

BOOK REVIEW

A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy and Contestation, Michael Zürn (2018), Oxford University Press, Oxford, xviii + 312pp., \$US26.95, ISBN 978-0-19-881998-1

This volume is an impressive synthetic text, pulling together the work of a couple of decades to sort out what is going on under the rubric of ‘global governance’. Its sources cover the gamut of international relations thinking about institutions, international organizations, states, and how they have all worked to change governance over the last few decades. The story is far from simple, and much of this book is an attempt to parse out some clear findings from the confusion of empirical studies and theoretical approaches that dominate the vast literature on international governance, international regimes, law, and organization. This book is definitely not one for the theoretically faint-hearted.

Indeed, the first problem for a book of this nature is to tease out what exactly constitutes its object of inquiry; it is not immediately clear that ‘global’ is necessarily the appropriate term, although it has, as the book demonstrates, become the most commonly used term of writers concerned with world politics. But the term has something to offer by way of a conceptual innovation that moves the discussion beyond the implicit assumption that all that are possible are minor changes in how states relate to each other and in innovations in the administrative arrangements states structure through an increasingly complex network of international organizations.

These institutional innovations have in turn produced numerous rules and regulations, processes and procedures for dealing with matters ranging from human rights to stratospheric ozone depleting substances. In the process, these organizations have become authorities with expertise that is deployed in many ways; hence the appropriate subtitle to this book. With these claims to authority and expertise come claims to legitimacy as the arbiter of many aspects of human affairs. Contestations arise, too, as other actors dispute the claims to authoritative expertise and the appropriateness of international rules when they intrude on what might be understood to be sovereign state authority, or on the remit of other institutions. This ‘global’ collectivity of agencies and institutions itself now influences governance, and has become a political player of sorts in its own right.

In short, there is a complicated politics to all this, one that Zürn persuasively argues is now to a substantial extent endogenously driven from within the arena of global governance itself. Thus, there is much more going on here than traditionally understood as international relations. This is about more than states and sovereignty; it is about complex social processes that transcend national frontiers. So, a new designation of the ‘global’ makes a substantial amount of sense. While the focus on globalization frequently looks to trade, and matters of cultural homogenization, the growth of international bureaucracies, and the norms and procedures that come with them and their scientific authorities, have generated a much more complex series of social arrangements to facilitate and oversee a much more interconnected world.

Cosmopolitans frequently welcome these innovations. But recent political events, and the emergence of national populist movements and authoritarian politicians, not just in the United States, contest the authority of numerous agencies in global governance. Here Zürn is surely accurate when he suggests that the processes of economic globalization, and in particular the neoliberal variants, have, by removing what he terms the ‘shock absorbers’ within national states, the welfare state functions that buffer them from the vagaries of the global economy, sown the seeds of the opposition to globalism.

Thus, the very success of key facets of globalization has fed the resurgence of claims to national sovereignty. This, in turn, involves challenges to the authority of international norms from such phenomena as Brexit-type political campaigns. The assumption of global conspiracies, of a sense of lack of control or a loss of national autonomy, offers a simple political rhetoric that posits

the global as the problem. Global governance increasingly blurs traditional distinctions between states and the international and Zürn's dense volume is an ambitious attempt to think through the consequences of these changed political circumstances. It suggests that the sheer complexity of global arrangements has a dynamic of its own that makes traditional assumptions about the role of states and the effective operation of territorial rule increasingly outdated.

It follows that the disciplinary paradigms of international relations also need an update. The emphasis in international relations analyses shifted from realists and assumptions of perpetual rivalries in the early cold war period through to a focus on institutions of cooperation and the operation of hegemony in global affairs, as the cold war confrontation eased and international institutions grew in the 1970s and 1980s. Now a more sophisticated understanding of global actors has to move beyond these institutionalist formulations, premised on states as relatively autonomous actors in various modes of cooperation, to grapple with the complex systems that enmesh states in ways that are hard to specify clearly, but which shape so many trade and technical issues.

Not surprisingly, this argument comes from German social science with its emphasis on social systems and complexity as well as issues of legitimacy in political processes. This institutional milieu and the presence of the European Union as the backdrop to these deliberations pose obvious questions about how power now works, and do so in ways that are more obvious to residents there than they are in North America, where state-centred international relations has been such a dominant discourse in political matters. None of this is to deny the importance of states, but their enmeshment is a much more complicated matter than earlier theories of international relations were equipped to explain.

Alas, none of this is reassuring, given the rise of contemporary authoritarian politicians anxious to be seen to be in charge rather than cooperating in the face of such problems as climate change, nuclear proliferation, persistent violence in many places, biodiversity loss, famines, and epidemic outbreaks. The potential for cooperation is clearly there; institutions and practices to deal with problems properly designated global exist, or the tools to construct them are now easily to hand, but as long as state politicians insist on reasserting their prerogatives to 'decide' on issues, the potential for global governance to tackle pressing matters through sustainable development goals or other international aspirational arrangements will be stymied. More worrisome still is the prospect of nationalist politicians eroding the processes of global governance that act as restraints on the worst inclinations of aggrandizing leaders, and provide face-saving devices for those who have overplayed their hand.

The key question now, and a theme at the heart of Zürn's book, is how global governance institutions themselves will respond to the rise of xenophobic political rhetoric and the growing disregard for the consequences of actions that fall beyond the immediate purview of nationalist publics. The complexity of current transformations, not only in the most high-profile issues of climate change, economic stability, and nuclear proliferation, clearly require much more than traditional rivalries among powerful states have to offer in terms of governance. It is far too soon to know the answers to this question about the evolution of global governance in the face of contemporary nationalist political strategies, but Michael Zürn's attempt to unravel how the politics of global governance has evolved so far is a very useful starting point to engage these debates.

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