

---

^{16} In addition, unclear and diverging hierarchies between actors collectively engaged in multiple configurations are likely to create political conflict between those. Such conflicts reflect fundamentally different notions of how different configurations should relate to each other and what ‘lines of subsidiarity’ in global governance should be exercised. Ultimately, this becomes a normative question of final responsibility and we see divergent answers to that question even from actors involved in a multitude of the same configurations. Considering their overall relevance from the actors’ perspective though helps us to explain situations in which we have agreement on a specific division of labor between actors internally and different configurations externally from situations in which we find lasting competition and rivalry.
Relating to the other dimensions, the question of development over time can be considered an immediate function of the quality and nature of prior cooperation. From a problem-solving perspective, we can think of cooperation and its assessment at a particular moment in time as either functional or dysfunctional. While few configurations will develop enough autonomy to emerge as independent actors themselves, it will still be held against them whether they at least contribute to solving the problems which triggered the configuration to emerge in the first place. Independent of the immediate functionality of any configuration, though, once initiated and assuming that there are no fundamental conflicts between the actors involved, configurations are likely to further create reciprocal dependencies over time, and hence, are likely to develop more salient cooperation. However, whether this increased degree of cooperation will stipulate further agreement or disagreement over time remains to be seen – what brings us together might as well bring us apart. On the one hand, we can think of further engagement and closer interaction should the original problem be perceived to be addressed adequately through initial cooperation, or should at least the perceived need of finding a solution for the problem remain. In other words, if there was enough overlap to convince actors to engage in cooperation, and this cooperation is perceived to be either fruitful or still very much needed, it is likely to stipulate further cooperation. On the other hand, the absence of initial consent in terms of purpose and direction of cooperation despite reciprocal dependencies, or the renewed and continued denial of such dependencies, is equally likely to lead to tensions and conflict, or even attempts to separate one’s self from the configuration. More a marriage by necessity than one by love, such configurations will most likely not develop in-depth cooperation in the long run, or might end up in divorce altogether (Brosig 2011: 164).

Having said this, inter-organizational relations overall appear to create path-dependent contingencies that favor more cooperation. While we find closely guarded autonomies, as well as miscommunication and misperception between actors involved, we nevertheless can expect at least those configurations born out of a conscious effort to be bound on a trajectory of increased cooperation. In addition, even in configurations born out of necessity which initially are not characterized by open conflict, the very fact that different actors interact with each other more closely over time makes it more likely that new dependencies emerge which ultimately add to the depth and quality of the configuration. Configurations characterized by fundamental opposition and disagreement, though, obviously represent a different story and are set to follow different trajectories (Biermann 2011: 176f). Studying those trajectories emerging out of inter-organizational relations,
and further theorizing them based on ideal types thus remains a major task which, just as with the other dimensions, rests on empirical engagement with different configurations. This and other implications for the research agenda of inter-organizational relations that follow from this will be spelled out in the final section.

5. Conclusion & Outlook

In this paper, I intended to advance three arguments. First, while the notion of global governance clearly brought renewed and welcomed attention to the study of IOs, it did so in a peculiar way. Partially in response to how the object was framed in the 1990s, partially due to genuine research interests, the study of IOs in global governance is often framed in single case studies focused on particular organizations. Given its focus on individual organizations in order to emphasize their relevance vis-à-vis nation states, global governance ironically reproduced substantialist ontologies which framed prior research and thereby limited itself to a “add new actors and issues and stir” approach (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014c: 210). Such ontologies no doubt work well when dealing with formal- legally defined actors. However, assuming and advocating a transition from government to governance on a global scale challenges this very logic, as acts of global governance are never conducted in isolation, nor are the relevant actors involved as obvious as one might think. Put differently, “[g]overning globally is never a solo act”, yet we do not always know who is in the band line-up (Finnemore 2014: 223). Given the complexities of multi-dimensional, polyarchic, and overlapping governance, we should hence think of it as an process in which we have to study agency as something that is negotiated, contested, and ultimately mutually constituted, instead of considering it as an a priori given. This helps us to better understand who becomes involved and who remains excluded in global governance, as well as how and why it is delivered (Qin 2011).

Second, with these broader remarks in mind, the paper turned to the study of inter-organizational relations to assess how this new field improves our understanding of IOs. Given that research in this field overall is still in its early stages and “a variety of diverging approaches are [still being] tested” (Biermann 2011: 174), it was argued that above and beyond shared empirical observations and common research interests that follow from this, different theoretical foundations are advanced which feature very different notions of how to conceptualize both organizations and their increasingly overlapping relations. Adding the practice-oriented and problem driven nature of many contributions (Koops 2012: 75-76), different commitments and ontologies in different contributions not only exist, but
for the most part remain unrelated. In an attempt provide a platform for dialogue, the paper introduced two dimensions to structure inter-organizational research and increase awareness of foundational differences in terms of divergent ontologies advanced. Following a narrow conceptualization advanced among others by Brosig (2011) and assumingly Panke et al. (forthcoming), we can perceive of inter-organizational relations as the overlap between otherwise independent formal IOs. Against this notion, Franke/Koch (2013) and Biermann (2011) argue in favor of a broader conceptualization recognizing all sorts of different entities in potential interaction. In addition, and somewhat cross-cutting to which entities are considered, different contributions look at inter-organizational relations either through the lens of the actors involved in interaction, or by emphasizing the constitutive effect of transactions. As such, current research on inter-organizational relations clearly reflects different ontologies out of which the relationalist perspective seems to offer the better value, at least when interested in global governance in all its complexities and ambiguities (Finnemore 2014; Avant et al. 2010).

Third and finally, in a first attempt to illustrate how inter-organizational research from a relationalist ontology could look like, the paper proposed to think of the various sites of inter-organizational relations in terms of relational configurations. As a heuristic tool, framing interaction in this way might help to better understand and explain overlapping mandates and mutual dependencies. Constituting parts are (a) actors – whether it is states, IOs, non-state actors, or other configurations remains an empirical question – in Matryoshka-like arrangements as well as (b) the processes in which they relate to each other (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 304f). Spelling out a range of distinctions focused on different ideal types, the paper intended to begin theorizing the implications of different configurations. Ranging from small to global, from deliberately created to unconscious or even unwanted, from binding to voluntary, from consensual to conflictual, from formalized to informal, each configuration obviously contributes differently to global governance overall. Systematizing these different constituents and constituencies of world politics in ideal types, and thereby understanding their internal dynamics, contributes to developing a more comprehensive framework of global governance which can deal with complexity and change on both the global level, as well as all subsequent levels. In addition, considering the different dimensions of relational configurations in theoretical terms might help draw conclusions on commonality and cohesion within, as well as between, different configurations in order to provide normative guidance as to which actors should be involved in particular configurations and hence in the provision of governance for any given problem overall (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014c: 213).
Since the discussion of these ideal type distinction constitutes the major contribution of this paper (given the lack of empirical illustrations...), further arguments for the rationale behind it should be given. In addition to creating awareness of the broad range of different configurations out there, specifying different configurations in more detail helps to consider their internal dynamics, as well as relate them externally to others, to study and eventually explain (non-)divisions of labor, both within and between configurations. This focus on oscillating patterns of cooperation and competition within and between configurations helps to determine the overall quality of governance for a particular issue. Put differently, we can discuss why a particular arrangement is not working by considering its internal set-up as well as how it relates to other relevant configurations in the same field. More specifically, from the perspective of actors involved, multiple, parallel engagements in different configurations need to be reconciled. Any configuration thus depends on recurring commitments of its constituting parts which, given that we find more overlap and dispersed responsibilities globally, are likely to be characterized by opportunistic “forum-shopping” against which configurations need to develop safety measures (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 24f). This, to some extent, not only marks the dilemma of multi-dimensional, polyarchic, and overlapping governance, but will also, in the long term, determine accountability and legitimacy of current manifestations of global governance (Hurd 1999; Avant et al. 2010). The contribution of inter-organizational research in this context is the insight that conflict might arise both within and between configurations. As such, these have to be studied not only in terms of their functional efficiency in terms of problem-solving, but rather in their political, contested dimension as well. The emphasis on conflict and contestation in this context reminds us that the “managerial vision of how to deal with global problems” itself is normatively charged and that we need to provide a better understanding of the dynamics and changes that occur between and within configurations, rather than just advancing assumed functional necessity as an explanation and thereby reifying them (Sinclair 2012: 5).

In the end, while lacking empirical illustrations, I hope the paper still showed how a relational take on inter-organizational relations represents a viable alternative to connect to broader themes of global governance and in particular to study different actors, be they states, IOs or non-state, not as singular and isolated but related and co-constituting global governors. As argued by Jackson/Nexon (1999: 296ff), reifying their agency and dispositions in an interaction framework makes it impossible to explain change. Global governance, however, as introduced by Rosenau (1992), as well as the empirical observations advanced so far on inter-organizational relations are all about dynamics of change.
Consequently, the dilemma of substantialist ontologies being interested in change they cannot explain confines both global governance and the new field of inter-organizational relations, at least if they remain solely committed to this particular set of ontologies. Holding on to substantialist ontologies, though, leaves us with the rather simplistic and somewhat disappointing conclusion that multiple actors are now engaged in global governance characterized by organizational overlap and institutional density. Focusing on the question of how agency is constituted within and between organizational configurations and how their particular characteristics influence governance in a transaction framework though allows us to tackle dynamics of change inherent in a system as complex as global governance. That at least is the hope as the search for “what makes the world hang together” continues (Ruggie 1998).

References


Franke, Ulrich/Koch, Martin 2013: Inter-Organizational Relations as Structures of Corporate Practice, in: Journal of International Organizations Studies 4: 1, 85–103.


Freeman, Edward 1984: Strategic Management. A stakeholder approach, Boston, MA:
Galbreath, David J./Gebhard, Carmen 2010: Cooperation or Conflict? Problematizing Organizational Overlap in Europe, Frarnham: Ashgate.


Jackson, Patrick T./Nexon, Daniel H. 2013: International Theory in a Post-Paradigmatic Era: From Substantive Wagers to Scientific Ontologies, in: European Journal of Inter-
national Relations 19: 3, 543–565.


Kolb, Marina 2013: The European Union and the Council of Europe, Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan.


Weiss, Thomas G. 2009: What’s Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It,


